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# A Mixed Methods Study of Teachers' Perceptions of Communicative Language Teaching in Iranian High Schools

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**Abstract**—This mixed methods research study explored Iranian high school English teachers' perceptions of the CLT approach and the problems that may hinder teachers from implementing CLT in classes. In addition, this study investigated the relationships between teachers' backgrounds and their beliefs towards CLT approach. In the quantitative phase of the study, 70 teachers responded to the Attitudes toward Communicative Approach Scale and the Perceived Difficulties of Communicative Language Teaching Implementation Questionnaire. In the qualitative phase of the study, six teachers, three inexperienced and three experienced, participated in semi-structured interviews concerning their beliefs about CLT approach and their perceptions of barriers in implementing CLT in the Iranian EFL setting. The quantitative results of the first questionnaire indicated that teachers had favorable attitudes towards CLT in general and group/pair work in particular. The results of the second questionnaire showed that teachers considered the problems created by educational system as the major hindrance in applying CLT in classes. Pearson Product-Moment Correlation analyses revealed a significant and positive correlation between teachers' CLT scores and their professional training but no significant relationship was found between teachers' CLT scores and their teaching experience. The qualitative results indicated that selected teachers yielded a better understanding of teachers' beliefs towards CLT.

**Index Terms**—communicative language teaching, EFL, English language teaching, language teaching, teachers' beliefs

## I. INTRODUCTION

The rapid expansion of global communication in recent decades has made the learning of the main international language, English, more accessible and salient than ever before. In the globalization era, English is the undisputed language of technology, science, medicine, education, business, and the Internet. Therefore, in order to accelerate the process of joining “a globalized village” and competing in a global economy, governments have made an extensive attempt to increase the number of their workforce who can communicate effectively and efficiently in English (Littlewood, 2007).

In response to this necessity, educational authorities have made fundamental reforms in English language education policies and syllabuses at national levels, which have led to a change in attitudes towards communicative language teaching (CLT) (Ansarey, 2012; Littlewood, 2007; Ozsevik, 2010). CLT advocates the development of communicative competencies a primary goal of language teaching through the extensive use of the target language as a vehicle of communication during classroom sessions (Chang, 2011; Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011). Therefore, it accentuates language in use rather than language per se (Duff, 2013).

The economic reforms carried out by the Iranian government in the last two decades have resulted in an explosion of interest in learning foreign languages in the society. An increasing demand for English language learning and teaching as a foreign language, therefore, has been gaining momentum across the country. Despite the fact that ELT has long been the center of attention and is a mandatory subject in the national curriculum, many Iranian high school graduates could not communicate in English effectively after studying it for seven years (See Razmjoo & Riazi, 2006). In an attempt to solve the existing problem and to help students develop communicative competence in English, in the mid-2000s, Iran's ministry of education developed new English language curricula and syllabuses, which encouraged the use of CLT in English language classrooms (Ministry of Education, 2006 as cited in Dahmardeh, 2009).

It has been more than eight years since the introduction of CLT into the Iranian national curriculum, with the hope of improving the quality of English language teaching and learning. However, the application of CLT approach in Iran has

not necessarily led to desirable outcomes of improvement in students' English communicative competence. Many ELT scholars and researchers state that 'traditional' methods are still prevalent in Iranian high schools (Kiyani, Mahdavi & Ghafar Samar, 2014; Sadani & Abdolmanafi-Rokni, 2014). Research on the appropriateness and efficacy of language teaching methods reveals that implementation of a method depends on such factors as the context in which it takes place, the institutional restrictions and demands, the local and culture-specific needs of students, and teachers' beliefs (Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011; Carless, 2003).

Among these factors, teachers' perceptions play a vital role in employing CLT in classes (Karavas-Doukas, 1996 as cited in Chang, 2011). Carless (2003) states that "If teachers' views are not sufficiently taken account of, the already challenging nature of implementing something new may be exacerbated" (p. 485). Similarly, Yin Wong and Barrea-Marlys (2012) argue that the instructional practices and the decisions that instructors make concerning teaching methods are largely influenced by their own beliefs.

In order to uncover teachers' beliefs about the implementation of CLT in classrooms a great deal of research has been conducted in different EFL settings (e.g. Lee, 2014; Ahmad & Rao, 2013; Ansary, 2013; Raissi et al., 2013; Ngoc & Iwashita, 2012). In addition, researchers found that teachers' teaching experience and professional training are among the significant criteria that can influence teachers' beliefs about implementing CLT (Suk-Fun, 1998; Chang 2011; Al-Mekhlafi, 2011).

However, there is a paucity of research examining teachers' beliefs about CLT as well as the effect of EFL teachers' demographic factors on the construction of their beliefs about CLT in the Iranian context. In addition, the literature in Iranian EFL setting shows that previous research mainly used quantitative research methods (Razmjoo & Riazi, 2006; Rahimi & Naderi, 2014), which are "not very sensitive in uncovering the reasons for particular observations or the dynamics underlying the examined situation or phenomenon" (Dö rneyi, 2007, p. 36). Thus, quantitative methods may yield basic information regarding teachers' beliefs about CLT, but qualitative inquiry is needed to understand the context and hear teachers' voices about this complex issue. However, mixed methods research can "provide a depth and breadth that a single approach may lack by itself" (Ivankova & Creswell, 2009, p. 136).

