
THE UNSUCCESSFUL IMPLEMENTATION OF CLT IN AN ENGLISH CLASS: A NARRATIVE INQUIRY BY A PRE-SERVICE TEACHER

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ABSTRACT

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) is widely promoted as an approach that supports meaningful interaction in English as a Foreign Language classroom. However, its classroom implementation can be challenging for pre-service teachers who are still developing pedagogical and classroom-management competence. This study explored factors that constrained the implementation of CLT during a teaching practicum. It employed an autobiographical narrative inquiry centred on the experience of a pre-service English teacher-researcher. The study was conducted in a ninth-grade class of 38 students, where CLT was implemented in eight 90-minute meetings. Two students with contrasting levels of English achievement were purposively selected to provide complementary perspectives on the teacher-researcher's narrative. Data were collected through a self-reflective narrative frame, individual semi-structured interviews consisting of 15 questions and lasting approximately 15–20 minutes, and lesson-plan analysis. The data were analyzed thematically by familiarizing the data, coding meaningful segments, developing and reviewing themes, naming the themes, and integrating evidence across the three data sources. The findings identified three context-specific constraints: students' limited engagement and communication, an unsupportive classroom environment, and the teacher-researcher's insufficient preparedness, including limited instructional time and an incomplete understanding of students' needs. The study concludes that CLT implementation during a teaching practicum requires gradual linguistic and affective scaffolding, responsive lesson planning, supportive peer norms, and sustained mentoring for pre-service teachers.

Keywords: Communicative Language Teaching, Narrative Inquiry, Pre-Service Teacher, Teaching Practicum

INTRODUCTION

Communicative language learning activities encourage students to convey their ideas, feelings, and opinions. Rather than focusing solely on grammar, students should be encouraged to use language as a means of communication when learning English. Therefore, Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) has been developed as an alternative to traditional grammar translation-based techniques of second language instruction (Chang & Suparmi, 2020). Doeur (2022) defines CLT as a teaching style emphasizing communicative

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ability as the primary goal of language learning. This method encourages authenticity, interaction, student-centered learning, and meaningful communication (Pitikornpuangpetch & Suwanarak, 2021). Students learn through various interactive activities, including role-playing, group discussions, and problem-solving tasks. These activities can help students convey their opinions using the target language.

One of the researchers, a pre-service teacher at a junior high school, was introduced to CLT as an effective method for teaching English speaking skills. She learned the principles throughout her coursework and was encouraged to implement CLT in the teacher-researcher's teaching practice. Therefore, the teacher-researcher prepared to learn more about CLT because she believed that using CLT would create an interactive and engaging classroom environment. Some studies have shown that several aspects can impact the effectiveness of CLT implementation in classroom settings. For instance, Doeur (2022), emphasized that teachers' positive attitudes and beliefs play a significant role in CLT implementation and are more likely to successfully implement CLT in the classroom. This suggests that a teacher's mindset and readiness play a crucial role in implementing CLT principles into effective practice beyond theoretical understanding.

On the first day of CLT implementation, the teacher-researcher introduced CLT by using YouTube videos as authentic materials. Initially, the students were enthusiastic and fully participated in carefully watching and listening to the video. However, when it comes to practices such as role-play or group discussion, the students lost enthusiasm and did not participate in doing the task. After implementing CLT several times, she discovered that students had difficulties learning English, including nervousness and fear of making mistakes when speaking, which led them to prefer theoretical learning to practical activities. Additionally, some students expressed concerns regarding group work assignments, which they perceived as hindering rather than supporting their learning progress. They also complained about the scheduling of English lessons, particularly during the last hours of the school day, making them less focused on studying. These factors suggest that the implementation of CLT did not meet the teacher-researcher's expectations and ultimately failed.

Despite her enthusiasm for CLT, it was realized that implementing it in a real classroom setting was far more challenging than the teacher-researcher had anticipated. According to Nam (2023), external factors, such as education policy and large class sizes, pose barriers to CLT implementation. However, internal teacher-related factors, including teachers' practices, beliefs, and limited understanding of CLT principles, play a more significant role in shaping the success or failure of its implementation. Similarly, Danibao and Tari (2023) emphasized that pre-service teachers frequently struggle to utilize communicative approaches during their teaching practicums due to a lack of experience in classroom management. Furthermore, Nababan and Amalia (2021) identified specific issues that pre-service teachers face during their teaching practice, such as difficulties in selecting appropriate teaching materials and a lack of student willingness to learn English. These challenges indicate that its practical application requires institutional support and a foundation of pedagogical competence, particularly for pre-service teachers.

