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Enhancing Oral Proficiency and Confidence through Communicative Language Teaching: A Case Study in a Chinese Secondary ESL Classroom

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Abstract

This study used mixed methods within a 12-week classroom action research framework to explore changes in oral proficiency and speaking confidence during a Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) intervention at Q Middle School in Jiangsu Province, China. Thirty-five Year 12 learners of English as a foreign language participated in role-plays, simulations, group discussions, information-gap activities, language games, and presentations integrated into the regular curriculum. Pre- and post-intervention speaking assessments and questionnaires were combined with classroom observations, reflective notes, and interviews with ten students. The reported mean speaking score increased from 6.41 to 11.13 out of 16, with the largest gains in interactional competence and fluency and coherence. Questionnaire responses indicated greater willingness to communicate and lower classroom speaking anxiety, while student accounts suggested greater speaking confidence. The reported baseline confidence mean requires verification. Observations and interviews suggested that structured peer interaction, defined learner roles, and delayed feedback supported participation. These results describe changes within one class; they do not establish statistical significance or isolate the effects of CLT from other influences. The study offers practical insights into adapting communicative activities to an examination-oriented senior secondary-school context, while highlighting the need for clearer measurement documentation and further research on the durability of the reported gains.

Keywords

Communicative Language Teaching, Oral Proficiency, Speaking Confidence,

Action Research, English as a Foreign Language

1. Introduction

Oral proficiency and willingness to communicate are relevant to learners' participation in classroom interaction. In institutional contexts that are exam-oriented, speaking skills are often sidelined in favour of structural grammar, reading and writing.

An emphasis on grammar, reading, and writing may leave limited classroom time for practising spoken communication. Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) offers a framework for addressing this gap in EFL instruction by emphasizing meaningful interaction through purposeful tasks.

In view of this, the present research studied the implementation of CLT techniques in a Chinese secondary EFL context in Q Middle School Jiangsu Province. The study looked into the feasibility of CLT in an exam-oriented context by investigating how task-based communicative activities affect learners' spoken performance and confidence. Eventually, this work documented the contextualization of CLT through classroom action and reflection, which was fit to develop oral expression and students' willingness to communicate.

1.1. Background and Problem Statement

CLT has influenced language teaching through its emphasis on functional interaction and learner participation. Its implementation nevertheless varies with assessment requirements, resources, classroom routines, and teacher preparation. Hu (2005a) identified regional differences in instructional practices in Chinese secondary education and related these differences to economic, social, and cultural conditions. His analysis supports examining local teaching conditions rather than treating Chinese English classrooms as a uniform setting. Hu (2005b) also reviewed the development of basic English education in China and the policy efforts and practical problems associated with its expansion.

Comparable tensions have been documented in other educational settings. Nishino and Watanabe (2008) discussed the gap between communication-oriented policies and classroom realities in Japan, while Abe (2013) examined learners' experiences of communicative approaches there. Li (1998) investigated South Korean teachers' perceived difficulties in introducing the communicative approach, including difficulties related to teachers, students, educational systems, and CLT itself. In Türkiye, Coşkun (2011) identified discrepancies between teachers' stated attitudes and classroom practices, with large classes, grammar-based examinations, and preparation time among the reported constraints. These studies establish the relevance of contextual adaptation; they do not imply that communicative teaching is impossible in examination-oriented schools.

These cross-contextual patterns collectively revealed that prior CLT mandates

will often succumb to entrenched assessment countries, resource limits and affective barriers. Nonetheless, together with this evidence, it was found that when communication strategies were adapted to the context through group work, structured speaking tasks and classes, the students improved in fluency and confidence. The classroom observations at Jiangsu province's Q Middle School, students were found to be overly focused on preparing for tests, so they had minimal opportunities to do communicative activities. Due to the exam pressure and increased cultural tendency to avoid making mistakes in public, many students are less willing to speak English before their peers.

These two conditions demonstrate the urgent need for strategies informed by CLT that increases oral confidence while appearing to be possible in a teacher-based examination environment. Locating Q Middle School in the world context, this paper suggests the adaptation of CLT techniques and practices to enhance the oral proficiency of the higher-level students in Chinese secondary school.

1.2. Problem Statement

In most public Chinese schools, senior secondary English is mainly conducted in standardized examination-based and teacher-centered practices as opposed to communicative competence promoted by curriculum reform.

As a result, the chances for Year 12 students to engage in longer talks are quite limited. Moreover, they have low willingness to communicate, and they also lack oral confidence and fluency. While CLT offers widely-known practices for improving speaking skills, there is a large gap between CLT ideas and classroom action; teachers lack training, lesson plans are stymied by high-stakes assessment demands, and context-relevant adaptations of CLT that are not only helpful to boost oral proficiency but also appropriate to exam-related schedules. This paper analyses some CLT-informed teaching procedures to enhance oral confidence and spoken proficiency of Q students under the constraints imposed by a regular Chinese secondary school in an attempt to fill that gap.

1.3. Research Questions

The study aimed to implement contextually appropriate CLT strategies and examine changes in students' oral proficiency and speaking confidence. It also considered how teaching practices could be adjusted in response to classroom observations. Two questions guided the inquiry:

1) What changes in oral proficiency and speaking confidence were observed during the CLT intervention?

2) How were CLT activities adapted to support communication in an examination-oriented secondary-school classroom?

1.4. Definition of Terms

1.4.1. Communicative Language Teaching (CLT)

The Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) introduced a more functional and

real-life use of language through interaction than mechanical structural practice. Based on this framework, learners were positioned to negotiate meaning and engage in real-life communicative events, applying the knowledge gained and not simply repeating sentences or grammatical rules (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). In order to foster communicative competence, referring to the ability to use language appropriately in different social settings, CLT classrooms employed communicative tasks such as gaps, role-plays and student collaboration (Hymes, 1972; Littlewood, 2014).

1.4.2. Oral English Skills

The spoken English competencies were defined as the ability of the learner to employ oral language in different contexts. One of the key competencies is communicating effectively in various dimensions of language such as phonology, verbal fluency, structural accuracy, lexical range, turn-taking, clarifying, and negotiating meaning (Brown, 2004). In this study, oral proficiency encompasses the ability to produce connected speech and to participate appropriately in classroom interaction.

