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Secondary EFL school teachers' perceptions of CLT principles and practices: An exploratory survey

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ABSTRACT

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) is advocated by many applied linguists as a common vehicle to curriculum innovation in many ELT contexts. It represents a change of focus in language teaching from linguistic structures to learners' need for developing communication skills. In recent years, the Iranian Ministry of Education has introduced the development of a new English curriculum for secondary schools with the aim of establishing the use of communicative activities in language classes. The present study was an attempt to investigate Iranian teachers' perception of CLT principles and practices through a survey of 75 secondary school teachers in the context of the newly introduced English language curriculum developed based on CLT principles. Based on a combination of quantitative and qualitative data using a semi-structured questionnaire supplemented with interviews with a smaller group of teachers, the results of the survey revealed that a change in classroom arrangements is required before CLT can be practiced in secondary school English classes in Iran. The results also showed that the employment of CLT procedures at the local level is at its beginning stages and might take time to take root. The conclusion is that for the suggested changes in the curriculum to be implemented and realized in English education in Iran, the findings of more comprehensive surveys complemented with observation of teachers' instructional practices is required to inform the change implementation.

Keywords: Communicative Language Teaching (CLT); Iranian EFL context; teachers' perceptions; secondary education; curricular innovation

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Introduction

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) is currently advocated and practiced as a potentially effective approach to teaching English with the aim of developing learners' ability to communicate (Burns, 2010; Brown, 2014; Harmer, 2007; Littlewood, 2011, 2014; Nunan, 2003; Wang, 2007). It has extended beyond English as a Second Language (ESL) contexts to English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts (Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011) and many EFL countries have shown a growing interest in CLT due to its capacity for engaging learners in communication as a pre-requisite for the development of communicative competence (Savignon, 2007). With a major focus on developing learner ability to use language appropriately in context, CLT contrasts sharply with the established traditions that emphasize learners' knowledge of formal features.

In Asia, CLT was first introduced in secondary education in the 90s. In Korea, "CLT was introduced through the 6th national curriculum with an emphasis on fluency rather than usage, the learner-centered class, communicative group activities, and authentic materials in 1992" (Yook, 2010, p. 29). Yook further adds that ever since it was introduced, CLT has been subject to enhancement policies to change teaching and testing methods, to increase English conversation class hours and to change the curricula of EFL teacher education programs. CLT entered secondary education in Japan in 1993 through the introduction of *The Course of Study* which emphasized higher achievement in English communication skills among secondary school students (Nishino, 2008). In China, as reported by Liao (2004), SEDC (State Education Development Commission), which is in charge of setting educational policy, made teaching English 'for communication' a requirement for secondary school teachers. The People's Education Press compiled a textbook series for secondary school English learners based on the syllabus developed by SEDC. The textbooks were aimed at helping students develop all-round ability in the four language skills, and an ability to use English for communication.

In Iran, in the first decade after the Islamic revolution (1979-1989), an attempt was made to make changes in the secondary education English curriculum. As a result of these changes, the book series called *Graded English* (Iranian Ministry of Education, 1984) was substituted with a new one called *Right Path to English* (Birjandi & Soheili, 1985). The approach to teaching English, as reflected in the book series is a blend of Grammar Translation and Audiolingualism putting emphasis on grammatical structures and vocabulary with the aim of helping students develop the skill of reading comprehension. The book series has been in use for almost three decades with no substantial changes to its content. It was in 2005 that a committee of experts was formed in the Curriculum Development Center (CDC) to develop a curriculum framework for teaching English in secondary schools. The curriculum framework, which adopted CLT as its selected approach, was evaluated in 2010 (See Anani Sarab, 2010). However, its translation into a syllabus and textbook series was delayed until 2013 when the first book of the *Prospect Series* (Khadir Sharabyan, Kheirabadi, Alavimoghadam, Anani Sarab, Forozandeh Shahraki & Ghorbani, 2013) was adopted in the first year of lower secondary schools. Since the inception of CLT-oriented curriculum, the teachers have been required to put emphasis on oral skills as well as written ones and try to help students use English for communication inside the classroom.

In spite of the universal agreement on the CLT rationale, its implementation in EFL contexts, especially in Asian countries mentioned above, has proved problematic due to certain limitations. In his critical analysis of the Iranian EFL context, Maftoon (2002) raises questions about the feasibility of adopting CLT in this context. He enumerates a number of limitations to the successful integration of oral expression as the major focus of CLT. These limitations include class size, the amount of exposure to authentic language and the availability of resources. In his argument for the unfeasibility of CLT in the Iranian context, Maftoon further adds the school culture which puts emphasis on repetition, memorization and accumulation of knowledge and the negative washback of the university entrance exam which has perpetuated the focus on grammar, vocabulary and to

some extent reading in the high school English curriculum to his list of impediments in the way of implementation of CLT in Iran.

