Original Paper

Research Trends in Communicative Language Teaching: A Bibliometric Analysis from 2014 to 2023

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Abstract

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) is an approach to language education that prioritizes communication as the core of language learning. Since its emergence in the 1970s, it has garnered significant attention from linguists and language educators. This study aims to reveal the current status and trends of CLT-related research, thereby contributing to its ongoing development. Through a bibliometric analysis using the RStudio Biblioshiny tool, 649 documents on CLT from the Web of Science Core Collection, spanning from 2013 to 2024 were examined. Various aspects such as the number of publications, publication venues, corresponding authors' countries, the most cited documents, and frequently explored topics were analyzed. The findings suggest avenues for further exploration, including the interdisciplinary development of CLT, its application in languages beyond English, and the exploration of more practical variants of the CLT method in the future.

Keywords

Communicative Language Teaching, bibliometric analysis, literature review

1. Introduction

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) or Communicative Approach is an approach to language education that emphasizes communication as both the goal and the means of learning a language. At its core, it involves learners in communication to enable the development of their communicative skills (Savignon, 1987). Its theoretical foundation is Michael Halliday's systemic functional grammar and Dell Hymes' model of communicative competence. Halliday (1978) viewed language as a system for expressing meaning in different social contexts and emphasized the functional aspects of language and how language is used for communication. Hymes (1972) challenged Chomsky's language nativism by

rejecting the separation of grammatical and pragmatic abilities, advocated understanding the situational significance of language in communication and proposed a model of communicative competence that includes grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence, and strategic competence.

It originated in the 1970s as a response to Situational Language Teaching (SLT) which focuses on the practice of basic structures in meaningful situation-based activities. Applied linguists supporting the functional and communicative aspects of language were initially British, including individuals like Christopher Candlin and Henry Widdowson. They were influenced by British functional linguists such as John Firth and M. A. K. Halliday, American sociolinguistic scholars like Dell Hymes and John Gumperz, and philosophical work by John Austin and John Searle (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). Then, Howatt (1987, p. 279) distinguished two versions of CLT: a strong one and a weak one. The weak version attempts to provide learners with communicative opportunities or activities to use English while the strong one claims language could not be acquired without communication. In the 21st century, both versions of CLT have undergone further distinctions. Some scholars considered Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) as the variant of the strong-version CLT and some argued that the weak form has developed into Task-Supported Language Teaching (TSLT) (Ellis, 2017). Regardless of the changes undergone by CLT, its underlying progressive philosophy empowers it to thrive across various countries and regions by adapting to diverse and specific characteristics (Huo, 2022).

Due to its profound impact on language teaching, scholars' interest and passion for CLT have remained unwavering in the past decade. They are consistently exploring the innovations of CLT within the new era (Ellis, 2015), discussing its theoretical foundations (Wang, 2022; Whong, 2013), and discovering the feasibility or space to improve the practice (Rahman, 2018; Toro et al., 2019). However, to the best knowledge, there are still few studies focusing on a comprehensive overview of the status and prevailing trends of CLT. The sound development of this field calls eagerly for a systematic, quantitative overview of CLT-related research.

Bibliometric analysis is a quantitative method used to evaluate and measure various aspects of scholarly publications, such as patterns, trends, and relationships within a specific field of study or body of literature. The convenience and robustness in data analyses have persuaded scholars to use this visualized analysis to explore the research trends in a particular area (e.g., Chen & Jiang, 2023; Djeki et al., 2022; Huang et al., 2019; Qin & Lei, 2022). With this technique, scholars can grasp a systematic understanding of a field through the citation analysis (e.g., Tsay & Shu, 2011), co-occurrence analysis (e.g., Cainelli et al., 2014), network analysis approaches (e.g., Zhai et al., 2014), the indicator-based approaches (e.g., Payumo & Sutton, 2015), and the topic-based approaches (e.g., Hassan & Haddawy, 2015). In contrast to experience-based approaches, this quantitative approach is superior in gathering and processing large volumes of information. Moreover, its outcomes are characterized by enhanced objectivity, enabling researchers to delve deeper into scientific and technical texts, uncovering specific patterns of change (Huang et al., 2019). Bibliometric analysis is commonly used in academic research

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to inform decision-making, assess the impact of research, and identify emerging trends within a discipline. It provides a quantitative and systematic approach to mapping the scholarly landscape and can be instrumental in making informed decisions about research directions, collaborations, and resource allocation.

