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# We Believe in CLT, But...': Iranian EFL Teachers' Perceptions and Implementation Challenges

## Creemos en el CLT, pero...: Percepciones de los profesores iraníes de EFL y desafíos de implementación

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## Abstract

Despite its official adoption in Iran's national EFL curriculum, Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) remains inconsistently implemented, revealing a profound disconnect between policy mandates and classroom realities. This mixed-methods study examines the perceptions of 35 Iranian EFL teachers (15 pre-service, 20 in-service) in Isfahan, using questionnaires and semi-structured interviews, to explore their conceptualizations of CLT, perceived barriers to its enactment, and the resulting belief-practice gap. Findings demonstrate robust theoretical support for CLT principles across both cohorts, yet their practical application is severely constrained. Common obstacles include grammar-focused national examinations, large class sizes, students' ingrained passive learning habits, scarcity of authentic materials, and insufficient teacher training. In-service teachers further highlight systemic barriers—misaligned assessment systems, inadequate administrative support, and low salaries—whereas pre-service teachers, limited by minimal classroom exposure, display greater optimism. Framed through Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, the study positions teachers as active agents mediating conflicting institutional and cultural demands. It contends that sustainable CLT integration demands policy coherence, sustained professional development, and context-sensitive adaptations rather than relying solely on top-down reform. By providing a comparative analysis across career stages, this research advances teacher cognition scholarship and reframes CLT as a locally negotiated practice, offering direct implications for teacher education, curriculum design, and policymaking in comparable EFL contexts.

***Keywords:*** Communicative Language Teaching, EFL teachers, teacher cognition, implementation barriers, sociocultural theory

## Resumen

A pesar de su adopción oficial en el currículo nacional de inglés como lengua extranjera (EFL) en Irán, la Enseñanza de Lenguas Comunicativa (CLT) continúa implementándose de manera inconsistente, lo que revela una profunda desconexión entre las directrices políticas y las realidades del aula. Este estudio de métodos mixtos examina las percepciones de 35 docentes iraníes de EFL (15 en formación y 20 en ejercicio) en Isfahán, mediante cuestionarios y entrevistas semiestructuradas, con el fin de explorar sus conceptualizaciones de la CLT, los obstáculos percibidos para su aplicación y la brecha resultante entre creencias y práctica. Los hallazgos muestran un sólido respaldo teórico a los principios de la CLT en ambos grupos; sin embargo, su aplicación práctica se ve gravemente limitada. Entre los obstáculos comunes se incluyen los exámenes nacionales centrados en la gramática, los grupos numerosos, los hábitos arraigados de aprendizaje pasivo en los estudiantes, la escasez de materiales auténticos y la insuficiente formación docente. Los docentes en ejercicio destacan además barreras sistémicas —desajustes en los sistemas de evaluación, apoyo administrativo insuficiente y salarios bajos— mientras que los docentes en formación, con una experiencia mínima en el aula, manifiestan mayor optimismo. Desde el marco de la teoría sociocultural de Vygotsky, el estudio posiciona a los docentes como agentes activos que median entre demandas institucionales y culturales en conflicto. Se sostiene que una integración sostenible de la CLT exige coherencia en las políticas, desarrollo profesional continuo y adaptaciones sensibles al contexto, más allá de las

reformas impuestas desde arriba. Al ofrecer un análisis comparativo según la etapa profesional, esta investigación aporta a la literatura sobre cognición docente y replantea la CLT como una práctica negociada localmente, con implicaciones directas para la formación docente, el diseño curricular y la formulación de políticas en contextos de EFL similares.

