

# Communicative language teaching implementation in Iran: The case of Junior high school Iranian state English teachers

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## Abstract

*Using an open-ended questionnaire to illicit the Iranian EFL state school teachers' experiences and perceptions about teaching in communicative language teaching (CLT) and teacher interviews as qualitative research procedures, the present study sought to examine how effective CLT approach might be in the critical years of the major curriculum innovation in Iran. To this end, we first asked 26 junior high school Iranian teachers to express their perceptions and teaching experiences in CLT. We then conducted semi-structured interviews with 12 of the teachers. The in-depth analyses of the survey and interview participants' perspectives towards and teaching experiences in CLT identified both macro and micro structural difficulties. Moreover, the study brought to attention, interalia, the need to provide teachers with constant teacher training support, to equip schools with instructional resources required by the particular curriculum innovation, to systematically seek the teachers' viewpoints in developing new textbooks embodying the new curriculum reform.*

**Keywords:** Iranian state schools; communicative language teaching; curriculum innovation; macro and micro structural difficulties

## 1. Background to the study

A major national curriculum innovation took place in Iran in the beginning of the new educational year in 2013. Before the 2013 national curriculum innovation took place in Iran, pre-university education was divided into three streams: elementary education (a five-grade education), secondary education (a three-grade education), and tertiary education (a 3-grade education plus one additional preparatory year prior to academic education). However, the new national curriculum brought about several changes in education in the country. First, it extended the duration of elementary education from the previous 5-grade elementary education to 6-grade elementary education by adding another grade to it. Second, it integrated secondary and tertiary education into a single stream thereby constituting of a 6-grade education prior to academic years. This stream came to be known as constituting two levels: junior high school (i.e. Grades 7, 8 and 9) and senior high school (i.e. Grades 10, 11 and 12). Foreign language learning especially English received dramatic changes in the way they were taught. Like the previous educational system English learning was introduced for Grade 7 students (aged 12) as a standard compulsory school subject with a new approach to teaching English named communicative language teaching (CLT). CLT was introduced as part of the Ministry of Education Development Project and its purpose is to teach language skills and familiarize students with communicative skills (National curriculum, 2012) for the students of the junior high school. However, students in the senior high school are expected to read intermediate level texts and be able to comprehend the reading texts. Moreover, they are expected to write a short essay and communicate with their peers as well as with native speakers (National curriculum, 2012). Stated otherwise, CLT emphasizes basic communicative abilities and problem solving tasks in a sense that the student could communicate while actively employing the four language

skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing) (National curriculum, 2012). Moreover, the new curriculum innovation is expected to familiarize students with the grammar of language, its vocabulary and appropriate grammatical choices (i.e., grammaring, our addition) so that the students could establish effective communication with others at international levels. Long time prior to the new curriculum innovation the aim of English as a foreign language (EFL) at state schools was to “enable students to use at least one (foreign) language to communicate with others at a survival level” (Secretariat of the Higher Council of Education, 2006, p. 43). However, over the past few years English, as a compulsory subject in primary education, started to be taught at a younger age (aged 12) in 2013 in Iranian secondary education in state schools due to the widespread importance of English and its global impact as an international language of business, technology, and science. To respond to this early introduction of English, the Ministry of Education begun to revise the existing foreign language teaching curriculum and introduced CLT. Grammar-focused, translation and reading-based approaches to English language teaching with their primary emphasis on the mastery of forms and usage had dominated English language education in Iran. Dissatisfaction with these traditional teaching methods and their inability to produce successful language learners in Iranian state schools (Khani, 2003) prompted the introduction of an alternative approach which could enable learners to communicate with English speakers. Accordingly, for the autumn educational year in 2013, new textbooks for Grades 7, 8 and 9 were developed embodying the principles of communicative approach. The new textbooks incorporated a communicative perspective and more listening and speaking exercises and activities compared to the older textbooks. Likewise, different teacher training schemes were designed to familiarize the Iranian EFL teachers with underlying principles of CLT and to help them teach new books in accordance with them. The rationale for the introduction of this teaching paradigm is to make pedagogical changes in teachers and students’ roles. Teacher-fronted and knowledge-transmission paradigm were considered to be the main classroom practices in Iranian state schools. With the initiation of CLT approach to language teaching, efforts were made to make a drastic shift in pedagogy from the teacher-fronted and knowledge-transmission paradigm to student-centred communicative teaching hoping that it promotes communicative language proficiency of the students. Therefore, in the new curriculum, learners should be put to the centre of attention and be helped to develop their communicative competence in English by taking active parts in the learning process through meaningful drills and communicative activities, such as games and with the aid of audio-visual materials.