Therefore, to discover the research trends of CLT in the past decade and facilitate its improvement in the new era, the present study adopts the bibliometric analysis to unveil the recent developmental trajectory of CLT research from 2014 to 2023 by answering the following research questions:

1) What is the research status in the field of CLT?

2) What are the research trends in CLT?

The first research question is expected to be answered through analyses of the number of publications, publication venues, corresponding authors' countries, and the most cited documents. The examination of the most frequently explored CLT-related topics could help address the second research question. A more profound comprehension of research in communicative language teaching and learning is expected to offer some implications for CLT researchers, language educators, syllabus designers, and language policymakers.

2. Method

2.1 Instrument

This study resorted to an open-source bibliometric software Biblioshiny 4.1 from RStudio. Contrasted with other bibliometric tools like VOSviewer or Citespace, this software simplifies bibliometric and visual analyses through an interactive web interface, significantly minimizing the effort required for user input and lowering the barrier to utilization. It is accessed through an open-source R package, entering the code " bibliometrix::biblioshiny()" in R. Programmed in R, the shiny app offers flexibility and can be swiftly updated and seamlessly integrated with other statistical R-packages (Aria & Cuccurullo, 2017). It is powerful in conducting a comprehensive analysis of scientific literature through science mapping.

2.2 Data Collection

The database retrieved was the Web of Science Core Collection. Because it is a primary bibliographic database universally acknowledged as a comprehensive data repository (Zhu & Liu, 2020) and a highly renowned and extensively utilized multidisciplinary bibliometric database which compiles bibliometric information for reputable journals (Roemer & Borchardt, 2015). We thought the high-quality journal articles and other documents in this database could represent the general development trajectory of CLT. The time span was from 2014 to 2023 because 2024 is not a complete publication year. We searched "Communicative Approach", or "Communicative Language Approach" in the hope to know the research trends over the decade. After screening the results and deleting irrelevant studies, we selected 649 articles from 452 sources for follow-up analyses.

2.3 Data Processing

We downloaded the full records and cited references of the selected articles in the form of a "plain text file" and then uploaded the file to the webpage "biblioshiny", which was accessed through R-packages. After confirming the uploaded data, we established criteria and applied filters to extract relevant information. Subsequently, data about the overview, authors, sources, and documents were visualized.