Previous studies have largely emphasized successful CLT practices or have examined teachers' general perceptions and challenges. Less attention has been given to how an unsuccessful CLT experience is understood from the reflective perspective of a pre-service teacher and supported by students' accounts and instructional documents. Consequently, the interaction among learner-related, environmental, and teacher-related constraints in a specific practicum classroom remains insufficiently documented. Addressing this gap, the present study investigates the following question: What factors constrained the implementation of CLT by a pre-service English teacher during a junior high school teaching practicum? By examining an unsuccessful experience rather than a best-practice case, the study seeks to provide context-sensitive insights for teacher educators, supervising teachers, and future pre-service teachers.

METHODS

This study employed an autobiographical narrative inquiry to examine the teacher-researcher's experience of implementing CLT during a teaching practicum. Narrative inquiry was appropriate because it treats professional experience as temporally and contextually situated and enables the researcher to reconstruct critical classroom events, interpret their meanings, and connect them with the social and institutional conditions in which they occurred (Barkhuizen & Wette, 2008). The teacher-researcher's self-reflection therefore served as the central narrative, while student interviews and lesson plan provided supporting perspectives and contextual evidence.

The study took place in a junior high school during an English teaching practicum. The focal class consisted of 38 ninth-grade students with varied English achievement and participation patterns. CLT was implemented in eight meetings, each lasting 90 minutes. The activities included the use of authentic audiovisual materials, guided discussions, role-plays, collaborative sentence-building tasks, and speaking performances. The practicum occurred during the second semester and was interrupted by school activities, the Ramadan break, Eid holidays, and examination preparation, which reduced continuity across the eight meetings.

The primary participant was the pre-service English teacher-researcher. Two students were selected purposively from the focal class to represent contrasting levels of English academic achievement and participation. Their selection was intended to obtain complementary perspectives rather than statistical representation: one student could describe the experience of a relatively stronger learner, while the other could illuminate difficulties experienced by a less proficient learner. Because the study centred on the teacher-researcher's autobiographical narrative, the two interviews functioned as supporting and contrasting accounts rather than as an independent basis for generalization.

Data were collected from three sources. First, the teacher-researcher completed a self-reflective narrative frame containing prompts that supported the chronological reconstruction of expectations, classroom events, difficulties, responses, and subsequent interpretations. Second, each student participated individually in a semi-structured interview consisting of 15 questions. Each interview lasted approximately 15–20 minutes and explored perceptions of authentic materials, pair and group work, speaking confidence, classroom interaction, and the teacher's instructional activities. Third, the lesson plans for the eight meetings were examined to identify the intended CLT principles, planned communicative tasks, grouping arrangements, instructional stages, and the degree of alignment between planned activities and the classroom experiences described in the narrative and interviews.

The data were analyzed through six recursive stages of thematic analysis. The researchers first read the narrative, interview transcripts, and lesson plans repeatedly to become familiar with the data. Meaningful segments were then coded, including references to participation, vocabulary limitations, speaking anxiety, peer responses, grouping difficulties, lesson design, mentoring, and time constraints. Related codes were clustered into preliminary themes. These themes were reviewed against all three data sources, refined to reduce overlap, and defined according to their relevance to the research question. Finally, the themes were named and reported through an integrated narrative supported by excerpts and document-based evidence. The analysis resulted in three themes: students' challenges in engagement and communication, environmental barriers, and teacher-related unpreparedness.

