

Barriers to Implementing Communicative Language Teaching for Developing Oral English Communicative Competence in EFL Higher Education: A Systematic Review

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ABSTRACT

This systematic review synthesizes 25 empirical studies published between 1992 and 2025 to examine barriers affecting the implementation of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) for developing oral English communicative competence (OCC) in higher education English-as-a-Foreign-Language (EFL) contexts. Following PRISMA 2020 guidelines, the review identifies three interconnected barrier categories: institutional (examination-driven curricula, large class sizes, limited resources), socio-cultural (communication anxiety, face-saving concerns, teacher-centered norms), and teacher-related (insufficient pedagogical training, linguistic insecurity, low self-efficacy). Examination pressures and communication anxiety emerged as the most recurrent barriers. Findings also highlight the unique contributions of non-native English-speaking teachers (NNESTs), particularly their empathy and shared language learning experiences, which help foster psychologically safe communicative environments. The review emphasizes that successful CLT implementation requires coordinated reforms across institutional policy, teacher education, and culturally responsive pedagogical adaptation.

Keywords: communicative language teaching, oral communicative competence, EFL higher education, implementation barriers, systematic review

INTRODUCTION

Background and Context

The global adoption of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) over the past four decades has fundamentally reshaped English language instruction worldwide (Pan & Nunan, 2025; Yu, 2001). Originating in the 1970s as a response to perceived limitations of grammar-focused, structural approaches to language instruction, CLT emphasizes communicative competence—the ability to use language appropriately and effectively in authentic communicative situations—rather than isolated grammatical accuracy (Canale & Swain, 1980; Hymes, 1972). The approach prioritizes learner-centered instruction, authentic communication, and meaningful interaction as central to language development (Richards & Rodgers, 2001).

In the era of globalization, proficiency in English, particularly in oral communicative competence, has become a pivotal skill for students worldwide (Abdullaev & Isanova, 2022; Li et al., 2025). Oral communicative competence, encompassing both speaking and listening skills, is often viewed as the most immediate and practical manifestation of one's language proficiency (Chen & Goh, 2011). While written skills are undeniably crucial, it is through spoken interactions that most real-time, dynamic exchanges occur in academic settings, business negotiations, and daily life (Emon, 2024).

Despite the recognized importance of CLT and its widespread adoption in policy documents and teacher training programs, the implementation of CLT in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts, particularly in Asian higher education settings, remains problematic and contested (Butler, 2011; Li, 1998; Thamarana, 2023). Pan

and Nunan (2025) reflect on CLT's evolution and future directions, noting that while CLT has become the dominant paradigm in English language teaching globally, its implementation remains "contested and contextually variable" (p. 695). The authors emphasize that CLT is not a monolithic set of techniques but rather a philosophy that must be adapted to specific educational contexts.

Problem Statement

A significant gap exists between CLT policy adoption and actual classroom implementation, particularly in EFL higher education contexts. Large class sizes, examination-focused curricula, limited resources, and cultural learning norms emphasizing teacher authority and collective harmony create significant constraints on communicative language teaching (Aldizeeri et al., 2023; Chen & Goh, 2011; Sun & Buripakdi, 2024). Non-native English-speaking teachers (NNESTs), who comprise the majority of English instructors in EFL countries, face distinctive challenges when implementing CLT, including institutional constraints, socio-cultural barriers, and teacher identity issues (Medgyes, 1992; Xu, 2025).

While numerous individual studies have examined CLT implementation challenges in specific contexts, there is a need for a comprehensive systematic synthesis of barriers across diverse EFL higher education settings. Such a synthesis can provide evidence-based insights for policy-makers, teacher educators, and practitioners seeking to enhance CLT effectiveness.

Research Questions

This systematic review is guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the barriers to implementing CLT for developing oral English communicative competence in EFL higher education contexts?
2. What teaching methods and strategies have been employed to overcome CLT implementation barriers?
3. How do non-native English teachers navigate these barriers in their pedagogical practice?