3. Result and Discussion

3.1 Number of Publications

Figure 1 illustrates the annual scientific production spanning from 2014 to 2023, revealing fluctuations in research output in the field of CLT over the years. Noteworthy trends include a relatively stable output from 2014 to 2018, with numbers ranging between 48 and 53. A substantial surge occurred in 2019, recording a significant spike to 104 scientific productions. The following year, 2020, sustained this high level with 96 productions. However, in 2021, there was a noticeable decline to 70, and although 2022 saw a rebound to 85, the trend reverted to a lower output in 2023 with 55 scientific productions.
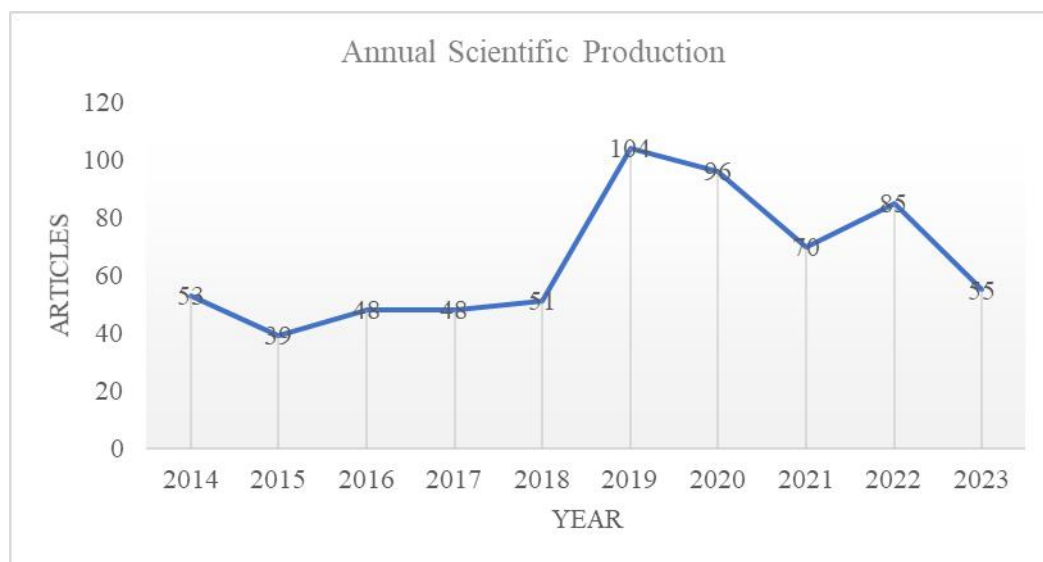
Figure 1. Annual Scientific Production

The decade-long upward trend can be attributed to the ascendancy of CLT in contrast to the traditional Grammar-Translation Method. As noted by Alamri (2018), CLT is globally employed in educational institutions, including schools, universities, colleges, and language institutes, to heighten learners' interest through interactive and authentic activities and materials. Furthermore, the adaptability of the CLT approach is evident across various situations and classroom activities, encompassing discussions, group sharing, problem-based learning, and even role-play learning (Dos Santos, 2020).

The reason for the significant spike in 2019 is the curriculum changes in certain countries, such as Indonesia and Kosovo. Indonesia's 2013 Curriculum takes advantage of CLT principles, fostering

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subsequent research on CLT implementation (Sabrina, 2020). Similarly, as highlighted by Kasumi (2015), ESL teachers in Kosovo have recognized the significance of CLT and incorporated it into their daily educational practices.

The subsequent decline in relevant research can be viewed as a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic. The lockdown imposed from 2020 to 2021 due to the highly contagious virus disrupted normal activities and impeded the continuation of pertinent educational research in real-life settings, resulting in setbacks for ongoing studies.

3.2 Publication Venues

Table 1 presents the top 10 journals with the highest number of articles related to CLT. Arab World English Journal secures the leading position with 12 articles, followed by Foro de Profesores de E/LE (an electronic journal of an inter-university academic nature aimed at teachers of Spanish for foreigners) and Language Teaching Research, each having 7 articles. Also, contributing significantly are Qualitative Inquiry (an interdisciplinary forum for qualitative methodology and related issues in the human sciences), ELT Journal, and RELC Journal (a triannual peer-reviewed international publication of the Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization Regional Language Centre), each with 6 articles. Furthermore, the "14th International Technology, Education and Development Conference (INTED2020)" and Frontiers in Psychology both appear with 5 articles each. Rounding out the top 10 are Journal of Asia TEFL (a publication dealing with English teaching and learning, esp. in Asian contexts.) and Nauchnyi Dialog (a Russian peer-reviewed journal for philology and history about Russian culture), each featuring 5 articles as well.

Table 1. Most Relevant Sources

Rank	Sources	Num. of Articles
1	*Arab World English Journal*	12
2	*Foro de Profesores de E/LE*	7
3	*Language Teaching Research*	7
4	*Qualitative Inquiry*	6
5	*ELT Journal*	6
6	*RELC Journal*	6
7	14th International Technology, Education and Development Conference (INTED2020)	5
8	*Frontiers in Psychology*	5
9	*Journal of Asia TEFL*	5
10	*Nauchnyi Dialog*	5

These ten journals span diverse subjects, including philology, psychology, education, and linguistics.