The practice of CLT, as a curricular innovation, has created challenges which have been widely researched (Carless, 2004 in Hong Kong; Hu, 2005 in China; Nishino, 2008 in Japan; Dahmardeh, 2009 and Razmjoo & Barabadi, 2015 in Iran; Orafi & Borg, 2009 in Lybia; Li, 1998 and Joen, 2009 in South Korea). Taking activity theory as the theoretical framework for their research, Razmjoo and Barabadi (2015) tried to draw a more comprehensive picture of the way the new CLT-oriented English curriculum in Iran was being interpreted and enacted by the participant teachers and learners. They identified a number of contradictions in the “instructional activity system” which made the change unfeasible for the teachers and students. Overall, their research demonstrated that the teachers had fallen back on the more familiar traditional methods and techniques instead of relying on the methods and techniques associated with the new curriculum. They attributed the identified inconsistencies to the contextual constraints such as the teachers’ inadequate oral proficiency, exam-oriented school culture, insufficient time to cover the curricular content with an optimal pace, problems with classroom management due to students’ lack of motivation and teachers’ lack of true confidence in implementing the new curriculum and finally the inefficiency of the short intensive in-service teacher training provided at the ministerial level and mediated through teacher managers.

Facing the challenges of CLT has not been totally unsuccessful. There are reports of the communicative approach being welcomed and resulting in positive learning experiences in the Asian EFL context. Riazi and Razmjoo (2006) indicate that despite the difficulties that may hinder innovation, there is a positive attitude towards CLT and its principles among most Iranian teachers in high schools. Wang (1990) points to the particular attention to oral communicative competence in a foreign language school in China and the development of the four language skills as the success of CLT. Chang (2009) reports that Taiwanese teachers have a tendency to use more communicative tasks in their classrooms. Sakui (2004) and Nishino (2008) also assert that Japanese teachers have positive perceptions and are willing to incorporate and use CLT in their teaching practices.

The anecdotal success stories and the welcoming perception of teachers toward CLT in spite of the challenges of its implementation raise questions which are yet to be answered. One such question deals with the way teachers interpret CLT principles and the way they perceive the problems in the way of its implementation. These questions gain more importance in the context of Iran where a CLT-oriented curriculum has recently been introduced and very few research projects have tried to provide answers to the above-mentioned questions.

Review of Literature

CLT methodologies emerged in the 70s and 80s mainly because of the growing feeling of disillusionment with the Grammar Translation and Audiolingual approaches to foreign language teaching. These decades were also the beginning of the widespread belief that there is no single method that can meet the differing needs of language learners. They were also coincident with the phenomenon which was dubbed “postmethod condition” (Kumaravadevilu, 1994) or “postmethod era” (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). CLT methodologies were compatible with the intellectual and attitudinal atmosphere of the time mainly because, as described by Brandi, (2008), “[they] encompass eclectic ways of teaching that are borrowed from myriad methods ... rooted not only in one but a range of theories ... motivated by research findings in second language acquisition (SLA) as well as cognitive and educational psychology” (p. 2).

CLT lacks adherence to one specific theory or method, it rather rests upon general principles. Doughty and Long (2003) have provided a list of eight principles that underlie CLT including task as an organizing principle; learning through doing; rich input which needs to be meaningful, comprehensible, and elaborated; authentic materials; promotion of cooperative and collaborative learning; focus on form; provision of error corrective feedback; and the consideration of affective factors of learning. These principles are assumed to help us in choosing teaching materials and learning activities. However, as concluded by Brandi (2008), due to the inconclusive nature of the teaching of proficiency and communicative-based skills the rate of success of the selected materials and activities is limited by the current insights we have received from SLA and educational psychology. In other words, our CLT-based methodology of teaching should be informed by the on-going SLA and educational psychology research and theory-building.

The open-ended nature of the CLT model gives way to diverse interpretations on the part of teachers. The problem is exacerbated by the fact that there is a wide gap between what is presented in the university methodology classes and the English language teaching practice at schools. In schools, one can hardly find materials and activities that can be considered truly communicative. In the absence of a model to rely on, it is not surprising that teachers diverge in their perception of CLT theory and practice.

From a theoretical perspective, CLT has been conceptualized in two different ways (weak and strong) which are roughly in agreement with its two main sources: a communicative perspective on *language* and a communicative perspective on *learning* (Littlewood, 2014). The communicative perspective on language suggests that when we learn a language we learn 'functions' and not 'structures' of language. Learners would practice these functions (such as making a request) and then use them in communicative activities such as role-plays. This perspective, which is called the 'weak' version of CLT, authorizes teachers for the presentation and practice of discrete items before and after their use by the learners in communicative activities (Howatt, 1984). The communicative perspective on learning, the 'strong' version of CLT, focuses on our natural capacities to acquire language through communication without explicit instruction. Conscious learning and error correction have no place in this version of CLT in which a humanistic approach (Rodger, 1984) is mainly emphasized.

In practice, though, adaptation to the contextual variations is the key for language teachers. The question is what criterion would determine adherence to CLT. In the context of Vietnam, Hiep (2007, p. 196) concludes that "teachers in many parts of the world may reject the CLT techniques transferred from the West". For him, the key for adaptation is what he calls adherence to the criterion of CLT spirit which is more likely to be achieved "when classroom practices are made real and meaningful to learners". The implication is that CLT should be implemented in such a way that it can shift the direction of teaching towards learners' communicative goals. Of special interest from a "postmethod" perspective are the ways through which teachers have managed to stick to the "spirit of CLT" (Littlewood, 2011). Some examples of such an adaptation are: Li (1998) who focuses on adapting the practices of CLT to special contexts; Rao (1996) who focuses on reconciling the traditional approach and CLT in a way that both of them are in equal relationship; and Wong and Ho (2004) who advocate the "cross-breeding of elements" from different ELT techniques, methods and approaches to form a localized methodology.

