Language teachers' knowledge and perceptions of the implementation of CLT in a Mexican language centre

Conocimiento y percepciones de profesores sobre la implementación de la enseñanza comunicativa en un centro de lenguas mexicano

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Abstract:

This study explores the knowledge and perceptions that language teachers hold of the implementation of the communicative language teaching approach in their teaching context, a language centre of a public university in central Mexico. To collect data, a questionnaire was disseminated among teachers of different languages including Spanish, Nahuatl, Italian, German, French, and English. Data on teachers' knowledge of the approach were included to discuss the reported use of CLT in their teaching activities. Then, inferences were made based on the contextual elements surrounding each language. The findings in this study provide evidence that there may be specific factors in each language that may foster or hinder the implementation of CLT principles.

Keywords:

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), Communicative approach, teachers' perceptions

Resumen:

Este estudio explora el conocimiento y las percepciones que los profesores tienen acerca de la implementación del enfoque comunicativo en su contexto laboral, un centro de lenguas de una universidad pública en el centro de México. Para la colección de datos, se distribuyó un cuestionario entre profesores de diferentes lenguas incluyendo español, náhuatl, italiano, alemán, francés e inglés. Datos sobre el conocimiento de los profesores del enfoque comunicativo fueron incluidos para discutir el uso de este enfoque en sus actividades de enseñanza. Posteriormente, se realizaron inferencias basadas en los elementos contextuales alrededor de cada lengua. Los resultados del estudio proporcionan evidencia de que pudieran existir factores específicos en cada lengua que facilitan o dificultan la implementación de los principios de la enseñanza comunicativa de lenguas.

Palabras Clave:

Enseñanza comunicativa de lenguas, enfoque comunicativo, percepciones docentes

Introduction

Considering the acceptance and relevance of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) on second/foreign language teaching, the purpose of this paper is to explore the knowledge and perceptions that language teachers hold of the implementation of CLT in their workplace, a language centre in central Mexico.

The selection of this particular teaching context lies on the identification of several factors that in many cases hinder the successful implementation of communicative language teaching and learning in Mexico. On one hand, the lack of teachers' formal training in language teaching and/or low proficiency in the languages they are teaching.

On the other hand, an existing tendency for objective assessment and the lack of commercially available materials that promote authentic communication among language learners.

Although "CLT is undoubtedly the most researched approach to second/foreign language teaching in the history of language teaching" (Spada, 2007, p. 283), studies where CLT is explored across teachers of different languages is scarce at the best, which makes the contribution of this study relevant for pedagogical decisions in a time of imminent change in language teaching.

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Literature review

Communicative language teaching (CLT)

Language teaching, as Spada (2007) states, has often turned to linguistics for guidance on how to teach languages and it was in the 1970s that new conceptualizations of language began to lay the theoretical groundwork for CLT. Hymes' theory of communicative competence and the notion that knowing a language includes more than knowledge of the rules of grammar, but also knowledge of rules of language use had a significant impact on CLT. Since then, other models of communicative competence have been proposed by researchers such as Bachman and Palmer (1981), Canale (1983), Canale and Swain (1980), Harley, Allen, Cummins, and Swain (1990). The underlying assumption of all these models, according to Spada (ibid), is that language proficiency is not a unitary concept but consists of different components including linguistic competence, pragmatic competence, sociolinguistic, and strategic competence.

Richards (2006) argues that most language teachers identify the methodology they use to teach languages as communicative; however, their explanations of the approach vary when they are asked to justify their response. For Spada (ibid), the main discrepancies lie on the disagreement as to whether CLT should include a focus on the analysis and practice of language forms and as to whether the inclusion of literacy skills, use of the first language (L1), and vocabulary instruction is compatible with the principles and practice of CLT.

The goal of CLT, for Richards (ibid), is the teaching of communicative competence which includes knowing how to use the language for a range of different purposes and functions, how to vary our use of language according to the setting and participants, how to produce and understand different types of texts, and how to maintain communication despite having limitations in the language.

The principles CLT is based on include promoting real communication as the focus of language teaching, providing opportunities to experiment with the language, being tolerant of errors, giving opportunities to develop accuracy as well as fluency, integrating language skills, and promoting the discovery of grammar rules (Richards, ibid).