Trustworthiness was strengthened through data-source triangulation among the self-reflective narrative, student interviews, and lesson plans. The researchers also engaged in reflexive comparison between initial expectations and subsequent interpretations to make personal assumptions visible. The two student accounts were used to confirm, complicate, or challenge interpretations emerging from the self-narrative. Ethical procedures included formal permission from the school, voluntary participation, and the use of the pseudonyms P1 and P2 in the manuscript. The students were informed that their responses would

be kept confidential and used only for research purposes.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis generated three themes that explain the context-specific constraints experienced during the eight CLT meetings: (1) students' challenges in classroom engagement and communication, (2) environmental barriers to CLT, and (3) the teacher-researcher's unpreparedness. Evidence from the self-reflective narrative and student interviews was compared with the lesson plans. The plans consistently included communicative objectives, authentic audiovisual input, pair or group interaction, and oral production; however, the classroom evidence showed that the planned interaction often exceeded students' linguistic readiness, confidence, and willingness to collaborate.

Students' Challenges in Classroom Engagement and Communication

As a pre-service teacher stepping into the classroom for the first time, the teacher-researcher was eager to implement CLT. However, the teacher-researcher encountered several student-related challenges throughout the teacher-researcher's teaching practicum that affected classroom engagement and communication. These challenges included students' lack of motivation, limited vocabulary knowledge, low speaking confidence, and frequent struggles during group work. In addition, many students experienced anxiety and fear of making mistakes, which further hindered their willingness to participate actively in class. These factors collectively contributed to a passive classroom atmosphere, posing significant barriers to the effective implementation of CLT.

Table 1. Students' Lack of Motivation in English Learning

Data	Source
<i>However, when the time comes, only a few of them prepare for it and the rest do not do it at all and just tell me that they just can't do that</i>	Self-Reflective Narrative Frame (March 12, 2025).

At the beginning of the class, the teacher-researcher consistently presented visuals, such as images or videos, to serve as a trigger. For instance, before introducing the primary material, the teacher-researcher showed a YouTube video and facilitated a discussion by asking questions about the content. To extend this engagement into speaking practice, the teacher-researcher assigned a role-play activity. The teacher-researcher aimed to encourage students to interact with each other using the target language. Ilmudinulloh et al. (2022) stated that learning methods requiring interaction in the target language can increase students' self-confidence and communicative competence. Based on this, students were allowed to choose their partners and select themes relevant to the learning topic. However, some students did not prepare anything for the role-play. This lack of preparation and participation reflected the students' lack of motivation. Despite having the autonomy to choose partners and relevant topics, many students remained passive and reluctant to engage. This suggests that take-home tasks are insufficient to foster motivation, particularly when students have low intrinsic interest or previous negative experiences with language learning. According to Kong (2021), motivation is crucial for success and well-being, driving self-awareness and inspiring individuals to engage in goal-directed behaviors that are essential for learning and educational achievement. In this case, the students' reluctance to prepare or participate in the role-play activity revealed a deeper issue of disengagement, which became a barrier to implementing CLT in the classroom. The corresponding lesson plan specified a sequence of audiovisual input, guided questions, and role-play production, confirming that the communicative activity was planned rather than improvised.

Table 2. Students' Lack of Vocabulary and Speaking Confidence

Data	Source
<i>They said that they didn't know much about the vocabulary, so they couldn't make any sentences.</i>	Self-Reflective Narrative Frame (March 12, 2025).
<i>I am afraid of making a mistake in my pronunciation or because of my lack of vocabulary. My speech is convoluted.</i>	P1, Interview (February 19, 2025, 00:21:25).
<i>True, I do not have much vocabulary yet.</i>	P2, Interview (February 19, 2025, 00:12:50).

Building on the issue of low motivation, another challenge that emerged was the students' limited vocabulary knowledge and low confidence, which further restricted their ability to participate confidently in communicative tasks. Vocabulary plays a crucial role in all language skills, and true mastery involves not just memorizing words but understanding and applying them in meaningful communication (Asrul & Dahlan, 2022). Several students reported difficulty constructing sentences due to a limited vocabulary. This issue was also evident in the interview data. P1 admitted that he felt anxious about making mistakes in pronunciation and struggling with a limited vocabulary while speaking English. He was worried that his speech would be unclear or unintelligible to the people. According to Ivan et al. (2020), students' lack of interest in learning English vocabulary, combined with pronunciation difficulties caused by differences between spoken and written forms, presents a significant challenge. On the other hand, P2 confirmed that he does not have sufficient vocabulary and found it challenging to participate in classroom discussions. These responses reflected a common issue among students and can negatively impact clarity and confidence in speaking. Therefore, they fear failure and embarrassment when talking to their friends. This fear created a psychological barrier that prevented the students from being active and engaging in the speaking task. Furthermore, these challenges showed that developing speaking skills through CLT required linguistic support and confidence-building strategies. In CLT, these barriers reduced the quantity and quality of negotiation of meaning: students produced shorter responses, avoided initiating interaction, and relied on more confident peers. Consequently, role-plays and discussions did not create the sustained target-language exchange anticipated in the lesson plans. The issue was therefore not merely that students lacked vocabulary, but that insufficient linguistic scaffolding and fear of public error prevented communicative tasks from functioning as opportunities for language use.