## 2. CLT and its challenges

Communicative language teaching has expanded in scope and has been employed by different educators in different ways all over the world since its inception in the 1970s. It is characterized by focusing on the learner and his or her needs and wants, on communicative functions, on meaningful tasks, on using authentic materials and group activities and on creating a secure and stress-free atmosphere. However, it has not been without criticisms. One serious drawback is, as research (Nunan, 1987; Legutke and Thomas, 1991; Kumaravadivelu, 1993 and Thornbury, 1996) shows, so-called classroom communicative activities are anything but communicative being dominated by function and grammatical accuracy activities. In fact, there is a consensus that communicative language teaching is nothing new. Rather it is actually a recruit with the addition of functional features to an explicit focus on grammar in language classrooms thereby retaining a P-P-P (presentation–practice–production) sequence of lesson structure which is characteristic of grammar-based approaches to language teaching. Another serious drawback is related to what Swan (1985) considers as the “tabula rasa attitude” where L1 pragmatic knowledge which learners bring with themselves to the second and foreign language situations is neglected. In CLT, the idea is that “adult L2 learners do not possess normal pragmatic skills, nor can they transfer them, from their mother tongue” (Kumaravadivelu, 2006, p. 131) thereby resulting in the nonuse of L1 in the foreign and second language teaching and learning

classrooms. Critiquing the communicative language teaching approaches over the heavy reliance on the use of L2 in the classroom, Cook (2002) suggest teachers “develop the systematic use of the L1 in the classroom alongside the L2 as a reflection of the realities of the classroom situation, as an aid to learning and as a model for the world outside” (p. 332).

Another drawback is the role required of the teacher. The teacher is required to provide maximum input to the students by exclusively using target language in the classroom. The input should be meaningful, comprehensible, and elaborated. This tends to be a strong principle of the CLT (Rolin-Ianziti and Brownlie 2002) which is likely to make the implementation of CLT cumbersome in EFL contexts with mostly non-native teachers. Last but not the least drawback is that the quality of teaching in CLT depends on the abundance and quality of instructional materials. Unfortunately, only in the most equipped teaching situations does an abundance and quality of instructional materials support the development of communicative language abilities of learners. Schools which are deprived of these teaching materials cannot accord high priority to the quality of teaching in CLT.

### **3. Factors Influencing Curriculum Innovations**

Curriculum innovations are likely to be influenced by a number of factors (Fullan, 1991; Markee, 1997) among which are teachers’ perceptions and understandings, their background training, lack of guidance, the influence of textbooks, as well as other variables, i.e., large class size and insufficient resources which make a proposed curriculum difficult. A plethora of research reports investigating such factors in various countries (Li, 1998 in South Korea; Carless, 1998; 2001; 2003 in Hong Kong; Hu, 2002 in China; Nunan, 2003 in the Asia-Pacific region; Kırkgöz, 2006; 2007; 2008 in Turkey). Teachers’ perceptions and experiences of teaching language while relying on a specific method of teaching is one of those factors which might impact on the implementation of curriculum innovation in the classroom and is important in determining the ultimate success or failure of an educational innovation (Markee, 1997; Renzaglia, Hutchins, & Lee, 1997; Stuart & Thurlow, 2000; Borg, 2001). Renzaglia, Hutchins and Lee (1997) indicated that beliefs and attitudes are “not only reflected in teachers’ decisions and actions, there is evidence that teachers’ beliefs (and attitudes) drive important decisions and classroom practice” (p. 361). Allen (2002), Freeman (2002) and Borg (2003) indicated that teachers’ beliefs and attitudes exercise significant influences on the way they teach, the way they learn to teach, and the way they understand educational innovations. For instance, Johnson (1994) considered that “research on teachers’ beliefs [would] ultimately become one of the most valuable psychological constructs for teaching and teacher education” (p. 439). The reason is that teachers are principal agents of implementing curriculum reforms and are at the forefront of putting into practice curriculum initiatives, plans, and policies. Richardson (1996) believes that teachers, along with learners, are at the center of education. Their roles are so important that they have gone by different names in the literature on language teaching practices, policy and planning ‘policy makers in practice’ (Kırkgöz, 2009) and ‘curriculum implementers’ or ‘policy implementers’ (Wang, 2010). According to Kırkgöz (2009), “teachers are key players in implementing macro policy decisions in practice at the micro level” (p. 675).

According to Carless (1998), three teacher-related factors are likely to influence a curriculum innovation: teacher attitudes, teacher training and teachers’ understanding of the innovation. He points out that if teachers are to implement an innovation successfully, it is crucial that they possess positive attitudes, receive on-going training and support and have thorough understanding of both the theoretical principles and classroom applications of the proposed innovation. With regard to teachers’ attitude to curriculum change, Kennedy (1988) believes that “teachers may be required to change the way they think about certain issues, which is a deeper and more complex change” (p. 329). Teachers, therefore, need to be supported to help them adapt and accommodate new ideas into their instructional practices. However, many of these new ideas in teaching tend to be of Western origin thereby being developed in a different cultural and educational context. Therefore, in designing training courses, a major concern for

course designers is to take account of contextual and local realities as well as recognize the local values of the teacher and classroom context. Bhargava (1986) and Sampson (1984, 1990) have stressed the significance of local needs and the particular conditions of teaching English in the EFL countries. According to Tollefson (2002), since the types, functions, and implications of English language education differ from one place to another based on their historical, sociocultural, and economic particularities, language policies in education are not shaped in vacuum, they rather are formed in response to important social forces.