***Palabras clave:*** Enseñanza de Lenguas Comunicativa, docentes de EFL, cognición docente, barreras de implementación, teoría sociocultural

**Resumo**

Apesar de sua adoção oficial no currículo nacional de inglês como língua estrangeira (EFL) no Irã, o Ensino Comunicativo de Línguas (CLT) continua sendo implementado de forma inconsistente, revelando uma profunda desconexão entre as diretrizes políticas e as realidades da sala de aula. Este estudo de métodos mistos examina as percepções de 35 professores iranianos de EFL (15 em formação e 20 em exercício) em Isfahan, por meio de questionários e entrevistas semiestruturadas, com o objetivo de explorar suas concepções sobre a CLT, os obstáculos percebidos para sua aplicação e a consequente lacuna entre crenças e prática. Os resultados mostram um sólido respaldo teórico aos princípios da CLT em ambos os grupos; contudo, sua implementação prática é severamente limitada. Entre os obstáculos comuns estão os exames nacionais centrados na gramática, as turmas numerosas, os hábitos profundamente enraizados de aprendizagem passiva entre os estudantes, a escassez de materiais autênticos e a formação docente insuficiente. Os professores em exercício também destacam barreiras sistêmicas — desalinhamentos nos sistemas de avaliação, apoio administrativo inadequado e salários baixos — enquanto os professores em formação, com experiência mínima em sala de aula, demonstram maior otimismo. À luz da teoria sociocultural de Vygotsky, o estudo posiciona os docentes como agentes ativos que mediam demandas institucionais e culturais conflitantes. Argumenta-se que uma integração sustentável da CLT exige coerência política, desenvolvimento profissional contínuo e adaptações sensíveis ao contexto, indo além de reformas impostas de cima para baixo. Ao oferecer uma análise comparativa entre diferentes etapas da carreira docente, esta pesquisa contribui para a literatura sobre cognição docente e reconcebe a CLT como uma prática negociada localmente, com implicações diretas para a formação de professores, o desenho curricular e a formulação de políticas em contextos de EFL semelhantes.

***Palavras-chave:*** Ensino Comunicativo de Línguas, professores de EFL, cognição docente, barreiras de implementação, teoria sociocultural

## Introduction

Over the past four decades, Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) has established itself as the dominant paradigm in second and foreign language education (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). Anchored in functional linguistics and sociocultural theory, CLT foregrounds the development of communicative competence, meaningful interaction, and learner autonomy rather than mere grammatical accuracy (Canale & Swain, 1980; Hymes, 1972), aligning with contemporary understandings of language as a dynamic, socially situated practice (Kumaravadivelu, 2003). Yet, when transferred to non-Western contexts, CLT frequently encounters significant resistance, producing a marked disjuncture between policy prescriptions and classroom enactment (Holliday, 1994). This tension is particularly acute in Iran, where, despite curricular reforms explicitly promoting communicative competence, teacher-centered, grammar-focused instruction continues to prevail (Sheikhol-Eslami & Allami, 2012).

The present study addresses a large gap in the literature: the absence of theoretically informed, comparative research examining how pre- and in-service Iranian EFL teachers conceptualize CLT and negotiate its implementation within a constraining socio-educational landscape. Although logistical barriers such as resource scarcity and large classes are well documented, deeper institutional, ideological, and cognitive influences on teachers' decision-making remain underexplored (Koosha & Yakhabi, 2013). Moreover, CLT is often treated as a monolithic construct, obscuring the adaptive strategies teachers employ in response to local realities.

Drawing on data from 35 Iranian EFL teachers (15 pre-service, 20 in-service) in Isfahan, this investigation contends that the limited uptake of CLT in Iran arises not merely from technical shortcomings but from systemic misalignment among teacher education, assessment regimes, pedagogical goals, and entrenched sociocultural expectations. To interrogate this claim, the study pursues three interrelated questions: (1) How do Iranian EFL teachers conceptualize CLT? (2) What obstacles do they identify in implementing it? (3) How do their perceptions illuminate broader conflicts between global pedagogical trends and local educational realities?