Whatever approach teachers take in their efforts to stick to the spirit of CLT, their instructional decisions are assumed to be shaped by their beliefs about teaching (Phipps & Borg, 2009). In a broader sense, beliefs constitute an important part of teacher cognition which is defined by Borg (2003, p. 81) as "what teachers know, believe, and think". In other words, the knowledge, beliefs and theories of teachers make up teacher cognition. According to Borg (2007), the thought processes of teachers such as what they know, how they come to know this and how they use their knowledge in the classroom can help define teacher cognition. Knowing teachers' beliefs is

significant in improvement and implementation of new programs and effective education (Richardson et al, 2012).

There have been many studies on teachers' beliefs and attitudes in recent years. The results suggest the importance of this issue in English language teaching (See for example Gorsuch, 2000, 2001; Nishino, 2008; Taguchi, 2005). In contrast, research on teachers' understanding of CLT is quite limited. Thompson (1996) identified four misconceptions among his colleagues about their understanding of CLT. From their perspective, CLT was teaching speaking, doing role plays in the class, not teaching grammar and expecting too much from teachers in the class.

Sato and Kleinsasser (1999) used three data sources to investigate 10 native Japanese teachers' understanding of CLT. They found out that teachers held four conceptions of CLT. Some of them thought that CLT is communicating in the second language. Others considered it as including mostly speaking and listening skills. The third group believed that CLT involves little grammar teaching, while the last group saw CLT as a bundle of time-consuming activities.

The study by Humphries and Burns (2015) shows that there are some barriers to the implementation of CLT as an ELT curriculum innovation in Japan. They believe that the main barriers to the implementation of CLT as an innovative curriculum are related to (a) minimizing the importance of the expectations and beliefs of the teachers (b) not providing opportunities for teachers to understand CLT principles underlying the textbooks and (c) not developing opportunities for problem-solving meetings between teachers and school managers.

In another study, Mangubhai, Marland, Dashwood, and Son (2005), in a two phase project, using semi-structured interviews and video-stimulated recall interviews, compared teachers' conceptions of CLT with the composite view of CLT assembled from researchers' account of its distinctive features. They found out that although the participant teachers' abstract understanding of CLT was quite similar to that of the researchers, they used a practical version of a smaller part of that abstract understanding which was compatible with their unique work context.

Teachers' understanding of the change principles and their attitude toward them have also been shown to be critical to the success of an innovation. Evidence comes from a number of studies. For example, Karavas-Doukas (1995) found that Greek high school teachers had an incomplete understanding of the innovative aspects of the curriculum they implemented. Their attitudes and beliefs toward learning were also not compatible with the innovations in learning principles. Li's (1998) study in Korea provided similar results showing that the teachers' misconceptions about CLT undermined their efforts to implement it successfully.

The teachers' perception of the time needed to complete the mandated curriculum deters them from carrying out process-oriented activities or sparing time for classroom interaction. In Razmjoo and Barabadi's (2015) study, the participant teachers justified their lavish use of L1, the omission of certain textbook activities and their use of traditional instructional techniques like reading aloud, drilling and translation with the pressure they felt for covering the syllabus. In Li's (1998) study in Korea, also teachers felt that time was not enough for carrying out communicative activities. One of the teachers in the case study conducted by Carless (2003) in Hong Kong pointed out that "maintaining English medium communication" (as opposed to switching to the mother tongue) could be quite time-consuming for her (p. 495). These views can be justified by the fact that in an EFL context learners' engagement with communicative activities requires a lot of drilling to consolidate grammar and vocabulary.

The concept of time is also related to the great emphasis teachers put on covering the textbook. In Hong Kong, the teachers' tendency to cover the textbook has been accounted for by "book deference" originating from the traditional Chinese culture (Tong, 1996 cited in Carless 2003, p. 493). Another reason that might be more relevant to the Iranian context is the teachers' overreliance on the textbook as the sole source of instruction and assessment activities.

A third aspect of time is teacher preparation for classroom instruction. As mentioned by Carless (2003, p. 494), when the time for preparation is scarce, "traditional teaching or following the textbook" can be the teachers' preferred instructional strategy as making arrangements for the CLT task-oriented classroom activities is more demanding in terms of time and energy needed for preparation.

Overall, the factors identified in the literature as impediments to the implementation of CLT in the EFL context can be summarized as: teachers' attitudes and beliefs, their understanding of the principles underlying curricular innovation, the time available, teachers' oral proficiency and their familiarity with CLT pedagogy, resources and support provided to teachers. To this list, we can add the contextually-induced constraints such as the impact of the exam system, the school culture in terms of educational values and the students preferred learning styles and strategies. As concluded by Carless (2003), the different trajectories of these impediments can lead to different degrees of implementation and to the emergence of management issues like discipline problems, overuse of L2 and less than optimal use of English.

The present research can be considered an attempt in line with the similar studies done in the context of Iran and other EFL contexts to find out how CLT as introduced in secondary school English curriculum is perceived by teachers and what they think are the impediments to the practice of CLT. In particular, the research tried to provide answers to the following research questions:

1. What are Iranian secondary school teachers' perceptions of CLT in secondary schools?
2. What are Iranian secondary school teachers' perceptions of their CLT practices in secondary schools?
3. What are Iranian teachers' perceptions of contextual limitations of the use of CLT in secondary schools?
4. What do Iranian secondary school teachers think should be changed in order to utilize CLT in Iranian secondary schools?