Significance of the Study

This systematic review contributes to the field of applied linguistics and English language teaching in several important ways. First, it provides a comprehensive synthesis of existing literature on CLT implementation barriers, moving beyond individual case studies to identify patterns across diverse EFL contexts. Second, it offers practical implications for teacher education and professional development programs by highlighting specific knowledge and skill gaps that need addressing. Third, it informs institutional policy decisions regarding English language curriculum design, class size policies, and assessment systems. Fourth, it contributes to the global understanding of CLT adaptation in diverse EFL contexts, recognizing that "one-size-fits-all" approaches are inadequate. Finally, it validates the distinctive strengths of non-native English teachers, particularly their empathetic understanding of learner struggles rooted in their own language learning experiences.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Communicative Language Teaching: Theoretical Foundations

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) emerged in the 1970s as a response to structural and grammar-focused approaches that dominated earlier decades. Traditional methods such as Situational Language Teaching emphasized oral drills and sentence pattern repetition but were criticized for failing to explain the creative and generative nature of language use (Xu, 2023; Richards & Rodgers, 2001). Influenced by developments in linguistics and by European language policy needs, CLT redirected attention from form-focused accuracy toward functional language use and communicative meaning (Ma, 2009).

A key theoretical component underpinning CLT is communicative competence. Hymes (1972) argued that knowing a language requires not only grammatical knowledge but also understanding of appropriateness and

contextual use. Building on this idea, Canale and Swain (1980) identified four components of communicative competence: grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic competence. This framework shifted pedagogical priorities from isolated grammar instruction to holistic communicative ability, where interaction, meaning negotiation, and context-sensitive language use play central roles (Scarella & Oxford, 1992; Savignon, 2002).

CLT is grounded in several instructional principles. Communication-focused tasks are emphasized, with information gap, choice, and feedback viewed as core characteristics of authentic communication (Ma, 2009). Errors are treated as a natural part of learning, and a tolerant attitude fosters learner confidence and risk-taking. Grammar remains important, but is taught in meaningful contexts where learners attend to form as a by-product of communication (Ellis, 1994).

Despite its theoretical appeal, research consistently shows that CLT implementation varies widely across global EFL contexts. Bax (2003) argued that communicative approaches must be adapted to local circumstances rather than imposed uniformly. Studies from South Korea, Iran, the Middle East, and Southeast Asia have identified similar constraints, including large class sizes, grammar-based examinations, limited instructional resources, and learner resistance to communicative practices (Li, 1998; Khodamoradi, 2024; Saengboon, 2006). In China, although CLT has been widely endorsed through national policy reforms, classroom realities often remain shaped by exam-driven curricula and traditional expectations for teacher-centered instruction (Yu, 2001; Zheng & Davison, 2008). Chen and Goh (2011) found that university teachers struggled with limited self-efficacy in oral English and insufficient pedagogical preparation for communicative instruction.

Barriers to CLT Implementation

Barriers to CLT are particularly visible in higher education. University students often prioritize high-stakes proficiency tests such as CET-4, CET-6, TOEFL, and IELTS, which have traditionally emphasized receptive skills over speaking (Chen & Goh, 2011). A systematic review by Li et al. (2025) identified four broad categories influencing EFL learners' oral communicative competence: environmental constraints (limited time and large classes), psychological factors (reluctance, anxiety, low confidence), linguistic limitations (insufficient vocabulary and strategic competence), and teaching-related factors (traditional methods, inadequate resources). These findings show a persistent mismatch between communicative goals and institutional assessment systems.

Socio-cultural values also shape communicative practices in many Asian contexts. Influenced by Confucian traditions, learners often prioritize accuracy, respect for authority, and avoidance of error, which can hinder participation in communicative tasks (Hasanah & Utami, 2020; Li & Peng, 2022). Communication anxiety and face-saving concerns are widely reported, with students preferring passive listening to avoid mistakes (Chen & Goh, 2011; Zhao & Baharom, 2023). Such tendencies create tension with CLT's emphasis on learner autonomy, interaction, and risk-taking (Chen, 2025).

Teacher-related factors further complicate implementation. Many EFL teachers, particularly in universities, lack professional training in communicative pedagogy and rely heavily on traditional methods (Chen & Goh, 2014). Non-native English-speaking teachers (NNESTs) frequently experience linguistic insecurity and low self-efficacy regarding pronunciation, fluency, or "native-like" accuracy (Liu, 2007). While such challenges can inhibit teaching confidence, recent scholarship highlights NNESTs' unique strengths, including empathy, multilingual awareness, and the ability to anticipate learner difficulties through shared language learning experiences (Medgyes, 1992; Wang & Fang, 2020). Empirical studies show that these strengths can help reduce learner anxiety and foster more supportive communicative environments.

