EXPLORING UZBEK EFL TEACHERS' UNDERSTANDING OF COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE WITHIN THE FRAMEWORK OF CLT

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Annotation. This article examines Uzbek EFL teachers' understanding of communicative competence within the framework of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). The study focuses on how teachers conceptualize communicative competence, their level of awareness of CLT principles, and the extent to which they apply these principles in classroom practice. It also explores the main challenges that prevent teachers from effectively implementing communicative approaches, such as limited training opportunities, grammar-focused curricula, and exam-oriented assessment systems. The findings highlight the need for enhanced professional development and curriculum reform to ensure that communicative competence becomes a practical goal of English language education in Uzbekistan.

Introduction. Over the past two decades, Uzbekistan has placed strong emphasis on improving the quality of foreign language education, particularly in English. With the government's educational reforms and the implementation of the "Action Strategy for the Development of Uzbekistan" (2017–2021), English has been officially recognized as a key tool for international communication, higher education, and professional advancement. Consequently, there has been a shift from traditional grammar-based instruction to Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), a learner-centered approach that focuses on developing learners' ability to use English effectively and appropriately in real-life situations. Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) is based on the idea that the primary goal of language learning is communicative competence, not merely linguistic accuracy. In other words, learners should not only know the grammatical rules of a language but also be able to apply them functionally and contextually. This concept, first introduced by Dell Hymes (1972) and later expanded by Canale and Swain (1980), redefined the objectives of language teaching and influenced curricula around the world. CLT promotes the integration of four main components of communicative competence: linguistic, sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic competence. These elements together enable learners to communicate effectively across different social and cultural contexts. In Uzbekistan, English is taught as a foreign language (EFL) at all levels — from

primary schools to universities. However, the implementation of CLT principles has been inconsistent. Many teachers continue to rely on teacher-centered, grammar-translation methods that prioritize accuracy over fluency. This discrepancy often stems from teachers' limited understanding of what communicative competence truly entails and how it can be developed in classroom settings. Moreover, the challenges of large class sizes, traditional textbooks, and exam-oriented assessments make it difficult for teachers to apply communicative methods effectively. Despite these barriers, there is a growing recognition among educators and policymakers that developing communicative competence is essential for preparing Uzbek students for global communication, study abroad programs, and international collaboration. However, successful implementation of CLT depends largely on teachers' perceptions, knowledge, and classroom practices. If teachers do not fully understand the theoretical foundations of CLT or lack practical strategies for applying it, the communicative goals of language education cannot be achieved. Therefore, this study aims to explore Uzbek EFL teachers' understanding of communicative competence within the framework of CLT. It seeks to answer several key questions:

- How do Uzbek EFL teachers conceptualize communicative competence?
- To what extent do they incorporate CLT principles into their teaching practices?
- What challenges do they face in applying communicative approaches in real classroom contexts?

By investigating these issues, the study intends to contribute to the improvement of English language teaching methodology in Uzbekistan. The findings can help curriculum designers, teacher trainers, and policymakers better understand current gaps and design more effective training programs that align with the communicative needs of 21st-century learners.

Analysis of literature. The concept of communicative competence has long been central to the field of language education, evolving through decades of theoretical and practical development. Early linguistic theories emphasized grammatical competence as the foundation of language learning; however, researchers later realized that mastery of grammar alone does not guarantee successful communication. This shift in perspective marked the beginning of the communicative approach in language teaching. The term communicative competence was first introduced by Dell Hymes (1972), who argued that language learning involves not only knowledge of linguistic forms but also the ability to use them appropriately in various social contexts. Hymes' view challenged Noam Chomsky's (1965) idea of linguistic competence, which focused primarily on grammatical correctness. According to Hymes, effective communication depends on the speaker's awareness of what is appropriate, when, and to whom certain expressions should be used. This idea laid the foundation for modern communicative teaching practices. Canale and Swain (1980) expanded Hymes' theory by identifying four components of communicative competence: linguistic competence (knowledge of language structure and vocabulary), sociolinguistic competence (understanding social and

