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**CHALLENGES AFFECTING THE IMPLEMENTATION OF COMMUNICATIVE
LANGUAGE TEACHING (CLT) IN THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE IN
SELECTED SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN FCT, ABUJA**

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Abstract

Despite the recognition of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) for its effectiveness in developing learners' communicative competence in English language, studies suggest that its implementation remains inconsistent in secondary schools in Nigeria. This study examines the factors affecting the successful operationalisation of CLT in selected secondary schools in the Federal Capital Territory (FCT), Abuja. Five English language teachers, purposively selected from randomly selected private and public secondary schools in Abuja, were interviewed with the aid of semi-structured questionnaire. Data collected from the interviews were analysed qualitatively through the lens of Everett Rodgers' (2003) Diffusion of Innovation theory (DoI). The findings show that the utilisation of CLT in secondary schools in Abuja is affected by factors such as time constraint, lack of training of teachers, the nature of English language examinations, negative perceptions of CLT, and the nature of the English language curriculum. The study concludes that while CLT has the potential of improving learners' proficiency in English language, its successful implementation in schools in the FCT depend on addressing the identified challenges. It recommends deliberate intervention by stakeholders towards improved teachers' training, reviewing the duration of English language lessons, reduction of teachers' workload, and incorporating CLT activities in the English language curriculum.

Keywords: Communicative language teaching, communicative competence, English as a second language, language acquisition

Background to the Study

The problem of English language teaching methods is an enduring concern in Nigeria where the English language is an official language, and the medium of instruction in schools (NPE, 2013). Okpala (2023) decries English teachers' overreliance on traditional teaching methods as one of the major problems with implementing the English language syllabus in secondary schools in Nigeria. The changing dynamics of teaching and learning English language in the 21st century generally require the instructional approach that can foster language use more actively. To this end, many scholars (Gil et al., 2019; Pratt, 2018; Richards & Rodgers, 2014; Littlewood, 2007) commend CLT as being among the most popular teaching approaches in the contemporary times.

In spite of the strong commendations of CLT, many studies (Chen & Shuib, 2026; Gu, 2025; Mothudi & Bosman, 2015) suggest that teachers of the English language perceive CLT as inadequate to improve English language performance, incompatible with a large class size, complex and 'incapable of providing sufficient support required to pass the West African Certificate Examinations (WAEC)' (Aza, 2018. P. 11). These perceptions are particularly worrisome due to the success recorded by CLT in Europe, America and some parts of Asia over the decades since its inception in the 1970s. If CLT is successful elsewhere, why can it not succeed in Nigeria?

The aim of this study is therefore to examine the major factors affecting the implementation of CLT in public and private secondary schools in FCT, Abuja. Specifically, the present study seeks to investigate the institutional, environmental and personal factors that affect the effective implementation of CLT with a view to recommending solutions on improving the quality of teaching and learning English language in schools in FCT. The findings and recommendations will provide policymakers with clear directions on making meaningful intervention towards a successful implementation of CLT in secondary schools in Nigeria.

Literature Review

Conceptual review

Extant research studies on the teaching of the English language as a second language (ESL) have identified various challenges with implementing the ESL project in different contexts around the world. Okpala, (2023) states that among the most significant challenges affecting the quality of teaching and learning of English are inappropriate teaching methods. Yaqobi, (2022) observes that in many non-native English speakers (NNES) countries, language teachers follow traditional teacher-centered EFL pedagogies which he argues, may lead to lack of proficiency and possibly hinder learners from reaching the desired goals of language learning objectives, particularly, the desired communicative goals.

Dissatisfactions with traditional teaching methods led to major reforms in language teaching theories. Interactive language theories such as Vygotsky's (1978) social constructivism theory, Krashen's (1982) input hypothesis, Swain's (1995) output hypothesis, and Long's (1983) interaction hypothesis have brought about improved language teaching methods such as communicative language teaching (CLT), task-based teaching and other multimodal approaches. Unlike traditional teaching methods which focus on structure and mastery of forms, the recent teaching methods place a high premium on promoting language learners' abilities to use language in real-time. Guided by language theories, especially the interactive language theory and the input hypothesis by Vygotsky (1978) and Krashen (1982), respectively, these teaching methods provide directions on how the English language is taught around the world today (Richards, 2015). This review focuses more on CLT.