1.4.3. English as a Foreign Language (EFL)

English as a Foreign Language (EFL) refers to the learning and use of English in a setting where English is not the principal language of everyday communication (Richards & Schmidt, 2010). In this study, EFL describes Year 12 students learning English as a curriculum subject at Q Middle School in Jiangsu Province, China. The focus is on their oral proficiency and confidence when using English for communicative classroom activities.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Theoretical Foundations and Evolution of CLT

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) in the 1970s came into existence due to this new perspective concerning language as a medium of genuine communication. Based on Hymes's (1972) idea of communicative competence, CLT posits that language is fundamentally social and functional. It is guided by meaning-cantered instruction (language as an instrument for communicating meaning), prioritizing authentic content and fluency over rote forms. The emphasis is not on grammar and precision, but grammar and accuracy are taught for the sake of communication with the Communicative Competence Theory focuses on the role of skills in successful language learning, including the correct use of the foreign language grammar as well as the use of language in a correct way. Canale and Swain (1980) proposed a framework comprising grammatical, sociolinguistic, and strategic competence. Their account of sociolinguistic competence included sociocultural rules of use and rules of discourse. Oral proficiency in this study is directly interrelated with communicative competence, and more specifically, to discourse and strategic competence, that is to say to be able to produce coherent spoken language and manage communication breakdowns. CLT is based primarily

on this theory because it is based on a perspective of communication in which meaningful interaction, real-life communication tasks, and learner involvement are prioritized. At present, by using role play tasks, engaging in group discussion and other activities, as well as doing activities to learn through solving problems, CLT helps students practice speaking English in authentic contexts, and therefore develop oral proficiency. This was where communicative competence theory comes into play, as it explains why CLT is the best language-based approach for improving students' oral proficiency, as both emphasize the impact of purposeful use of language as opposed to form memorization.

CLT has been adopted worldwide with the aim of boosting oral communication. For example, in South Korea CLT was introduced in the mid-1990s (the 6th National Curriculum, 1995) to emphasize fluency and authentic communication. In Japan, curriculum policy increasingly emphasized oral communication through the Courses of Study discussed by Nishino and Watanabe (2008), including the 1989 and 1999 documents and the 2003 action plan. Vietnam and Türkiye have likewise explored CLT to counteract the traditional grammar-focus. In Vietnam, the national curriculum's grammar-heavy focus is cited as a barrier to communication, and CLT has been proposed as a solution to improve students' oral fluency. Turkish educators have introduced CLT and related methods (e.g. task-based learning) to raise student speaking confidence; studies note that CLT activities (even combined with Total Physical Response) can significantly reduce speaking anxiety and enhance fluency. In general, international research finds that CLT-oriented classes tend to yield better spoken English proficiency than lecture-based ones, when fully implemented. These improvements are often reported across contexts when students have ample practice with pair/group work, authentic materials, and emphasis on meaning over form. Abe (2013) notes that Japanese curriculum revisions placed greater emphasis on oral communication and encouraged wider use of CLT methodology. Early CLT-driven reforms (e.g. 1993 Course of Study) aimed to improve oral skills but classroom studies still find limited speaking practice, prompting calls for more focus on student-led, communicative activities. Watson (2021) reports that Korea began CLT reforms around 1995, yet "traditional methods … are still in wide use." When CLT activities are used (especially in listening/speaking classes), Korean students show greater engagement and communicative ability. However, many teachers still default to grammar-translation. Comparative studies highlight that where Korean EFL classrooms implement CLT tasks (discussion, role-play), students' speaking proficiency improves but these gains are uneven due to systemic.

2.2. Common Barriers to CLT in EFL Contexts

Though policy support exists within several countries, there are similar challenges hindering CLT's effect on speech. Examination pressure is a major barrier. Most high-stakes national tests (e.g. university entrance examinations) test grammar and reading more than oral communication, thus creating a washback effect that

discourages CLT. For example, Korean students and teachers see the subject English as "little more than another subject…to study for examinations" (Watson, 2021) leading teachers to teach reading and grammar, not speaking. Japanese educators likewise note that an entrenched exam-driven system (continuing older grammar-translation methods) leaves little room for speaking practice. In China, CLT-oriented reforms have been undermined by Gaokao demands: classrooms emphasize writing and translation while students' oral fluency remains weak (a phenomenon called "dumb English").

Teachers often lack the training or confidence to conduct communicative classes. Korean studies report that many EFL teachers are grammatically strong but feel inadequate in spoken English, so they shy away from using English in class (especially given a cultural aversion to "losing face"). Similarly, in Japan many teachers have limited oral skills, making them reluctant to run CLT activity. East Asian contexts, Confucian classroom practices (respect for authority, student reticence) can conflict with the CLT focus on student talk. For example, both Korean and Japanese learners often expect teacher-led lessons, making group discussions feel foreign. Studies point out that saving face and avoiding embarrassment can prevent students from speaking freely, particularly when errors are harshly corrected (which is common in traditional schooling). Overcoming these attitudes generally requires culturally sensitive adaptation of CLT. A common problem around the world facing most developing countries is overcrowded classrooms with limited resources. In a survey of 75 Iranian secondary-school teachers, Anani Sarab et al. (2016) identified class size, limited class hours, and insufficient materials among the perceived obstacles to implementing CLT. Chinese educators also report that heavy textbooks and many students leave little time for conversation practice. Oral practice is often forced out of the schedule, without smaller classes or additional speaking labs to fill the space.

2.3. CLT in Chinese Senior Secondary Education

Communication has had increasing emphasis in Chinese education since the 1990s to a certain degree. Government publications, such as the 2001 curriculum standards and the 2007 revised standards, openly promote communication activities and "active participation". The 2014 reform ("Implementation Opinions on Examination and Enrollment System Reform") focused on the change in examination. China's Standards of English Language Ability, released in 2018, subsequently provided descriptors across nine proficiency levels, including oral language production. In short, policy-makers repeatedly stress that secondary English teaching should cultivate students' speaking ability.

