

Research Article

Adapting Communicative Language Teaching Approach to Enhance University Students' English-Speaking Skills: A Qualitative Case Study in Timor-Leste

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Abstract. This qualitative case study examines how the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach can be adapted to general English classes in a higher education institution in Timor-Leste to answer the long-standing question of how students can acquire speaking proficiency in a multilingual learning environment. The paper brings into focus the incorporation of CLT into classroom activities with special emphasis on the application of role play, pair work, seminars, simulations, and task-based learning as means of promoting interactive and communicative competence. A descriptive qualitative case study design was used to develop in-depth knowledge of contextual teaching and learning experiences, the perspectives of the participants, and naturally occurring practices in the institutional setting. Semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis were the data-gathering methods. Purposive sampling was used to select the two lecturers and seven students directly involved in teaching general English. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data, which made it possible to identify repeated themes and patterns that revealed both opportunities and difficulties in implementing CLT in context. The results of the study indicate that, despite the adaptation of the CTL approach in teaching practices, its implementation is often sporadic due to concerns about English proficiency, teacher training, and flexibility in using local and official languages during instruction. The research demonstrates the necessity of adapting CLT methods to the local education environment and arranging long-term professional development for lecturers. This study helps us understand how context-sensitive CLT approaches can lead to improved results in teaching and learning English in Timor-Leste. The interactive approach and the systematic teacher model could significantly improve students' communicative competence.

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1. Introduction

In the context of globalisation, English has emerged as a critical tool for international communication, academic advancement, and professional mobility (Toro, Minuche, Tapia, & Paredes, 2019). As a newly independent nation striving for integration with ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) and the global community, Timor-Leste recognises the strategic importance of English language proficiency for its young generation. Despite this, the level of communicative competence among Timorese students remains relatively low, even after several years of formal English education in secondary schools and higher education institutions (Mulyanah, Ishak, & Dewi, 2018). This reality reflects a gap between the intended curriculum goals and students' practical speaking skills in everyday communication. Addressing this gap is crucial for preparing Timorese learners for wider academic and professional opportunities.

However, Timorese students continue to struggle with speaking English fluently at the higher education level, although they have learnt English for six years at junior and senior high schools (Agun and Aclan, 2024). This situation is viewed as a significant issue for the Timorese people because English influences every aspect of life, making communication

between individuals from different linguistic backgrounds extremely challenging. Consequently, if people are not fluent in English, it can limit their job opportunities and it can also lead to social isolation, as it prevents individuals from being part of the international community (Chea & Lo, 2022).

To address the problems raised, this study aimed to examine the type of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) methods used in General English classes at the higher education institution of Cristal in Baucau, and the ways of applying these methods can help students improve their speaking skills. Specifically, this research focuses on the types of techniques applied, their method of application, and the challenges to their efficient utilisation in the local higher education setting. Then, this study was also enlightened with the four main research questions. Firstly, which CLT methods are presently employed by lecturers in General English classes at Instituto Superior Cristal Polo Baucau? Secondly, what role do these methods play in developing the English-speaking abilities of the students? Thirdly, what are the issues that lecturers and students encounter when applying the CLT techniques? Lastly, what can be done to reinforce the application of CLT in higher education in Timor-Leste?

2. Literature Review

Theoretical Foundations of CLT

A Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) emerged as a response to the shortcomings of previously used language methods, specifically audiolingual and grammar-translation approaches. Its major focus is to stimulate real-life communication and foster the communicative competence of learners (Jebahi, 2022). The idea of communicative competence in CLT, explained by Canale and Swain (1980), includes four parts: grammar skills, social language use, conversation skills, and strategies for communication. Additionally, CLT is grounded in sociocultural theories, particularly the perspective of Vygotsky and Cole (1978), which emphasises that learning is a social process where interaction facilitates language development. Dos Santos (2020) argued that effective language teaching using CLT should consider local factors like culture, available resources, and what students expect.