Also of importance is the interaction between teachers as implementers of a new curriculum and policy makers and curriculum developers. Hope and Pigford (2001) call for the constant dialogue between teachers as policy implementers and policy makers and argue that “those who shoulder responsibility for policy implementation... must also be involved in policy development”. If teachers as curriculum deliverers are not engaged in setting and developing macro educational policies or if their experiences, perceptions and understandings of curriculum initiatives are not systematically sought and examined, the implementation of such policies at the practice level “may ... be confounded by the resistance of the primary stakeholders, i.e. the teachers” (Williams, Williams, Guray, Bertram, Brenton, & McCormack, 1994). Likewise, Bamgbose (2003) argues that “no matter how desirable language policies may be, unless they are backed by the will to implement them, they cannot be of any effect” (p. 428).

#### **4. Review of the Previous Studies on Curriculum Innovations**

Li (1984) and Prabhu (1987) strongly defended the adoption and implementation of CLT in EFL contexts. In contrast, a significant body of research (e.g., Anderson, 1993; Chick, 1996; Ellis, 1994, 1996; Gonzalez, 1985; Kirkpatrick, 1984; Sano, Takahashi, & Yoneyama, 1984; Shamin, 1996; Tickoo, 1996; Valdes & Jhones, 1991; Zhu, 2003, Zhang, 2006 and Littlewood, 2007) shows that implementing CLT worldwide has encountered difficulties. Despite this, many countries have introduced CLT to their language teaching programs hoping that it will improve English teaching there. Sano, Takahashi and Yoneyama (1984) study of the Japanese students showed that the Japanese students were found not to feel a pressing need to use English, therefore efforts to promote communicative competence did not seem to be of a priority to the students. Kirkpatrick (1984) studied adoption of CLT in secondary schools in Singapore and found that the grammar-based approach which prevailed English language syllabus has made the English teaching context complex and the local use of CLT difficult. According to Gonzalez (1985), due to the fact that English instruction was irrelevant to the Philippine people’s needs in rural areas and they rarely used English, it made CLT implementation difficult there.

Chau and Chung’s (1987) exploration of the attitudes of Hong Kong educators toward adopting CLT in the local context revealed that teachers used CLT only sparingly because it required too much preparation time. Burnaby and Sun’s (1989) study of the views of 24 Chinese teachers of English on the appropriateness and effectiveness of “Western” language-teaching methods in China revealed difficulties in using CLT in language classrooms. The context of the wider curriculum, traditional teaching methods, class sizes and schedules, resources and equipment, the low status of teachers who teach communicative rather than analytical skills, and English teachers’ deficiencies in oral English and sociolinguistic and strategic competence were some of the constraints in adoption of communicative approach in Chinese teaching contexts. In Cuba, Valdes and Jhones (1991) found that teachers’ lack of proficiency in English, their traditional attitudes toward language teaching, the lack of authentic materials in a non-English-speaking environment, the need to redesign the evaluation system, and the need to adapt textbooks to meet the needs of communicative classes were obstacles that made CLT difficult to use in Cuban English classes. Exploring the pros and cons of implementing communicative approach in China, Anderson (1993) found that properly trained teachers and appropriate texts and materials were lacking, the students were not being accustomed to CLT and there were difficulties in evaluating students taught in CLT. These were among the obstacles that had to be overcome if desirable outcomes were expected. Ellis (1994) study of using CLT in Vietnam

revealed that class size, grammar-based examinations, and lack of exposure to authentic language were drawbacks that exerted significant influences on implementation of the communicative approach. In Pakistan, the learners' resistance as a barrier to introduce innovative CLT methodology was identified by Shamin (1996).

In South Africa Chick (1996) reported that introduction of the communicative approach to the teaching of English in KwaZulu was faced with constant unwillingness on the part of both teachers and students for the implementation of CLT. Li's (1998) study of perceived difficulties of a group of South Korean secondary school English teachers in adopting CLT revealed difficulties which had their origins in the differences between the underlying educational theories of South Korea and those of Western countries.

Reviewing prior related research, Littlewood (2007) came across some of the practical and conceptual concerns that have affected the implementation of CLT in primary and secondary schools of East Asia.

Rahman, Islam, Karim, et al.'s (2019) review of the prior research on implementation of CLT in Bangladesh brought to attention factors associated with teachers and teaching practices as dominant problems despite the fact that it had begun with lots of promises.

Iran is one of those EFL countries which has begun to implement CLT since 2013, hoping that it improves the then-present status of English language teaching and learning in the state schools. However, to what extent it brings about positive changes in English language teaching and learning in the Iranian state schools has remained underresearched.

## **5. Purpose and Justification for the Present Study**

As the studies reviewed above showed, efforts to implement (and even foster) the communicative approach in EFL countries were met with difficulties from both micro-structures and the broader social, cultural, and historical macro-structures that are ever present and ever changing in the foreign language teaching profession. These studies showed that the communicative approach was in some EFL contexts (e.g., in Philippine) inappropriate due to the fact that it did not address adequately the people's needs. Or the assumptions of CLT in some other contexts were not met thereby making its implementation difficult. Concurrent with the 2013 curriculum reforms in Iranian, CLT has been adopted as an approach to teaching English as a foreign language in Iranian state schools. Now that seven years have elapsed from the introduction of this approach in Iranian state schools, to the best knowledge of the researchers no or (little if any) research has reported to investigate the appropriacy or inappropriacy of this approach to teaching English in Iranian EFL school contexts. The researchers believe that the Iranian EFL teachers' beliefs and experiences are particularly important in informing policy makers, curriculum developers and textbook authors for the next years to come. Therefore, we believe that a thriving implementation of any educational reform is contingent on and tightly intertwined with how teachers perceive and experience the new approach to ELT. The Iranian state teachers as the main implementers of the new policy would be in better position to pass judgments about the pros and cons of using the communicative approach in Iranian state schools. To this end, we asked them to answer a set of questions about their teaching perspectives and experiences in using CLT in their classrooms (Appendix A). Also, interviews (Appendix B) were conducted with them to examine if the shift in pedagogy in the government's policy result in an improvement in students' communicative competence? Were Iranian state schools prepared to implement CLT in English instruction?