Therefore, the aim of this mixed methods study is to obtain an in-depth understanding of Iranian EFL teachers' perceptions about CLT and of the challenges and difficulties that impede them from implementing CLT practices in language classes.

#### **Research questions:**

Based on the aforementioned objectives, the following research questions are posed:

1. What beliefs do Iranian high school English teachers hold about CLT?
2. What are the barriers to implementing CLT in Iranian high school English classes?
3. How do teachers' backgrounds affect their attitudes towards CLT?
4. How do interviews with teachers help to explain their attitudes towards CLT and the barriers that impeded them in implementing CLT in classes?

## II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Developing L2 students' communicative competence through interaction and communication is the central target of CLT (Brown, 2006; Canale & Swain, 1980 as cited in Yin-Wong & Barrea-Marlys, 2012). The term *communicative competence* was first coined by Hymes (1971). He criticized Chomsky's theory of *linguistic competence*, a speaker's underlying knowledge of grammatical structure, for not taking into account the social aspects of language. Hymes (1972 as cited in Chang, 2011) states that acquiring communicative competence consists of the following aspects. First, "whether something is formally possible" which is to some extent similar to Chomsky's notion of grammatical competence. It is concerned with whether a particular structure is grammatical or not in a language. Second, "whether something is feasible" means that a sentence is grammatical but not useable in a language. In other words, because of the limited capability of human beings' information processing, a sentence cannot be said to form part of our competence. Third, "whether something is appropriate" means that a sentence can be grammatical and feasible but inappropriate for the context in which it is employed. Fourth, "whether something is in fact done" indicates that a sentence may satisfy the previous aspects but does not actually occur (Hymes, 1972, p. 14).

In summary, communicative competence includes not only knowing a set of lexical, grammatical, and phonological rules but also the ability to use the knowledge in a variety of communicative situations. It deals with "both social and cultural knowledge that speakers are presumed to have which enables them to use and interpret linguistic forms as well as meanings" (Dahmardeh, 2009, p. 36).

## III. METHODOLOGY

Integrating both quantitative and qualitative methods, a mixed methods approach, in a single study has recently gained momentum in applied linguistics research projects (Hashemi & Babaii, 2013). In designing a mixed methods research, three main characteristics need to be taken into account: 'timing', 'emphasis', and 'mixing' (Ivankova & Creswell, 2009). Timing refers to the sequence of qualitative and quantitative data collection and analysis in the study. Emphasis refers to which method, either qualitative or quantitative, is given importance or priority in the study. Mixing

refers to the phase in the research process where the two methods, qualitative or quantitative, are integrated (Ivankova & Creswell, 2009).

This study employed an explanatory sequential mixed methods design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011), which is used frequently in applied linguistics research. It consisted of two distinct phases. In the first stage, the quantitative, numeric data were collected, using a questionnaire, and were then analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics. The results of the analysis were teachers' attitudes towards CLT, the influence of teachers' demographics on their beliefs about CLT, and the barriers that impeded them in implementing CLT in classes. To explain these results, qualitative data then were collected using semi-structured interviews and analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) in order to provide a fuller understanding of the quantitative data. Equal emphasis was given to the quantitative and qualitative data. With respect to mixing aspect, connecting across stages was used. In other words, the results of the quantitative data were employed to select participants for qualitative data gathering in the follow-up phase. Figure 1 presents the mixed methods procedural diagram for the study.