Table 3. Students' Struggles in Group Work

Data	Source
<i>I tried to solve the problem by changing the teaching strategies, such as making them work in groups. Turned out, it didn't work for some students because they said the group task didn't help.</i>	Self-Reflective Narrative Frame (March 12, 2025).
<i>If it is like being in a group, it does not feel enjoyable, because sometimes I get a group that does not give much help. I do not like it.</i>	P1, Interview (February 19, 2025, 00:07:02).
<i>I prefer individuals, because sometimes one person is lacking if you are in a pair. They do not understand enough, so I did it alone.</i>	P2, Interview (February 19, 2025, 00:04:08).

Students' lack of vocabulary and confidence hindered their individual speaking performance and affected their participation in group work activities. The teacher-researcher adjusted the teacher-researcher's teaching strategy in another teacher-researcher's teaching activity by assigning group work. The teacher-researcher assigned a sentence race task, where students were divided into small groups and given some vocabulary word cards. Each group was tasked with constructing as many meaningful sentences as possible using the given vocabulary within a specified time limit. The purpose of this task was to encourage collaborative work among students by discussing sentence structures and meanings, and then combining their sentences to present to the class. According to Haliwanda (2021), the CLT approach promotes peer interaction and collaboration through group work to enhance students' speaking opportunities and improve their fluency, accuracy, and clarity in using English. The lesson plan allocated group work for collaborative sentence construction, but it did not specify differentiated roles or additional vocabulary support for students with lower proficiency.

She realized that certain aspects made group work less effective for some students. This can also be seen from the interview responses, P1 expressed frustration about being placed in a group, indicating that not everyone can learn with many people. Some students may perform better and more efficiently when working individually. Another student, P2, highlighted that the abilities and habits of other group members often hinder the effectiveness of group work. When group members struggle to understand the material or exhibit low motivation, it becomes challenging to engage in meaningful discussions. Näykki et al. (2021) found that students encountered more socio-cognitive than socio-emotional challenges during group tasks while completing the assignments and reflecting on their group performance. This suggests that collaborative learning activities require more support in guiding students through cognitive processes such as understanding content, solving problems, and staying focused on the learning goals.

Table 4. Students' Anxiety in Speaking

Data	Source
<i>Finally, at the end of the class, we were doing feedback together, and I asked them about their feelings and the challenges while they performed in front of the class. They said it was hard and nervous. Yeah, I saw that, and I think they looked hesitant to speak because they feel afraid of making mistakes.</i>	Self-Reflective Narrative Frame (March 12, 2025).
<i>I was nervous, but I felt challenged.</i>	P1, Interview (February 19, 2025, 00:17:52).
<i>Nervous, embarrassed to speak in front of others, and lacking in public speaking. That is it.</i>	P2, Interview (February 19, 2025, 00:12:10).

Another psychological factor, such as students' speaking anxiety and fear of making mistakes, also emerged as a significant barrier to student communication. Although the teacher-researcher had prepared learning activities that encouraged students to talk and interact, they were reluctant to get involved. Excerpt 4 showed that many students expressed feeling nervous and hesitant when speaking in front of the class. This hesitation was often rooted in their fear of being judged or making errors, particularly in pronunciation or sentence construction. As further reflected in the interviews, both P1 and P2 admitted feeling nervous and lacking confidence in public speaking. According to Suparlan (2021), these issues are closely related to speaking anxiety and negatively impact second language learning. It means that higher anxiety levels tend to result in lower learning outcomes. These obstacles create a passive classroom atmosphere and do not support the main principles of CLT,

which focus on active and student-centered communication.