Although research on CLT, implementation barriers, and NNEST identity is extensive, limited work has examined how these factors intersect specifically within higher education. Existing literature has primarily documented obstacles rather than exploring how teachers leverage their strengths—such as empathy—to navigate contextual challenges. This systematic review addresses this gap by synthesizing findings across diverse EFL settings and examining how institutional, socio-cultural, and teacher-related barriers interact to shape CLT implementation in university English classrooms.

METHODOLOGY

This review followed PRISMA 2020 procedures to ensure transparency and methodological rigor. Eligible studies included empirical research published in English between 1992 and 2025 that focused on CLT implementation or oral competence development in EFL higher education. Searches were conducted in Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, ProQuest, Google Scholar, SpringerLink, and Taylor & Francis. Out of 1,103 identified records, 25 met inclusion criteria after screening. Data extraction captured research context, design, participants, and identified barriers. A thematic and framework synthesis approach classified barriers into institutional, socio-cultural, and teacher-related categories.

Eligibility Criteria

To enhance methodological transparency and replicability, explicit inclusion and exclusion criteria were established prior to the screening process. Studies were included if they met the following conditions: (a) the research context was English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in higher education settings, including universities and colleges; (b) the study focused on the implementation of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and/or the development of oral English communicative competence; (c) the research adopted an empirical design, including qualitative, quantitative, or mixed-methods approaches; (d) the study was published in peer-reviewed journals in English; and (e) the publication date fell between 1992 and 2025.

Studies were excluded if they were conducted in English as a Second Language (ESL) contexts, focused on primary or secondary education, or examined vocational training outside formal higher education institutions. Conceptual papers, theoretical discussions, opinion pieces, editorials, conference proceedings, dissertations, and non-peer-reviewed publications were also excluded. These criteria ensured that the selected studies were methodologically comparable and directly relevant to CLT implementation and oral communicative competence in EFL higher education.

Criteria	Inclusion	Exclusion
Educational Context	English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in higher education settings (universities and colleges)	ESL contexts; primary or secondary education; vocational or non-formal training
Research Focus	Implementation of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and/or development of oral English communicative competence	Studies not related to CLT or oral communicative competence
Research Design	Empirical studies employing qualitative, quantitative, or mixed-methods approaches	Conceptual papers, theoretical discussions, opinion pieces, editorials
Publication Type	Peer-reviewed journal articles	Conference proceedings, dissertations, theses, reports, non-peer-reviewed sources
Language	English	Non-English publications
Time Frame	Published between 1992 and 2025	Published outside the specified time range

The following search string was used with Boolean operators:

("communicative language teaching" OR "CLT" OR "communicative approach") AND ("barriers" OR "challenges" OR "difficulties" OR "obstacles" OR "constraints" OR "implementation") AND ("EFL" OR "English as a foreign language" OR "non-native" OR "foreign language") AND ("higher education" OR

"university" OR "college" OR "tertiary") AND ("oral" OR "speaking" OR "communicative competence" OR "spoken English") Truncation symbols () were used for word variations (e.g., teach for teach, teacher, teaching).

Selection Process

The selection process followed four phases:

Phase 1 - Identification: Records were identified through database searching (N = 1,103).