In a CLT classroom, learners take a cooperative approach to learning by participating in pair and group work tasks and are expected to have more responsibility for their learning. Teachers, on the other hand, assume the role of facilitators and monitors rather than being models for correct language use. Among the activities that characterise CLT are task-completion activities, information-gathering activities, opinion-sharing activities, information-transfer activities, reasoning-gap activities, and role-plays.

Over the years, CLT has been interpreted and implemented in different ways resulting in several myths. These myths, as Spada (ibid) explains, are that CLT places an exclusive focus on meaning, no explicit feedback on learner error, learner-centred teaching, listening and speaking practice, and avoidance of the learners' L1. Although different studies have been conducted to shed light on these aspects, there are questions that still need to be answered. Therefore, there is a need in teacher education programs to make teachers aware of the different ways in which CLT can be interpreted and implemented. It is also recommended to introduce teachers to findings of classroom research that have investigated the impact of the different versions of CLT on second/foreign language earning.

Teachers' perceptions

A perception can be understood as "a proposition which may be consciously or unconsciously held, is evaluative in that it is accepted as true by the individual and is therefore imbued with emotive commitment; further, it serves as a guide to thought and behaviour" (Borg, 2001, p. 186).

As Allahyar et al. (2022) indicate, previous research on teachers' perceptions shows that they affect teachers' selection of topics and classroom practices and assessment (Borg, 2001), instructional decisions (Borg, 2006; Ng & Farrell, 2003), and the use of approaches, activities, and techniques (Donaghue, 2003; Li, 2008). Johnson's work (1992) also suggests that teachers' perceptions are closely related to the approaches they take towards teaching. Hence, the relevance of exploring and understanding teacher's perceptions and their relationship with teachers' classroom practices regarding the CLT approach.

Previous research

Nursyam et al. (2022) study on teachers' perceptions in implementing CLT at Maritime English class in Indonesia showed that the teachers understood the approach and believed it could improve the students' communicative competence. The research also provided evidence that the teachers were able to differentiate CLT from other approaches. However, in a similar work, Makina Zulu (2019) in Zambia found that teachers had low to moderate understanding of CLT and that some teachers held misconceptions about the approach which misguided their classroom application. One of the misconceptions that teachers held was that CLT encouraged errors and neglected grammatical correctness of utterances. She also discovered that most teachers had negative attitudes

towards CLT which had implications on the aspects and quality of the CLT the teachers used. Makina Zulu identified the need for continuous professional development (CPD) among teachers to acquaint them with the demands of CLT and possibly change their attitudes towards the approach.

On the same line, Adamou's (2017) work on the perceptions and challenges that teachers face when using the CLT approach revealed that although teachers were positive towards CLT, their reported classroom practices caused discrepancy between prescribed theory and their actual classroom practice. Chang and Suparmi's (2020) study on the implementation of CLT and the factors that hinder teachers from using the approach found that limited access to the target language's culture, limited time to develop materials and lack of training are among the obstacles that hinder the implementation of CLT in Indonesia.

Based on the cited articles, the purpose of this research is to explore the knowledge and perceptions that the language teachers of a language centre in Mexico hold of the implementation of CLT in their workplace. The study is particularly relevant as it compares data from teachers of different languages to find any possible relationship between the surrounding factors of each language and the teachers' knowledge and implementation of CLT.

Methodology

Research context

The study was conducted in the language centre of a public university in Central Mexico. This language centre attends to the needs of university students in higher education as well as the general population interested in learning languages. Most language teachers at the centre use commercially available textbooks in their lessons, except for the Spanish and Nahuatl teachers, who create their own teaching materials.

Participants

A questionnaire was sent to over 50 language teachers; however, only 20 participants decided to take part in the study: 1 teacher of Spanish, 1 teacher of Nahuatl, 1 teacher of Italian, 2 teachers of German, 2 teachers of French, and 13 teachers of English. By the time the study was conducted, only 13 of the participants had formal education in language teaching, 50% had been working as language teachers between 9 and 16 years, 25% had between 17 and 25 years of teaching experience and the other 25% had less than 8 years of experience.