Evidence from Chinese secondary education suggests that the adoption of CLT varies with local conditions. In a questionnaire study of secondary school graduates from different parts of China, Hu (2005a) found that instructional practices in more developed regions incorporated some communicative features, whereas those in less developed regions remained more traditional. The study related these

differences to economic, social, and cultural conditions. These findings suggest that implementing communicative activities requires attention to the particular curriculum and classroom conditions in which teaching takes place.

Chinese students usually show positive attitudes toward speaking practices. However, many feel unprepared. Many graduates have "dumb English" due to exam English (grammar/vocabulary drills). They are good readers but poor users of English. The limited class time, large class size and students' weak background knowledge are cited by teachers as constraints that make CLT not applicable. Interview data suggest when communicative tasks are used, students enjoy but there is a challenge in executing them.

2.4. Effective CLT Strategies and Adaptations

Teacher training and ongoing support are essential for implementing CLT. Research shows that targeted CLT workshops, coaching, and in-service programs bolster teachers' confidence in spoken English and their use of interactive lessons. Teacher development should address both communicative proficiency and practical ways of adapting classroom tasks. In South Korea, teachers have reported difficulties related to their own preparation and to the institutional conditions for introducing communicative teaching (Li, 1998). Targeted training can provide an opportunity for teachers to explore how to apply test materials (e.g. grammar/vocabulary) to communicative tasks, and mitigate the fears of low students' performance in such assessments.

Task-based and authentic activities can connect examination preparation with meaningful language use. Shifting the curriculum toward task-based learning can help tailor CLT to communicative experience. Research suggests embedding exam objectives into authentic tasks: for example, with role-plays for those same skills that need to be practiced before the exam, or switching textbook dialogues into interviews led by students. Activities that include an "information gap" or problem-solving component (e.g. designing a project) encourage students to access English spontaneously. For this intervention, textbook content was adapted into role-plays, interviews, and information-gap tasks intended to give students a meaningful reason to exchange information. Participation was then examined through classroom observations.

A focus on fluency requires teachers to respond selectively to learners' errors. In communicative lessons, teachers deliberately refrain from constant correction to encourage risk-taking. CLT's principle of tolerating error (to avoid hampering fluency) is especially important in exam-driven environments by modelling peer feedback or delayed correction, teachers help students build confidence in speaking.

Pair and group work can create opportunities for communication in large classes. Even large classes can be made communicative by dividing students into small groups or pairs. Teachers assign roles and use cooperative learning so that every student must speak. For example, in a class of 50, one effective strategy is "jigsaw"

speaking tasks or debates where each group prepares a portion of the content. This ensures that even timid students have a speaking role. Such grouping maximizes practice time and reduces silence. Koenig (2014: p. 103) describes a teacher's account of a festival-planning task in which students discussed how to organise a celebration and then wrote about it. This classroom illustration suggests a way to connect communicative activity with writing, but it does not establish an intervention effect. Similar approaches have improved speaking confidence in Turkish and Vietnamese classes as well. Such approaches intensive teacher preparation, task-based curricula, tolerant error correction, cooperative learning, and cultural adaptation, are all successful strategies. For instance, when CLT is promoted solely as exam preparation, increased communicative activities can have substantial improvement in oral performances (even if exam scores were unaffected). There is a consensus that CLT need not be abandoned due to exams; it just needs to be well contextualized into the local education system where communicative practices are strategically linked to the learners' path of exam achievement, rather than isolated from it.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

The study used a practitioner-led action research design organized around planning, action, observation, and reflection. Action research enables teachers to identify a classroom problem, implement an intervention, document what occurs, and use reflection to guide subsequent teaching (Burns, 2010). This design was selected because the project aimed to improve practice within one class at Q Middle School. It supported incremental adjustments during regular lessons rather than a single fixed treatment delivered independently of classroom conditions (Wallace, 1998).

A mixed-methods approach combined numerical descriptions of change with qualitative accounts of the learning process. Speaking tests and questionnaires provided pre- and post-intervention comparisons. Classroom observations, reflective notes, and semi-structured student interviews provided information about participation, difficulties, and responses to particular activities. The strands were considered together to interpret the classroom changes, following the rationale for integrating quantitative and qualitative evidence described by Creswell and Plano Clark (2018).

The action research sequence began with the identification of limited speaking practice and low confidence. Planning involved selecting tasks and preparing materials connected to the syllabus. During the action phase, students completed communicative activities in regular lessons. Observation documented participation and language use. Reflection focused on what supported or restricted communication and informed adjustments to subsequent tasks. This sequence allowed the teacher-researcher to respond to difficulties such as uneven group participation and concerns about grammatical accuracy. The design involved one intact class

and no comparison group. Consequently, the pre- and post-intervention differences are interpreted as changes observed during the project.

3.2. Setting and Participants

The intervention will take place at Q Middle School, a senior secondary school in Jiangsu Province, China. Q is a public high school that follows the Chinese national curriculum for Year 12 English. Class sizes are typically around 30 - 40 students. As in most Chinese schools, English instruction is exam-oriented, but recent reforms also emphasize communicative competence. The action research will be conducted during regular English class time, supplementing the existing curriculum with additional speaking-oriented activities.

There are thirty-five (35) Year 12 EFL students (about 17 - 18 years old) in one intact class at Q Middle School. The class included boys and girls with varying levels of English proficiency, most of whom were at an intermediate level relative to upper secondary expectations. The students' English teacher is the teacher-researcher. Formal informed consent was obtained from parents or legal guardians, along with student assent. To maintain anonymity, all data will be reported in the standard pseudonym or same as codes. Both the overall study and the CLT teaching intervention lasted 12 weeks. The baseline assessment was conducted in Week 1, and the post-intervention assessment was conducted in Week 12. Communicative activities were integrated into regular English lessons throughout the intervention and supplemented the existing curriculum. Their progression is described below.

3.3. Preparation and Intervention

3.3.1. Preparation

Preparation involved baseline assessment, review of the speaking tasks and questionnaire, and development of teaching materials. The baseline speaking assessment used an individual monologue and a paired interaction task to elicit oral performance on familiar topics, including self-introduction, daily routines, memorable experiences, and short-trip planning. These tasks were intended to balance relevance to students' classroom experience with opportunities to observe fluency and interaction. Recordings were identified by participant codes rather than names.