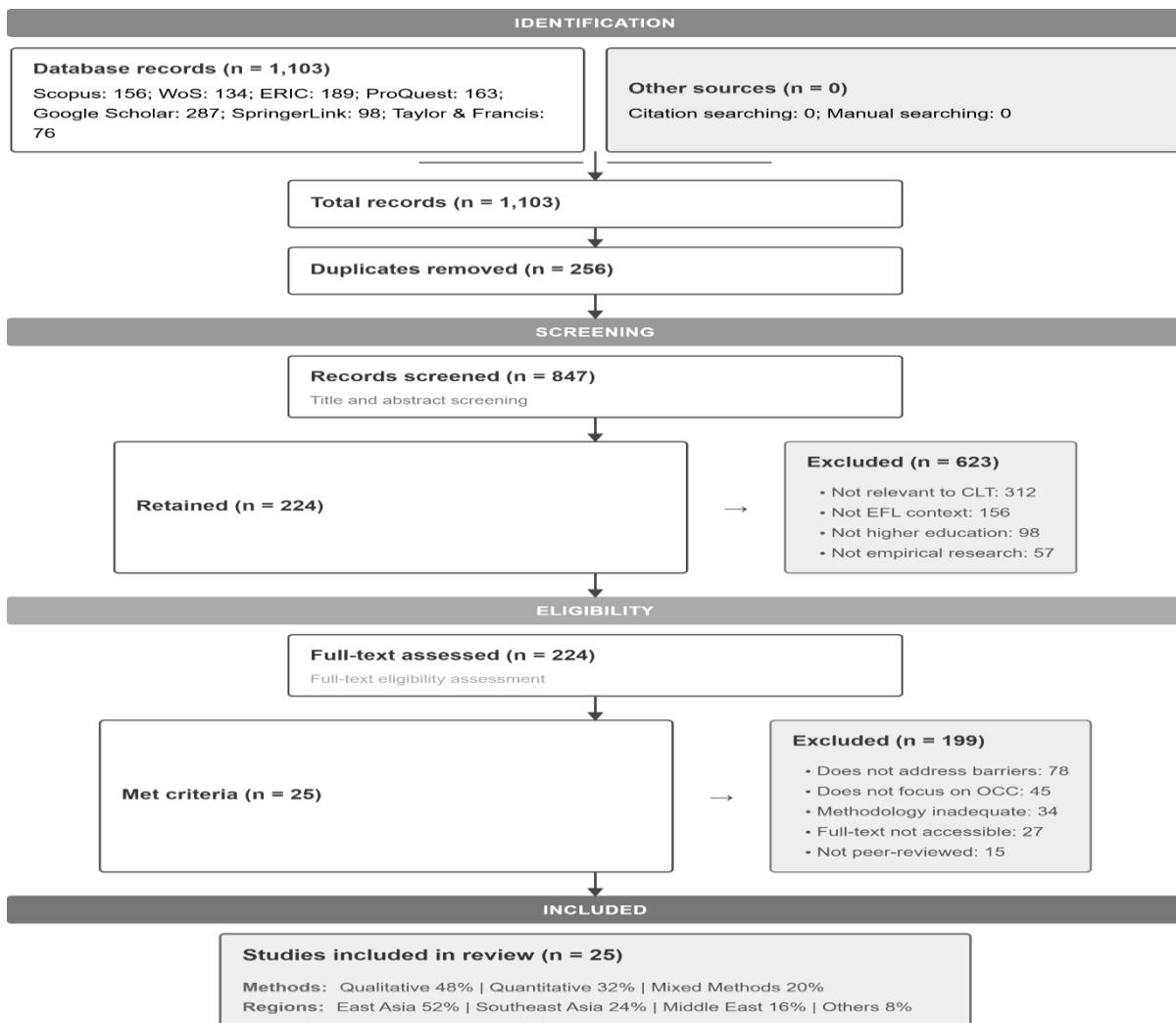
Phase 2 - Screening: After removing duplicates (n = 256), records were screened by title and abstract (n = 847). Records were excluded if not relevant to CLT (n = 312), not EFL context (n = 156), not higher education (n = 98), or not empirical research (n = 57).

Phase 3 - Eligibility: Full-text articles were assessed for eligibility (n = 224). Articles were excluded if they did not address barriers/challenges (n = 78), did not focus on oral competence (n = 45), had inadequate methodology (n = 34), lacked full-text access (n = 27), or were not peer-reviewed (n = 15).

Phase 4 - Inclusion: Twenty-five studies met all inclusion criteria and were included in the final synthesis.

Figure 1

PRISMA 2020 Flow Diagram for Systematic Review of CLT Implementation Barriers



This flow diagram illustrates the systematic literature search and selection process following PRISMA 2020 guidelines. The initial database search yielded 1,103 records, which were progressively screened through four phases: identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion. After removing duplicates (n = 256) and excluding

irrelevant records through title/abstract screening ($n = 623$) and full-text assessment ($n = 199$), 25 studies met all inclusion criteria for final synthesis.