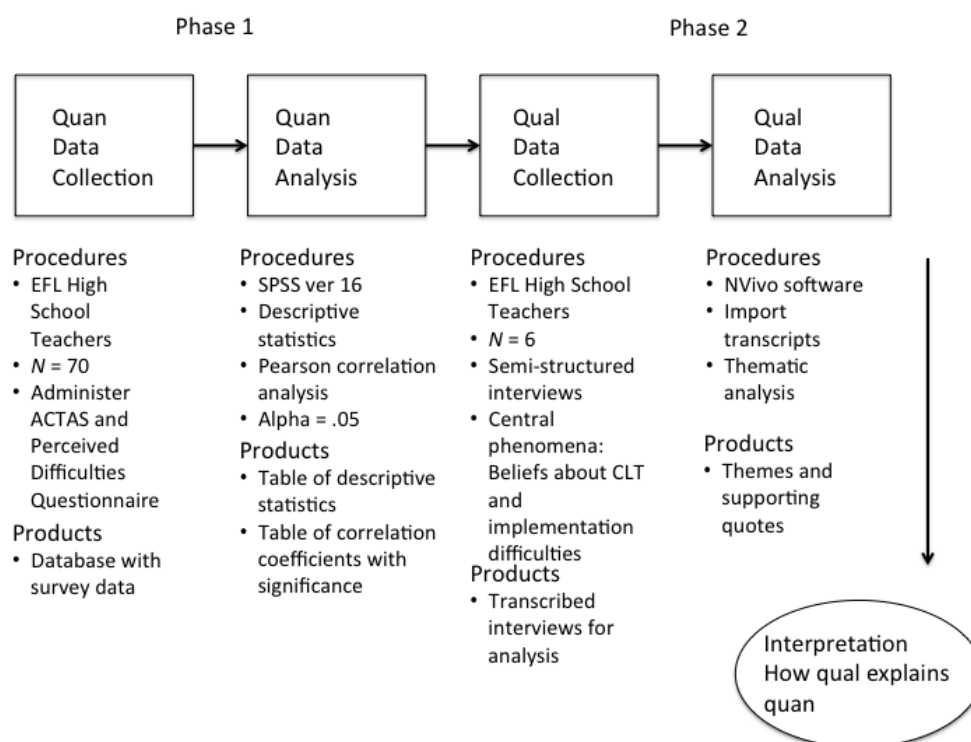


Figure 1. An Explanatory Sequential Mixed Methods Design of Teachers' Perceptions of CLT in Iranian High Schools

## A. Quantitative Phase

### a. Participants

Seventy EFL high schools teachers (50 males and 20 females) took part in this study. To select the samples, the researchers used 'convenience sampling' and chose Shiraz city since it met practical criteria: 'geographical proximity' and 'availability at a certain time'. Then, because the high schools in this city were widely dispersed and in order to raise the sampling representativeness of Iranian English high schools, the authors adopted cluster random sampling to select the participants of this study. According to Dörnyei (2007) cluster sampling includes the random selection of "some larger groupings or units of the population and then examining all the individuals in those selected units" (p. 98). In this study, the selected unit is public high schools in Shiraz. On the basis of a list of the Fars province department of education, there are 123 public high schools in Shiraz of which 20 were selected from the four educational districts randomly. Then, all the teachers in 20 public high schools were recruited for the survey through simple one-stage cluster sampling. They ranged in age from 30 to 53 with a mean age of 38. Sixty had a B.A degree, and 10 held an M.A degree in TEFL, English language and literature, and English translation. The teaching experience of the participants ranged from 6 to 25 years with an average of 12 years.

### b. Instruments

#### 1. Attitudes toward Communicative Approach Scale (ATCAS)

The first instrument, the 24-item ATCAS, originally designed by Karava-Doukas (1996), was employed to measure the participants' beliefs about CLT. It includes five sub-categories: the place and importance of grammar (six items), group/pair work (four items), the role of the learners in the process of language learning (six items), the role of the teacher in class (four items), and the quantity and quality of error correction (four items). The ATCAS items are rated by a five-point Likert scale, ranging from five points (*strongly agree*) to one point (*strongly disagree*). A score of 120

indicates the most favorable attitude towards CLT, 24 indicates the least favorable perception of CLT, and 72, the middle point of the continuum, indicates uncertainty in all 24 items. In the original study, Karava-Doukas (1996) reported a Cronbach's alpha of 0.88. The ATCAS has been extensively adopted in various EFL contexts, such as in Pakistan (Ahmad & Rao, 2013), Oman (Al-Mekhlafi, 2011), Taiwan (Chang, 2011), and all of them demonstrated a reasonable level of reliability of the questionnaire. The questionnaire has also been used in the Iranian context (Rahimi & Naderi, 2014; Razmjoo & Riazi, 2006). In the two studies the reliability of the questionnaire was 0.78 and 0.81, respectively. In this study, the reliability of questionnaire as calculated on Cronbach alpha was 0.86, which reveals a reasonably high internal consistency. To ensure the validity of this measurement, all items of this questionnaire were reviewed by experts in EFL language teaching methodology for content validity. This panel of experts reached a consensus that the ATCAS items were appropriate. Regarding construct validation, factor analysis (Principal Axis Factoring) was run to determine the underlying structure of ATCAS. The results showed that the questionnaire measures the five following constructs as "the place and importance of grammar" (six items), "group/pair work" (four items), "the role of the learners in the process of language learning" (six items), "the role of the teacher in class" (four items), and "the quantity and quality of error correction" (four items). The confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) revealed the same categorization of the questionnaire items as the original one designed by Karavas-Doukas (1996).

### **2. Perceived Difficulties of CLT Implementation Questionnaire**

The second questionnaire was on the perceived difficulties of CLT implementation, originally designed by Ozsevik (2010) and consisting of two parts. The first part was designed to elicit the respondents' demographic and background information including gender, age, educational background, and years of teaching. The second section assessed the difficulties that Iranian English high school teachers encounter while trying to implement CLT in their classes. This section consists of 18 items. The respondents were asked to rate each item on a four-point Likert scale ranging from 4 (major challenge) to 1 (not a challenge at all). The questionnaire measures five broad categories of difficulties in implementing CLT in classrooms: namely, teacher-related difficulties, student-related difficulties, difficulties related to the educational system, and CLT-related difficulties. In the original study, Ozsevik (2010) reported the Cronbach coefficient alpha as 0.80. The reliability calculated in this study was 0.84 using the Cronbach coefficient alpha. To assess the content validity of this questionnaire the researcher asked the same panel of experts to evaluate the items. This panel of experts reached a consensus that the items were appropriate. Then, factor analysis (Principal Axis Factoring) was run to determine the underlying structure of the questionnaire to establish initial evidence of construct validity. The results revealed that the questionnaire measures the four following constructs as "teacher-related difficulties" (six items), "student-related difficulties" (four items), "difficulties related to the educational system" (three items), and "CLT-related difficulties" (five items). The confirmatory factor analysis demonstrated the same categorization of the questionnaire items as Ozsevik (2010).