cultural norms of language use), discourse competence (ability to produce coherent and cohesive texts), and strategic competence (skills for overcoming communication problems). Their model became one of the most influential frameworks in second language acquisition and pedagogy, providing a theoretical basis for Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). The emergence of CLT in the 1970s and 1980s represented a major shift from teacher-centered, grammar-translation approaches to learner-centered methodologies that prioritize meaningful communication. Littlewood (1981) emphasized that CLT encourages learners to use the language as a tool for interaction, not just as an academic subject. Similarly, Richards and Rodgers (2014) noted that CLT seeks to engage learners in authentic communication tasks that mirror real-life situations, enabling them to develop fluency, accuracy, and confidence. In the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching, many studies have demonstrated the effectiveness of CLT in improving learners' communicative competence. Savignon (2002) highlighted that communicative competence develops through active participation and exposure to meaningful interaction, rather than through rote memorization of grammatical rules. Moreover, Nunan (2004) emphasized the importance of task-based learning within CLT, where learners acquire language through purposeful tasks and collaboration. In Uzbekistan, several researchers have explored the implementation of CLT and its challenges. Karimov (2019) found that although many Uzbek teachers are familiar with CLT principles, they often face difficulties in applying them due to traditional exam systems and limited teaching materials. Qodirova (2021) observed that some teachers tend to equate communicative competence solely with speaking skills, neglecting other crucial aspects such as sociolinguistic awareness and strategic competence. Similarly, Tursunova (2020) argued that most English textbooks used in Uzbekistan still follow grammar-translation methods, which restrict opportunities for students to practice authentic communication. Despite these challenges, recent studies have shown positive trends. Sharipova (2022) noted that the introduction of new national standards and teacher training programs has gradually improved teachers' understanding of communicative approaches. However, the success of CLT largely depends on the extent to which teachers internalize the theoretical concepts of communicative competence and translate them into classroom practice. Therefore, continuous professional development and institutional support are crucial for the effective implementation of CLT in Uzbekistan. In summary, the literature demonstrates that communicative competence remains the cornerstone of effective language teaching and learning. While global studies confirm the value of CLT, its successful application in Uzbekistan requires not only theoretical understanding but also practical adaptation to local educational realities. Future research should focus on bridging the gap between teachers' knowledge of CLT principles and their ability to implement communicative methods in diverse classroom environments.

Table 1. Key Points from Selected Studies

Author	Focus	Key Idea
Hymes (1972)	Communicative competence	Language use must fit social context.
Canale & Swain (1980)	CLT framework	Defined four parts of competence.
Karimov (2019)	CLT in Uzbekistan	CLT rarely applied in practice.

Research discussion. The findings of this study reveal that most Uzbek EFL teachers recognize the importance of communicative competence but interpret it in a limited way. Many participants equate communicative competence mainly with speaking skills, overlooking its other dimensions such as sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic competence. This supports Qodirova's (2021) observation that teachers often focus on oral performance rather than the broader communicative ability described by Canale and Swain (1980). Data from the survey and classroom observations indicate that while teachers are aware of CLT principles, their classroom practices remain largely traditional. Grammar-translation methods and teacher-centered instruction are still dominant in many schools. This aligns with Karimov's (2019) conclusion that national exams, grammar-based textbooks, and large class sizes hinder the practical use of communicative activities. Consequently, teachers struggle to balance the need for accuracy with the development of fluency and interactional competence. The small analytical table summarizing key studies (Table 1) demonstrates that international theories, beginning with Hymes (1972) and Canale and Swain (1980), have had a strong conceptual influence, but their practical adaptation in Uzbekistan remains incomplete. Most teachers understand communicative competence at the theoretical level, yet few successfully integrate it into classroom instruction. This indicates a clear gap between theoretical understanding and pedagogical implementation. Another important issue identified through interviews is the lack of continuous professional development. Teachers reported that they had received limited training on how to design communicative tasks, manage interactive lessons, and assess students' communicative performance. This gap in methodological preparation reduces the effectiveness of CLT implementation and explains why communicative competence often remains an abstract concept rather than a measurable classroom goal. Despite these challenges, there are signs of gradual improvement. Younger teachers and those who have participated in modern training programs demonstrated a more accurate understanding of CLT and were more willing to experiment with student-centered methods. This trend reflects Sharipova's (2022) findings that updated national standards and workshops are slowly enhancing teachers' communicative teaching practices.

Conclusion. This study explored how Uzbek EFL teachers understand and implement communicative competence within the framework of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). The results show that while teachers conceptually recognize the value of communicative competence, their classroom practices often

remain traditional and focused on grammar accuracy rather than meaningful communication. The gap between theoretical awareness and practical application indicates that many teachers still need methodological guidance and professional support in adapting CLT effectively to the Uzbek educational context. The analysis also highlighted several barriers to successful CLT implementation, such as exam-oriented assessment systems, limited training opportunities, and outdated instructional materials. However, positive tendencies were observed among younger and newly trained teachers, suggesting that gradual improvement is possible with continuous professional development and institutional support.

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