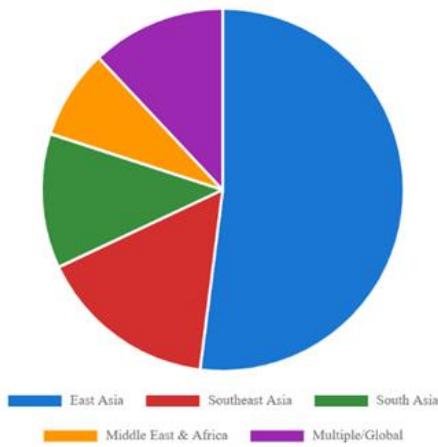
Due to the heterogeneity of research designs, contexts, and outcome measures across the included studies, a formal meta-analysis was not feasible. Therefore, this review adopted a mixed narrative and comparative synthesis approach to integrate findings and examine patterns of barriers and pedagogical responses.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

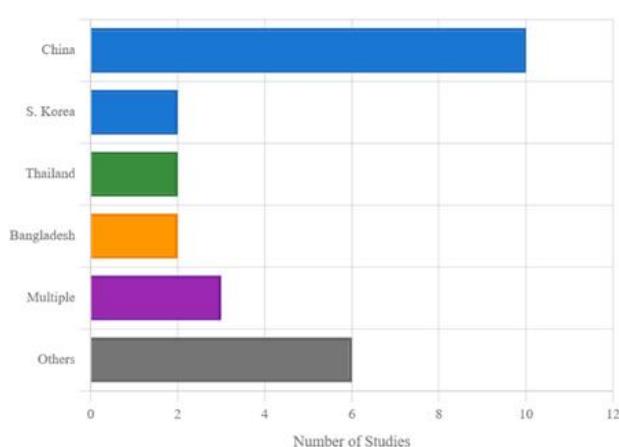
Figure 2

Geographic Distribution of Studies Included in the Systematic Review (N = 25)

(a) Distribution by Region



(b) Distribution by Country



Region	Country/Context	Number of Studies	Percentage
East Asia	China	10	40%
	South Korea	2	8%
	Japan	1	4%
	Subtotal	13	52%
Southeast Asia	Thailand	2	8%
	Indonesia	1	4%
	Philippines	1	4%
	Subtotal	4	16%
South Asia	Bangladesh	2	8%
	Nepal	1	4%
	Subtotal	3	12%
Middle East & Africa	Libya	1	4%
	Sudan	1	4%

	Subtotal	2	8%
Multiple/Global	Multiple EFL Contexts	3	12%
Total		25	100%

Geographic Distribution Studies were conducted across diverse EFL contexts, with the majority from East Asia (52%), particularly China (40%). Southeast Asia contributed 16%, South Asia 12%, and Middle East/Africa 8%. Three studies (12%) examined multiple EFL contexts. Figure 2 visualizes this geographic distribution.

The geographic distribution reveals a concentration of studies from East Asian EFL contexts, particularly China ($n = 10$, 40%), reflecting both the significant challenges faced in these contexts and the extensive research investment in understanding CLT implementation. Southeast Asian countries (Thailand, Indonesia, Philippines) contributed 16% of studies, while South Asian contexts (Bangladesh, India) and Middle Eastern/African countries (Iran, Libya, Sudan, Lebanon) each contributed approximately 12% and 8% respectively. Three studies (12%) examined multiple EFL contexts, providing cross-cultural comparative insights.