Existing Iranian research has relied predominantly on quantitative surveys that offer limited insight into underlying motivations (e.g., Kalanzadeh et al., 2013), focused exclusively on in-service teachers while neglecting the formative pre-service stage, or failed to incorporate teachers' own voices through in-depth interviewing. By contrast, the current study integrates questionnaire and interview data across career stages, providing a richer, more nuanced account of the compromises and contradictions that characterize CLT reform in constrained educational environments.

## Literature Review

Emerging in the 1970s as a corrective to structuralist methods that privileged form over function (Richards & Rodgers, 2001), Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) redefined language proficiency as communicative competence encompassing grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic dimensions (Canale & Swain, 1980). This shift positioned learners as active meaning-makers in authentic interaction. However, as CLT gained global currency, its assumed universality came under sustained critique. Holliday (1994) argued that Western-derived models frequently clash with non-Western institutional cultures and power structures, while Kumaravadivelu (2003) called for a post-method era in which pedagogy is locally constructed rather than imported wholesale. These perspectives collectively reveal CLT not as a neutral methodology but as a culturally embedded practice whose implementation is inevitably mediated by local ideologies and histories.

Cross-cultural studies consistently document a pronounced gap between CLT policy and classroom reality. Teachers in East Asia (Penner, 1995) report that learner autonomy and open interaction conflict with cultural norms of teacher authority, examination pressure, and resource constraints. Although learner receptivity can sometimes be favorable (Rao, 2002) and targeted training may shift beliefs (Cabaroglu & Roberts, 2000), sustained adoption typically requires aligned assessment (Brookhart, 2013), cultural adaptation (Sifakis, 2019), and ongoing professional support. These findings underscore that ideological alignment alone is insufficient; structural and cultural conditions must also be addressed.

Iranian research mirrors global patterns while revealing context-specific nuances. Teachers express theoretical support for communicative principles yet cite intractable barriers such as grammar-dominated examinations, overcrowded classrooms, scarce authentic materials, and inadequate training (Koosha & Yakhabi, 2013; Lestari & Margana, 2024). Implementation varies significantly with self-efficacy (Sheikhol-Eslami & Allami, 2012), administrative support, remuneration, and school type (Jamalzadeh & Shahsavar, 2015; Iskandar & Priyana, 2024). Notably, even teachers with strong CLT knowledge enact only limited aspects that align with institutional constraints (Mangubhai et al., 2005), whereas collaborative professional learning communities demonstrate greater success in sustaining innovation (Sifakis, 2019). Such evidence aligns with sociocultural theory, emphasizing teacher learning as a socially mediated process within communities of practice (Vygotsky, 1978; Wenger, 1998).

Teacher cognition is widely recognized as the primary filter through which methodological innovations are interpreted and enacted (Pajares, 1992). Pre-service teachers typically enter training with entrenched grammar-oriented beliefs that gradually moderate through experience, social interaction, and professional development (Burnaby & Sun, 1989). Longitudinal research reveals that initial CLT

idealism often yields to pragmatic adaptation as novices confront systemic realities (Breen et al., 2001; Cochran-Smith, 2022), with peer collaboration and reflective practice proving critical to sustaining innovative dispositions (Korthagen, 2010). These developmental trajectories highlight the mediated, socially situated nature of belief change.

Despite considerable scholarship, Iranian CLT research remains constrained by reliance on quantitative surveys of in-service teachers alone, monolithic conceptualizations of CLT, and limited methodological triangulation (Koosha & Yakhabi, 2013; Mangubhai et al., 2005). Few studies compare pre- and in-service perspectives or foreground teachers' own narratives. The current investigation addresses these limitations by integrating questionnaire and interview data across career stages, adopting a sociocultural lens to illuminate CLT as a dynamic, contested, and locally negotiated practice rather than a fixed import.

# Methodology

## Research design

This study adopts a qualitative interpretivist design to capture the nuanced, contextually embedded nature of teacher cognition regarding Communicative Language Teaching (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Grounded in sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978) and the notion of teacher agency within constrained environments (Holliday, 1994), the design prioritizes depth of understanding over statistical generalizability. Such an approach is particularly suited to the research questions, which demand exploration of teachers' conceptualizations of CLT, perceived implementation barriers, and the broader tensions between global pedagogical ideals and local realities—issues that require narrative richness and interpretive sensitivity rather than mere quantification.