Communicative language teaching (CLT)

The concept of communicative competence was first introduced by Dell Hymes (1973). Since then, researchers have developed theories and practices of communicative language teaching. Indeed, Richards and Rodgers (2014) argue that the goal of language teaching is to develop what Hymes (1973) referred to as 'communicative competence,' CLT emphasises that language teaching is built around communicative situations where language learners perform different roles similar to those they encounter in real-life situations (Hedge, 2014). One of the strands of CLT is a shift away from a focus on how language was formed to an emphasis on what language is used for (Harmer, 2014). Harmer suggests a paradigm shift from teacher-centered to student-centered classroom experience. Ugwu & Onwe, (2022) agree that in general, communicative language teaching has sophisticated ideas of what students need to learn, which have undoubtedly freed the classroom from the rigors of the academic and audio-lingual styles. Qasserras (2023) submits that CLT emphasises the importance of fluency over accuracy, making it a popular choice for language instruction in many contexts.

Richards and Rodger (2001) further elaborate the concept of CLT by providing the following fundamental principles on which CLT is anchored. In the implementation of CLT, emphasis should be on the integration of linguistic form, meaning, and function. Fluency and accuracy are complementary principles underlying communicative techniques, therefore learners should be engaged in the pragmatic, authentic, and functional use of language. Reading and writing skills should be promoted through pair or group work. While evaluating fluency and accuracy, errors should be tolerated as a natural part of the learning process. The teacher should facilitate students' learning of the target language, and the student's native language should be avoided. Chen & Shuib (2026) extol CLT by stating that unlike traditional approaches, CLT places greater emphasis on providing students with opportunities for interaction and authentic communication in real-life contexts. They observe that many EFL classrooms worldwide have shifted from traditional language teaching methods, such as grammar-translation and reading-focused instruction, to communicative language teaching (CLT).

The triangular relationship in the understanding and application of CLT is very important to highlight; the teacher, the learner and the CLT materials. The teacher is a facilitator and a provider of comprehensible input (Krashen, 1985). Brown, (2007) agrees that the role of a teacher in CLT is that of a facilitator and a guide, not an all-knowing source of knowledge. The learner is an active participant and a negotiator of meaning; the teacher only provides the input or guide and the required resources with which the learner assumes ownership of their learning activities (Krashen, 1985; Parvin, 2016). The teaching materials for a CLT classroom are derived from specifically designed texts and other forms of input, provided the learning processes they stimulate are authentic (Widdowson, 1978).

Empirical Review

This part of the review examines the various perspectives from which language scholars have explored CLT ranging from application, effectiveness, and perceptions. Areas of convergence and divergence have been highlighted in order to establish a gap which this study attempts to fill.

Exploring the application and effectiveness of CLT in language teaching, Eze, (2024) investigated the effectiveness of CLT compared in improving students' performance in Igbo poetry in South-East Nigeria, adopting a quasi-experimental design. The results of the study reveal that; CLT significantly enhances students' understanding, creativity, engagement, and performance in Igbo poetry; CLT positively influences students' interests and motivations. The

study recommends among others, that addressing implementation challenges can further enhance the effectiveness of CLT in secondary schools. Seminars and workshops for secondary schools, where parents, students and teachers can learn the importance of indigenous language in human development.

Similar to Eze's (2024) study is a research by Husaini, (2025) which proposes a pedagogical model for integrating Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) into Hausa language classrooms. Drawing largely on cultural perspectives, Husaini explores the compatibility of CLT principles with Hausa language teaching. The study concludes that effective adoption of CLT can revitalize Hausa language education, promote linguistic confidence among students, and align local language pedagogy with global communicative standards. These studies show similarity in their interests in employing CLT in the teaching of indigenous languages in Nigeria. While these studies attempt to apply CLT in the teaching of Igbo and Hausa languages, the present study explores the various challenges that affect the implementation of CLT in the teaching of English in FCT, Abuja, North Central Nigeria, where studies on CLT are quite rare.