#### **c. Data collection procedure**

Quantitative data collection from all of the participants took place over approximately two months (from 5<sup>th</sup> December to 10<sup>th</sup> February, 2013-2014). First, the researchers contacted the principals of the selected high schools in Shiraz by phone to ask for permission to carry out the study. After the researchers had obtained permission from the principals, the researchers distributed the consent form showing the goal of the study to 70 English teachers of the selected high schools. They all agreed to participate in the study. Before the distribution of the instruments, directions and procedures were explained to the participants by the researchers. The researchers assured participants of strict confidentiality of the information and data gathered and explained that that only aggregated results would be public. Then, the researchers distributed the two questionnaires to the teachers. They first completed ATCAS, which took 20 minutes, and then the second questionnaire, perceived difficulties for implementing CLT, was completed, taking 15 minutes. The questionnaires were in English. During the survey sessions, the researchers responded to all of the questions that the participants had about the questionnaires.

#### **d. Data analysis**

The data were analyzed by using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS), version 16. Descriptive statistics (mean, and standard deviation) were computed for demographics and answering research questions one and two. For research question three, Pearson Product-moment correlation coefficients were conducted to find out whether teachers' background factors including qualification and teaching experience had an effect on their attitudes towards CLT. Statistical significance was set at  $p < .01$ .

## **B. Qualitative Phase**

### **a. Participants**

Before gathering the qualitative data, and consistent with the explanatory sequential mixed methods design, the researchers made a connection between the two phases of the study. Based on the quantitative collection performed earlier, the researcher purposefully selected six teachers based on maximum variation sampling, three inexperienced and three experienced, for semi-structured interviews in order to explain the results of the survey. According to Dö nyei (2007) maximum variation sampling "allows [the researchers] to explore the variation within the respondents" (p. 128).

### **b. Semi-structured Interviews**

Semi-structured interviews were used to obtain in-depth understanding of the results of the quantitative analyses concerning teachers' beliefs about CLT and the difficulties that they encounter in implementing it in classrooms. The researchers used semi-structured interviews to explore topics in depth (Kajornboon, 2005). Gillham (2000 as cited in Dörnyei, 2007) urges "survey researchers to conduct semi-structured interviews to accompany questionnaire results ... [because] interview data can both illustrate and illuminate questionnaire results and can bring your research study to life" (p. 82).

As described in the previous section, the researchers deliberately selected six participants. Each interviewee was asked seven open-ended questions according to a semi-structured interview protocol. The interview protocol with the six teachers, which was developed based on the results of the survey, was divided into two dimensions. They were: (1) exploring teachers' attitude towards the five principles of CLT (sample question: what roles do you consider for teachers in language teaching?); and (2) exploring factors that impeded teachers from implementing CLT in language classes (sample question: how do you feel about employing CLT in an EFL context like Iran?).

#### *c. Data collection procedure*

On the interview day, the participants were asked to fill in the informed consent forms. All six agreed to participate. They were Kazem, Jamal, Rahim, Sara, Sahar, and Elham. For the purposes of confidentiality, pseudonyms were used. The semi-structured interviews took place in the teachers' offices. The language of the interviews was Persian (the participants' mother tongue) to create a rapport with the participants (Susan Gass, personal communication, June 22, 2012) and to expedite communication and avoid misinterpretation. The researcher began each interview by concisely explaining the purpose of the study and asking the participant to be sincere, honest, and communicative during the course of the interview. Each interview lasted for 35 to 40 minutes. All of the interviews were audio-recorded.

#### *d. Data analysis*

The transcripts were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). According to Braun and Clarke (2006), thematic analysis is a "method for identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes) within data. It organizes and describes your data set in rich detail" (p. 79). Employing thematic permitted "flexibility". In other words, this method is independent of theory and epistemology, and can be applied across a wide range of theoretical and epistemological approaches (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Hence, it is ideal for a mixed methods research (Querstret & Robinson, 2012 as cited in Jafari & Shokrpour, 2012).

Thematic analysis included six steps. First, the interviewees' responses were transcribed verbatim and the transcripts were read multiple times to identify text related to teachers' beliefs about CLT and the difficulties implementing it in their classes. Second, the researchers coded the data by dividing and labeling the data. Third, the codes were analyzed and combined to form themes. Themes were developed on the basis of an inductive interpretation of the individual texts, as well as being theoretically influenced by conceptual underpinnings of CLT. Fourth, the themes were reviewed and refined to develop a satisfactory thematic "map" of the data. Then, the researchers defined and further refined each theme and generated definitions and names, followed by the sixth phase, which was writing the final report of the analysis. The qualitative data were analyzed via NVivo, qualitative analysis software.