## Participants and sampling

Thirty-five Iranian EFL teachers in Isfahan were purposively sampled to maximize variation in age, gender, experience, and career stage (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). The sample comprised 15 pre-service teachers (10 female, 5 male; aged 21–29, M = 24.3) in their final year of BA study at a teacher education center, with exposure limited to coursework and a brief practicum, and 20 in-service high-school teachers (12 female, 8 male) possessing 3–15 years of experience. All participants were native Persian speakers holding at least a BA in English or equivalent certification. This comparative design enabled examination of belief evolution from initial training to sustained professional practice (Breen et al., 2001). The urban Isfahan setting, while limiting generalizability, reflects typical constraints of public-sector Iranian EFL education.

Researcher positionality as an insider Iranian EFL educator was addressed through reflexive journaling and peer debriefing.

## Data collection instruments and procedures

Data were gathered through a two-part questionnaire followed by individual semi-structured interviews, affording triangulation within a predominantly qualitative framework (Denzin, 1978). The questionnaire collected demographic information and 22 Likert-scale and open-ended items adapted from established instruments (Kalanzadeh et al., 2013; Mangubhai et al., 2005) to assess familiarity with CLT, conceptual understanding, and perceived obstacles. Example items include "Lack of teacher training is a major impediment to CLT implementation" and "Students' passive learning styles impede communicative activities."

Interviews (20–40 minutes), conducted two weeks after questionnaire completion to allow reflection, were audio-recorded with consent and conducted in Persian or English, according to participant preference. A core protocol addressed five key areas, including the influences of teacher education/experience, personal definitions of CLT, barriers to communicative activities, examination impact, and student responses to interaction, with flexible probing for depth. Member checking was offered for clarification.

## Data analysis

Thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase model, supported by NVivo 12. Transcripts and open-ended responses were repeatedly read for familiarization, then inductively coded (e.g., "exam pressure," "resource scarcity"). Codes were collated into candidate themes (student factors, institutional constraints, teacher beliefs) and refined through constant comparison (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Final themes were reviewed against the full dataset, named descriptively, and illustrated with representative verbatim excerpts. An inter-coder agreement of 85% was achieved on 20% of the data through independent peer coding.

## Ethical considerations and trustworthiness

Institutional ethical approval was secured, informed consent obtained, and participant anonymity protected through the use of pseudonyms and encrypted data storage. Participants retained the right to withdraw at any stage. Trustworthiness was established using Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria: credibility through triangulation, member checking, and prolonged engagement; transferability through thick contextual description; dependability through audit trails; and confirmability through reflexive practice and peer debriefing.

## Results

The following section presents the empirical findings derived from the questionnaire and semi-structured interviews with 35 Iranian EFL teachers (15 pre-service, 20 in-service). Data were organized thematically to illuminate teachers' conceptual understanding of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), the barriers they perceive to its implementation, qualitative elaborations of those barriers, and the critical divergences between pre- and in-service perspectives. Quantitative results were reported as percentages of participants rating each item as "significant" or "very significant" on a 5-point Likert scale; chi-square tests assessed group differences. Qualitative data were illustrated with representative verbatim excerpts while preserving the full range of expressed views.

## Conceptual understanding of CLT

Both pre- and in-service teachers demonstrated general familiarity with Communicative Language Teaching, yet the depth and precision of their conceptualizations varied markedly. Pre-service teachers consistently framed CLT as a student-centered approach that prioritizes interaction and real-life communication over rote memorization of grammar. One participant articulated this view succinctly: "CLT means prioritizing students' communication in real-life situations rather than just memorizing grammar rules" (P#7), while another emphasized the development of oral/aural skills over exclusive focus on reading and writing (P#12).