Consequently, CLT emerges as an interdisciplinary concern with potential connections to various fields. Future research endeavors might explore the organic integration of CLT with other humanistic disciplines, enhancing the application of CLT from diverse perspectives. Originating from different nations and addressing issues in various languages, these journals exemplify the widespread applicability of CLT. As a universal language teaching method, CLT extends beyond English instruction to encompass other languages like Spanish or Russian. Moreover, as these journals are all from the Web of Science Core collection, it seems that CLT has gained broad acceptance as a pedagogical approach for instructing and acquiring a second or foreign language.

3.3 Corresponding Author's Countries

Figure 2 illustrates the rank of countries of corresponding authors in these CLT documents, distinguishing between Single Country Publication (SCP) and Multiple Country Publication (MCP). Russia leads with a total of 83 publications, comprising 82 SCPs and 1 MCP. This suggests a profound interest and focus on CLT research domestically. China closely follows with a total of 80 publications, including 76 SCPs and 4 MCPs. Spain, the United States, and the United Kingdom contribute 75, 45, and 20 publications, respectively, indicating significant research activity in these nations. The substantial percentage of MCPs in different countries indicate active international collaboration in the field of CLT. Moreover, despite the origins of CLT in the UK and USA, these two nations do not boast the highest number of publications. This suggests a setback for CLT within English-speaking countries. Conversely, the prevalence of CLT research in non-English-speaking countries, such as Russia, China, and Spain, underscores its global influence and signifies its substantial impact on language education worldwide.
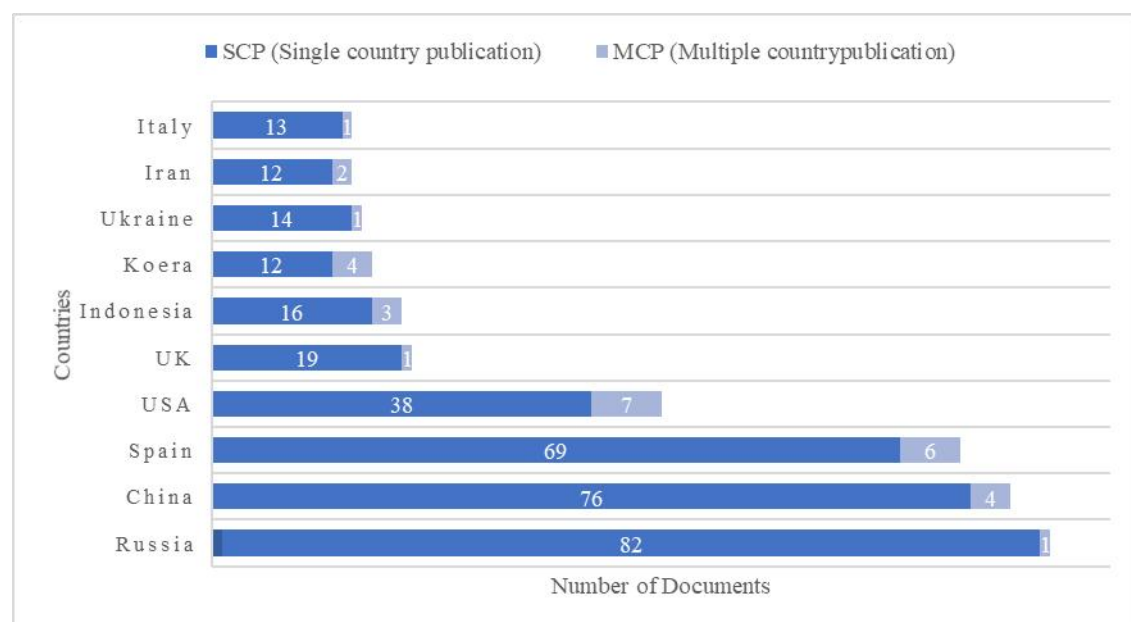

Figure 2. Corresponding Author's Countries

3.4 Most Cited Documents

The citation frequency of journal articles in a specific field can provide insights into the theoretical sophistication and development pace of academic research within that domain. Analyzing these papers not only allows for a direct understanding of the historical and current development status of the research field but also enables a rough prediction of its future trends.