#### *e. Qualitative Validation Strategies*

Prior to performing the interview sessions, the same panel of experts validated the content of the questions of the interviews. To ensure accuracy of the data, the researcher analyzed some excerpts twice. In addition, the researcher trained a second coder who specializes in applied linguistics. The coder engaged in independent coding and worked on all excerpts. At the end, the results were compared and any discrepancies were discussed. For all coding units, the level of intracoder agreement was found to be sufficient (.85 for rater 1 and .79 for rater 2).

## IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### A. Quantitative Research

#### *Q.1: What beliefs do Iranian high school English teachers hold about CLT?*

Descriptive statistics were used to address the first research question. The descriptive statistics provided means and standard deviations.

TABLE 1:  
DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS OF THE PARTICIPANTS' OVERALL PERCEPTIONS OF CLT

	Min	Max	Mean	SD
Score	76	118	88.44	6.54

As Table 1 shows, EFL teachers' average scores for the whole questionnaire ranged from 76 to 118, with a mean of 88.44 and a standard deviation of 6.54. This means that the participants had positive attitudes towards CLT in general. This finding is in line with other research on teachers' attitudes towards CLT in other contexts (e.g. Lee, 2014; Ahmad & Rao, 2013; Ansary, 2013; Raissi et al., 2013; Ngoc & Iwashita, 2012; Chang, 2011; Ozsevik, 2010). This finding sends a positive signal to educational authorities and policy makers who design and prepare curriculum for high school students since the implementation of an innovation partly depends on teachers' beliefs towards it.

TABLE 2:  
DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS OF THE RESPONDENTS' BELIEFS ABOUT THE FIVE SUB-SCALES OF CLT

Scale	Mean	SD
The role of the teacher in the classroom	3.72	.49
Place/importance of grammar	3.38	.48
Group/pair work	3.82	.52
The role and contribution of learners in learning process	3.52	.58
Quantity/quality of error correction	3.31	.55

Table 2 displays the overall mean scores for the five principles of CLT. The average scores of each principle of CLT were 3.72 for "the role of the teacher in the classroom", 3.38 for "place/importance of grammar", 3.82 for "group/pair work", 3.52 for "the role and contribution of learners in learning process", and 3.31 for "quantity/quality of error correction". As shown in Table 2, "group/pair work" was the highest mean, while "quantity/quality of error correction" was the lowest mean. In general, EFL teachers as a cluster concurred with the five categories since the average scores of none of the principles is lower than 3. The results are consistent with Ngoc and Iwashita's (2012) findings that teachers had most favorable attitudes towards the role of pair/group work activities than the other CLT principles. These results suggest that facilitating students' autonomy and training them to be responsible for their own learning are the main concerns of teachers. As students need to experience or practice communicating in the target language through negotiating meaning with others (Duff, 2013) to develop communicative competence, pair/group work provides students the chance to practically experience the language.

Q.2: *What are the barriers to implementing CLT in Iranian high school English classes?*

Descriptive statistics including means and standard deviations were used to address research question two.

TABLE 3:  
DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS OF PERCEIVED DIFFICULTIES IN IMPLEMENTING CLT IN IRANIAN CLASSROOMS

Scale	Mean	SD
Teacher-related difficulties	3.46	.49
Student-related difficulties	3.52	.51
Educational system difficulties	3.63	.45
CLT-related difficulties	3.23	.52

As Table 3 illustrates, the mean of each category reported shows that Iranian English high school teachers face obstacles in implementing CLT in their classrooms. The most challenging difficulties that the participants reported were "educational system difficulties" ( $M=3.63$ ), followed by "student-related difficulties" ( $M=3.52$ ), "teacher-related difficulties" ( $M=3.46$ ), and "CLT-related difficulties" ( $M=3.23$ ). These results are consistent with Rahimi and Naderi's (2014) study. These findings suggest that some reforms should be done in the educational system of Iran. One of the changes that seem necessary in this area is a reform on the current examination system. High-stakes English language examinations in Iran assess linguistic competence rather than communicative competence, and do not involve listening, writing, and speaking skills. This is true of all examinations held in guidance schools and high schools and of nationwide university entrance examination. Generally speaking, the predominance of grammar-centered examinations in Iran does not provide a basis for the student-centered, fluency-focused, and problem-solving activities required by CLT.

Q.3: *How do Iranian high school English teachers' backgrounds affect their attitudes towards CLT?*

TABLE 4:  
DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS OF TEACHERS' PERCEPTION SCORES ON THE BASIS OF THEIR TEACHING EXPERIENCE

Year of teaching experience	Number	Mean	SD
0-6	7	74.2	8.88
7-12	18	71.16	8.34
13-17	25	68.23	6.43
18-25	20	66.17	7.56
Total	70	71.12	7.89

As Table 4 demonstrates, the mean of the participants with 0-6 years of teaching is the highest among four groups ( $M=74.12$ ,  $SD=8.88$ ). However, teachers with more than thirteen years have relatively lower scores than other groups.