## **6. The Study**

### *6.1 Survey participants*

26 Iranian English teachers who were teaching at junior high schools in the Iranian state schools constituted the participants of the current study. Their students aged 11-12 years old in 18 different state schools. 10 of the teachers were male and 16 female ranging from 24 to 50 years in age. In order to be informed about the background of the teachers, we looked for their relevant

demographic data, e.g., information on the age, gender, and years of teaching experience (Table 1). They were asked to answer open-ended questions which aimed at investigating their teaching experiences using CLT. These questions were “open-ended, designed to explore the perspectives of the people concerned” (Hammersley, 1990, p. 31).

### 6.2 Interview Informants

12 out of the 26 survey participants were chosen for interviews. To choose the interview informants, we met two criteria: First, we followed Patton’s “maximum variation sampling” (cited in Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 200), and selected the interview informants who were as varied as possible in their age, sex, teaching experience, teaching setting. Second, we decided to include an equal number of male and female teachers and of teachers in rural and urban schools.

### 6.3. Data Collection Instruments and Data Analysis

According to Wiersma and Jurs (2005), in qualitative research, the analysis of data is “a process of successive approximation towards an accurate description and interpretation of the phenomenon” (p. 206). To this end, we used two ethnographic data collection tools to collect data for the present study: First, we asked 26 teacher participants to answer seven questions about their views and teaching experiences in CLT (Appendix A). Second, to follow Bailey and Nunan (1996), we conducted interviews with 12 of the teachers to delve deep into the teachers’ perspectives and experiences of what implementation of CLT requires, the nature of CLT and impacts that the teacher training scheme could have on their implementation of CLT. Stated otherwise, we interviewed the teachers in order to gain an emic perspective of the phenomena. The interviews were semi-structured conducted in ways that allowed us to ask questions beyond those asked in the questionnaire. To eliminate the possibility that the interviewees’ imperfect English might limit the information they provided, the interviews were conducted in Persian<sup>1</sup>. Also, efforts were made to ensure that interview questions were clear and precise (Appendix B).

All the interviews, which lasted 1–2 hours each, were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim as soon as the interviews ended. As part of the data analysis ‘member checking’ (Brown & Rodgers, 2003, p. 245) was carried out by giving the transcripts of the interviews to the participants for further verification. To identify the salient and recurring themes with reference to the both interview and survey participants’ understanding of the implementation of CLT, we drew on the strategy of analytic induction (Goetz & LeCompte, 1984) by repeatedly reading through the completed questionnaires and interview transcripts. To better illustrate the interview participants’ comments on the views reported below, each comment was identified with numbers referring to the interview participants in Table 1.

TABLE 1  
Background of Survey Participants

Participant	sex	age	years of teaching experience	Teaching setting
1(also the interview participant)	Male	26	5	Urban
2	Male	28	7	Rural
3 (also the interview participant)	Male	40	18	Urban
4 (also the interview participant)	Male	45	24	Rural
5	Male	36	16	Urban
6	Female	40	18	Rural
7	Female	41	19	Urban
8(also the interview participant)	Female	25	4	Rural
9 (also the interview participant)	Female	29	8	Rural
10	Female	33	10	Urban

11(also the interview participant)	Female	42	20	Rural
12 (also the interview participant)	Female	50	28	Urban
13	Female	31	11	Rural
14	Male	28	6	Urban
15(also the interview participant)	Male	34	10	Rural
16	Female	38	15	Urban
17	Female	44	23	Rural
18	Female	36	14	Rural
19	Female	34	12	Urban
20	Female	26	5	Rural
21(also the interview participant)	Female	36	14	Urban
22	Female	44	22	Urban
23	Female	42	20	Rural
24 (also the interview participant)	Male	45	25	Rural
25 (also the interview participant)	Male	38	16	Urban
26 (also the interview participant)	Male	24	2	Urban

## 7. Results and Discussion

The analysis of the teachers' answers to questions and transcription of the interviews with sample teachers revealed some difficulties into the implementation of CLT in the Iranian state schools. The difficulties reported by the participants were grouped into five categories: those caused (a) by the teacher, (b), by the educational system (c), by the textbooks (d) by the students, (e) and by the parents (see Table 2).