CLT Implements in Practice: Strategies of Speaking Skills Development

CLT applies its principles in communicative work, such as role-plays, interviews, group discussions, and simulations. Such activities enhance spontaneous language production as well as meaning supportive (Azizova & Gapparova, 2021). Allowing learners to engage in authentic communication, rather than relying on mechanical language practice, also enhances their speaking fluency and confidence (Phoeun & Sengsri, 2021). Aliazas and Velasco (2023) discovered that a CLT-based instruction enhanced the oral fluency and grammatical accuracy of Filipino high school students. In a similar result of research, Ayulisjati, Kariadi, & Sulistio, (2021) also revealed that the students in the Indonesian Purwokerto school improved their speaking competence by implementing CTL approach. Increased fluency and communicative confidence were observed in tertiary learners in Bangladesh with the implementation of CLT, which suggests the effectiveness of this approach in a similar setting in Southeast Asia (Nisha, 2024).

Adaptation of CLT in Non-Western and Developing Scales

Certain problems must be solved when implementing CLT in a country that is under development, like Timor-Leste, such as the maximum number of students per group, poor supply of materials, and the traditions of a teacher-directed strategy of teaching (Nguyen & Jaspaert, 2020). In a study conducted by Danibao and Tari (2023), pre-service teacher perceptions were investigated in West Timor, revealing that future educators were in favour of CLT but could not manage to implement it because of the institutions' limitations. The research by Andrade, Pereira, and Tolo (2018) in Oecusse, Timor-Leste, showed that using CLT techniques helped improve students' speaking skills through classroom action research, highlighting the importance of making local adjustments.

Role of English in Higher Education in Timor-Leste

As a multilingual nation, Portuguese and Tetum are the official languages in Timor-Leste, whereas English is the language of work in the education setting and the labour market (Soares & Prabawa, 2025). Soares and Prabawa (2025) mentioned the obstacles of low fluency in instructional languages and their impact on student attainment. The teaching strategy of English at the university level of study may start at a fundamental part: this necessitates bridging programs and special pedagogy (Achieng, 2023). These results support the need for adapted CLT methods that align with the linguistic realities of students and the available institutional resources.

The Contribution of Qualitative Case Studies to CLT Research Roles

A qualitative case study is important to provide information on how to implement and adapt CLT. The study, as noted by Tisdell, Merriam, & Stuckey-Peyrot (2025) it can help us understand how teachers and students view their experiences, classroom situations, and the real challenges of using CLT. It has been revealed that qualitative inquiry can assist in learning about the contextualisation of CLT and its experience (Andrade and Tari, 2018; Danibao and Tari, 2023). These studies play a crucial role in establishing effective and long-lasting strategies for language teaching in higher education institutions in Timor-Leste. The potential implementation of CLT to enhance speaking skills, particularly when designed to the students' desires (Abdelmageed & Omer, 2020). A context-based approach to implementing CLT in higher education means using flexible and adaptable strategies in Timor-Leste, with sufficient support offered by qualitative research. By understanding the practices of educators and learners using CLT, stakeholders can create more communicative, educational, and teacher-centred classrooms that better prepare students for academic and professional success (Pitikornpuangpetch & Suwanarak, 2021).

3. Materials and Methods

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative descriptive research design to investigate the application of CLT techniques and it allows researchers to gain deep insights into participants' experiences, perspectives, and practices (Edwards, 2020; Morse, 2020). This approach is especially suitable for exploring how English teaching methods are adapted and perceived in real classroom settings.

Research Site and Participants

The choice of *Instituto Superior Cristal* (ISC) institution as the research site was based on its representative context for English language education in Timor-Leste. The participants of this study were selected by a purposive sampling technique as a common non-probability sampling technique in qualitative research (Ahmad, & Wilkins, 2024). The researchers selected nine participants, including two English unit lecturers and seven students from English class. They were recruited to share their experiences, views, and challenges related to the application of CLT techniques in English class.

Data Collection Techniques

Data were collected through a semi-structured interview, classroom observation, and document analysis (Ruslin et al., 2022). English unit lecturers were interviewed in a semi-structured manner to discuss which techniques of the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) they incorporate, the approaches that are used to ensure its success, and the pedagogical or institutional challenges and difficulties they have faced. The interviews conducted with the students were similar but were adjusted to focus on their experiences and perceptions regarding classroom interactions, opportunities to speak, and the effectiveness of the teaching methods employed by their teachers. Furthermore, the semi-structured approach naturally allowed the participants to speak freely but in a focused manner, since it allowed discussing the research topics deeply but did not restrain the participants (Pediaditis, 2022).