Table 2 lists five most cited documents, representing the representative of contributions to the CLT field over the past decade. Articles are ranked according to the local citations, and the count of citations the article has received within the collected papers. Topping the list is Humphries S. and Burns A.'s study in 2015 which focuses on the difficulty of CLT-oriented curriculum change in practice and attributes a Japanese CLT pilot study to a culture of pedagogical uncertainty and lack of professional support. The following study (Sarfraz et al., 2015) is also to investigate the participants' perceptions of CLT. This confluence serves as a reminder of an emerging trend in the CLT discourse – a focus on probing teachers' or students' attitudes towards long-standing CLT-oriented curricula in empirical studies. Noteworthy in its innovation, this study distinguishes itself by integrating Computer-assisted Language Learning with CLT principles. The ranked third study has a global and theoretical vision. Kramsch discussed "a more reflective, interpretive, historically grounded, and politically engaged pedagogy" (2014, p. 296) that derives from the traditional CLT method. This article introduced a new teaching method and thus caught the great interest of global scholars. The fourth paper reported on the implementation of CLT in Malaysia (Hardman & A-Rahman, 2014). The fifth article diverges from the preceding four papers as it constitutes a literature review. Moodie and Nam (2016) conducted a comprehensive review of studies on English language teaching (ELT) in South Korea spanning from 2009 to 2014 and concluded the importance of CLT-related research in the ELT field. In general, three out of the five studies explore the application of CLT principles within specific programs in various countries. One theoretically analyzes a teaching method more advanced than CLT, while another conducts a comprehensive literature review. Collectively, these articles have made substantial contributions to the advancement of CLT research.

Table 2. Most Cited Documents

Title of Document	Author(s)	Year	Source	LC[1]	GC[2]
'In reality it's almost impossible': CLT-oriented curriculum change	Humphries S. & Burns A.	2015	*ELT Journal*	7	42
Teachers' and Students' Perceptions of the Communicative Language Teaching Methodology in the CALL Environment: A Case Study	Sarfraz S. et al.	2015	*Proceedings of the Social and Behavioral Sciences*	5	6

Teaching Foreign Languages in an Era of Globalization: Introduction	Kramsch C.	2014	*Modern Language Journal*	4	273
Teachers and the implementation of a new English curriculum in Malaysia	Hardman J. & A-Rahman N.	2014	*Language, Culture and Curriculum*	3	21
English language teaching research in South Korea: A review of recent studies (2009–2014)	Moodie I.& Nam H.	2016	*Language Teaching*	3	22

[1] LC: Local Citations. It refers to the count of citations the article has received within the collected papers.

[2] GC: Global Citations. It refers to the total number of citations the article has accumulated across all published papers.

3.5 Most Frequently Explored Topics

Biblioshiny offers users several forms to grasp which words appear most frequently, such as the word cloud, and the co-occurrence network. A word cloud is a data visualization method that represents the frequency of words in a text by visually displaying them. The co-occurrence network unveils the relationships between terms or keywords that frequently appear together in a set of documents.

Analyses of the word cloud and keyword co-occurrence in the CLT-related research from 2014 to 2023 reveal that the top six keywords are, in order, "language," "education," "English," "beliefs," "students," and "teachers" (see Figure 3 and Figure 4). These keywords demonstrate the interest and consensus of scholars in the field of CLT.