Table 2  
Difficulties Reported by the Teachers in Implementing CLT

Source and difficulty	Number of Mentions
<b>Teacher</b>	
<i>Little familiarity with the principles of CLT</i>	14
<i>Deficiency in strategic and sociolinguistic competence</i>	22
<i>Deficiency in written English</i>	24
<i>Deficiency in training in CLT</i>	22
<i>Misconceptions about CLT</i>	19
<b>Educational System</b>	
<i>Dull and demotivating classroom atmospheres</i>	24
<i>Lack of educational facilities in schools</i>	26
<i>Large classes</i>	25
<i>Lack of enough class hours</i>	25
<i>Lack of in-service training schemes in CLT for teachers</i>	26
<b>Textbooks</b>	
<i>Unfamiliar proper names</i>	22
<i>Claiming knowledge of English above the level of first Grade 1</i>	20
<i>Lengthy conversations</i>	24
<b>Students</b>	
<i>Lack of motivation for developing communicative competence</i>	20
<i>Lack of self-confidence in the students</i>	18
<i>Resistance to class participation</i>	19

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**Parents**

<i>Lack of awareness of importance of implementation of CLT and its requirements</i>	18
<i>No or Little cooperation with school officials</i>	24

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**Difficulties caused by the teacher**

There were some obstacles which made it difficult for the Iranian teachers to teach in CLT. These difficulties were caused by the teachers themselves. Five of them are discussed below.

*Little familiarity with the principles of CLT*

Some of the Iranian English teachers (i.e., those who had more than 20 years of teaching experiences) reported that CLT was all new to them. Stated otherwise, they believed that since they themselves have been taught with grammar-and-translation methods teaching methods, they kept teaching grammatical structures and unfamiliar words to their students and had no or little familiarity with CLT. When responding a question about the difference between the grammar-and-translation methods and CLT, these teachers were not able to differentiate between these two. However, they kept talking about the key principles of traditional teaching methods. This is reflected from the teacher participants whom we interviewed:

1. "It was all new to me. I was not aware of the underlying principles of CLT. With the implementation of this new approach to English teaching, I was somehow made aware of some of its principles in three-day course designed for CLT though the three-day training was too short for us to get familiar with the principles of CLT". (No. 12)

These teachers believed that they could improve teaching in CLT if they were familiarized more with the principles of CLT in action. They also considered that it would be much more fruitful for them to begin teaching in CLT if they observe one teacher teaching in CLT.

*Deficiency in strategic and sociolinguistic competence*

The teachers' low strategic and sociolinguistic competence in English was another obstacle which constrained their use of CLT. Most of them believed that they had not difficulty in reading, speaking or comprehending English. However, they reported that teaching English in CLT would entail possessing a deep knowledge English culture as well. They said that they got disappointed when they couldn't answer their students' questions about sociolinguistics aspects of English. For instance, questions about the way English people lived though they enjoyed teaching English in CLT. Consider the following comment:

We were waiting for a long time to change focus from grammar teaching to communicative competence because teaching grammar and requiring the students to memorize grammatical rules were really cumbersome. When the books changed in focus from grammar to communication, I became very interested in teaching English. But once when one of the students asked about how English people celebrated the New Year, I felt embarrassed because I couldn't answer her question. (No. 1)

The implication is that in addition to possessing knowledge about English language and its structures, the Iranian English language teachers should be equipped with sociolinguistic and strategic competence as well. Stated otherwise, the Iranian teachers should be well aware of cultural references, indices and registers as well as possess sociolinguistic competence. To be sociolinguistically competent, the teachers are required to have "knowledge of dialects/varieties, registers, natural or idiomatic expressions and cultural references and figures of speech" (Bachman and Palmer, 1996, p. 68).



### *Deficiency in written English*

Almost all the survey and interview participants reported that they cannot write in English effectively despite the fact that they know most of the grammar of English and are almost proficient in reading ability and teaching grammar. Even when responding a survey question “whether you as an English teacher consider yourselves capable of teaching in CLT”, almost all the respondents believed that they all were deficient in written English. They also expressed that they would be more insecure if they want to teach in higher grades since it will claim more efficiency in writing from the teachers. They believed that it would limit the implementation of CLT in higher grades if they cannot improve their writing ability in English.

“I am well aware of almost all of grammar and structures of English during all these years of teaching English at schools. But I am not good at writing English. One the things that is highly emphasized in CLT is to write in English, I suppose. When you cannot write in English, you are not considered an English teacher in Iran. Once one of my students wanted me to revise a letter in English for him but I got unhappy when I couldn't help him with it” (No. 11).

They reasoned that writing skill has been totally neglected in English classes in the Iranian state schools. However, they were happy that the teaching “how to write in English” has received attention in the Iranian English classes with the onslaught of implementation of CLT in state schools in Iran.

### *Deficiency in training in CLT*

Most of the survey participants and all of the interview participants had participated in a three-day in-service teacher training course designed for this purpose. However, they all agreed that first a three-day training course was too short for getting familiarized with a totally new approach to teaching English in the Iranian state schools. Second, due to some inconsistencies and lack of some fundamental requirements for implementing a training course, it was not desirable and fruitful for them. Consider one typical complaint about the three-day course:

A three-day course in CLT is in no ways enough for us to teach in CLT. We could not observe one teacher teaching CLT in the course in entirety due to the shortage of time. Four or five went to the board and taught one part of a lesson supposing that their teaching is more or less in line with the CLT (No. 8).

One of the interviewees mentioned a rather different point about what constituted their three-day training course specifically designed for this purpose.