Method

Participants

There were altogether 75 English teachers who volunteered to take part in the study. Table 1 provides the general profile of the participants.

Table 1
General Profile of Participants

Participants' General Information	Iranian Teachers
Gender	
Male	33
Female	42
Educational Background	
BA degree	51
MA degree	24
Age	
21-30	14
31-40	26
41-50	20
50 +	15
Teaching Experience	
0-1	23
1-5	17
5-10	18
10+	17

Instruments

The data for the present study were elicited using a survey questionnaire. The questionnaire was a modified version of Nishino's questionnaire (2008). The questionnaire has two parts: The first part deals with teachers' background information (age, gender, teaching experience and educational background) and the second part deals with teachers' perception of CLT principles and practices. Questions 1 to 5 concern Iranian teachers' beliefs and knowledge about CLT. Questions 6 to 8 are concerned with the perceived use of communicative activities and their acceptability among teachers and learners in CLT classes in Iran. Questions 9 to 12 concern the difficulties and problems that Iranian teachers perceive they are facing when they employ CLT in their classes. Questions 13 and 14 ask about teachers' perceptions of the importance of language skills and elements for learning English communicatively compared with getting prepared for taking the university entrance exam. The internal consistency estimate of reliability for the Likert-scale questions (Questions 13 & 14) using Cronbach's Alpha was estimated to be .82. The reason why the reliability of these two questions was checked was the decision to run a test of significance on the answers provided by the teachers. The rest of items in the questionnaire included selective responses and very few of them included a rating scale. This made the reliability check redundant for the rest of the items.

The questionnaire was piloted with 20 English teachers to check its content and written expression. Based on the feedback obtained, several items were modified for relevance and clarity of expression. For example, in the background information section, two items (university, others) which were not relevant to the current teaching position of the teachers were deleted. Question No. 5 (What is your understanding of communicative competence?) was replaced by: What is your definition of communicative competence? due to the use general terms like 'understanding'.

The reason why this questionnaire was selected for the study was the fact that it contained both close-ended and open-ended questions which provided opportunities for the respondent teachers to justify their perceptions and extend the scope of the items. The second reason was that the questionnaire includes two items which focus on the teachers' rating of the language skills and elements required for learning the language communicatively and for taking the university entrance

exam. After the questionnaire had been administered, interviews were conducted with 10 secondary school teachers who had previously answered the questionnaire and had volunteered for the interviews. Basically, the interviews aimed at probing the questionnaire's open-ended questions more deeply. The interviews lasted not more than fifteen minutes. The teachers' responses were recorded. The recordings were played several times to identify the themes referred to by the majority of the respondents. The extracted themes were then used to supplement the written responses to the same questions.

The teachers' consent to participate in the study was sought and secured. They were assured that all the data collected were for research purposes only, and their confidentiality would be respected during the study. All the interview data were recorded with the participants' permission.

Results

Questions 1 to 5 concern Iranian teachers' beliefs and knowledge about CLT. In response to Question 1, 54 out of 75 participants indicated that they had heard of or studied CLT. However, responses to Question 2 show that they mainly learned about CLT through workshops held by local boards of education. Only 6 teachers reported learning about CLT from a Course of Study. There were also 3 teachers who reported learning about CLT through the Internet.

Table 2
Where (or from What) the Teachers Heard/Learned about CLT

Sources and Places	No. of Mentions
Workshop held by the board of education	66
Books or journals	35
Teachers' manual	33
University	24
TESOL seminars/lectures	21
Workshop held by a teachers' association	12
The Course of Study	6
Others	3

As seen in Table 3, the majority of the teachers believed it was most important for students in CLT classrooms "to communicate effectively", "to enjoy communicating" in L2 and "to collaborate with each other". Few teachers selected native-like pronunciation or native-like accuracy and fluency as important factors.

Table 3
What the Teacher Think is Important for Students in CLT Classroom (N=75)

Important factors for students	No. of Mentions
To communicate effectively in L2	63
To enjoy communicating in L2	60
To collaborate with each other	48
Never to use L1 (Persian)	15
To talk to a native speaker	12
To acquire native like accuracy	9
To acquire native-like fluency	6
To acquire native-like pronunciation	6

Teachers' responses to question 4 show that the majority of teachers viewed themselves as being "facilitator", "communicator model", "communicator" and "material provider" as the main roles of teachers in CLT classrooms which can indicate their perception of and tendency toward communicative activities in English classes. Only some teachers chose native-like pronunciation, fluency and accuracy as important attributes of CLT teachers. None of these teachers considered being a native speaker as a crucial factor in teaching English. The teachers' views expressed in response to this item are consistent with the assumption of world Englishes that intelligibility (Jenkins, 2009) is more important than blindly following nativism in the world of glocalization (McKay, 2012). They are also consistent with the concept of pluricentricity of English and the plurilingual nature of today's English which encourage teachers to be aware of all different varieties of English and improve the ability to communicate across cultures and Englishes in today's globalized communicative settings that are international, intercultural, and multilingual in nature.