Classroom observation conducted aims to confirm interview data and gain lecturers' knowledge of the teaching and students' learning process (Mirhosseini, 2020). The given observations were particularly concerned with how lecturers arranged communicative approaches in the activities that included paired work/role-play situations, seminar discussions, simulations, and task-based learning. According to Giraldo (2021), observing classrooms directly offers researchers an important way to examine how real and effective communicative practices are, helping to connect theory with what happens in teaching.

In addition, document analysis was used to review the institutional and teaching documents, such as lesson plans, teaching syllabi, and curriculum guidelines. These documents were evaluated for the extent to which CLT ideals were deeply rooted in the official educational system and the degree to which they were pertinent to the daily activities of teaching. Through the method of triangulating multiple data facts, the credibility of the qualitative research is solidified, and the trustworthiness of the conclusions could be strengthened (Edwards, 2020; Morse, 2020).

Data Analysis

A constant comparative method was used in the data analysis process, which is a careful and repeated approach often used in qualitative research to develop insights based on grounded theory (Saldana, 2021). This technique implies a strict comparison of information

from various sources to distinguish common patterns, conceptual categories, and emerging themes. Each such category was then cross-examined at several different sources of data, such as lecturer and student interviews, observation field notes, and institutional documents, to reveal the points of convergence and differences in views (Saldaña, 2021).

Member checking was obtained through the members' participation in reading synthesised summaries of the interviews and having a chance to discuss or explain their stated words. More feedback supplied by peers in debriefing sessions with supervisors and fellows critiques the initial interpretations, diminishing the bias of researchers (McKim, 2023). More importantly, the data analysis procedure included an assessment track and comprehensive field notes, ensuring transparency and reproducibility.

Ethical Considerations

Throughout the research process, ethical considerations were carefully observed. Participation was entirely voluntary, and all participants were informed about the study's purpose, procedures, and their right to withdraw at any time. Anonymity and confidentiality were ensured by using a pseudonym in transcripts and reports. Data were securely stored and only accessible to the researchers. These measures were taken in line with standard ethical guidelines for social and educational research (Pediaditis, 2022).

4. Results and Discussion

The results of the study confirm a promising future of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) in helping Timor-Leste students improve their English-speaking skills in higher education, particularly for the General English classes at *Instituto Superior Cristal* (ISC) in Baucau. Nevertheless, the data also indicates that CLT implementation is not well-developed yet since the implementation process is restricted by a complex of pedagogical, institutional, and sociolinguistic issues. Existing literature on the localisation of CLT in low-resource and multilingual education contexts finds support in these results. This section discusses the four guiding research questions outlined in the study and addresses the study's findings, which are synthesised with theoretical frameworks and academic discussions on the nature of CLT in Timor-Leste to provide a comprehensive picture of what currently exists and how it will develop in the country.

CLT Methods Employed in General English Classes

The comparison of interview data, classroom observations, and document analysis showed that lecturers currently use a variety of CLT techniques in General English classes, although somewhat inconsistently. The most common methods used include, pair work, simulations, role plays, group discussions, and task-based activities. As one lecturer stated, "*We motivate students to communicate with each other in English and small talk. Role plays also support them to express themselves.*" From the classroom observation discovered that the student-conducted dialogues, scripted role plays, and interactive group work, were sometimes established. However, the use of these methods was not regular and because the lecturers dealt with many students or lacked time, they sometimes resorted to a teacher-centered approach, which included translation, grammar training, and verbal understanding.

Regarding the materials in institutions, communicative objectives were embedded in lesson plans and syllabi and mentioned the following activities: interview and presentation. Nevertheless, there was not much correspondence between the written plans and the practices that were present in the classroom. One student confirmed this contradiction, saying, "*I had a chance to practice English in the first semester, but I haven't had a chance to practice speaking English in the classroom.*" Therefore, while CLT methods are present in the instructional selection, they lack uniformity and comprehensive implementation.