The questionnaire asked about speaking confidence, willingness to communicate, and classroom speaking anxiety. It included positively worded confidence statements and negatively worded anxiety statements on a five-point response scale. A pilot involving students was used to review the tasks and questionnaire, and rubric descriptors were discussed by the teacher-researcher and an external rater.

Teaching preparation included role cards, information-gap worksheets, group arrangements, and simplified task instructions. Students were introduced to participation expectations and supportive feedback. The purpose was to make the

new routines manageable during early lessons, particularly for learners who were reluctant to speak publicly. Materials drew on the regular curriculum so that oral practice could use vocabulary and structures relevant to ongoing lessons. Within the 12-week study, CLT activities were incorporated into three to five English lessons per week, each lasting 40 minutes. During Weeks 2 - 3, the reported per-lesson allocation included approximately 30 minutes of teacher talk and 5 minutes of feedback. Each student had one or two speaking opportunities per lesson, with less than 5 minutes of individual speaking time. During Weeks 4 - 12, the reported allocation was approximately 15 minutes of teacher talk, 22 minutes for the student speaking component, and 5 minutes of feedback per lesson. These activity times are approximate estimates that varied with classroom activity, rather than an exact additive division of the 40-minute period. The 22-minute estimate refers to the speaking component and does not establish that every student spoke continuously for that duration.

3.3.2. Warm-Up Activities and Interactive Oral Tasks

Short warm-up activities began lessons and encouraged students to switch to English in a relatively low-pressure setting. Students shared brief descriptions of familiar experiences, such as what they were doing, eating, or listening to. These contributions were less demanding than extended presentations and were intended to help students begin speaking before undertaking more complex activities. The activities provided opportunities to practice familiar language without requiring a lengthy prepared performance.

Students then completed oral tasks in pairs or small groups. Role-play scenarios included ordering food, asking for directions, interviewing another student, and introducing an object as a tour guide. Learners took roles such as customer, restaurant owner, interviewer, or interviewee and practiced exchanges appropriate to each situation. These were simulated classroom situations rather than observations of communication outside school. Their purpose was to create meaningful speaking requirements within the lesson.

Collaborative storytelling provided another form of interaction. Students contributed sentences in sequence to construct a shared story. This activity required listening to previous contributions and formulating a related response. Pair and small-group formats were used to reduce the pressure of addressing the whole class and to provide more occasions for learner contributions. The teacher-researcher monitored participation and noted difficulties for subsequent reflection.

Information-gap tasks included maps, schedule coordination, and picture-difference activities. Each learner held only part of the information needed to complete the task and had to obtain the remaining information through interaction. Clear instructions and useful language frames supported the exchanges. These tasks were intended to make English a means of completing a shared goal, while providing opportunities to ask questions, clarify meaning, and respond to a partner.

3.3.3. Language Games and Presentations

Interactive language games were incorporated to encourage spontaneous speech and vocabulary use. In one activity, a student described a word without naming it, and classmates attempted to identify it. The activity gave the speaker a reason to explain meaning and gave listeners a reason to respond. Games were connected to lesson content rather than treated as separate entertainment. The teacher-researcher used observations of participation to assess whether the activities involved quieter students as well as confident speakers.

Presentations became progressively more demanding. Students began with short self-introductions and descriptions of familiar objects or concepts. They then described interests, hobbies, or favorite songs in several sentences, focusing on clarity and basic grammatical accuracy. Later, groups selected a topic and prepared a brief presentation with opportunities for peer questions. The progression was intended to move students from short prepared contributions toward longer and more interactive use of English.

Project work included planning a school cultural festival, producing a hometown tourist guide, or preparing an environmental awareness campaign. Group presentations lasted three to five minutes and were followed by a short question-and-answer session. Students took roles such as moderator, researcher, presenter, and timekeeper. These responsibilities were intended to distribute participation, while the teacher-researcher monitored whether individual students contributed. Assigning a role did not by itself demonstrate that participation was equal.

The intervention connected task content to the vocabulary, reading themes, and language structures in the textbook. This alignment addressed concerns that speaking activities might divert time from examination preparation. The project did not report written examination scores, so alignment with the syllabus should be understood as an implementation strategy rather than evidence that the intervention preserved or improved examination performance.

3.3.4. Observation and Adjustment

The teacher-researcher adjusted the activities in response to classroom observations. During initial open discussions, quieter and lower-proficiency students participated less, while several more confident learners dominated. Subsequent tasks therefore used clearer assignments and more structured roles, including information holder and timekeeper. The intention was to give students a specific communicative responsibility rather than rely on unrestricted discussion alone.

The teacher-researcher also noted increased classroom noise and grammatical inaccuracies as students began to speak more. Delayed feedback was introduced: recurring errors were noted during an activity and discussed afterward instead of repeatedly interrupting the exchange. This was a change in feedback timing, not the abandonment of correction. The adjustment illustrates how the action research process responded to tensions between encouraging fluency and supporting accuracy.

3.4. Data Collection and Instruments

3.4.1. Speaking Assessments

Pre- and post-intervention speaking assessments were used to describe changes in oral performance. In the individual task, students received a short prompt, approximately one minute of preparation, and one and a half to two minutes to speak. Topics included self-introduction, a memorable day, and hobbies. Paired tasks used complementary information to require an exchange toward a common goal. The post-test was intended to be comparable to the pre-test in format and difficulty.

Recorded performances were scored in four domains, each from 0 to 4, producing a maximum composite score of 16. The domains were fluency and coherence, lexical resource, grammatical accuracy and vocabulary use, and interactional competence. The rubric was intended to capture both the quality of spoken language and the ability to maintain an exchange. Lexical resource assessed the breadth, variety, range, and precision of students' vocabulary, including topic-related vocabulary, synonym use, and paraphrasing to overcome lexical gaps. Grammatical accuracy and vocabulary use assessed sentence completeness, grammatical correctness, and the structural and functional use of words within sentences, including tense, singular and plural forms, subject-verb agreement, and collocational correctness within grammatical frames. The intended distinction was between the range and selection of lexical resources and their grammatically appropriate deployment. Rubric 1 presents the score-level descriptions, organised by

Rubric 1. Score-level descriptors for the speaking assessment.