Table 4
What the Teachers Think is Required of Teachers in CLT Classrooms (N=75)

Role of Teachers	No. of Mentions
To be a facilitator	63
To be a communicator model	52
To be a communicator	44
To provide material	42
To have native like accuracy	20
To have native-like pronunciation	18
To have native-like fluency	16
To be a native speaker	0

Question 5 asked teachers to define "communicative competence". None of the teachers pointed to Canale and Swain's (1980) four aspects of communicative competence which are grammatical, discourse, sociolinguistic and strategic competences. 55 teachers defined communicative competence as the ability to understand others and to be able to communicate with other people. Ten teachers referred to it as the knowledge which can be used for expressing opinions. Ten teachers also did not have a clear understanding of this concept. Overall, the participant teachers do not seem to have developed a conceptual definition of CLT. The interview data related to the conceptual definition of communicative competence are not more revealing than the respondents' written answers. The following excerpts which are representative of the interview data are cases in point.

Participant 5: *The main goal of CLT is to enable people to communicate and use language in context. It focuses on meaning rather than on form.*

Participant 9: *My students should be able to cooperate with each other and express their opinions.*

Use of Communicative Activities in CLT Classes

Consistent with the CLT approach, the newly-developed textbooks for the new secondary curriculum include activities to be carried out in groups or pairs. Questions 6 to 8 asked the participant teachers about their use of group/pair work and their acceptability among teachers and learners in EFL classes in Iran.

Table 5
Frequency of Group/Pair Activities (N=75)

Frequency	No. of Mentions
Never	0
Hardly ever	3
Sometimes	6
Often	18
Usually	24
Always	24

Table 5 shows that 66 out of 75 teachers claimed that they *often, usually* or *always* used group or pair activities. The high frequency of perceived use of pair and group work shows the respondent teachers' tendency to use pair and group work in their classes. However, this tendency does not necessarily indicate that they use them for carrying out communicative activities.

Table 6
Range of Communicative Activities Used by Teachers (N=75)

Activity	No. of Mentions
Role play	66
Games	54
Discussion	30
Problem solving	24
Information gap	12
Listing/ranking	4

As for question 7, which asked the participants about the use of the different types of activities, the responses provided a variety of activities. The ranking of activity types mentioned by the participants suggest that "role play", and "games" were more likely to be employed by Iranian teachers. The higher priority given to these two activities might reflect their high frequency in the textbooks used by the teachers compared with the other ones mentioned in the list.

Question 8 asked teachers about their perception of their students' favorite activity in CLT classes. In response to question 8, 66 teachers out of 75 reported that their students' favorite activity was role play. Fifty five teachers also chose games as the activity which was most desired by their students. The teachers' views about their students' favorite activity support the point mentioned earlier about the type of activities included in the textbooks.

Problems and difficulties in implementing CLT in English classes

Questions 9 to 12 were concerned with the difficulties and problems that Iranian teachers believed they faced when they employed CLT in their classes. Question 9 asked Iranian teachers about the effectiveness of CLT in language classes. Their answers revealed that 63 of them thought CLT was not used effectively in their classes. In spite of their propensity to use pair work and group work in their classes and engage students in communicative activities such as role plays and games, the participant teachers did not perceive the use of these activities effective in English classes. The teachers' responses to question 10 (Table 7) which asked them about the reasons behind the lack of CLT effectiveness shows that the majority of teachers (more than 50%) considered the number of hours and class size as the major reasons for the ineffectiveness of CLT in language classes. Between 30% to 40% perceived lack of materials for communicative activities and evaluation system as the major reasons. Less than 15% of the teachers considered lack of teachers' language proficiency, curriculum and textbooks as responsible for the lack of effectiveness.

Table 7
Reasons Why CLT Cannot Be Effective in Classes (N=75)

Problems	No. of Mentions
Number of class hours	57 (76%)
Class size	51 (68%)
Lack of materials for communicative activities	30 (40%)
Evaluation system	21 (28%)
Lack of teachers' English proficiency	15 (20%)
Curriculums	12 (16%)
Textbooks	10 (13%)

Question 11 showed that 57 out of 75 Iranian teachers wanted to provide their students with more communicative activities. Few teachers believed that teaching grammar and vocabulary was more important for the students and that their main focus should be on them and not on communication. Asked why they want to employ more communicative activities, the majority of teachers believed that communication should be the main goal of teaching as a foreign language. Most of the teachers believed that CLT classes give students the opportunity to engage in communicative activities.

Table 8 presents responses to question 12 which asked teachers about the conditions which are needed to be changed in order to use CLT more effectively in the classrooms. The majority of Iranian teachers (more than 50%) pointed to "number of class hours", "class size", "lack of materials in the education system" as the main challenging factors which should be modified before they can expect more effective CLT classes. The "teacher training courses for teachers" and "teachers' attitudes towards the new system" and "textbooks" were mentioned by less than 50% of the teachers.

Table 8
Conditions to Be Changed in Order to Use CLT in the Classrooms (N=75)

Problems	No. of Mentions
Number of class hours	50 (66%)
Class Size	45 (60%)
Lack of materials for communicative activities	40 (53%)
Teacher training courses	35 (46%)
Teachers' views	28 (37%)
Text books	16 (21%)
Teacher's proficiency	10 (13%)

One interview question dealt with problems and challenges that teachers faced in their practice of the new English curriculum. The following comments by teachers about these problems and challenges reflect the sentiment expressed by the majority of interviewed teachers.