The three-day training scheme was, in fact, a kind of gathering in which the participant teachers exchanged some raw ideas about how to implement CLT conceptually at schools rather than getting involved actively in CLT and observing one another teaching lessons in it (No. 24).

### *Misconceptions about CLT*

Little familiarity of the teacher participants had created in them some misconceptions about CLT and, as a result, constrained its implementation. For instance, some of them believed that CLT favour helping students improve one aspect of language at the expense of another. One typical misconception was the following:

I thought that CLT was supporting fluency and paid no attention to grammar. I supposed that teaching grammar should totally be neglected. I felt uneasy about it. This challenged

my view of the nature of language and made me set guard against implementing it in my classes (21).

These misunderstanding might lead to total rejection of CLT on the part of the teachers especially those teachers who have been teaching grammar over years. The implication is that teachers should be helped dispel the myth that CLT favours fluency over accuracy by providing opportunities for them to get more familiar with fundamental principles of CLT.

### **Difficulties caused by educational system**

The participant teachers also identified some barriers related to the educational system in Iran which limited the implementation of CLT in their classes. Four of them are discussed below.

#### *Dull and demotivating classroom atmospheres*

Almost all of the teachers complained about the atmospheres within which all lessons in general and English teaching in particular are taking place in the Iranian state schools. They reported that there are only a few number of students who are motivated to learn English and the rest usually lack motivation to learn. Therefore, the teachers think that this has to a large extent impacted on the way they teach English. The following comment was typical.

I talk a lot about the importance of English learning in the class for my students. I gave them typical examples of how English learning can be advantageous for them compared to them who do not know English. When I feel that they do not take it seriously and show no or little interest in learning English, I lose my enthusiasm (No. 26).

The teachers believe that most of this lack of interest on the part of students can be explained by the dull and demotivating atmospheres that are common in the Iranian state schools. The students feel that no matter how they complete their studies at schools, no prospects await them.

#### *Lack of educational facilities in schools*

Almost all of the participants both survey teachers and interview teacher were unhappy about the educational facilities that are available in the Iranian state schools. They believe that the full implementation of CLT entails equipping the schools with audio-visual resources. This difficulty become more exacerbating when it comes to consider schools in rural areas where schools are deprived of the least educational resources that any school should have to implement CLT. One of the participants suggested that ...

For a CLT to be successful as a new approach to teaching and learning English in the Iranian state schools, I think every school should be equipped with language labs. I think teaching in CLT requires that teachers be active, think of and use new appropriate games in the class. I myself feel that I can do these. But lack of such language labs in my school has prevented me from doing this since part of these can be done by means audio-visual aids which are not available in my school (No. 24).

All the teachers wanted their schools to be equipped with audio-visual aids so as to help them to implement CLT in their classes. Lack of these educational facilities have made some of the teachers give up CLT after a brief try or simply or they have not ventured to try it.

#### *Large classes*

Almost all of the teacher participants who taught in urban schools complained that their classes were too large for them to attempt to use CLT. They believed that improving oral English which is essential in CLT especially in first graders was not possible in their classes. They also

reported that since their classes were large, it constrained one-by-one monitoring of the students' activities. One typical comment:

Because the number of the students in my class was more than thirty, it took me more than two sessions to check one exercise in the notebooks for all the students. I sometimes had to skip them so as to allow me to cover the whole book till the end of the year. So I think that the implementation of CLT will be in intention than in action (No. 25).

The number of the students in urban classes in the Iranian state schools often exceed thirty which makes it difficult for the teachers to use CLT with so many students in one class. As long as the number of the students in classes is high, the implementation of CLT will be in intention than in action. Therefore, one condition which makes the implementation of CLT easier in the Iranian state schools is decreasing the number of the students in each class.

#### *Lack of enough class hours*

All of the participants reported that the class time in no way is enough for them to teach the whole textbooks. Add to this problem the high number of the students in each class which discourages the teachers to totally give up CLT. All the teachers demanded that more time be allocated for the English class.

Part of my class time is spent on calling the roll. Since the number of my students is high, it takes a great deal of the class time. I am able to cover only a small part of the textbooks in the remaining time. And because we have to cover the whole book till the end of the year, I have to skip some important parts of the book due to the shortage of time (No. 3).

#### *Lack of in-service training schemes in CLT for teachers*

All the teacher participants reported that there were no in-service training courses during the past educational year. They said that before the educational year began, they took parts in a three-day training course designed to familiarize the Iranian teachers with the fundamental principles of teaching in CLT. They reported that since this was the first year that teaching English in CLT had begun in the Iranian state schools, designing different training courses in CLT during the year seemed mandatory.

I had never attempted to teach in CLT. During my teaching I had some questions about how to teach it. There was no training course during the year. I was inexperienced in using CLT and I would often find myself in need of help (No. 3).

#### **Difficulties caused by the textbooks**

In addition to other difficulties constraining the implementation of CLT in the Iranian state schools, the textbooks were also found to limit the implementation of CLT. Three major constraints were reported by the participants.

#### *Unfamiliar proper names*

22 participants mentioned that the textbooks contained proper names that were totally unfamiliar. They reported that the students were amazed at hearing such uncommon names in the conversations and in some cases they were unable to pronounce the surnames. They said that although all the names were Iranian proper names and they had all heard those names, the names (being strange) diverted the students' attention away from the class.