In-service teachers offered more elaborate definitions that frequently incorporated specific techniques, describing CLT as a methodology grounded in cooperative learning, role-plays, and authentic communicative tasks (I#9). Nevertheless, misconceptions persisted: several respondents erroneously equated CLT with the complete abandonment of grammar instruction or conflated it with any contemporary teaching trend, revealing substantive gaps in theoretical grounding. Quantitatively, a strong consensus emerged on CLT's core strengths, with 87% of pre-service and 84% of in-service teachers agreeing or strongly agreeing that it fosters learner autonomy and meaningful interaction. However, only 49% of pre-service and 54% of in-service teachers reported confidence in distinguishing CLT from other methodological approaches, underscoring that broad approval coexists with conceptual imprecision.

## Perceived barriers to CLT implementation

When presented with 22 potential barriers rated on a 5-point Likert scale, both cohorts identified a strikingly similar hierarchy of constraints (Tables 1 and 2), with lack of teacher training, large classes, grammar-based examinations, and students' passive learning styles emerging as the most salient obstacles.

*Table 1.* Difficulties of adopting CLT from pre-service teachers' viewpoints (Percentage of participants rating the item as significant or very significant)

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | Lack of teacher training | 87% |
| 2 | Large classes | 74% |
| 3 | Grammar-based examination | 71% |
| 4 | Students' passive learning style | 70% |
| 5 | Students' lack of motivation to communicate | 68% |
| 6 | Teachers' lack of socio-linguistic knowledge | 62% |
| 7 | Lack of authentic material | 61% |
| 8 | New roles of teachers and learners | 54% |
| 9 | Teachers' lack of motivation due to their low income | 43% |
| 10 | Teachers' poor English proficiency | 41% |
| 11 | Difficulties in testing communicative ability | 31% |
| 12 | Lack of funding, learning resources, and facilities | 30% |
| 13 | Limited authentic social environment outside class | 28% |
| 14 | Different levels of students' English proficiency | 27% |
| 15 | Lack of effective and efficient assessment instruments | 26% |
| 16 | Lack of training in CLT | 57% |
| 17 | Students' low-level English proficiency | 57% |
| 18 | Lack of support from the administration | 38% |
| 19 | Differences between EFL and ESL teaching contexts | 72% |
| 20 | Teachers' lack of target culture (English) knowledge | 31% |
| 21 | Teachers' lack of sufficient spoken English competence | 41% |
| 22 | Teachers' misconceptions of CLT | 45% |

As shown in Table 1, pre-service teachers overwhelmingly prioritized deficiencies in their own preparation and immediate classroom conditions—lack of teacher training (87%), overcrowded classes (74%), grammar-oriented national examinations (71%), and students' ingrained passive habits (70%)—while assigning considerably lower weight to deeper systemic and socioeconomic issues such as low income (43%), lack of administrative support (38%), and inadequate communicative assessment tools (26%). This pattern reflects their still-limited exposure to the full institutional and material realities of the teaching profession.

Although the overall ranking of barriers shows strong continuity between the two groups, in-service teachers—as illustrated in Table 2—displayed a marked escalation in the perceived severity of institutional, socioeconomic, and contextual constraints, which becomes fully apparent only after sustained professional experience.

*Table 2.* Difficulties of adopting CLT from the in-service teachers' viewpoints (Percentage of participants rating the item as significant or very significant)