CLT Roles in Developing Students' English-Speaking Skills

Pairwork and role play were some communicative practices that gave students opportunity to speak in a very relaxed atmosphere. According to the statements of the students, "*during pairwork, we consider it easier to practice since we can ask our partner when we did not understand the words*". Students can practice language in real-life circumstances such as interviews, classroom discussions, through simulations, and role plays. One lecturer stated that "*we make students accustomed to discussing with their fellow peers in English. That is where they get better to speak English.*" However, these techniques were limited to students who were less confident students tended to be passive, especially during group activities. Some students spoke Tetun or stayed quiet when they didn't know what to say in English. Moreover, the lack of feedback on speaking tasks suggests that students did not always understand or analyse the content of what they practiced. Despite such limitations, the results revealed that well-organised and actively

implemented CLT approaches led to the positive development of fluency, vocabulary, pronunciation, and confidence levels among learners in spoken English.

Challenges Encountered in Applying CLT

The major challenges of the CLT application in English class was included, time limitation, large classes, language barriers, and organisational barriers. Role plays or seminar and discussions were regarded as time-consuming, and in most cases, lecturers would locate them as more controllable and less open-ended in the teaching process. The students confirmed that *“we did not have much time to engage ourselves in the dialogue activities that the lecturer used in the classroom, so we could not practice speaking English much more.”* In addition, the inflexible schedule and heavy syllabus do not provide enough time to complete tasks that involve extended forms of communication.

Secondly, the classes were 35-45 on average, and there was also the difficulty of overseeing all speaking groups, giving feedback, and taming noise in the classroom. One of the students stated, *“I have never attended the seminar because the lecturer did not give me opportunity to practice my English.”* This was supported by the observations that only a small number of students made consistent participation in speaking activities and the rest were passive.

Thirdly, linguistic issues significantly influenced both the students and the lecturers. To ensure students' understanding, lecturers often transitioned to Tetun or Portuguese. One lecturer stated, *“If I speak only in pure English, some students cannot understand at all.”* Therefore, *“I interchanged between languages to guarantee that they comprehend the message effectively.”* This was useful in understanding, but it decreased the immersion in the English language, which is crucial in achieving fluency in speaking.

Finally, the structural issues demanding institutional support included a small number of classes, the ability to schedule lesson times more freely, and the availability of online materials. These findings, drawn from the experiences of participants, point to a better and more inclusive way to implement CLT that will address both teaching methods and the overall system of language learning in Timor-Leste.

Suggestions to Reinforce the Application of CLT

Similarly, lecturers and students gave brilliant suggestions for optimising CLT in general English classes. Lecturers stressed that a combination of so-called hands-on workshops, collaborative work with peers, and the possibility to visit model lessons would enable them to vary their teaching practices. Students wanted more equal and regular access to the right to speak, so that everyone can participate more. The students recommended, *“perhaps we can spend time allowing everybody to discuss, rather than choosing the same people the entire time to speak out.”* Both students and lecturers stressed the necessity of enhancing English immersion in the classroom, building smaller classes, more flexibility in lesson times, and access to the digital environment.

Discussion

The results of the study confirm a promising future for Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) in helping Timor-Leste students improve their English-speaking skills in higher education. Nevertheless, the data also indicates that CLT implementation is not yet well-developed, as a complex of pedagogical, institutional, and sociolinguistic issues affects the implementation process. The four guiding research questions outlined in the study are discussed in this section and attend to the findings of the study, synthesised with the theoretical frameworks and academic discussions on the nature of CLT in Timor-Leste to make a comprehensive picture of what it is and will be developed in the country.

CLT Techniques in Practice: Evidence of Intent and Inconsistency

The results reveal that lecturers irregularly employ various CLT methods. Lecturers observed and reported techniques such as pair work, role plays, task-based learning, seminar discussions, and simulations. Those methods are based on the main principles of CLT: interaction, intercession of meaning, independence of students, and contextualised language use (Jebahi, 2022). The course documentation, such as syllabi and lesson plans, indicates the institutional recognition of their communicative competence. However, this acknowledgement does not affect the systematic or sustained classroom application of the CLT methods mentioned in such planning documents.