Curious about how CLT is perceived in Nigeria, Aza, (2018), who was at the time a postgraduate student studying in the United Kingdom, investigated English language teachers' perceptions of CLT in the teaching of the grammar of English in secondary schools in Nigeria. Krashen's (1982) input hypothesis guided the analysis and the findings reveal lack of training, limited awareness and negative perceptions of CLT by English language teachers in Nigeria. The teachers feel so strongly against CLT that they suggest it is 'unethical' to teach second language learners without drilling and correcting errors on the spot (p. 54).

An earlier study by Mothudi & Bosman, (2015) explores a similar concern in Botswana. The study investigated teachers' perceptions of the implementation of CLT in the metropolitan junior secondary schools in Botswana. Contrary to Aza's (2018) finding on lack of teachers' training, Mothudi & Bosman's (2015) study reveals that English teachers in Botswana have been well trained to implement CLT. However, despite their training and level of awareness of CLT, the teachers in Botswana believe that CLT does not necessarily lead to improved English language proficiency among learners.

Both studies make similar findings about teachers' perceptions of CLT but contradict on teachers' training. This suggests that the CLT project has attained a more advanced stage in Botswana than its current status in Nigeria. While the above studies focus on perceptions, this study focuses on the general factors affecting the implementation of CLT in secondary schools in FCT, Abuja. Instead of input hypothesis, the study adopts Diffusion of Innovation (DoI) theory by Rodgers, (2003) to view CLT from a different lens, altogether.

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts Diffusion of Innovation theory propounded by Everett Rodgers, a communication theorist at the University of New Mexico, in 1962. Diffusion of Innovation theory (DoI) is suitable for this study because it offers a comprehensive perspective for understanding why the implementation of CLT faces challenges in the Nigeria context. Rogers's theory of Diffusion Model is one of the widely used curriculum innovation model, the main concept in innovation literature and an important stream for studying innovation (Rahman, et al., 2018).

Diffusion of innovation theory

Diffusion of Innovation Theory (henceforth, DoI) explains how new ideas, practices, and technologies spread within a social system. It elucidates the process by which a new concept is

adopted by different people who contribute to or start using the innovation. Dol argues that the rate of adoption of an innovation depends on how it is perceived by potential adopters of the innovation. Rodgers, (2003) highlights five attributes of DOI as follows: relative advantage, compatibility, complexity, trialability and observability:

Relative advantage refers to whether an innovation is perceived as an idea that it supersedes. It reflects stakeholders' perception of how much better an innovation is compared to the idea, programme, or product it replaces. Compatibility is the degree to which a new product or method aligns with an individual's existing beliefs, habits, expectations, experiences, needs and values. Complexity refers to the degree to which an innovation is challenging to use and serves as a major barrier towards adoption. Technologies and innovations that require minimal effort are more likely to be adopted than those perceived as complicated by potential users. Trialability means the extent to which experts are willing to test an innovation in their field before making a decision on its adoption. Observability is a measure of how much a person can determine and observe the results of an innovation. It is an extent to which an individual recognizes the tangible, observable outcomes from using new systems.

The researchers applied the conceptual postulations in Dol in this study by examining the degree to which CLT is perceived in relation to traditional teaching methods (i.e., relative advantage); the extent to which CLT is consistent with existing values, past experiences, and need of English teachers and students (i.e., compatibility); the extent to which CLT is perceived by English teachers as being complicated to use (i.e., complexity). The study also examines the rate at which CLT is experimented in classroom situations (i.e., trialability), and how the results of CLT interventions are visible (i.e., observability).