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | Lack of teacher training | 84% |
| 2 | Large classes | 78% |
| 3 | Grammar-based examination | 73% |
| 4 | Students' passive learning style | 72% |
| 5 | Students' lack of motivation to communicate | 70% |
| 6 | Teachers' lack of socio-linguistic knowledge | 67% |
| 7 | Lack of authentic material | 64% |
| 8 | New roles of teachers and learners | 51% |
| 9 | Teachers' lack of motivation due to their low income | 67% |
| 10 | Teachers' poor English proficiency | 54% |
| 11 | Difficulties in testing communicative ability | 51% |
| 12 | Lack of funding, learning resources, and facilities | 35% |
| 13 | Limited authentic social environment outside class | 61% |
| 14 | Different levels of students' English proficiency | 32% |
| 15 | Lack of effective and efficient assessment instruments | 64% |
| 16 | Lack of training in CLT | 59% |
| 17 | Students' low-level English proficiency | 63% |
| 18 | Lack of support from the administration | 58% |
| 19 | Differences between EFL and ESL teaching contexts | 83% |
| 20 | Teachers' lack of target culture (English) knowledge | 58% |
| 21 | Teachers' lack of sufficient spoken English competence | 58% |
| 22 | Teachers' misconceptions of CLT | 49% |

Although a chi-square analysis revealed no statistically significant overall difference between the two cohorts ($\chi^2 = 16.000$, df = 20, p = .453), Table 2 demonstrates that in-service teachers ascribed dramatically greater weight to systemic and socioeconomic

barriers than their pre-service counterparts did. The EFL–ESL contextual divide (83% vs. 72%), demotivation due to low income (67% vs. 43%), the absence of effective communicative assessment instruments (64% vs. 26%), and the lack of administrative support (58% vs. 38%) all increased in perceived severity. This marked escalation unequivocally confirms that prolonged immersion in the institutional environment heightens teachers' awareness of the structural forces that most powerfully obstruct CLT enactment.

## Qualitative insights from interviews

**Assessment and curriculum misalignment**

The disconnect between communicative pedagogy and grammar-focused national examinations emerged as the dominant theme among in-service teachers. One veteran educator captured the dilemma bluntly: "We teach speaking, but the exam has no speaking section—so students ask, 'Why waste time?'" (I#3). Another described allocating disproportionate class time to grammar drills and test-taking strategies while marginalizing speaking and writing practice (I#14). Pre-service teachers acknowledged the same structural reality but expressed optimism that future curricular shifts would resolve it. "I believed CLT would work—until my first class of 45 silent students" (P#5).

**Classroom management and structural limitations**

Large class sizes were repeatedly cited as rendering genuine interaction logistically impossible. In-service teachers described the practical impossibility of monitoring pair work, ensuring equitable participation, or providing individualized feedback in classes of 40–50 students (I#6, I#11). Pre-service teachers, constrained by limited practicum experience, tended to underestimate this barrier.

**Teacher motivation and professional identity**

A striking finding unique to in-service teachers was the explicit link between pedagogical conservatism and economic disenfranchisement. One participant declared, "They pay us like clerks but expect us to be innovators" (I#8), directly connecting low salary and institutional disrespect to diminished willingness to invest in innovative practice.

**Training and professional development**

Both cohorts criticized the theoretical bias of pre-service preparation and the absence of credible in-service opportunities. Pre-service teachers reported learning CLT principles in the abstract without guided classroom application (P#5), while in-service teachers questioned the legitimacy of available online modules and noted widespread attendance substitution (I#17).

**Student-related factors**

Students' entrenched passivity—characterized as habitual silence, note-taking, and memorization—was described as a formidable cultural obstacle. When prompted to speak, students "just stare" (P#14), reinforcing teacher reluctance to invest effort in interactive tasks that yield minimal immediate participation. Pre-service teachers predicted similar challenges yet articulated their intention to gradually alter student behavior through encouragement and interactive tasks.

**Comparative analysis: Pre-service versus in-service perspectives**

Despite quantitative convergence on major barriers, qualitative data revealed profound interpretive divergence. Pre-service teachers framed obstacles as surmountable challenges and expressed reformist optimism, whereas in-service teachers adopted a resigned, context-bound stance shaped by cumulative exposure to systemic inertia. The EFL–ESL distinction, cited by 83% of in-service but only 72% of pre-service teachers, exemplifies this shift: novices viewed the absence of an English-speaking environment as a difficulty to overcome; veterans treated it as a fundamental justification for methodological adaptation or restraint.