Figure 3. Wordcloud of most frequent keywords
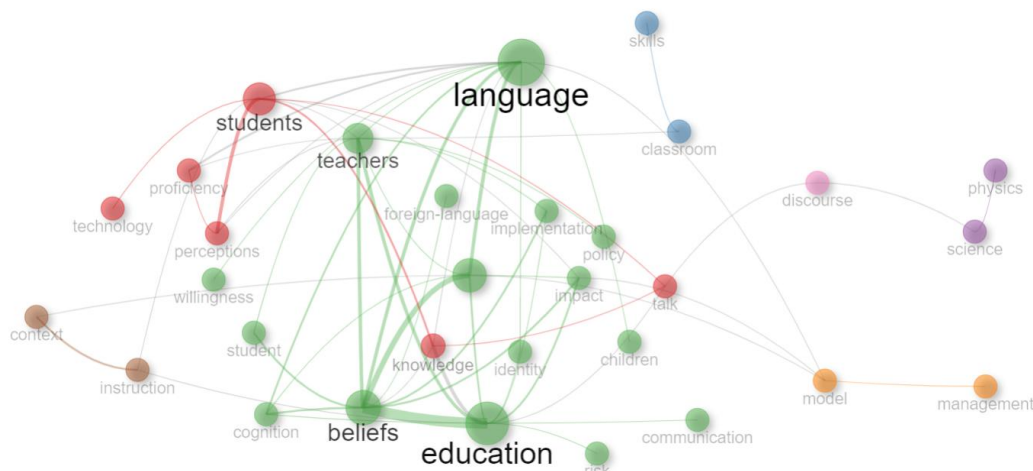
Figure 4. Co-occurrence Network of Keywords

Firstly, the most frequent words are "language" and "education", which implies that CLT has been universally acknowledged as a method or approach for language education. Many contemporary linguists or language educators have realized the significance of this method, such as Sabrina (2020), Dos Santos (2020), and Ho (2022).

Secondly, the keyword "English" indicates that CLT primarily focuses on English instruction. Although teaching in other languages with the CLT method exists (such as Morales & Alvarado, 2023; Viswanathan, 2019), it is comparatively less common. Therefore, future studies could explore the application of CLT in teaching languages other than English to comprehensively enhance the evolution of the CLT method.

Thirdly, the following three keywords "beliefs," "students," and "teachers," point to another group of studies which scholars prefer, the investigation of students' attitudes or teachers' beliefs in implementing CLT courses. For example, Manzano surveyed the beliefs, practices, and problems encountered by university English teachers in using CLT (2015). According to Abdullah and Shah, the studies examining students' perceptions are fewer than those dealing with students' attitudes (2015). They explored students' beliefs, perceptions, and attitudes toward these English language instructions in classroom practices of CLT and Structural Approach.

In essence, the analysis highlights the widespread acknowledgement of CLT as a pivotal language education method, predominantly focused on English, with a potential avenue for future research to explore its application in other languages, while also emphasizing the importance of studying students' attitudes and teachers' beliefs in implementing CLT courses.

4. Conclusion

This study gathered 649 documents related to CLT from the Web of Science Core Collection spanning from 2013 to 2024. It conducted analyses of the number of publications, publication venues,

corresponding authors' countries, the most cited documents, and frequently explored topics using Biblioshiny in RStudio, aiming to discern the current research status and trends in CLT. While CLT has been widely advocated and extensively researched for practical applications, it has also witnessed the emergence of new methodologies due to inherent limitations. The specific findings are as follows: 1) A spike in publication numbers in 2019 indicates increased scholarly attention since its inception but also suggests a research slowdown in the past five years. 2) Examination of publication venues indicates that CLT has evolved into an interdisciplinary topic with potential connections to various fields. 3) Research on CLT is more predominant in non-English-speaking countries than in English-speaking countries. 4) The most cited documents underscore the predominant trend of investigating CLT's real-life application and a more advanced variant of CLT. 5) Analysis of frequently explored topics highlights CLT's widespread acknowledgement as a crucial language education method, primarily centred on English. Therefore, there is potential for delving into the interdisciplinary development of CLT, its application in languages beyond English, and the exploration of more practical variants of the CLT method in the future.

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