Besides their work at the language centre, some of them also taught in either public or private institutions, 1 of them worked for an international German school, 1 teacher worked for an international English institute, 1 teacher worked in a public high school, and 3 more in private universities.

Research instrument

The questionnaire used to collect the teachers' knowledge and perceptions of the implementation of CLT in their teaching context includes 32 questions (see Appendix). Following the structure suggested by Dörnyei (2007), the questionnaire is divided into six different sections. The first section explains the intended purpose of the instrument, followed by clear and general instructions for the completion of the questionnaire. The second section is composed of 10 general questions to collect demographic information about the participants such as place of work, taught language, years of experience, material used, number of students, and number of hours worked per week. It also asked for information about the international certification that the teacher holds and the certifications that the institution offers to those learners studying the language.

The third section contains 5 multiple choice questions that aim to find out if the teacher is familiarised with the communicative approach, if he or she has received any training on it, if the material and the assessment performed follow the principles of CLT, and if the institution promotes the use of such teaching approach. To respond to these questions, the teachers can select an option from the 3 choices provided 'Yes', 'No' or 'I don't know'.

In the fourth section, teachers are asked to answer some Likert Scale questions about the activities that characterise their teaching. The activities were decided based on writers such as Griffiths (2011), Canale and Swain (1980), Cloud et al. (2011), among others who have published on CLT. The activities reflect the principles and characteristics of CLT suggested by Richards (2006), being student-centred, making real communication the focus of instruction, integrating language skills, taking a cooperative approach to learning, giving opportunities to experiment with the language, developing accuracy as well as fluency, promoting the discovery of grammar rules, and being tolerant to errors.

The fifth section is composed of only 2 open-ended questions where teachers are invited to express their perception regarding CLT and its benefits over other methods and approaches and the extent the language centre supports them to work with this approach. Teachers are encouraged to provide examples as well as to extend their answers as much as they consider it necessary.

The questionnaire was written in Spanish so that regardless of the language the teacher taught, they could

all participate in the study. As suggested by Nunan (1992), once the questionnaire was finished, it was given to 5 native Spanish speakers who had a similar profile as the intended final participants to pilot the instrument and make necessary amendments. Several remarks were received mainly regarding instructions and the wording of the questions that in some cases was vague or asked for information not relevant to the study. Once the amendments were made, the questionnaires were sent.

Findings and Discussion

The questionnaires collected from the participants allowed us to make a descriptive analysis of the data, which may convey teachers' knowledge and perceptions of the implementation of the CLT approach in the language centre. The following sections present the main findings as well as a discussion of them in relation to existing literature in the area.

Language teachers' knowledge of CLT

As shown in Figure 1, all the teachers, regardless of the language they teach have knowledge of the CLT approach, only 5 teachers have not received training on the approach, 6 out of the 20 teachers do not have material with an emphasis on communicative language teaching, and 8 teachers still perform their assessment using the traditional methods.

Most of the teachers also indicated that the institution they work at does not promote the use of the communicative approach. While all the teachers show awareness of the CLT approach, the data show a clear decrease when we move to receiving training on the approach, using materials that foster it, and even more when using assessment that supports the CLT approach.
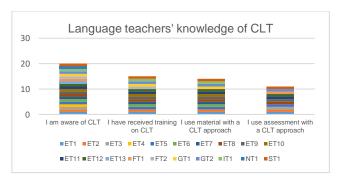

Figure 1. Language teachers' knowledge of CLT

Language teachers' perceptions of their implementation of CLT

Data from items 16 to 30 of the questionnaire were analysed in terms of frequency and perceptions. These items present activities used in the communicative approach, to which teachers were asked to indicate how

frequently they used them in their lessons. The answers were assigned numerical values starting with 0, corresponding to the option of never, 1 for almost never, 2 for sometimes, 3 for almost always, and 4 for always. In this way, the closer the values are to 4, the more frequently that activity was fostered in the teaching practice. Averages were made of the values so that comparisons could be made between the languages.