Score and level	Fluency and coherence	Lexical resource	Grammatical accuracy and vocabulary use	Interactional competence
4 Excellent	Fluent speech with very few pauses.	Rich and precise vocabulary.	Error-free grammatical structures.	Active, natural interaction
3 Good	Generally fluent speech with occasional pauses.	Appropriate vocabulary.	Generally correct grammar, with minor errors that do not affect meaning.	Responds well during interaction.
2 Satisfactory	Some fluency, with relatively frequent pauses.	Limited vocabulary.	Numerous grammatical errors that sometimes affect meaning.	Requires guidance to maintain interaction.
1 Needs Improvement	Poor fluency, with long pauses.	Extremely limited vocabulary.	Frequent grammatical errors that make meaning unclear.	Very little interaction or delayed responses.
0 Not Attempted/Very Poor	Shared descriptor: Unable to produce clear speech; no actual communication or interaction.			

Note. The domain labels are retained from the assessment. The score-level descriptions concern fluency, vocabulary, grammatical accuracy, and interaction; they do not provide separate coherence criteria or level-specific rules for collocational correctness. The band-0 description is stated globally rather than separately for each domain. Potential overlap between lexical precision and collocational correctness remains a measurement limitation.

the four domains. However, lexical precision and collocational correctness may intersect, and the level descriptions do not specify how potential overlap was resolved. The two vocabulary-related domain scores should therefore not be interpreted as independent measures of lexical development.

3.4.2. Questionnaire

The questionnaire collected students' perceptions of speaking confidence, willingness to communicate, and classroom oral anxiety. It complemented the speaking assessments by addressing experiences that a performance score alone could not describe. The rationale for attending to these affective dimensions draws on work on language anxiety and willingness to communicate (Horwitz, 2001; MacIntyre et al., 1998). The instrument was administered before and after the intervention.

The results report three statements on a five-point scale. They concern confidence during speaking activities, willingness to initiate conversations with peers, and anxiety or fear of errors in class. Higher values on the confidence and willingness items indicate more positive responses; higher values on the anxiety item indicate more anxiety. The anxiety item is therefore reported in its original direction in **Table 2**. For the confidence statement, responses were coded from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) and summarised as the unweighted arithmetic mean of that single item, rather than as an average across multiple statements. The displayed baseline confidence mean was attributed in a subsequent scoring clarification to truncation to two decimal places. The original response total and calculation formula were not available to verify that explanation, which is not assumed to apply to the other reported means.

3.4.3. Classroom Observations and Reflective Notes

Classroom observation documented speaking behavior, participation patterns, and responses during the CLT activities. The teacher-researcher used tracking logs, checklist notes, and reflective field notes to record how tasks unfolded in regular lessons. Attention was given to hesitation, sustained exchanges, turn-taking, and students' responses to peer questions. These observations provided contextual information for interpreting the speaking-test and questionnaire results.

Reflective notes recorded teaching decisions and difficulties encountered during implementation. They were used to consider why some tasks encouraged participation while others left quieter learners less involved. These notes also documented adjustments to role allocation and feedback. Because the teacher-researcher both implemented and observed the intervention, the notes are treated as a practitioner's account rather than independent verification of classroom behavior.

3.4.4. Student Interviews

Semi-structured interviews with a sample of ten students explored their experiences of the activities, speaking confidence, anxiety, motivation, and perceived progress. Interviews provided opportunities to explain responses that could not

be interpreted fully from questionnaire means. The use of semi-structured questions also allowed discussion of difficulties with particular tasks and of differences between speaking to a partner and speaking before the class (Dörnyei, 2007; Patton, 2015).

The interviews were considered alongside classroom observations and assessment trends. Student statements are identified by codes. The findings distinguish a direct quotation from paraphrased accounts of students' experiences.

"*I m scared to speak English because I fear making mistakes. I don't want to be wrong in front of the class*." This saying was coded as "*fear of making mistakes*," and then associated with the theme of Confidence Development. This student's levels of engagement in oral tasks following involvement in CLT-related activities such as pair discussion and role play were gradually increased in later phases of the course, indicating that anxiety levels gradually attenuated. This result was supported by a student's interviewee, as well as a class observation of this student who more frequently participated in pair or group discussion. Thematic analysis will be used for data analysing to look at patterns found in the data and its associated meaning and how it is consistent with the study questions. This is in line with qualitative research methodology that examines students' sense of self-consciousness, classroom and the influence of CLT-derived teaching methods. The aim was to identify themes related to speaking confidence, learning experiences, and communicative task effectiveness, and to interpret students' experiences during the intervention.

3.5. Ethical Considerations

"Prior to the study, ethical clearance was obtained from the institutional ethics committee and the administration of Q Middle School." Since all the students who participated in the study were minors, we obtained formal informed consent from the students' parents or legal guardians, along with student assent. Before classroom data collection, the participants were informed about the purpose and nature of the study.

Secondly, participation and anonymity were voluntary. Participation was completely voluntary throughout the research. Students and their guardians were told that they could opt-out of the study at any time without any consequences. In order to preserve confidentiality, identities were maintained through the use of pseudonyms and unique numerical identifiers in all.

In addition, data collection was incorporated into everyday classroom activities, in order not to disrupt instruction. All media recordings and written transcripts were password-protected, and paper materials were locked up in cupboards. The researchers destroyed all raw data once the data was analyzed and the report was made to ensure the integrity and validity of the research.

4. Data Analysis and Findings

The analysis addressed the two research questions by examining changes in oral

proficiency and speaking confidence, followed by the classroom adaptations used to support communication. Evidence came from the speaking assessments, questionnaire responses, classroom observations, reflective notes, and interviews with ten students. The findings concern the 35 Year 12 students who participated in the 12-week intervention at Q Middle School.

4.1. Data Analysis Procedures

4.1.1. Quantitative Analysis

The Week 1 and Week 12 speaking assessments were compared using descriptive statistics. Two English teachers rated the recorded monologues and paired interactions, and their ratings were averaged. The analysis retained the four rubric domains described in Section 3.4.1, each scored from 0 to 4, and the composite score out of 16. For each domain, the mean gain was calculated by subtracting the pre-test mean from the post-test mean.