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopts qualitative research approach, using interviews as the major instrument for data collection. A qualitative approach is an inquiry process into how people understand social or human problems and form meanings from them (Creswell, 2007). With the aid of a semi-structured questionnaire, the researcher conducted face-to-face interviews with five (5) English language teachers, each of the teachers having a minimum qualification of a Bachelor's degree and at least five years of teaching experience in secondary school. The choice of interviews was informed by the teachers' first-hand experience with teaching and learning dynamics in the classroom. From their experience, the teachers provide more detailed information about the challenges of implementing CLT beyond the mere numbers that a survey study would reveal. Face-to-face interviews were preferred due to their flexibility for follow-up questions in line with the participants' responses. Since the researchers reside in the Federal Capital Territory, Abuja, proximity was another major factor that determined this type of interview procedure. A total of five (5) teachers were randomly selected from two government secondary schools and two private secondary schools in the Federal Capital Territory, Abuja and provided consent letters for their consent to participate in the study. To observe ethical standards and protect the privacy of the participants, the researchers ascribed the participants anonymous labels as T1, T2, T3, T4, and T5. The interviews were coded under the various themes that guide the analysis.

Data Analysis

The analysis of the interviews data reveals great insights into the numerous challenges hindering the successful implementation of CLT in secondary schools in FCT, Abuja. The challenges are analysed under five themes: time constraint; the nature of English language examinations; inadequate training of teachers and lack of confidence; negative perceptions of CLT, and the nature of the curriculum.

Time constraint

Responding to the likelihood that he would use CLT activities during lessons, T4 admits, ***‘The curriculum provides for the teaching of grammar only once in a week. So as much as I would like to do more activities, I am constrained by the time provided on the time table’***. T2 expresses similar frustration, ***‘we teach (English language) only once in a week and it is not enough especially when you have so much to cover before examination’***. These assertions reinforce earlier findings by Chikelu, (2024) that teachers are under extensive pressure to impress the school management and parents who have high expectations of students’ achievements in internal and external examinations.

Shown a template with different classroom activities and asked his opinion of the template, T3 responds; ***‘So it is okay but for an environment like ours, the game part (CLT activity) particularly may be very difficult. That will be quite challenging in terms of timing; you can’t achieve all these in 40 minutes’***. This appears to be a recurrent concern in many parts of the world where CLT has been introduced recently. The teachers perceive CLT activities as complex because they are time-taken, therefore unsuitable for a 40-minutes lesson period.

The Nature of English language examinations

Asked about the nature of the examinations the students take, T1 says, ***‘Students mostly answer multiple choice questions on principles of grammar. They also answer questions on comprehension passages.’*** These examinations do not test communicative competence and oral fluency; they test the ability to correctly identify grammatical structures and proficiency in reading and writing. With this nature of assessment, there is more emphasis on grammatical accuracy and written English than there is on oral communication. This is why the teachers would favour a method that ***‘explains the basics’*** (T4).

The teachers believe that taught communicatively, the students would master an aspect that is not required to pass examinations and may fail such examinations. T1 agrees by stating that ***‘CLT activities don’t promote deep learning. Students taught this way will only have surface knowledge of English and will not do well in examinations.’*** While IELTS tests and TOEFL test the four language skills of listening, reading, speaking and writing, internal and external examinations in Nigerian schools only test reading and writing. Basically, the knowledge of sounds is tested through a sound identification activity also carried out in writing.

T4 went further to highlight the possible implications of employing CLT in the class; ***‘if I use this method to teach, the students will fail English. The school management will assume I don’t know how to teach, and so will the parents’*** [of the students]. This is consistent with the assertion by Osakwe, (2016) that many teachers tend to orientate their teaching towards methods that can help students develop writing skills in order to address the various aspects of the English paper with relative ease and pass examinations. While international examinations such as the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) and Test of

English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), conducted by British Council and Education Testing Service respectively, assess the four language skills of listening, reading, speaking and writing, internal and external examinations in Nigerian schools only assess reading and writing. The knowledge of English sounds is tested through a sound identification activity also carried out in writing without a practical speaking component. The teachers consider CLT as inadequate in supporting the achievement of good grades in examinations. As a result, they would not adopt it for use.

Teachers' inadequate training and lack of confidence

The tension that comes with employing a new innovations and technologies pitches the teachers against CLT. T2, admits; ***'I am more comfortable with using activity C [deductive teaching activity] actually.*** She finds CLT activities strange and complicated; ***'for this (CLT) to be implemented successfully, the teacher must learn its application and the students too must adjust to learning in that way'.*** T3 admitted he never heard about CLT in his entire six-years teaching career. T2 said she attended a training on interactive teaching but she could not tell if that was the same as CLT. These insights underscore the point that without the required background, training and positive attitude, it is difficult for a teacher to teach a class communicatively (Richards & Rodger, 2014).