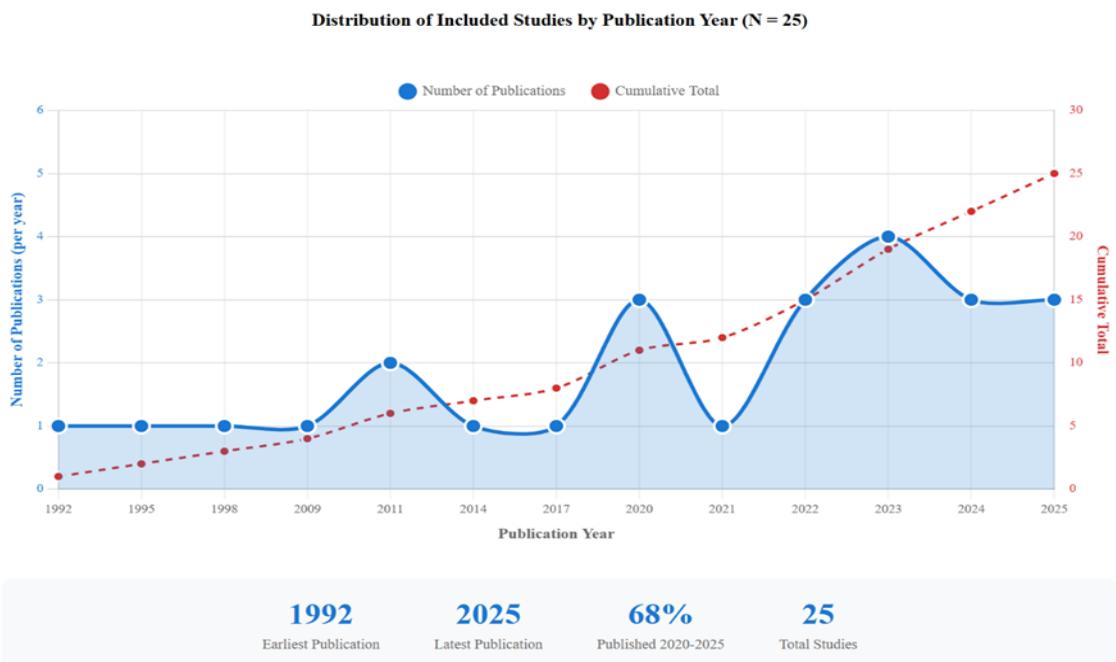


Figure 3

The publication timeline demonstrates growing scholarly attention to CLT implementation barriers in EFL higher education. While seminal works by Medgyes (1992) and Li (1998) established foundational frameworks, the majority of research (68%) emerged between 2020-2025. This surge coincides with increased global emphasis on communicative skills in higher education, post-pandemic attention to oral communication challenges, and the growing recognition of NNEST perspectives in applied linguistics research.

Institutional Barriers

Institutional barriers were reported in 22 of 25 studies (88%). Table 2 summarizes the frequency of specific institutional barriers.

Table 2 Institutional Barriers to CLT Implementation (N = 25)

Barrier	n	%	Impact
Examination-driven curriculum	18	72%	High

Large class sizes	16	64%	High
Limited teaching resources	15	60%	High
Insufficient instruction time	12	48%	Medium
Curriculum constraints	11	44%	Medium
Lack of policy support	8	32%	Medium
Assessment system misalignment	7	28%	Medium

Examination-Driven Curriculum: The most frequently cited barrier was institutional emphasis on standardized tests. Chen and Goh (2011) reported that “students know they need to pass CET-4 to graduate” and frequently ask teachers whether speaking activities will help them pass examinations. When teachers acknowledge that communicative activities do not directly prepare for tests, student motivation declines. In the Topic1 Manuscript study, 16 of 18 participants reported test-focused curricula created pressure to prioritize grammar and vocabulary over communicative competence.

Socio-Cultural Barriers

Socio-cultural barriers were reported in 21 of 25 studies (84%). Table 3 summarizes these findings.

Table 3 Socio-Cultural Barriers to CLT Implementation (N = 25)

Barrier	n	%	Impact
Student communication anxiety	17	68%	High
Lack of authentic environment	15	60%	High
Face-saving concerns	14	56%	High
Cultural learning norms	13	52%	High
Student expectations (teacher-centered)	12	48%	Medium
Hierarchical relationships	10	40%	Medium

Student Communication Anxiety: Aldizeeri et al. (2023) found that 70% of students reported difficulty understanding lecturers due to rapid speech and limited vocabulary. Students are often “terrified to speak” and prefer listening over participating. One teacher observed: “Some students appear to be reluctant to open their mouth; they’d like to keep their ideas reserved. In my eye, they are shy, fear of making mistakes” (Chen & Goh, 2011).

In the reviewed studies, socio-cultural barriers were not only discussed at the level of abstract cultural values but were also manifested in observable classroom behaviors. Students’ reluctance to initiate oral interaction frequently appeared as prolonged silence, avoidance of voluntary participation, and a preference for choral responses over individual speaking. Such interactional patterns constrained the implementation of student-centered CLT activities that rely on spontaneous negotiation of meaning.