Pearson Product-moment correlation analysis was conducted to investigate the relationship between teachers' attitude scores toward CLT and teaching experience. No significant relationship was found between Iranian high school English teachers' attitude scores towards CLT and their teaching experience. This finding is inconsistent with Suk-Fun's (1998) study.

TABLE 5:  
CORRELATIONS BETWEEN TEACHING EXPERIENCE AND ATTITUDES SCORES TOWARDS CLT

	Years of teaching practice	CLT practice
Years of teaching experience	1	.225
Sig. (2-tailed)	70	70
CLT practice	-.141	1
	.225	70
	70	

Descriptive statistics, including means and standard deviations for attitude scores based on the number of Iranian high school English teachers' professional training programs, are summarized in Table 6.

TABLE 6:  
DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS OF ATTITUDE SCORES BASED ON CLT PROFESSIONAL TRAINING

Number of workshops attended	Number	Mean	SD
0	11	68.23	3.45
1	16	73.15	2.65
2	12	79.56	4.34
3	14	82.11	6.36
4 and more	17	84.23	6.05
Total			

As can be seen in the Table above the participants participating in four or more seminars and workshops obtained the highest average attitude score towards CLT ( $M=84.23$ ,  $SD=6.05$ ), while the participants who never participated in seminars and workshops obtained the lowest average attitude score towards CLT ( $M=68.23$ ,  $SD=3.45$ ).

Pearson Product-moment correlation was computed to investigate the relationship between the number of teachers' professional training and their attitudes towards CLT. The correlation coefficient is significant ( $r = 0.634$ ,  $p \leq 0.01$ ; see Table 7). Thus, the more professional training courses (e.g. conferences, seminars, and workshops) the participants attended, the more positive the teachers' attitudes were inclined towards CLT. This result is in line with Chang's (2011) study, who found a positive relationship between the teachers' professional training and their attitudes towards CLT in Taiwan. Generally, these results back this idea that teachers' in-service training influences teachers' perceptions of language teaching and develops their positive attitudes toward a teaching approach (Ellis, 1994; Karavas-Doukas, 1996 as cited in Chang, 2011).

TABLE 7:  
CORRELATIONS BETWEEN TEACHER PROFESSIONAL TRAINING AND ATTITUDES SCORES TOWARDS CLT

	Professional Training	CLT practice
Professional training	1	.634**
Sig. (2-tailed)	70	.000
		70
CLT practice	.634**	1
	.000	
	70	

\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

## B. Qualitative Research

### Q.1: What beliefs do Iranian high school English teachers hold about CLT?

To gain deeper insight into high school English teachers' attitudes towards the five principles of CLT mentioned in the questionnaire, the researchers conducted follow up interviews. Based on interviewees' responses, the themes and sub-themes under each principle are discussed below.

#### 1. The role of form and grammar instruction in CLT

##### (a) *Paying attention to form and the capability to utilize grammar for communication*

All of interviewees believed that CLT emphasizes the need to include grammar instruction and considers it as one of the components of 'communicative competence'. From their point of views, the place of grammar in CLT is considerably different from that of in traditional methods since in CLT students learn grammar in order to use it in real communication. On the other hand, grammatical structures are learnt out of real contexts in traditional methods such as GTM and ALM. Kazem explained his ideas about grammar in CLT:

I think grammar plays a pivotal role in language learning process. That is true that language is communication, but without having grammatical knowledge the message would be imperfect. Given this point, CLT advocates the inclusion of grammar instruction in its teaching practices

Elham explains the benefits of teaching grammatical points in CLT classes:

In our context, when we teach grammatical points through traditional methods we see that students are able to explain them clearly but are unable to use them in real contexts. However, when we follow CLT techniques and

principles for teaching grammar the students are able to apply their linguistic knowledge in their conversations. Therefore, we see how CLT contributes in effective learning of grammatical structures

## 2. Pair/group work

### (a) *Creating opportunities for authentic interaction*

The general consensus among interviewees was that pair/group work activities in class are useful. They believed that such activities provide the students with sufficient opportunities to use the target language in the classroom, as it is used in real and authentic situations. They endorsed the interactions between students-students and teacher-students. For example, Rahim said:

In my opinion pair/group work activities assist students to find themselves in real communication. As such they create a chance for social interaction. In these activities, students initiate to interact with their teacher and their classmates as well so the atmosphere of interaction is closer to communications that occur outside of the class.

Another interviewee, Sahar, said:

Student-student interaction is an important activity in language learning process. In such activity, students not only receive input but also produce output, the situation that occurs in an authentic communication. They also try to rectify each other's misunderstanding through the negotiation of meaning.