The activities were categorised according to the principles and characteristics of CLT suggested by Richards (2006). The global reported frequency of activities that reflect the principles and characteristics of the CLT approach of the 20 language teachers is presented in Figure 2 below.
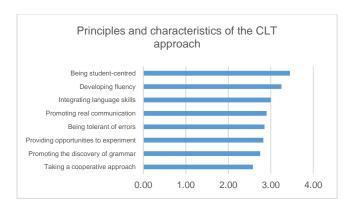

Figure 2. Language teachers' knowledge of CLT

The data indicate that while having a student-centred class, and focussing on fluency is fostered, the values for fostering a cooperative approach as well as letting students discover grammar, experiment, and build tolerance to errors are among the least fostered elements.

To better understand the implementation of the CLT approach in each language, the data were also analysed per language.

The data for the teaching of English in Figure 3 show that items 19 and 27 are the lowest values, that means that students doing role-play and the use of technology to present classes are the activities least practised by the English teachers. The highest value is in item 17 which reflects that the class being focused on the students is a common practice. More importantly, the assigning of tasks related to real life situations, the practice of continuous speaking activities and encouraging students to practise outside the classroom have very high values, which means that is a common practice among all the English teachers in the sample.
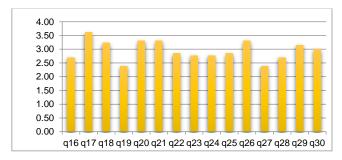
Figure 3. Values for the teaching of English

The teaching of French data in Figure 4 shows the highest value located in item number 18, which means that the activity that French teachers do more often is the presentation of new vocabulary within a context. On the other hand, items 23 to 25 and 28 to 30 present the lower values, indicating that the activities presented in class are not designed based on the needs of the students, nor are those found useful for everyday situations. Students use very little of their own experiences to practice speaking in class and the priority is not on the fluency but on the grammar accuracy of the spoken production. The material used is mostly not authentic and the emphasis in general in the class tends to lean away from the achievement of a communicative goal.
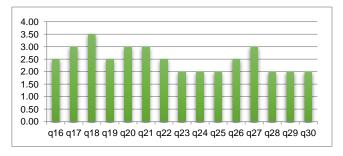

Figure 4. Values for the teaching of French

Figure 5 shows the data on the teaching of German. The highest values are found in the class focused on the student, the presentation of new vocabulary in context and to prioritising fluency when the students communicate. The lowest values are in items 16, 19 and 30, which indicates that there is not much work in groups or pairs, students do not practice role play with much frequency, and the emphasis of the class in general is not towards the communicative language teaching approach, rather it is based much more on aiming for a correct grammatical production of the language.
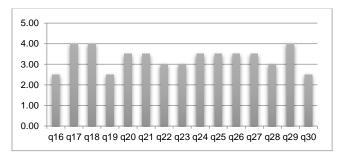

Figure 5. Values for the teaching of German

In the teaching of Italian, Figure 6 presents the higher values in speaking as a skill practised with very high frequency in class, students use their own personal experience for this speaking practice, and they receive encouragement to continue practising the language outside the classroom. The lowest values are presented in items 19, 24, 28 and 28. This means that students in Italian classes do not practise role play with much frequency, the activities used in class are not in response to their needs, the material used in class is not frequently authentic, and fluency is not prioritised over the grammatical structures when the students attempt to communicate.
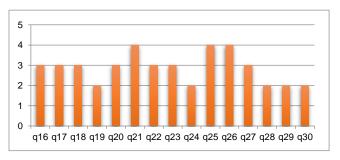

Figure 6. Values for the teaching of Italian

The data for the teaching of Nahuatl are presented in Figure 7. The data indicate that classes are focused on the students, the tasks assigned by the teacher are always related to the activities that students do in real life situations, and there is a lot of speaking practice in the classroom. At the same time, students are encouraged to continue the practice of the language outside the classroom, and priority is always given to fluency when the student is trying to communicate. Very low values on the practice of role play and the representation of grammar implicitly in exercises indicate that this rarely ever happens in the Nahuatl classroom.
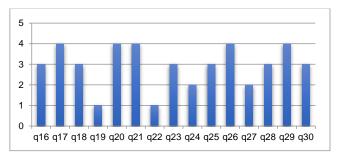
Figure 7. Values for the teaching of Nahuatl

Figure 8 presents the values for Spanish taught to foreigners in Mexico. All the values expressed in this table indicate that at least half of the activities proposed in the questionnaire are practised all the time, and the other half almost always present in the class.
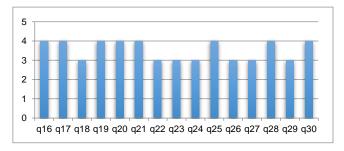

Figure 8. Values for the teaching of Spanish for foreign speakers

To aim for further exploration, the average values for each one of the languages were graphed to look for a tendency in the language correlated with the use of communicative language teaching activities. The results are explained below.