Questionnaire responses were analysed separately for the three statements reported in Section 3.4.2. The analysis compared the pre- and post-intervention means and calculated the difference in scale points for each item. Higher scores indicated greater confidence and willingness to communicate on the two positively worded statements. The anxiety item retained its original direction, so a lower mean indicated less reported anxiety. The items were interpreted individually rather than combined into an overall psychological score.

The numerical analysis describes the direction and magnitude of changes within this class. No inferential test is reported, and the differences are therefore not described as statistically significant. Classroom tracking logs were also examined for changes in speaking opportunities and participation. These observations are presented alongside the assessment results as contextual evidence of how students used English during lessons.

4.1.2. Qualitative Analysis and Integration

The qualitative analysis drew on Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis framework. Interview transcripts, observation notes, and the teacher-researcher's reflective journal were read repeatedly to identify comments and episodes relevant to the research questions. Coding focused on students' accounts of speaking and on participation during tasks. For example, an account of being afraid to make an error in front of classmates was coded as fear of making mistakes and considered in relation to the theme of confidence development. Related material was organised around speaking confidence, communicative participation, and the classroom conditions that supported or restricted these changes. The themes were reviewed in relation to the research questions and the accounts and classroom episodes from which they were developed.

The quantitative and qualitative evidence was then considered together. For oral proficiency, rubric changes were compared with observations of hesitation, turn-taking, and responses to peer questions. For confidence and anxiety, questionnaire trends were interpreted alongside students' accounts of speaking to a

partner and speaking before the class. Reflective notes helped connect implementation difficulties with subsequent changes in task design and feedback. This integration follows the rationale for mixed-methods inquiry described by Creswell and Plano Clark (2018). Agreement across sources strengthened the interpretation of a classroom pattern, while the teacher-researcher's involvement and the different purposes of the instruments remained relevant to judging the evidence.

4.2. Changes in Oral Proficiency

4.2.1. Overall Performance and Differences across Domains

The class mean composite speaking score increased from 6.41 in Week 1 to 11.13 in Week 12, a gain of 4.72 points on the 16-point rubric. All four domain means increased, although the size of the change varied considerably. Table 1 presents the pre- and post-intervention means, absolute differences, and relative increases.

Table 1. Pre- and post-intervention speaking assessment means.

Oral Proficiency Criterion	Pre-Test Mean (Max 4.0)	Post-Test Mean (Max 4.0)	Mean Gain Score	Percentage Increase
Oral Fluency & Coherence	1.42	2.86	+1.44	101.4%
Lexical Resource	1.65	2.71	+1.06	64.2%
Grammatical Accuracy & Vocab Use	2.11	2.54	+0.43	20.4%
Interactional Competence	1.23	3.02	+1.79	145.5%
Total Composite Score	**6.41**	**11.13**	**+4.72**	**73.6%**

Note. Each domain was scored from 0 to 4; the composite maximum was 16. Mean gain = Week 12 mean − Week 1 mean. Relative increase = mean gain/Week 1 mean × 100, rounded to one decimal place. Class size: 35.

Interactional competence showed the largest absolute gain, increasing from 1.23 to 3.02, followed by fluency and coherence, which rose from 1.42 to 2.86. These two domains began with the lowest means and accounted for 3.23 of the 4.72 points gained in the composite score. The pattern indicates that the clearest changes concerned maintaining an exchange and producing connected speech. Lexical resource increased from 1.65 to 2.71, whereas grammatical accuracy and vocabulary use increased more modestly, from 2.11 to 2.54.

The absolute gains provide a useful basis for comparing domains because each uses the same 0 - 4 range. Relative increases need additional care: interactional competence had the lowest starting mean, which contributes to its large percentage increase of 145.5%. The post-test profile also shows continuing differences between domains, with grammatical accuracy and vocabulary use remaining below the other three post-test means. Improvement was therefore uneven rather than a uniform advance in every aspect of speaking.

4.2.2. Fluency and Interaction in Classroom Tasks

Classroom observations provided examples consistent with the increases in fluency and interactional competence. Early performances were characterised by

long pauses, short responses, and difficulty sustaining an exchange. Students frequently waited for the teacher's prompt or relied on an isolated word rather than extending a contribution. Such behaviour restricted opportunities to practise responding to another speaker, even when students possessed vocabulary relevant to the topic.

Later information-gap activities required students to obtain information from a partner to complete a map or coordinate a schedule. The observation notes described more sustained exchanges during these activities and during interactive language games. The communicative requirement was specific: students needed to ask for information, listen to the response, and use it to complete the task. This gives a classroom context for the interactional score changes, since successful participation depended on responding to another person rather than delivering a prepared answer alone.

The Week 11 group presentations offered a further example. The teacher-researcher observed students listening to peer questions and formulating responses without relying entirely on their prepared scripts or slides. These episodes suggest a developing capacity to continue speaking when the next contribution was not fully predetermined. They illustrate the assessment pattern without establishing that all students participated equally or that the same performance would occur outside the classroom.

4.2.3. Lexical Development and Continuing Accuracy Difficulties

The increase in lexical resource suggests that students became more able to draw on familiar vocabulary during oral tasks. Role-plays and information-gap activities repeatedly used words and expressions connected to textbook themes, creating occasions to retrieve that language for a communicative purpose. The higher post-test mean is consistent with this emphasis on using available vocabulary in an exchange, although the results do not identify which words were acquired or distinguish new learning from more accessible use of existing knowledge.

Grammatical accuracy and vocabulary use showed the smallest gain, at 0.43 points. Review of the post-test recordings still identified grammatical slips, including errors with third-person singular forms. In the observed examples, students were often able to continue communicating despite these errors. The smaller gain nevertheless identifies an area requiring further attention. Increased readiness to speak did not remove the need for instruction and feedback on language form, and the findings do not support treating fluency gains as evidence of equivalent grammatical development.

4.3. Speaking Confidence and Classroom Anxiety

4.3.1. Questionnaire Results

The reported questionnaire means showed increased willingness to initiate conversations with peers, from 1.54 to 4.11, and reduced anxiety, from 4.37 to 2.03. The reported confidence means were 1.88 at baseline and 3.94 afterward. The confidence statement was a single, unweighted five-point item administered to the

class of 35 students. The baseline display of 1.88 was attributed to two-decimal truncation, which is mathematically possible with 35 integer-valued responses; conventional rounding would not produce that value. However, the item-specific valid-response count, original response total, and calculation formula have not been verified. The confidence comparison is therefore treated as provisional. Table 2 presents the reported values and this qualification.