## 3. Quality and quantity of error correction

### (a) *Fluency and accuracy are both important goals to pursue in CLT*

All of six interviewees believed that fluency and accuracy have equal importance in learning process. In contrast, they asserted that in some activities like pair/group work, the teacher should be aware of not interrupting students' communication. They also explained that in skills like writing teachers need to correct students' errors immediately. For example, Jamal said:

I think we should be patient about students' errors in pair/group work activities. In these types of activities we need to put more emphasis on fluency and let students to express their ideas and opinions. But in a skill like writing, where the writer does not receive immediate feedback from the reader, expressing ideas through inappropriate forms causes negative outcomes. So, students first need to learn grammatical forms and how to organize their ideas and opinions.

## 4. The role of teacher in class

### (a) *Create authentic situations in class*

All of the interviewees believed that teachers can assist learners learning the target language through creating authentic situations. They asserted that the role of the teacher is to promote communication in class through creating environments that are close to situations outside the class. Sara, for example said:

As a teacher in CLT class we should establish contexts that students are likely to experience outside the class. In this type of class teacher is a person who is aware of the phases that would occur in real communication situations and plan class activities based on them. He/she can use techniques such as role play, pair/group work to reach the goals.

## 5. The role and contribution of learners

### (a) *Learners are independent learners at the end*

Interviewees stated that in CLT class, the focus should be on learner's autonomy. In other words, learners should take the responsibility of their own learning. They supported learner-centered approach because it gives them more 'initiative and responsibility'. Kazem argued that:

I strongly approve learner-centered approach since in a teacher-centered approach the learners are under the power of the teacher and they have not any role in their learning. Teachers' role in CLT class is to help learners the necessary skills for becoming independent learners.

### Q.2 *What are the barriers to implementing CLT in Iranian high school English classes?*

Based on the early data analysis, three main themes emerged: constraints caused (a) by the teacher, (b) by the learners, (c) and by the educational system in Iran. The data were revisited in order to identify sub-themes for each main theme.

## 1. Teacher-related factors

### (a) *Deficiency in spoken English*

Nearly all of the interviewees expressed that they do not have the proficiency to teach speaking skills. Most of them blamed the way that they were taught English as students. They reported that they were taught based on traditional methods, so they are highly competent in reading and grammar. Sara said:

I learned English at both school and university based on traditional methods. My teachers never provided opportunities for us to interact with our classmates. They just asked us to memorize vocabulary and grammatical items. There were no speaking activities at all.

Similarly, Jamal said, "I'm quite good at grammar and reading. But, I'm not good at speaking. So, how can I run my class based on CLT principles".

### (b) *Deficiency in strategic and sociolinguistic competence*

All of interviewees reported that they do not have acceptable level of strategic and sociolinguistic competence. Because teacher's strategic and sociolinguistic competence should be much greater in a CLT class than in a traditional grammar-based class, the interviewees were reluctant to implement CLT in their classes. For example, Elham said:



I feel comfortable when my students ask questions about grammar. I do not have any problem in answering them. But when they ask me questions about sociolinguistic features of the target language, I'm not able to answer them. In the Iranian culture when you are unable to answer your students' questions, it means that you are not a competent teacher.

## 2. Difficulties caused by the learners

The second main category of limitations was related to the students' low English proficiency and lack of motivation.

### (a) *Students' low English proficiency*

The interviewees identified students' low English proficiency as one of the main obstacles that prevent them from implementing CLT in class. They believed that students have low English proficiency because they begin to learn English from guidance school, and they have only one, 60 minute English class each week. For instance, Rahim said:

Iranian high school students have low vocabulary repertoire. They are also not competent in grammar. So, they cannot express themselves clearly. The problem is that they do start to learn English from guidance school and the amount of time that spend in class in order to learn English is just one and hour which is not enough for preparing students to speak and understand English.

### (b) *Lack of motivation*

Four of the interviewees reported that students do not have enough motivation to learn English for the purpose of communication. Although students know they need to become fluent in English to become successful in both education and business, they have little motivation to acquire it. In this regard, Sahar said:

Although Iranian high school students know that they need to improve their communicative competence, they still stick to mastering grammatical points since national university entrance exam is just based on grammar and reading comprehension. In other words, they prefer to obtain this goal rather than the primary goal of language learning - communication.

## 3. Difficulties caused by educational system

Based on the interviewees' opinions the difficulties and challenges related to the current educational system in Iran are large classes and grammar-based examinations.

### (a) *Large classes*

All of the interviewees reported that all of the classes in public schools are a large size, which causes difficulties in organizing groups and oral communicative activities. They also stated that dividing students into groups takes quite a long time. They further reported that they could not motivate all students to focus on studying particularly students at the back rows. This factor might therefore be one of the other barriers that impede application of CLT in the classroom. Jamal said:

Working with a large class is extremely difficult. Dividing them into groups is time-consuming. I also cannot manage such large groups. It is not possible to give equal attention to each group as required in CLT. Some students do not participate in group activities since they understand that I cannot monitor them.