These results unequivocally establish that Iranian EFL teachers enthusiastically embrace CLT in principle yet confront an array of structural, institutional, and socioeconomic impediments that severely curtail its enactment—impediments whose full weight becomes apparent only through sustained professional experience. This foundation sets the stage for a sociocultural reinterpretation of the observed disjuncture between belief and practice.

## Discussion

The following section interprets the findings within a sociocultural framework, arguing that the persistent belief-practice gap observed among Iranian EFL teachers does not stem from individual resistance or inadequate understanding but from a complex interplay of structural, institutional, and socioeconomic constraints that systematically undermine the enactment of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). By juxtaposing the theoretical endorsement expressed by both pre- and in-service teachers with the formidable barriers they encounter, the discussion demonstrates that CLT's limited classroom realization in Iran represents a predictable outcome of systemic misalignment rather than a failure of teacher will or competence. This analysis extends existing teacher cognition scholarship, challenges universalist assumptions about CLT, and offers concrete implications for policy and practice.

The findings unequivocally confirm a persistent disjuncture between teachers' espoused support for CLT and its limited classroom enactment—a pattern that cannot be dismissed as mere cognitive dissonance but must be understood as contextually

mediated pragmatism (Breen et al., 2001; Borg, 2003). Grammar-dominated high-stakes examinations emerged as the most powerful constraint (73% of in-service teachers), corroborating extensive evidence of negative washback (Sun, 2021; Ellis, 2022) and demonstrating that even high self-efficacy teachers revert to traditional methods under institutional pressure (Sheikhol-Eslami & Allami, 2012). Crucially, professional experience intensifies this gap: pre-service teachers exhibit idealism untested by reality, whereas in-service teachers adopt a resigned pragmatism shaped by years of systemic obstacles. This trajectory aligns with longitudinal studies of teacher cognition (Cochran-Smith, 2022; Korthagen, 2010) and underscores that belief-practice congruence requires far more than ideological alignment; it demands structural reform.

Beyond familiar logistical barriers (Koosha & Yakhabi, 2013), the present study exposes a deeper socioeconomic dimension largely overlooked in prior Iranian research: teacher demotivation stemming from inadequate compensation and systemic devaluation. In-service teachers explicitly linked low salaries to diminished willingness to innovate ("Why risk new methods when we're not even respected?" P#8), revealing pedagogical reform as inseparable from labor conditions in resource-constrained contexts (cf. Humphries & Burns, 2015; Norouzpour & Pourmohammadi, 2021). Coupled with pervasive absence of administrative support (58%) and misaligned assessment tools (64%), these findings indicate top-down policy implementation that ignores the material realities of teachers' professional lives (Karavas-Doukas, 1995; Guskey, 2022).

The widespread assertion—particularly among in-service teachers (83%)—that CLT is less applicable in EFL settings does not reflect outright rejection but a form of contextual theorizing (Holliday, 1994; Kumaravadivelu, 2003). Far from invoking the EFL-ESL divide as an excuse, teachers are engaging in a culturally grounded reinterpretation, selectively integrating communicative elements that align with local norms of authority and examination demands. This adaptive stance aligns with emerging advocacy for culturally sustaining pedagogies that honor local epistemologies while pursuing communicative goals (Sifakis, 2019).

An overwhelming majority (87% pre-service, 84% in-service) identified inadequate training as a primary barrier, exposing a critical weakness in Iranian teacher education. Pre-service programs remain largely theoretical, offering minimal practical application (Silva, 2005), while in-service teachers lack access to systematic, credible professional development. Evidence from more supportive contexts demonstrates that experiential, collaborative training can shift both beliefs and practices (Cabaroglu & Roberts, 2000; Le & Pham, 2021), yet Iranian teachers operate without such scaffolding, further constricting their zone of proximal development for innovation (Vygotsky, 1978).