One of the teachers emphasized the importance of providing workshops and enough materials for teachers:

Participant 4: *The demand of CLT on teacher is too much. Teachers should be creative and spend a lot of time to prepare supplementary teaching materials. Besides, most of the public schools in Iran are suffering from financial problems which makes it difficult for schools to provide enough materials, suitable classes and also workshops for teachers.*

Another participant pointed out the assessment system in Iran as a big challenge for students:

Participant 6: *The educational system of Iran cannot meet our students' needs in the long run. Teachers want our students to be able to speak in English, but they are finally assessed on their knowledge of grammar, vocabulary and reading in the university entrance exam. I think English should be assessed through standard proficiency tests and not through university entrance exam. Most of the students spend their energy and time to get prepared for university entrance exam which is the most important thing for them in their lives!*

One of the participants considered lack of training as the main reason why some teachers still stick to traditional methods, which somehow demotivate students to be communicative:

Participant 2: *I think some teachers discourage students from talking in English. Teachers should be trained well to know the goals and ultimate purposes of CLT. Some of the teachers still stick to traditional methods to teach English.*

Participant 8 believed that the main problem is the large size of classes which makes it difficult for teachers to manage the class more effectively;

Participant 8: *Managing students in crowded classes is not easy at all! English classes unlike other classes should be busy and sometimes teachers of other classes complain about this issue. I think we should have special classes for English as distinct from other subjects' classes. It also takes a lot of time in crowded classes to lead the students to their seats after pair work and group work.*

Participant 10 also points out the sitting arrangement of students as a big challenge in CLT classes:

Participant 10: *Considering the sitting arrangement of the class, number of students is really important if we want to have role play and group activities. The traditional way of arranging seats cannot be effective.*

Importance of Domain-Specific Skills/ knowledge

Questions 13 and 14 asked about teachers' perceptions of the importance of language skills and elements. These questions were intended to check the teachers' perception of the relative importance of the listed skills and elements for either learning English for communication or learning English for passing the University Entrance Exam (UEE). As a 6-point Likert scale (0 = not important; 1 = little importance; 2 = slight importance; 3 = somewhat important; 4 = important, and 5 = very important) was used with these questions, it was decided to check the hypothesis whether the teachers considered each of the skills and elements important for learning English for communication or for learning English with the aim of passing the UEE. Seven paired sample t-tests were conducted. The independent variable was the purpose of English learning (learning English for communication, and learning English to pass the University Entrance Exam). Dependent variables included the teachers' perception of the importance of language skills (reading, writing, listening, speaking) and knowledge of the language elements namely grammar and vocabulary.

Significant mean differences were found between the perceived importance of learning English communicatively and learning English for passing the University Entrance Exam for all the five levels of the dependent variable (reading, listening, speaking, grammar and vocabulary). The strength of relationship between the purposes and the change in perceived importance, assessed by Eta Squared (η^2), was relatively strong: listening 0.55, speaking 0.59, grammar 0.49, vocabulary 0.27 and reading 0.31 (Table 9).

The results indicate that listening and speaking skills were perceived to be more important for learning English communicatively than for passing the University Entrance Exam. They also show

that Grammar and Reading were perceived as more important for passing the UEE than for learning English for communication.

Table 9
Means, Standard Deviations, and Paired Sample t-test for Effects of Learning Purposes on Six Dependent Variables (N = 75)

	In general		Univ. Exam		Paired Sample T-test			
	M	SD	M	SD	t-Value	F	P	η^2
Reading	4.96	0.88	5.52	0.81	-4.21	74	.000	0.31
Writing	4.36	1.13	4.40	1.34	-.344	74	.732	0.01
Listening	5.64	0.75	3.64	2.00	7.919	74	.000	0.55
Speaking	5.84	0.37	3.72	2.00	9.373	74	.000	0.59
Grammar	3.72	1.38	5.16	1.13	-7.985	74	.000	0.49
Vocabulary	5.48	0.64	5.80	0.49	-5.046	74	.000	0.27

Discussion

The current study examined Iranian Secondary School EFL Teachers' perception of CLT principles and Practices. The views expressed by Iranian secondary school teachers in this study seemed to be relatively consistent with the CLT principles with regard to teachers' roles in CLT classrooms, the role of teacher language proficiency and the goals of teaching and learning English. All Iranian teachers emphasized the importance of incorporating all four language skills to their English lessons in order for students to communicate effectively and enjoy communication in English classes. However, at the same time, their responses showed that there were some problems that were perceived to hinder the implementation of CLT. Teachers' responses showed that they mainly learned about CLT through workshops held by local boards of education. The teachers' reliance on workshops held in their workplace, as their sole source of familiarity with CLT concepts, confirms Mehrani's (2015) finding which suggests Iranian teachers' low engagement with reading and conducting research. The implication is that the change agents should pay due attention to the Iranian teachers' involvement with curricular innovation through their engagement with research.

Iranian teachers mentioned shortage of supplementary teaching materials for communicative activities as one of the main problems which hinders the implementation of CLT in Iran. This might indicate that teachers' access to communicative activities is limited to those included in the textbook. This means that teachers have to stick to the textbook activities irrespective of whether they suit the teaching context or not. For teachers to be creative they should have access to an inventory of communicative tasks to choose from based on the needs of the teaching context. As recommended by Richards (2015), schools should provide resources that teachers can make use of to complement their lessons.