The students had not only difficulty reading new English words but also reading strange proper names in the textbooks. This, in fact, did not develop good feelings in them in

the class. There are far more common and easy-to-pronounce proper names which the writers of the textbooks could use (No. 21).

#### *Claiming knowledge of English above the level of junior high school*

Most of the teachers reported that the textbooks written junior high school students required that all the students have some knowledge of English especially knowledge of vocabulary before they came to the class. They believed that the book was advantageous to some of the students in that it begin with some words which some of the students knew whereas some of the others did not know.

When I saw the book (developed for Grade 7) for the first time I thought that the book was written for higher grades. It could be written better than this. It should have been written assuming no or little knowledge of the vocabulary on the part of the students. I saw some students disinterested to continue learning it since they felt that they knew less than their peers (No. 15).

The implication is that the textbook writers should write books for Grade 7 with the assumption that the students have no or little knowledge on the part of the students.

#### *Lengthy conversations*

Almost all the teachers agreed that the textbooks contained lengthy conversations that were difficult for the students to learn reading, retelling and comprehending. They believed that it is too soon to include long conversations in the textbooks especially that written for Grade 7. They reported that the textbook for Grade 7 could be motivating and enjoyable by including in it some lovely pictures and avoiding such long conversations.

To be honest, the conversations were too long for the Grade 7 students to learn something from them. I have seen most of my students give up the whole conversation when they noticed that they could not catch up on the class though I tried to read at their pace. This made them resist active participation in the class (No. 1).

#### **Difficulties caused by the students**

Difficulties related to the students themselves were also constraint to using CLT in the Iranian state schools. Three of them were mentioned by the teacher participants.

#### *Lack of motivation for developing communicative competence*

20 participants mentioned that their students were not motivated enough to develop communicative competence and instead took much care about English examinations. The teachers' investigation about their students' lack of motivation had revealed that they did not opportunity to use English outside the class. Therefore, they reported that it is a difficult task to encourage students to think of learning English as a communicative tool rather than as a means to getting good marks. They said that this can be accounted for by the fact grammar-and-translation-focused approach to learning English still holds sway among both teachers and students. Consider the following comment:

Very few numbers of my students were aware of how important it is to be able to communicate in English rather than to know English grammar well. Getting good marks by memorizing new words and knowing grammar are primary for almost all the Iranian students. Only few are concerned with learning English to communicate in the real world (No. 9).

#### *Lack of self-confidence in the students*

18 teacher participants identified their students' lack of self-confidence while interacting with the students in the class. They reported that their students did not have faith in themselves to learn English to communicate. Their students said that they don't think they are able to learn English to comprehend, speak, read and write in English.

During the last year, some of my students referred to me and said that they don't think that they will learn English to do beyond memorizing a series of new words and acquiring some grammar. One of my students said that I cannot even imagine learning English to speak with English people (No. 25).

#### *Resistance to class participation*

19 participants mentioned that their students resisted to participate actively in the class. They believed that this can be accounted for by the fact that most of the Iranian state schools are teacher-fronted and students sit silent listening to their teachers and taking notes and speak only when they are spoken to. This traditional settings of the classrooms still govern the students thereby making it difficult for the language teachers to get their students to participate in class activities. The following is one typical comment:

I find it difficult to adopt CLT in my class when I see that my students show little interest in taking parts in the class activities. When they do not participate in the activities, I had to do all the work, the role played by a traditional grammar-focused teacher was supposed to play (No. 26).

#### **Difficulties caused by the parents**

The teachers' experiences of teaching also revealed that the parents of the students have also a significant role to play in the success of this new approach to learn English in the Iranian state schools. The following two difficulties were reported by them.

#### *Lack of awareness of importance of implementation of CLT and its requirements*

Most of the teachers reported that the parents still hold the idea that English learning at schools is limited to learning grammar and memorizing a set of new words, reading and translating a few English sentences into Persian. They are not still aware of the importance of learning English as a great communicative tool in international arenas. They only care about the students' final scores and think that if the students pass the English examinations with high scores, they become highly proficient in English. The teachers believe that the chance of success of the implementation of CLT will undoubtedly increase if the parents become aware of what implementation of CLT requires from the parents in addition to others involved. One typical comment from one participant:

I think the parents should also play an important role in implementing this new approach to English teaching in Iran. Parents should be well aware that their students should spend some time listening, speaking, reading and writing English at home under their supervision (No. 15).

This highlight the significance of the fact that education should not be left to the teachers only. Among other groups who should be involved in helping education come to fruition, parents should have a role to play.

#### *No or Little cooperation with school officials*

24 teachers complained that the parents play no or little role in their students' progress. They reported that this manifests itself in little cooperation that exist between parents and school officials in Iran. One of the teachers commented that:

The fact is that since first graders need more protection from their parents since Grade one is the first Grade in which English learning begins at state schools in Iran. I think that most of the parents do not even know that when their children start to learn English. During my whole teaching years, I have seen parents only a few times consulting with me and other teachers about their children. (No. 6)

Despite the teachers' reports that the implementation of CLT in the Iranian state schools were met with difficulties, it were not without positive consequences for the English learning in the Iranian state schools or any other EFL contexts provided that the obstacles discussed above are removed. For instance, they reported that they enjoyed teaching in CLT since it frees them of teaching an endless number of grammatical rules in isolation. Teaching grammar in isolation was cumbersome. The way grammar teaching is treated in CLT kept them interested. Also, they were happy that "how to speak and write effectively in English" would receive deserved attention after a long time of total negligence. They believed "how to speak and write effectively in English" manifest itself as a major problem for the Iranian students once they continue their studies in courses in English for specific purposes in the Iranian higher educations. They reported that CLT can indeed address this issue if the constraints reported above are to be well addressed.