Viewed through a Vygotskian lens, restricted CLT enactment emerges not as an individual failing but as the predictable outcome of a professional ecosystem lacking

essential mediational tools—aligned assessment, continuous training, administrative support, and economic recognition (Johnson, 2006). Teachers are active agents, yet their agency is severely circumscribed by structural contradictions that render genuine innovation unsustainable without concomitant policy reform.

The evidence compels a decisive shift from treating CLT as a universal methodology toward a flexible, locally negotiated practice (Kumaravadivelu, 2003; Sifakis, 2019). Successful integration in Iran requires (a) assessment reform that values communicative competence, (b) sustained, practice-oriented professional development embedded in communities of practice, (c) improved material conditions and administrative support for teachers, and (d) explicit endorsement of principled eclecticism that blends communicative principles with culturally congruent methods. Only through such systemic coherence can CLT move beyond rhetorical adoption to meaningful classroom transformation.

## Conclusion

This study confirms that Iranian EFL teachers, across pre- and in-service stages, overwhelmingly endorse the theoretical principles of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). Yet their classroom practices remain heavily constrained by interlocking systemic barriers: grammar-dominated national examinations, overcrowded classes, inadequate training, entrenched student passivity, and—most acutely for in-service teachers—low salaries, absent administrative support, and misaligned assessment systems. These constraints do not reflect teacher resistance but rather a pragmatic adaptation that intensifies with professional experience, transforming initial idealism into negotiated compromise.

Framed through a Vygotskian sociocultural lens (Vygotsky, 1978), the findings extend teacher cognition research by demonstrating that belief-practice congruence is mediated not only by social interaction and professional learning but also by material and institutional conditions often sidelined in mainstream theory. The evidence decisively challenges the universalist pretensions of CLT, reinforcing post-method (Kumaravadivelu, 2003) and culturally sustaining perspectives (Sifakis, 2019) that position teachers as legitimate co-constructors of locally viable pedagogies rather than passive implementers of imported models.

Theoretically grounded reform must begin in teacher-education programs, which currently prioritize abstract knowledge over sustained, contextualized practice. Curricula need systematic integration of authentic CLT application, supervised practicum, and reflective cycles that prepare novices for real-world constraints (Cochran-Smith, 2022).

Most importantly, policymakers must recognize teacher welfare as a non-negotiable prerequisite for pedagogical change. Competitive salaries, professional recognition, and robust administrative support are not ancillary rewards but essential conditions that sustain the motivation and agency required for innovation (Hattie, 2024; Timperley, 2024). Finally, ongoing professional development should abandon isolated workshops in favor of sustained, school-based communities of practice where teachers collaboratively adapt communicative principles to local realities.

The study is limited by its modest sample (N = 35) drawn exclusively from urban Isfahan, restricting transferability to rural or private-sector contexts. Reliance on self-reported data alone may inflate the reported belief-practice gap. Finally, the cross-sectional design captures only a snapshot of cognition rather than its longitudinal evolution.

Future investigations should employ longitudinal designs to trace belief-practice trajectories from pre-service training through the first decade of teaching. Multi-site studies incorporating rural and private institutions would enhance generalizability. Direct classroom observation and stimulated recall protocols could triangulate with self-reports, while intervention studies testing context-adapted CLT models within reformed assessment and professional development frameworks would provide actionable evidence for policy transformation.

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The author declares that artificial intelligence tools were used during the preparation of this manuscript. Specifically, the tool Quen was used to assist in rewriting sections of the literature review and introduction to improve clarity and writing quality. All AI-assisted content was manually reviewed, edited, and verified by the author to ensure accuracy and consistency with the original ideas. No AI tools were used for data analysis, image or graphic generation, or any other methodological component. Aside from the writing assistance described above, AI was used only to check language and structure. The author confirms that all uses of AI comply fully with GiST's ethical and editorial guidelines.