Environmental Barriers to CLT

Another challenging moment the teacher-researcher faced as a pre-service teacher was the presence of peer mockery. During class activities, some students would become visibly hesitant or completely silent when asked to speak in front of the class. These struggles reduced their motivation to learn English, contributing to a less supportive classroom environment.

Table 5. Unsupportive Classroom Environment

Data	Source
<i>My friends often tease me and say I am being too English.</i>	P2, Interview (February 19, 2025, 00:20:46).

The classroom situation she experienced showed that the classroom atmosphere becomes less supportive when many students feel anxious or afraid of making mistakes. When some students exhibit reluctance to speak English, it can have a negative impact on others, leading to a passive and unmotivated classroom environment. Asvio and Batusangkar (2017) found that the learning environment has a strong and positive influence on learning achievement, indicating a close correlation between the learning environment, learning motivation, and student achievement. Additionally, in the student interview, P2 had difficulty speaking English because his classmates had teased him. When a student performed in front of the class and made a small mistake, it was often met with laughter from peers. This made some students feel uncomfortable speaking English in front of the class due to the fear of being judged or ridiculed by their peers. Damayanti and Listyani (2020) discussed how students’ awareness of their poor English performance in the communicative class can lower their self-esteem and contribute to their reluctance to participate. In this context, Ali et al. (2020) emphasized that having supportive peers is crucial in creating a positive classroom environment, as peer groups can significantly enhance the learning process. However, in the class, the lack of supportive peer interaction and students’ fear of judgment made it challenging to create a safe space. Instead of fostering students’ confidence, the classroom became filled with hesitation and pressure. This reflected that the classroom environment failed to support the communicative and active participation that are the core principles of CLT.

Teacher’s Unpreparedness

The teaching practicum program marked her first opportunity and experience as a teacher in an actual classroom. As a pre-service teacher, the teacher-researcher faced several internal and external limitations. She struggled to fully understand the students’ interests and needs, making it challenging to create an engaging and relevant classroom. In addition, she experienced personal anxiety and overthinking in preparing lesson plans, which often caused her to focus too rigidly on structure rather than on classroom dynamics. Moreover, the limited duration of the teacher-researcher’s teaching practice made it challenging to consistently build strong connections with students and apply the CLT approach. These factors highlight how a teacher’s lack of preparation can become a significant barrier to implementing CLT.

Table 6. Unpreparedness of a Pre-Service Teacher

Data	Source
<i>It would have been very helpful if I had recognized the students’ interests and needs first.</i>	Self-Reflective Narrative Frame (March 12, 2025).
<i>Maybe it is because of the way the material is delivered. Games should be included, so it would not be boring.</i>	P1, Interview (February 19, 2025,00:11:06).
<i>Maybe have to play the game first.</i>	P2, Interview (February 19, 2025, 00:12:58).

The teacher-researcher emphasized the implementation of communicative tasks

during the teacher-researcher's teaching practice, assuming they would naturally engage students. Furthermore, the teacher-researcher frequently opened the class with simple warm-up activities, such as showing a picture related to the topic and asking students a few guided questions to activate their background knowledge. The teacher-researcher opened the class with a casual storytelling activity connected to the learning material in some sessions. These activities were intended to capture students' attention and help them relate the content to their daily lives. However, the teacher-researcher overlooked a crucial aspect, which is understanding what genuinely interests and motivates the students. If the teacher-researcher had taken time at the beginning to identify their preferences, learning styles, or feelings toward learning English, the teacher-researcher would have been better equipped to design meaningful and relevant activities. Dos Santos (2020) indicated that one of the advantages of using the CLT approach is increasing students' interest in language learning. However, the failure to align the learning activities with the students' interests resulted in a disconnect between the lesson's goals and the learners' engagement. As this was her first time teaching, the teacher-researcher was still learning to adjust her methods to suit the classroom dynamics and students' preferences. P1 suggested that the way the teacher-researcher delivered the material could be improved by incorporating games to make the lesson more engaging and less boring. Similarly, P2 expressed that starting the class with a game might help create a more engaging atmosphere. As Maryam (2020) discussed, using communicative language games provided students with more opportunities to practice speaking English through interactive activities, thereby increasing their motivation to participate in speaking classes. These responses highlighted that her instructional approach did not fully align with the students' expectations, affecting their motivation and participation in class. Document analysis similarly showed that the plans emphasized task completion and oral production but contained limited procedures for assessing students' interests before the lesson.