T5 equally sounds indifferent about CLT activities by admitting; ***'ehh...I have not used these activities before'.*** Asked if he felt the activities are capable of stimulating learning, T5 expressed uncertainty: ***'I cannot tell since I have not used them before'.*** T1 agrees she would use CLT activities but only together with other activities with which she is familiar. ***'Yes I would like to use them but together with other activities I have been using'.*** The use of different teaching methods (eclectic approach) in the class is generally commendable. However, her response to a follow-up question, 'I do not know why the students will be the ones talking and I, the teacher, will be the one listening.' suggests lack of confidence to manage CLT dynamics independently more strongly than the desire to employ an eclectic approach. It is also likely that she does not believe these activities alone can help her achieve the aims of her English language lessons, which is another point entirely in the succeeding theme.

The findings show teachers' reluctance to trialability of CLT, from Rodgers' perspective. Teachers without adequate training will ordinarily find CLT complex, therefore unwilling to use it. Without confidence, the studied teachers can barely see relative advantage in CLT, so they readily resist its adoption

Negative perceptions of CLT

The teachers do not believe that CLT provides the necessary rigour that is required to transmit deep knowledge to the learner. In similar research conducted by Rahman & Kaur, (2018) the English language teachers state that the CLT approach alone is not suitable to teach English language in Bangladesh. T4 pointed this out, ***'these activities (CLT) do not promote deep learning.'*** Similarly, T3 doubts the appropriateness of CLT especially in early-years' instruction; ***'They (CLT activities) are not good for beginners'.*** He explains further: ***'I believe in looking at the concepts, studying the rules, then applying them'.*** He suggests that even if CLT would be implemented, it should be with students at the advanced level who have already been thoroughly drilled on the rules of grammar and accuracy of pronunciation through grammar translation.

Submissions from all the participants seem quite consistent, each preferring tradition teaching methods to CLT. For T5, the end justifies the means. His aim of teaching English is to ***'equip the students with the correct grammar of the language. But after this, the students will be able to use English in real life.'*** He personalises this assumption by alluding to his own language learning experience: ***'After all, some of us were taught this way [teacher cantered] but we speak good English and we have made good teachers.'*** He insists that learners do not necessarily need to be taught communicatively to be able to speak a language. T2 agrees: ***'I think it is a necessary background getting the rules, knowing how they are applied. With that you can easily create one-on-one together. Concepts should be taught first then application'***. For her, any teaching approach that does not pay attention to the rules of the language is counterproductive. Similarly, T4 holds the opinion that second language learners (L2 speakers) learn English by its rules; ***'the students apply the rules when they speak'. When then will the students learn the rules if we commit all the time to developing communicative competence alone?'***

Another area that most of the participants disagree strongly with CLT is on the procedure of error correction. CLT advocates trial and error by the learners, suggesting that teachers should tolerate the error in an effort to motivate students (Richards & Rogers, 2001; Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011) T1 interrogates why CLT discourages on-the-spot error correction and maintains that if a child has mispronounced a word while making a contribution for instance, ***'it is important that at that time the correction is taken. In fact it is ethically wrong to watch a learner commit errors without correcting them'***.

CLT on the other hand sees errors as a natural phenomenon in language learning and advocates that the learner should rather be guided with clues to realise and correct their error by themselves (Richards, 2015). This should be delayed in order not to interrupt the flow of communication. For T1, however, delayed error correction or absence of one is a wilful failure of a teacher to perform their duty. Asked to tick the activities they prefer to use during lessons from a pre-designed template with drills and practice, dictation, and demonstration on one hand; role-play, bingo games, and making a travel diary on the other, the teachers overwhelmingly ticked the later set of activities. Since the teachers feel that CLT is better than traditional teaching methods, they do not accept it as having a relative advantage, thereby resisting its adoption.