The inconsistent application of these approaches significantly impeded the students' study of English. The communicative tasks also occurred more frequently when the semester had just started, but the frequency of communicative tasks decreased with time, often to be replaced by teacher-orientated explanations or grammar translation-driven activities. The

decline was blamed on the need to regulate the curriculum and the handling of classes and linguistic problems, which put limitations on interactive classroom activities. These developments have been described as pushing and pulling stereotypically with enthusiasm, with a subsequent move back to conventional teaching in other Southeast Asian environments (Nisha, 2024; Danibao & Tari, 2023), where CLT has not been systematically supported.

Furthermore, lecturers demonstrated comprehension of CLT at the conceptual level; however, when they applied CLT techniques, they did not provide the necessary depth and scaffolding to the learning process. As an illustration, an example of pairwork and role plays without well-identified communicative goals, contextual background, and specific feedback implementation is sometimes provided. This underutilisation is in balance with the criticism by Dos Santos (2020) that CLT becomes superficial and insensitive to local conditions, but at the same time, somehow mechanical and uninteresting when simply implemented without being made sensitive to local conditions. Therefore, while ISC lecturers show both willingness and knowledge regarding CLT methods, their application remains inconsistent and unsustainable, necessitating suitable support and defined institutional-level expectations.

The Impact of CLT on Speaking Skill Development

The study found that the successful implementation of CLT approach enables students to communicate in English with greater fluency, accuracy, willingness, and confidence. The students were showing consistent reports, according to which engaging activities, including dialogues, group discussions, and simulations, were able to make them more comfortable when speaking English in real-life situations. The results support Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory, which says that people learn languages best through social interactions and participation. The fact that CLT adapts with this theory implies that it can be used to cultivate language proficiency rather than routine learning.

However, the application of CLT resulted in disproportionately varied attainment gains among students. Similarly, more proficient students gained more out of group-based and discussion tasks, whereas students who were less competent or shy were passively involved. Such an imbalance is characteristic of a long-term problem in communicative classrooms, where more able learners take control over the communication unless activities are well scaffolded and differentiated (Nguyen & Jaspert, 2020). Moreover, there was no reflection on a task, customised feedback, or analysis of the performances of speaking activities that could add value to learning over the long term. Speaking skills, compared to distinct goals of grammar, cannot be cultivated through frequent practice and sessions of continuous feedback and are recursive (Goh & Burns, 2012). Therefore, it turns out that, although CLT was a beneficial idea, its poor and unstable practice made its transformative capability inapplicable.

Challenges in Implementing CLT

Concerning the barriers to the implementation of CLT, an analysis of the results showed a complex pattern involving institutional, pedagogical, and sociolinguistic reasons. The first of these was the class size and the management of time. Lecturers had problems with managing meaningful interactions and controlling speech activities because the average number of students was more than 35 or 45. The classroom was too big to sustain engagement, feedback, and control of noise levels, particularly when communicative group work was conducted, as indicated in the interviews and the observations.

Moreover, insufficient teaching time restricted the variety of longer, step-scaffolded activities, such as structured debates, peer presentations, or multi-phase simulations. Students quickly identified the pressure to complete the syllabus as the primary motivation that led lecturers to return to more controlled, form-based teaching. This limitation goes in concurrently with results achieved by Nguyen & Jaspert (2020), who stated that test-based education systems and accurate curricular management were some of the most significant obstacles to CLT in most Asian countries. Significant challenges were also evident in the linguistic environment. Students commonly used Tetun and Portuguese in class, particularly when they needed to clarify a task or faced confusion. Lecturers admitted that the monocentric teaching policy often led to student monotony and hindered their understanding, while they considered code switching to be a valid practice. Although reasonable, this habit eliminated the immersion required to develop speaking fluency since regular input is essential to the growth of a second language (Ellis et al., 2020). The bilingual contradiction of the course then became a sword with two edges: facilitating the understanding at the expense of communication development.