The data in Figure 9 shows the average values of the practice of activities that are part of the communicative language teaching approach. The data indicate that the language with the lowest value is French, followed by Italian, Nahuatl, English, German, and Spanish.
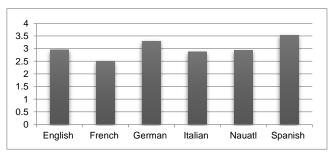

Figure 9. Comparative of values for different languages

In the questionnaire, we also made use of open-ended questions to obtain a clear idea of the perceptions the teachers have on the approach. When asked if they perceived CLT useful, some of the answers were:

English teacher 5: Yes, because *they [students] learn to use the language in possible contexts, for example when they are taught to ask for a service or to order in a restaurant through the use of vocabulary or idiomatic expressions appropriate for the situation*.

English teacher 16: *Yes, because CLT allows the student to face situations in everyday life and in simulated contexts (…)*

French teacher 18: *Yes, because the objective of the language which is to communicate properly is definitely achieved, and the needs of the student are the ones indicating the path to follow.*

Italian teacher 2: *Yes, it can be focussed and applied in real life situations in such a way that the student manages to individualise the idea or concept that is being proposed (…)*

Nahuatl teacher 8: *At the beginning to develop the oral area it is functional and much better with a didactic and efficient process (…) In my case with Nahuatl, there are messages like 'Nimits tlasojtla[i]' that we say write as it sounds and students can use them according to their context*

The extracts show that regardless of the language taught, elements such as the context and real-life needs are an essential part of perceived benefits of CLT.

Teachers that practise the communicative language teaching approach the most are those teaching Spanish to foreigners in Mexico. Since this is the language spoken in the country, there is more meaningful learning for the students because they can use their learnt language every day, which coincides with the perceived benefits; use in real life and contextual availability.

Alongside the line of design of material and activities, since the availability of materials that can be found in the market to teach Spanish to foreigners is not as big as with the other languages, the material and activities are specially designed by the teacher according to the needs of each group, which makes it much more consistent with the communicative approach. Cloud et al. (2011) explains that this process of personalising the experience of learning as much as possible one that can take into consideration the learner and its many facets to "create meaningful learning experiences to motivate" (p. 152) the learner in the process.

Nahuatl is another language that lacks material produced by big publishing houses and that has an oral nature; thus, transmitting it in the teaching. Because this is a language that not many people study, the groups are quite small and the teacher has the time and resources to design his own material and curriculum for every group.

Regarding Italian, French and German, which are foreign languages with less demand than English in Mexico, the proximity of companies of German and French origin provokes a considerable flow of foreign speakers who come to the central area of Mexico, making German and French languages favoured when students select a different language from English to learn. Once again, since communication with foreigners is the main concern of the students who decide to undertake the learning of German, teachers make a great emphasis on their speaking practice and the communicative activities with a strong emphasis on the structural aspect.

Findings from the study reveal that although most teachers report having knowledge of the CLT approach, that is not completely consistent with their classroom practices, as it was also found in Adamou's (2017) study. Teachers report focusing their instruction on the students and including activities to develop fluency in the languages they teach, but they do not foster activities that promote cooperation and participation among students. Furthermore, principles such as being tolerant of errors, promoting the discovery of grammar, and providing opportunities to experiment with the language are not always present in their teaching. Additionally, not all them use materials or assessment practices in line with the approach.

Results also provide evidence that specific factors in each language may facilitate or hinder the implementation of CLT principles. For instance, being Spanish and Nahuatl languages that lack materials produced by big publishing houses, teachers have the need to create their own materials. This factor gives teachers the opportunity to focus on their students' learning needs and personalise their instruction. This aspect as opposed to Chang and Suparmi's (2020) findings was perceived more as an opportunity rather than a limitation in the implementation of CLT. The fact that Spanish and Nahuatl are also spoken in the country may also contribute to making students' learning experience more authentic and meaningful which may also impact how these languages are perceived and taught in the centre of the country.