The nature of the curriculum and the expected outcomes

On the English language curriculum, the teachers reveal that the expected outcomes of the curriculum do not require teaching communicatively. ***'The objectives for teaching the complex sentence for instance, are: a. students should be able to define a complex sentence b. students should be able to construct a complex sentence using the correct conjunctions c. students should differentiate complex sentence from other sentence types. Now if I teach using these activities [CLT] without analysis, how can the students do all these at the end of the lesson? (T5).'***

T3 emphasises the importance of the curriculum to the choice of instructional pedagogies that will succeed in the school and those that will be an incongruity: ***'We also look at the ability of the learner to connect with the rules that govern the structure of the language. ...we also look at the ability of the child to apply those rules in writing. And then the child is able to articulate as close as possible, the phonemes like the native'***

speakers would. So the Nigerian curriculum and syllabus expect the learner to master the operational rules of grammar. She suggests that she teaches in a way that ensures the achievement of the curriculum objectives which quite clearly underscores Obanya's (2002) argument that there should be a perfect match between what is prescribed, what is practiced, and consequently what is achieved.

T1 categorically states that **'the curriculum does not provide for the assessment of speaking'**. It is understood in the context of her submission why she is more concerned about teaching what would be assessed during examinations; since speaking is not tested, communication is not necessary. T1's response reinforces teacher T3's that **'The curriculum prescribes written assessments only'**. These arguments point towards a common target; the students are taught to pass examinations first and foremost, then they can learn to speak later. Since the teachers cannot establish a link between the curriculum and CLT, they see no relative advantage in adopting CLT over traditional teaching methods, therefore they reject it.

Discussion of Findings

Findings from the interviews reveal that one of the major factors militating against a successful implementation of CLT in schools in the FCT is insufficient time. Each of the participants expressed frustration with time constraints. First, each aspect of the English language (i.e., reading, writing, vocabulary and grammar) is taught only once in a week. Second, an English language lesson lasts for only forty minutes. The near-absence of CLT activities in schools in FCT denies the learners the opportunity to negotiate meaning' which Long (1996) identifies as central to language acquisition. Basically, the teaching and learning of English language in secondary schools in Abuja is geared towards sequential continuous assessments, end-of-term examinations and final-year external examinations conducted by examinations bodies such as the West African Examinations Council (WAEC), and National Examinations Council (NECO). The teachers therefore teach to test and not necessarily to meet real communicate goals.

Another factor deduced from the interviews is the teachers' lack of confidence in their ability to manage CLT activities in the classroom due to limited exposure and lack of training. They seem unmotivated about CLT because they are more disposed towards the teaching procedures that they are familiar with, and which they have used over the years. Most of the teachers lack sufficient professional training on CLT principles and techniques, contrary to Mothudi & Bosman's (2015) findings that teachers in Botswana are sufficiently trained in CLT. Related to the above is the finding that English language teachers in Abuja do not believe that CLT provides the necessary rigour that is required to transmit deep knowledge to the learner, lending credence to Rahman & Kaur, (2018) who state that English language teachers believe that the CLT approach alone is not suitable to teach English language. It has also been discovered that English language teaching methods and approaches in secondary schools in the FCT have also been significantly influenced by the nature of the current Nigerian curriculum. The English language curriculum places more emphasis on writing and the mastery of structure, and less on oral fluency and communicative competence.

Conclusion and Recommendations

In summary, the implementation of CLT in secondary schools in Abuja is affected by many interrelated factors which include time constraint, the nature of English language curriculum and examinations, lack of teachers' training, and large class size. These factors accentuate English language teachers' negative perceptions of CLT and reinforce their reliance on traditional teaching methods especially audio-lingual method, grammar translation method and lecture method. From a Diffusion of Innovation point of view, the teachers perceive CLT as

complex, and lacking relative advantage and compatibility with the objectives of the English language curriculum and classroom realities. The study concludes that overcoming these challenges is not impossible if relevant stakeholders in secondary school education in Nigeria make deliberate effort to address the bottlenecks. To improve the practice of CLT and the chances of its adoption in Nigerian schools, the study recommends training workshops on CLT for English language teachers, inclusion of more communicative activities in the English language curriculum, more assessment of communicative competence in external examinations, and the reduction of workload for English language teachers.

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