Teachers' responses also showed that group/pair work and communicative activities like role plays and games were considered more favorable to the teachers and students. However, they acknowledged that the communicative activities were not used effectively in language classes. This result indicates that there is a tension between the teachers' priority in sticking to the CLT approach and the limitations of the teaching context which militate against their best efforts to remain faithful to the CLT spirit in their language classes.

The majority of the teachers perceived factors such as “number of class hours” and “class size” to be the major problems limiting the efficacy of CLT in high school classes. The exam system was also another mentioned problem which was perceived to hamper the effectiveness of CLT in English classes. In fact, when teachers were asked about the conditions which should be changed so that CLT can be used more effectively, most of them pointed to the “number of class hours”, “class size”, “lack of supplementary teaching materials”, “teacher training courses for teachers” and “teachers’ attitudes towards the new system” as the main challenging factors which should be changed before CLT can be practiced more effectively in High school English language classes. Interviews also confirmed the results of the survey regarding Iranian teachers’ beliefs and practices towards CLT. For example, interviewed participants pointed out the issues like poor management, lack of professional support, class size and exam system as the main reasons for the failure of new curriculum in Iran. In fact, some previous researchers also point to these issues as the main challenges of implementing CLT.

Waters and Vilches (2008) believe that incompatibility of educational policies with realities of the teaching context, lack of professional support and inadequate materials are the main reasons for the failure of curriculum innovation which seems to be true in case of CLT in some ELT contexts. In the context of Iran, in dealing with the problems perceived to hinder the implementation of CLT, high school teachers should be professionally supported to link their perception of CLT theory and practice to the real practice of using the textbook communicative activities in high school English language classes. The result that showed English teachers do not consider CLT activities sanctioned by the curriculum as effective may indicate the lack of congruence between the textbook activities and the realities of the teaching learning situation. One way of dealing with this problem, as suggested in the literature, is training teachers in textbook evaluation and adaptation. In his discussion of the way teachers’ level of involvement in teaching and their creative use of textbooks can be heightened, Richards (1993) suggests that teachers’ skills in evaluating and adapting published teaching materials should be developed. His argument is that over-dependence on textbooks can hinder teachers from evaluating the teaching situation and as a result adapting their teaching to the students’ learning. This problem can be dealt with through active involvement of teachers in material evaluation and adaptation.

The problems mentioned by Iranian teachers are not unique to the Iranian EFL context as mentioned frequently by other researchers (Humphries & Burns, 2015; Kim, 2014; Ghanbari & Ketabi, 2011; Li, 1998; among others); however, their predominance in the Iranian teachers’ thought while they are involved in the early stages of the curriculum innovation is significant as it refers to problems which need urgent attention on the part of the change agents. If these problems persist or the teachers are not supported in their struggle to come into terms with them, they will be prone to frustration which is considered the major cause of teachers’ reverting back to their traditional ways of teaching English as a foreign language. As mentioned frequently in the literature (Fullan, 1991; Pinar, 1999) the change itself, if it makes too many demands on teachers, can create frustration which in turn can make teachers conservative and less liable to persist in implementing the innovations.

Teachers’ answers to questions 13 and 14 showed that listening and speaking skills were perceived to be more important for learning English for communication than for passing the UEE. They also showed that Grammar and Reading are more important for passing the UEE than for learning English for communication. This suggests that there is a discrepancy between what the learners need for learning the language for communication and what the exam system requires them to learn. This can hamper the use of CLT as the demands of the exam system are more oriented toward knowledge of language than the ability to use that knowledge in oral communicative activities recommended by the CLT-oriented high school English language curriculum. Teachers are encouraged to put emphasis on the development of listening and speaking skills; whereas, the prospect for the students is to take the UEE, which emphasizes the knowledge of grammar and

vocabulary and the reading skill. Changing the exam system seems to be an urgent need at this stage which should be given high priority by the change agents.

The school officials and the parents are intently pursuing the goal of preparing students for the UEE from early stages of their education, that is, junior high school. This is the source of negative washback of UEE on language teaching in high schools. The negative washback (Messick, 1996) of UEE can be translated in assessment terms to its under-representation of the construct as it does not include oral skills and to the questionable relevancy of assessing the explicit knowledge of grammar and vocabulary to the construct of communicative language ability. The new English curriculum does not apply to the secondary school graduates who are currently taking the UEE in Iran. The graduates of the new curriculum will have to take it in two years from now. However, as it is not clear how it will be modified to come in line with the goals of the new curriculum, the negative washback will continue in the foreseeable future and this can undermine the best attempts of teachers who have decided to stand by the change. Being aware of the power of assessment as a driving force behind curriculum innovation, one cannot help wondering why the obvious power of this instrument in showing the direction of change and backing the efforts made by both teachers and students in that direction are ignored by the change agents.

Conclusion

The present study intended to contribute to the current CLT literature through probing the Iranian teachers' perceptions of CLT concepts and practice of this approach in the Iranian teaching context. The initial assumption which motivated the present study was that teachers play an important role in any curricular innovative change. The study started with the observation that very few studies have focused on Iranian teachers' attitudes toward CLT-oriented English language curriculum recently introduced in secondary schools. So the study was designed to investigate Iranian secondary school teachers' perception of CLT theory and practice. The general picture which emerged was that teachers' views were compatible, to some extent, with CLT principles in the sense that they held a positive attitude toward its practice; however, they seemed to be struggling in their efforts to stick to the spirit of CLT. They thought that there were factors limiting their ability to implement CLT effectively in high schools.