Recommendations for further research

To investigate teachers' knowledge and perceptions of CLT in depth, it is recommended to use other research instruments such as interviews and classroom observations in the future. It is also suggested to include an equal number of participants, teachers of each language, so that, if possible, some inferences can be made to help us understand how the surrounding factors of each language may impact teachers' perceptions and implementation of CLT in Mexico.

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Appendix

Cuestionario

El presente cuestionario tiene la intención de recabar información acerca de su percepción y uso que los maestros de lengua en México tienen sobre el enfoque comunicativo de enseñanza de lenguas (CLT).

La información obtenida será utilizada solo para propósitos académicos y su anonimato será respetado en todo momento.

El cuestionario está dividido en cuatro secciones; la primera recaba información nominal, donde información relacionada con su quehacer docente es requerida; la segunda parte busca conocer si su práctica docente se relaciona de alguna forma con el enfoque comunicativo, mientras que la tercera parte lista una serie de actividades que posiblemente usted haya aplicado en clases. La sección final contiene dos preguntas abiertas para recabar su opinión.
Por favor lea cada pregunta cuidadosamente y conteste en la sección prevista para ello.

I En la presente sección conteste con respuestas breves la información solicitada en cada una de las casillas.

1	Lugar de adscripción	
2	Idioma que enseña	
3	Años de experiencia	
4	Libro de texto / material usado en clase en el último periodo escolar	
5	Número promedio de alumnos por grupo	
6	Número de horas clase por semana	
7	Número de semestres ofrecidos en su idioma	
8	Método de evaluación dictada por la institución	
9	Certificación internacional (en caso de tenerla)	
10	Certificaciones internacionales ofrecidas por el instituto para su idioma	

II En la presente sección, coloque una **X** bajo la casilla de acuerdo con la opción que se encuentre más cercana a su respuesta.

		Si	No	No sé
11	Está familiarizado con el enfoque comunicativo de enseñanza			
12	Ha recibido capacitación sobre cómo usar el enfoque comunicativo			

13	El material que utiliza tiene énfasis en el enfoque comunicativo			
14	El tipo de evaluación que realiza tiene énfasis comunicativo			
15	La institución promueve el uso del enfoque comunicativo			

III En la presente sección marque con una **X** la opción que mejor refleje la frecuencia con la que realiza en su práctica docente cada una de las actividades listadas a continuación.

No	Actividad	Nunca	Casi nunca	Algunas veces	Casi siempre	Siempre
16	Mis alumnos trabajan en pares o grupos					
17	Mi clase está enfocada en el alumno					
18	Presento el vocabulario nuevo en contexto					
19	Mis alumnos realizan juegos de rol					
20	Asigno tareas que están relacionadas con actividades de la vida real					
21	Incluyo actividades de practica oral en mis clases					
22	Presento a gramática de manera implícita en los ejercicios en clase					
23	Mis alumnos encuentran las actividades comunicativas significativas para su vida diaria					
24	Las actividades que uso en clase se diseñan en respuesta a las necesidades del alumno					
25	Mis alumnos hablan de su experiencia propia en la clase					
26	Impulso a los alumnos a que continúen la práctica del idioma fuera de clase					
27	Hago uso de la tecnología para presentar temas en clase					
28	Hago uso de material autentico en clase					
29	Doy prioridad a la fluidez cuando el					

	alumno se comunica					
30	El énfasis de las actividades en mi clase es que el alumno logre la meta en lugar de una producción gramatical perfecta					

IV En la presente sección conteste las siguientes preguntas con la información que usted considere necesaria.

31 ¿Considera que el método comunicativo tiene beneficios sobre otros métodos de enseñanza de lengua? Favor de dar ejemplos.
Si, ¿por qué?
No, ¿por qué?

32 ¿Considera que en su espacio de trabajo se favorece el uso del enfoque comunicativo? Favor de proporcionar ejemplos.
Si, ¿por qué?
No, ¿por qué?