Moreover, hierarchical teacher-student relationships shaped expectations of classroom roles, with learners often perceiving the teacher as the primary knowledge authority. This orientation limited peer-to-peer communication and reduced students’ willingness to challenge ideas or express personal opinions in English. To address these constraints, several studies reported that teachers adopted culturally responsive strategies, such as providing

structured speaking frames, allowing rehearsal time before public speaking, and creating low-stakes communicative tasks. These practices aligned CLT principles with local classroom norms and facilitated gradual increases in student oral participation.

Teacher-Related Barriers

Teacher-related barriers were reported in 19 of 25 studies (76%). Table 4 summarizes these findings.

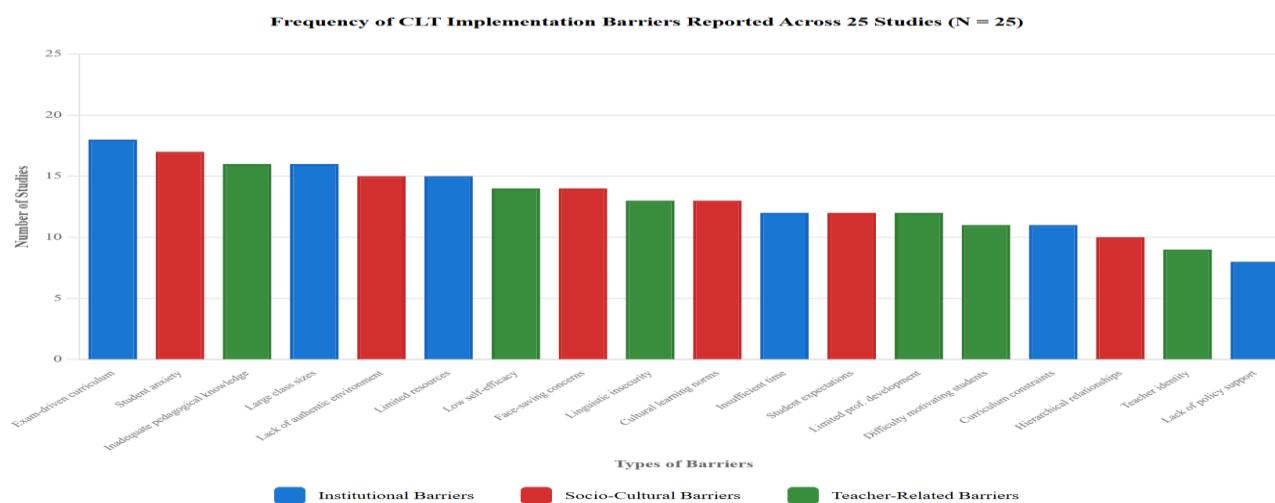
Table 4 Teacher-Related Barriers to CLT Implementation (N = 25)

Barrier	n	%	Impact
Inadequate pedagogical knowledge	16	64%	High
Low self-efficacy	14	56%	High
Linguistic insecurity	13	52%	High
Limited professional development	12	48%	Medium
Difficulty motivating students	11	44%	Medium
Teacher identity challenges	9	36%	Medium

Inadequate Pedagogical Knowledge: Teachers lack training for oral English instruction. Chen and Goh (2011) found that 28 of 30 interviewed teachers “desperately needed some training on teaching methodology”. Many teachers begin their careers feeling unprepared, as “there is no systematic pre-service training” in countries like China (Wu, 2001).

Low Self-Efficacy: Teachers expressed doubts about their own oral English proficiency. One teacher stated: “I don’t have good oral English proficiency. Sometimes I can’t express exactly what I mean and I can’t judge whether students express themselves in the proper way or not” (Chen & Goh, 2011). Low self-efficacy affects willingness to conduct oral activities and model communicative behavior.

Linguistic Insecurity: Related to self-efficacy, NNESTs often feel insecure about their pronunciation and accent. The Topic1 Manuscript study reported that 13 of 18 participants experienced anxiety about their proficiency. However, some teachers reframed this vulnerability as a strength: “When I make mistakes in class and correct myself, students see that mistakes are normal.”



Note. Values represent the number of studies (out of 25) reporting each specific barrier. Percentages in parentheses indicate the proportion of studies identifying each barrier: CLT = Communicative Language Teaching.