Table 2. Pre- and post-intervention questionnaire item means.

Survey statement	Week 1 mean	Week 12 mean	Descriptive direction
I feel confident when speaking English during activities.	1.88	3.94	Unverified change†
I am willing to initiate conversations in English with peers.	1.54	4.11	Increase
I feel anxious, nervous, or afraid of making errors in class.	4.37	2.03	Decrease

Note. Responses used a five-point scale. The confidence statement was scored from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) and reported as a single-item, unweighted arithmetic mean. Questionnaires were administered to the class of 35 students at Week 1 and Week 12; item-specific valid-response counts and response totals have not been verified. † The baseline confidence display of 1.88 was attributed to two-decimal truncation rather than conventional rounding. Truncation can produce 1.88 from 35 complete integer-valued responses, but the original response total and calculation formula remain unverified. This explanation is not extended to the other means; no verified confidence gain is reported. Higher confidence and willingness values indicate more positive responses; lower anxiety values indicate less anxiety. All trends are descriptive; no statistical significance test was reported.

Willingness to initiate conversations increased by 2.57 scale points. This reported change is relevant to the intervention's emphasis on learner contributions: students reported becoming more willing to begin an exchange. The decline of 2.34 points on the anxiety item indicates less reported nervousness and fear of errors by the end of the intervention. It does not imply that anxiety disappeared, since the item summarises students' perceptions and the post-intervention mean remained above the lowest scale value. The confidence item requires reconciliation of its baseline mean and response count before its change can be interpreted.

These item-level trends complement the speaking assessments by addressing students' experience of oral participation. They do not establish whether each student's confidence increased alongside that student's test score. The relationship between individual changes in confidence and performance would require an analysis of matched participant-level data.

4.3.2. Student Accounts of Fear and Participation

Student interviews helped explain what classroom speaking had felt like and why some activities were experienced as more manageable. At baseline, Student S07 stated, "*Teacher, I'm not very brave to speak English… I am always afraid that my grammar is wrong and everyone will laugh at me*." The account identifies anticipated peer judgement as a reason for remaining silent. The difficulty involved the social exposure of making an error, alongside uncertainty about linguistic correctness.

In the later interview, S07 described role-plays and interactive games as helping

reduce this fear. Taking on a character during role-play shifted attention toward the situation being enacted and made participation feel less threatening. Student S14 similarly described the information-gap map task as giving a clear reason to speak: the partner needed information that S14 held. S14 also reported feeling less pressure when interacting with one partner than when speaking under the attention of the whole class.

The two accounts point to related but distinguishable features of the activities. Role-play altered how students experienced public performance, while the information gap gave each participant information that mattered to the shared outcome. Pair work also reduced the immediate audience. These accounts suggest that students experienced some speaking tasks as more manageable; the questionnaire separately indicated greater willingness to initiate conversations and less anxiety. The evidence supports a change in students' experience of classroom speaking, rather than a claim that all speaking situations had become equally comfortable.

4.4. Classroom Adaptations Supporting Communication

4.4.1. Structuring Participation through Learner Roles

The early open discussions revealed a difficulty that was less visible in the class mean scores. Several confident students dominated group talk, while quieter and lower-proficiency learners contributed less. Providing time for discussion alone did not ensure that each learner had an identifiable contribution to make. The teacher-researcher therefore introduced clearer instructions and roles, including information holder and timekeeper, to make task responsibilities more explicit.

Information-gap activities gave the information holder a reason to contribute because another student needed that information to proceed. In group projects, responsibilities such as presenter and moderator provided a more organised basis for participation. These adjustments addressed the observed imbalance by making the expected contribution clearer. The finding is that communicative activity required deliberate organisation and monitoring; assigning students to groups did not automatically create balanced interaction.

4.4.2. Adjusting Feedback during Oral Tasks

Around Week 4, increased classroom noise and grammatical errors raised concerns about how to manage communicative work alongside accuracy expectations. The teacher-researcher responded by changing the timing of correction. Recurring errors were noted during the exchange and discussed afterward, allowing students to complete their message before attention returned to language form.

This adjustment retained a place for correction within the lesson while reducing interruptions during speaking. The reflective account links it to the effort to encourage participation without overlooking recurring errors. Students' accounts of reduced pressure are compatible with that intention, but the study did not compare immediate and delayed correction as separate treatments. The contribution of feedback timing therefore remains an interpretation of the classroom process.

4.4.3. Connecting Tasks with the Examination Syllabus

Curriculum alignment was another practical adaptation. The role-plays used in Weeks 4 - 6 and information-gap exercises used in Weeks 7 - 8 drew on textbook vocabulary, reading themes, and language structures. Speaking tasks could therefore be incorporated into regular lessons through content already relevant to students' coursework. This addressed the teacher-researcher's concern that communicative practice might appear disconnected from examination preparation.

The implementation evidence supports the feasibility of incorporating these activities into this class over 12 weeks. It also identifies the work needed to make them manageable: preparing purposeful tasks, distributing responsibilities, and adjusting feedback in response to student participation. Written examination results were not an outcome of the study, so curriculum alignment cannot establish that examination performance was maintained or improved.

Taken together, the findings answer the first research question through higher mean speaking scores and more positive self-reported experiences of participation. They answer the second through the documented adjustments to learner roles, feedback, and syllabus content. The classroom changes involved both students' responses and the teacher-researcher's continuing revision of practice.

5. Discussion

5.1. Communicative Practice and Uneven Speaking Development

The strongest speaking gains occurred in interactional competence and fluency and coherence. This pattern is consistent with an intervention that repeatedly required learners to exchange information, respond to partners, and maintain a shared activity. Hymes's (1972) account of communicative competence directs attention to the appropriate use of language in social interaction, while Littlewood (2014) discusses the continuing development of communication-oriented teaching. In this study, classroom tasks provided opportunities to use familiar language for a purpose that extended beyond reproducing a correct sentence. The observations of peer questions and unscripted responses illustrate the kinds of performance to which the rubric changes relate.