## 8. Conclusions and pedagogical implications

The results of analyses of the survey and participant teachers' experiences of using CLT revealed that the efforts to implement the communicative approach in the Iranian state schools were met with difficulties from both micro-structures (e.g., teachers and students) and the broader social, cultural, and historical macro-structures (the educational system) in Iran. More particularly, the in-depth analyses of the survey and interview participants' perspectives towards and teaching experiences in CLT identified both macro and micro structural difficulties which have their sources in five categories: those difficulties caused (a) by the teacher, (b), by the educational system (c), by the textbooks (d) by the students, (e) and by the parents in the country. By revealing the teachers' experiences and perceptions of CLT implementation in classrooms, the results of the present study hopefully inform curriculum developers and textbook writers about the importance of systematically seeking the teachers' experiences and perceptions if they expect new reforms bring about positive changes and educational benefits in English teaching in particular and the whole educational system in Iran or elsewhere in the world in general. However, to implement and even foster a new curriculum reform, not only in Iran but also in any EFL context, the present researchers recommend that curriculum developers (including foreign language programmers) pay attention to the following points reported by the participant and survey teachers implementing CLT in action.

First, full implementation of CLT in any EFL context requires that all schools be equipped with material resources by which we mean *space* (classes proportionate with the number of students), *equipment* (all audio-visual equipment) and *materials* (paper, picture and library resources).

Second, the teachers in the present study believed that they should be not held the only one responsible for the implementation of this new approach to English teaching. Rather, all stakeholders involved should play their roles in fulfilling the educational policies. Stated otherwise, successful implementation of a given curriculum depends on a joint collaboration and active involvement of all players and stakeholders. To this end, the experiences, perceptions and understandings and recommendations of all stakeholders should be systematically sought and taken on board.

Third, the results of the present study revealed that the teachers were in need of teacher training schemes so as to help them implement curriculum innovation. There is no reservation that these training schemes will influence teachers' understandings and their classroom practices (Carless, 1998; Kırkgöz, 2007; Vandenberghe, 2002). It is necessary to point out that these teacher training and supports should be developmental and on-going rather than piecemeal (Brindley and Hood, 1990). We suggest that in these training schemes teachers should be given

opportunities to learn new concepts, the underlying principles of CLT. They should also be provided new ways of presenting content, helped restructure ways of interacting with their students. They should also be helped improve their knowledge of English language as well as sociolinguistic and strategic competence.

Forth, teacher trainers have significant roles to play in preparing teachers for a new curriculum reform. In addition to the fact that the teacher trainers should well familiarize the teachers with the theoretical underpinnings and practical requirements of a new approach to teaching, they should also pay attention to the existing beliefs and perceptions of the teachers about the nature of language and language teaching. They are suggested to make a trade-off between the teachers' previously held ideas and new ones to be introduced.

Last but not the least, before new textbooks are written to embody a new reform, an in-depth analysis should be carried out to discover cognitive abilities of the students for whom the textbooks are written. The Iranian teachers' reports showed that the textbooks the tasks and activities in them were not tailored to the proficiency level of the students. Therefore, investigation of these issues will inform the textbook writers to write books whose language tasks and activities do not exceed the cognitive abilities of the students.

Since this is the first critical year which CLT is implemented in the Iranian state schools, the results of this study should be taken with care for the reason that this study has set as its participants a particular group of teachers teaching a particular group of students in particular state schools. That is to say, the results of this study are recommended to be generalized to other EFL contexts.

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### Appendix A survey questions

Please fill in the following questions as appropriate.

- a. Sex .....
- b. Age .....
- c. How many years have you been a teacher of English? .....
- d. Are you teaching at junior high schools? .....
- e. Are you teaching in an urban or rural junior high school? .....
1. What is communicative language teaching?
2. What factors (school-related, student-related, parents-related, and teacher-related) do you think help you implement CLT in your English classes?
3. What factors (school-related, student-related, parents-related, and teacher-related) do you think prevent you from implementing CLT in your English classes?
4. Could you describe the characteristics of a CLT teacher?
5. Do you think that you feel possessed of the characteristics of a CLT teacher?
6. How do you differentiate CLT from GTM?
7. Have you taken part in the teacher training scheme developed to familiarize the Iranian state teachers with CLT? If so, to what extent do you think they helped you to teach in CLT?

### Appendix B Interview questions

1. What do you know about communicative language teaching?
2. Tell us about your experiences of teaching in CLT in your class?
3. Are you concerned about the methods you use in teaching English?
4. What methods are you using now?
5. Have you tried Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) before?
6. Do you want to try CLT? If no, why?
7. How do you think you can use CLT in your classroom?
8. What impacts did the teacher training scheme have on your implementation of CLT?