Similarly, the preparedness of teachers was also an important consideration. Most lecturers reported having limited formal training in Communicative Language Teaching

(CLT), particularly regarding task sequencing, error correction, and assessment. Very few of them reported that they recycled the same pair of tasks or discussion prompts because they had run out of ideas or felt uncertain about creating any new materials. This finding supports what Tisdell, Merriam, and Stuckey-Peyrot (2025) say: for teachers to successfully use CLT within a sustainable framework, they need a deep understanding of teaching content, not just a basic awareness. Lack of performance-based oral assessment also served to discourage speaking practice even more, as students did not see that it interfered with their overall final grades in any significant way. Without institutional investment in their professional development, assessment reform, and resource allocation, lecturers struggle to implement CLT theory effectively.

Strategies for Reinforcing CLT in Higher Education

In the reinforcement of CLT in the higher education context of Timor-Leste, the list of recommended strategies discussed by the participants is identical to those proposed in the academic literature and reflective of them. On the pedagogical level, students and lecturers demanded more diverse, inclusive, and long-term speaking experiences that would be backed with targeted feedback and reflective learning (Achieng, 2023). Rotational group roles, scaffold discussion prompts, and audio-visual aids were specific suggestions that facilitated understanding and participation (Ayulisjati, Kariadi, & Sulistio, 2021). The recommendations agree with those found in current best practices in the area of task-based language teaching, which focus on pre-task modelling, in-task scaffolding, and post-task feedback (Ellis et al., 2020).

5. Conclusion

This study found that Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) has meaningful potential in encouraging the acquisition of the English language by students belonging to higher education in Timor-Leste. The careful use of CLT methods—pair work, simulations, group discussions, and task-based activities—ensured the students were more interested, motivated, and confident in their oral English skills. Despite these encouraging results, the study found that the implementation of CLT is not an even process and is adversely to circumstances such as large classes, short teaching periods, and the lecturer not being fully prepared. Additionally, other institutional barriers to language learning, such as limited curricula, the absence of speaking assessments, and the widespread use of official languages (Tetun and Portuguese) in teaching, also restrict immersive language learning conditions that are essential for achieving communicative competence. This institutional planning and practical implementation gap in the classroom indicated an incoherence between the curricular and pedagogical domains. CLT's success depends on how well national educational systems and the area in which they are applied have integrated and facilitated it.

While the principles underlying CLT are accessible and valued by both lecturers and students, their application in higher learning institutions in Timor-Leste remains incomplete and reactive rather than systematic and sustained. The practical application of CLT needs more than just awareness; it needs contextualised lecturer preparation that is sustained by the institutions and curricular systems that focus on communicative culminations. It seems that realising the transformative potential of CLT is not possible unless structural and pedagogical strengthening occurs. However, the insights gained from qualitative interviews, classroom observations, and document reviews help us understand that when local versions of CLT are well-planned and regularly used, they can greatly improve students' English language skills. Although the contemporary use of CLT is far from optimal, it still displays some innovative possibilities, which, with the inclusion of synchronised efforts, can eventually deliver long-term change to the national language education in Timor-Leste.

Recommendations

To improve the successful implementation of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) at *Instituto Superior Cristal* in Baucau and other universities in Timor-Leste, the following recommendations are provided:

Lecturers should be trained continuously and practically based on their ability to manage the communication task in the classroom, scaffold the performance task in speaking, conduct performance-based evaluations, and structure interactive lesson planning. This addresses the current excessive reliance on a narrow range of activities and the monotony of methodologies observed in the classroom.

Speaking/oral diagnostics should be incorporated into assessment outlines in the form of controlled speaking activities, such as presentations, role-plays, interviews, and peer assessments. This guarantees that speaking correctly is not relegated, and the students are rewarded or punished based on communicative performance, and it encourages them to continue practising.

To overcome the problems of overloading and time constraints, institutions are advised to divide classes into small groups that can be managed or introduce flexible scheduling, whereby all learners can be given an equal chance to engage in a participatory learning process.

Lecturers need to use gradual scaffolding tools, such as simplified English, pictures, and peer interactions, to ensure that students are exposed to as much English in the classroom as possible between sessions. This approach facilitates language acquisition and improves fluency. Students can be given a chance to practice language use in a real-life environment through the creation of English-speaking clubs, peer mentoring programs, and informal conversation. These environments foster self-directed learning, reduce stress, and enhance the education provided in formal CLT classrooms.

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