Table 7. Student Anxiety Related to Peer Mockery

Data	Source
<i>My friends often tease me and say I am being too English.</i>	P2, Interview (February 19, 2025, 00:20:46).

The student excerpt in Table 7 further illustrates how peer mockery intensified speaking anxiety. Although this evidence concerns the learner rather than the teacher, it is relevant to the teacher-researcher's preparedness because the lesson plans did not include explicit norms or intervention strategies for preventing ridicule during oral performance. In a CLT classroom, failure to establish psychological safety can reduce risk-taking and voluntary participation. This experience indicated that novice teachers need preparation not only in designing communicative tasks but also in managing peer responses and protecting learners' willingness to speak.

Table 8. Limited Teaching Time

Data	Source
<i>Besides that, since my teaching practicum time is limited. I wish it was conducted in the first semester, so I can implement CLT several times to see students' progress in learning English.</i>	Self-Reflective Narrative Frame (March 12, 2025).

As an external factor, time constraints significantly hindered the effective implementation of CLT during the teaching practicum. The teaching practice program was conducted in the second semester of the academic year, often disrupted by annual events

such as the Ramadhan break, Eid holidays, and final examinations for third-year students. At my school, all teaching and learning activities were suspended during Ramadan, which limited her opportunities to build connections and engage students through the CLT approach. After the break, regular classroom instruction was not conducted immediately, as the school focused on exam preparation. These interruptions resulted in inconsistent learning sessions, making it difficult to establish a stable learning environment. According to Andersen et al. (2016), increasing instructional time significantly improves students' academic performance and language skills. Since CLT requires multiple sessions for interactive activities, group discussions, and real-world communication practice, limited time became a significant constraint. As a result, the teacher-researcher was unable to facilitate meaningful interactions and provide essential and personalized feedback to the students. This experience highlighted the importance of time management and institutional support in successfully implementing communicative language teaching.

Within this particular practicum context, the teacher-researcher interpreted the constrained implementation of CLT as the product of interacting with student-related, environmental, and teacher-related factors. This interpretation is not intended to generalize to all CLT classrooms; rather, it illustrates how communicative principles may be difficult to enact when learners need greater language support, the classroom climate discourages risk-taking, and a novice teacher has limited time and mentoring.

CONCLUSION

This narrative inquiry explored factors that constrained CLT implementation during an eight-meeting teaching practicum in one ninth-grade class. The findings suggest that the difficulties did not arise from a single cause. They emerged from the interaction of students' limited vocabulary, speaking anxiety, uneven participation in group work, peer mockery, interruptions to instructional continuity, and the pre-service teacher-researcher's limited knowledge of students' needs. The lesson plans demonstrated an intention to provide authentic and communicative activities, but the narrative and interviews indicated that these activities were not always accompanied by sufficient linguistic, affective, and collaborative scaffolding.

These findings should be interpreted cautiously because they are based on one teacher-researcher's narrative, two supporting student interviews, and documents from a single practicum class. The study did not formally measure changes in English proficiency or motivation; therefore, it does not claim that CLT was ineffective in general. Rather, it shows why the planned CLT activities were experienced as being less effective in this particular context.

The study has practical implications for teacher education. Teacher educators can prepare pre-service teachers to diagnose learners' linguistic and affective readiness before implementing demanding communicative tasks. Supervising teachers and lecturers should provide sustained feedback on classroom management, differentiated grouping, vocabulary scaffolding, and strategies for creating psychologically safe speaking environments. Future pre-service teachers may benefit from introducing CLT gradually, combining structured language support with meaningful interaction, and using ongoing learner feedback to adapt lesson plans. Future research could use daily reflective journals, classroom observations, a larger range of student perspectives, and longitudinal assessment to examine how CLT practices develop across a longer practicum period.

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