### (b) *Grammar based examinations*

All of the interviewees reported the discrepancy between what the curriculum goals are and what is actually evaluated on the national university entrance exam. The national English curriculum designed in the ministry of education clearly states that it is based on the principles of CLT. However, these standardized tests assess the students' grammatical and vocabulary knowledge. There are also a number of reading comprehension questions. However, speaking, listening, and writing skills are not assessed in those multiple-choice tests. As Kazem said:

One of the biggest problems in implementing CLT in class is the discrepancy between the goal of teaching English speculated by the ministry of education and those of the national university entrance exam. There is a strong mismatch between these two equally important elements and this leads to a very big challenge. I myself simply cannot teach students speaking skills since it is not assessed in this exam. The course books include listening and speaking activities. However, the nationwide university entrance exam concentrates on grammar, vocabulary, and reading skills only, all assessed through multiple-choice questions.

## C. *Mixed Methods Integration*

Q. 4: *How do interviews with teachers help to explain their attitudes towards CLT and the barriers that impeded them in implementing CLT in classes?*

To address the final research question, the researchers reexamined the integrated interview findings and considered the value of mixed methods in explaining the statistical results. Table 8 summarizes how mixed methods led to a better explanation. The table aligns the quantitative results with the related qualitative findings that account for those results. The integrated analysis focused on the first two research questions related to teachers' beliefs about CLT and barriers to its implementation. As previously noted, the third research question related to teacher experience. Experience differed among the participants although the instrument analysis indicated experience was not correlated with CLT attitudes. The experience level, however, was key in selecting representative participants for the follow-up qualitative phase. Thus, the results regarding experience served to connect the quantitative and qualitative phases.

TABLE 8:  
A MIXED METHODS JOINT DISPLAY OF THE INTEGRATION OF QUANTITATIVE AND QUALITATIVE DATA TO EXPLAIN CLT

Quantitative Results	Qualitative Findings	Mixed Methods Integration
<b>Beliefs about CLT principles</b>		
1) Group/pair work ( $M=3.82$ )	-Group work is important because it gives opportunities for authentic use of the target language	Mixed methods yielded a better understanding of the beliefs. The qualitative follow-up explained beliefs about CLT by identifying the reason principles are or are not important in the view of teachers. For example, the mean teacher belief was lowest for error correction. However, the qualitative interviews indicate that teachers were only concerned with error correction in interrupting communication.
2) Role of teacher ( $M=3.72$ )	-Teachers see their role as creating an authentic learning situation	
3) Role of learners ( $M=3.52$ )	-Teachers felt learners are ultimately responsible for their own learning	
4) Place/importance of grammar ( $M=3.38$ )	-Teachers believe CLT emphasizes grammar for real communication	
5) Error correction ( $M=3.31$ )	-Teachers cautioned that error correction in group work can interrupt communication	
<b>Barriers to implementing CLT</b>		
1) Educational system difficulties ( $M=3.63$ )	-System-related barriers include large class sizes and examinations that focus on grammar. The exams are inconsistent with CLT goals.	The use of mixed methods provided a better understanding of the barriers. In addition to identifying barriers, the integration of data indicated the specific details (e.g., low motivation with students). Scholars can then use this knowledge to make recommendations.
2) Student-related difficulties ( $M=3.52$ )	-Learners' low English proficiency and lack of motivation among students tended to impede CLT.	
3) Teacher-related difficulties ( $M=3.46$ )	-Teachers felt their own English proficiency was lacking and felt they needed stronger sociolinguistic skills	
4) CLT related difficulties ( $M=3.23$ )		

## V. CONCLUSION

Iranian ministry of education required Iranian high school English teachers to implement CLT approach in teaching English by designing a new curriculum in the mid- 2000s; however, the traditional teaching methods are still prevalent in English classes in Iran. Therefore, this mixed methods study aimed to examine Iranian high school English teachers' perceptions of CLT, the barriers that impede them from implementing CLT, and how their backgrounds affect their attitudes towards CLT. Concerning the goals of this study, the following results were obtained.

1. Iranian high school English teachers held favorable attitudes towards CLT. Teachers' favorable attitudes indicate strong potential for applying CLT in the Iranian context, since its core principles including learner centeredness, learner autonomy, and the role of teacher as a facilitator appear to be accepted in the context of this study.

2. The survey results revealed that Iranian high school English teachers had positive attitudes towards the five principles of CLT. Among these principles, "group/pair work" was the highest mean, while "quantity/quality of error correction" was the lowest mean. However, the qualitative interviews revealed that teachers were only concerned with error correction in interrupting communication. Such views might be due to the importance of accuracy in students' examinations. Therefore, textbook designers should integrate explicit instruction of grammatical points into the books.

3. The most challenging difficulties that the participants reported were "educational system difficulties". To remove such obstacles, some micro and macro changes need to be taken by the ministry of education. For example, a reform should be made on the current examination system, which is grammar oriented.

4. The more professional training courses (e.g. conferences, seminars, and workshops) the participants attended, the more positive the teachers' attitudes were inclined towards CLT. Therefore, special attention should be paid to teachers' training. In other words, in-service teachers need opportunities to retrain themselves in CLT approaches.

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