The best way to understand the most effective ways of implementing CLT is doing more research to understand teachers' and learners' concerns toward it (Gorsuch, 2000). The teachers in this study reported that some changes are necessary in order to have more useful results in CLT classes. The implication is that to a certain extent beliefs and practices regarding CLT might be under the influence of contextual factors which, in the context of the present study as reported by the participant teachers, are classroom hours, class size, lack of supplementary materials, teacher training courses for teachers and teachers' attitudes towards the new system. Another limiting contextual factor was revealed to be the discrepancy between what teachers perceive to be crucial for learning English communicatively and what they think is important for preparing the students to take the UEE. The indirect competence-oriented assessment which is now in place in secondary education is not compatible with the direct performance type assessment which is often recommended for measuring the major features of communication. Shifting to performance-based exams seems to be the change in the right direction. However, the teachers may not be ready for this shift as they have not been trained for this type of assessment and the time and facilities for its implementation are not available to them.

The results of the present study are consistent with Borg's (2003) suggestion that contextual factors influence both teacher cognition and practice. Based on Borg's suggestion, we can conclude that

the practices and beliefs of the Iranian high school English teachers can be changed by improving these contextual factors. In other words, listening to teachers' voices and recognizing what conditions they really want to see changed can be instrumentally effective in implementing CLT in Iranian high schools.

The implications of the present study will make more sense if the results are corroborated with further research. Replication and extension of the study are recommended specially because of the limitations of the reported results. The survey results, as frequently mentioned in the literature, need to be complemented with observation of the participants' practice. There are also certain variables like age, experience and level of education of the participants which were not controlled and as a result might have affected the results. Future studies might benefit from controlling the mentioned variables.

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Appendix 1

CLT Questionnaire

This survey is intended to elicit your perceptions of communicative language teaching principles and practices (CLT). The information you provide is considered confidential and will be used for research purposes only. You do not need to mention your name. We truly appreciate your volunteering to cooperate and spend time completing the questionnaire.

Background Information

Please circle the item that best describes your background and current teaching situation. (Check all items that apply.)

Sex:

Male Female

Present Teaching Position:

Junior high school High school

Type of school:

Public Private Other -----

Areas you teach:

Reading Writing Oral communication

Grammar Other -----

Teaching Experience:

1-5 years 6-10 years over 10 years

Experience of living abroad:

None 1-6 months 6-12 months

1-3 years Over 3 years

Your views on CLT principles and practices

Please check the items that apply to you.

1. Had you heard about communicative language teaching (CLT) before?

Yes No

2. Where did you learn about communicative language teaching (CLT)?

Books or journals TESOL seminars/lectures

Teachers' manual Teacher training course

Workshop held by the board of education

University degree program

Workshop held by a teachers' association

Others -----

3. What do you think is important for students in CLT classrooms?

To talk to a native speaker

To acquire native-like pronunciation

To acquire native-like fluency

To acquire native-like accuracy

To communicate effectively in L2

Never to use L1 (Persian)

To collaborate with each other

To enjoy communicating in L2

Others -----

4. What do you think is required for English teachers in CLT classrooms?

To be a native speaker

To have native-like pronunciation

To have native-like fluency

To have native-like accuracy

To provide teaching materials

To be a facilitator

To be a communication model

To be a co-communicator

Other -----

5. What is your definition of "communicative competence"?

6. How often do you use group/pair activities in your lessons?

Never Hardly ever Sometimes

- Often Usually Always
7. Which of the following activities have you used in your lessons?
 Information gap Problem solving
 Discussion Listing/ranking
 Role-play Games
 Other -----
8. Which of the following activities do you think your students prefer?
 Information gap Problem solving discussion
 Listing/ranking Role-play Games
 Other -----
9. Do you think CLT is employed effectively in your school?
 Yes No
10. If no, which of the following factors do you think is the biggest problem?
 Lack of materials for communicative activities
 Lack of teachers' English proficiency
 Curriculum (The Course of Study)
 Textbook Class size
 Number of class hours
 Assessment and evaluation system
 Other -----
11. Do you want to provide your students with more communicative activities? Why?
 Yes No
 Your reasons:
12. What do you think should be changed first in order for you to apply CLT more effectively in your lessons?
13. In your opinion, how important are the following areas for your students to learn English? (Circle the number that best describes the degree of importance that you attach to the item on the left.)

Importance Skill	None	Little	Slight	Somewhat	Important	Very important
Reading	0	1	2	3	4	5
Writing	0	1	2	3	4	5
Listening	0	1	2	3	4	5
Speaking	0	1	2	3	4	5
Grammar	0	1	2	3	4	5
Vocabulary	0	1	2	3	4	5

14. In your opinion, how important are the following areas for your students to pass university entrance examinations?

Importance Skill	None	Little	Slight	Somewhat	Important	Very important
Reading	0	1	2	3	4	5
Writing	0	1	2	3	4	5
Listening	0	1	2	3	4	5
Speaking	0	1	2	3	4	5
Grammar	0	1	2	3	4	5
Vocabulary	0	1	2	3	4	5