The smaller gain in grammatical accuracy qualifies this interpretation. Meaningful practice may create opportunities to retrieve and use language, but the results do not show that communicative participation develops all aspects of proficiency at the same rate. Continuing errors in the recordings suggest a need to connect later feedback with the difficulties encountered during tasks. This is compatible with the place of communicative practice within broader approaches to language teaching discussed by Richards and Rodgers (2014). The practical issue is how to sustain an exchange while giving learners opportunities to notice and work on recurring problems.

5.2. Confidence as a Response to Classroom Conditions

The confidence and anxiety findings can be interpreted through MacIntyre et al.'s

(1998) model of willingness to communicate, which situates the decision to speak within a combination of personal and situational influences. S07's concern about classmates laughing and S14's preference for a single partner show why the immediate speaking situation mattered. Participation could become more manageable when learners had a clear purpose, a smaller audience, and a contribution their partner needed. The reported willingness and anxiety changes are consistent with these accounts of reduced social pressure.

Horwitz (2001) also establishes the relevance of language anxiety to achievement, but the present study did not test a causal pathway between reduced anxiety and better speaking performance. More successful exchanges may have supported confidence, while greater willingness to speak may have created additional practice opportunities. Both processes are plausible interpretations of the concurrent changes. Their relative contribution cannot be separated using the class means and illustrative interviews reported here.

5.3. Adapting CLT within an Examination-Oriented Classroom

The implementation findings place contextual adaptation at the centre of the intervention. Hu (2005a, 2005b) examined how conditions within Chinese education shape English teaching, while Li (1998) and Nishino and Watanabe (2008) identified difficulties in introducing communicative approaches in South Korea and Japan. These accounts provide a basis for considering the institutional demands surrounding classroom change. They should not be read as establishing that CLT is inherently incompatible with secondary education.

At Q Middle School, the teacher-researcher addressed practical difficulties through structured responsibilities, delayed feedback, and task content connected to the existing syllabus. The early imbalance in group talk is especially instructive: increasing learner autonomy required support for students who were less ready to participate. Coşkun's (2011) investigation of teachers' attitudes and classroom practices likewise draws attention to the conditions under which communicative principles are enacted. The present case contributes a local account of how those principles were adjusted during teaching.

The action research process made these adjustments part of the inquiry. Observation of uneven participation led to revised roles, and concerns about accuracy led to changes in feedback timing. This use of reflection to guide subsequent action is consistent with Burns (2010). The educational contribution lies in documenting the connection between an observed classroom difficulty and a practical response. Whether the same responses would work in other classes, or support written examination outcomes, requires further investigation.

6. Conclusion and Implications

6.1. Conclusion

Analysis of the 12-week data indicated changes in classroom speaking participation. The primary purpose of the research was to find out whether a contextually

designed CLT could help enhance the spoken English and confidence of 35 senior high students of Q Middle School. Quantitative and qualitative findings indicated higher speaking scores and more positive self-reported experiences of classroom participation by Week 12. The mean composite speaking score increased from 6.41 to 11.13 out of 16, a relative increase of 73.6%. Interactional competence and fluency and coherence increased by 145.5% and 101.4%, respectively. Classroom observations described a shift from brief responses and long pauses in Week 1 toward more sustained peer exchanges later in the intervention. The mean anxiety score decreased from 4.37 to 2.03 on the five-point scale. Classroom observations and student accounts were consistent with the descriptive speaking-score changes and with reports of greater willingness to participate. This agreement across sources does not rule out chance or establish that CLT caused the observed changes.

The study also identified how communicative practice was adapted during implementation. Clearer learner roles addressed uneven participation, delayed feedback allowed exchanges to continue before recurring errors were discussed, and textbook content connected oral tasks with regular coursework. The findings suggest that introducing communicative activities requires continuing attention to how learners participate and how speaking fits existing teaching demands.

6.2. Implications for Teaching

Teachers working under similar constraints can begin with short pair tasks built around current lesson content and a clear communicative outcome. Information gaps can give each learner a contribution that a partner needs, while role-play can offer a manageable context for practising familiar language. Responsibilities should include opportunities to speak, and teachers should monitor individual contributions rather than assume that group activity involves everyone equally.

Feedback can be organised to preserve time for interaction and subsequent attention to accuracy. Teachers can note recurring problems during a task and return to them afterward, using those observations to plan further practice. The relatively modest accuracy gain in this study makes that follow-up particularly relevant. At school level, shared task materials and opportunities for teachers to review classroom experience could support implementation. The present results provide a rationale for further classroom trials rather than a basis for prescribing examination reform.

6.3. Limitations and Future Research

The study involved one intact class, no comparison group, and a 12-week period without follow-up assessment. Regular instruction, familiarity with the assessment format, and the novelty of the activities may have contributed to the changes. The reported means do not show the distribution of individual gains, and inferential statistics are not available. Averaging two teachers' ratings does not establish inter-rater reliability; a documented measure of agreement would strengthen confi-

dence in the speaking scores.

Questionnaire and interview responses may also have been influenced by the teacher-researcher's position. The qualitative accounts provide useful explanations of classroom experience, but the illustrative statements do not establish how common each experience was among all participants. In addition, written examination scores were not collected as a reported outcome, so the effects on examination performance remain unknown.

Future research could follow students across a longer period, add delayed assessments, and examine individual patterns of change using clearly documented scoring and response procedures. Studies involving additional classes and independent assessment would help evaluate the consistency of the findings. Collecting both oral and written outcomes would also allow a more direct examination of how communicative practice relates to examination preparation in senior secondary education.

Author Contributions

Conceptualization, Chengwen Si and Jiaohan Li; methodology, Chengwen Si; software, Chengwen Si; validation, Chengwen Si and Jiaohan Li; formal analysis, Chengwen Si.; investigation, Chengwen Si; resources, Chengwen Si; data curation, Chengwen Si.; writing—original draft preparation, Chengwen Si; writing—review and editing, Jiaohan Li; visualization, Chengwen Si; supervision, Chengwen Si; project administration, Chengwen Si; funding acquisition, Jiaohan Li. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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