Figure 4:

This horizontal bar chart displays the percentage of studies ($N = 25$) reporting each specific barrier, organized by category. The analysis reveals that examination-driven curriculum (72%) and student communication anxiety (68%) are the most prevalent barriers, followed closely by large class sizes (64%) and inadequate pedagogical knowledge (64%). The visualization demonstrates that while institutional barriers appear most frequently as a category (88% of studies), individual socio-cultural and teacher-related barriers show comparable frequencies, underscoring the multidimensional nature of CLT implementation challenges.

Strategies for Overcoming Barriers

Several studies identified strategies that teachers and institutions employ to navigate barriers.

Reframing Communicative Activities as Test Preparation: Teachers connect speaking practice to examination skills. The study found that teachers frame communicative activities as test preparation strategies, teaching students how to organize their thoughts quickly, how to recover from mistakes, how to speak fluently under pressure.

Strategic Grouping and Pair Work: Despite large class sizes, teachers use pair and small group work to create interaction opportunities. Students practice with partners before whole-class sharing, allowing preparation time and reducing face-saving anxiety.

Creating Psychologically Safe Environments: Teachers acknowledge student anxiety, share their own language learning struggles, and normalize mistakes. One teacher reported: "I know this feels uncomfortable. I remember feeling exactly this way when I was learning English. Let's take this step by step".

Leveraging Teacher Empathy: NNESTs' shared language learning experience serves as a resource. Teachers who openly discuss their own struggles create empathetic connections that support student engagement. As one teacher noted: "They respect me because I care about them, because I understand their struggles."

Technology Integration: Kwangsawad (2017) found that professional development programs can increase teachers' knowledge of CLT and technology integration. Teachers use videos, online resources, and multimedia to provide authentic input and enhance engagement.

Synthesis of Findings

The synthesis reveals that CLT implementation barriers in EFL higher education are multidimensional and interrelated. Institutional barriers create structural constraints that limit what teachers can do in classrooms. Socio-cultural barriers shape student behaviors and expectations in ways that conflict with CLT principles. Teacher-related barriers affect teachers' confidence and competence in implementing communicative approaches.

Importantly, these barriers do not operate in isolation. Examination-driven curricula (institutional) reinforce student expectations for teacher-centered instruction (socio-cultural), which in turn affects teachers' willingness to adopt CLT (teacher-related). Large class sizes (institutional) exacerbate student anxiety about public speaking (socio-cultural) and make it difficult for teachers to provide individual feedback (teacher-related).

However, the findings also reveal that teachers develop creative strategies to navigate these barriers. Teacher empathy emerges as a particularly important resource, especially for NNESTs who can draw on their own language learning experiences to connect with students. This suggests that barrier reduction requires not only addressing institutional constraints but also recognizing and leveraging teacher strengths.

CONCLUSION

This systematic review has identified three interconnected categories of barriers to CLT implementation in EFL higher education: institutional barriers, socio-cultural barriers, and teacher-related barriers. Examination-driven curricula, student communication anxiety, large class sizes, and inadequate teacher training are the most frequently reported obstacles. However, teachers develop creative strategies to navigate these barriers, and

teacher empathy emerges as a particularly valuable resource for NNESTs.

The findings suggest that successful CLT implementation requires addressing barriers at multiple levels simultaneously. Institutional reforms (assessment, class size, resources) must be accompanied by attention to socio-cultural factors (creating safe environments, respecting cultural norms) and investment in teacher development (pedagogical training, addressing self-efficacy).

Future Research Directions

Future research should adopt a more comprehensive and multidimensional approach to deepen understanding of CLT implementation in EFL contexts. Longitudinal studies are needed to examine how teaching barriers and coping strategies evolve over time and to evaluate the sustained impact of CLT on student learning outcomes. Intervention-based research could identify effective professional development models that enhance teachers' communicative competence, self-efficacy, and pedagogical adaptability. Incorporating student perspectives would provide valuable insights into learners' experiences of CLT-related challenges and the factors that influence their willingness to participate in communicative activities. Cross-cultural comparative studies beyond Asian EFL settings may further illuminate contextual variations in CLT implementation. In addition, future research should explore how technology can support CLT in resource-constrained environments, investigate assessment models that align with communicative goals while satisfying institutional accountability, and examine how teacher education programs and institutional structures can cultivate empathy as a core pedagogical competence.

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