

EXPLORING VOCATIONAL STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF COMMUNICATIVE LANGUAGE TEACHING DURING WORKPLACE ENGLISH CONVERSATION TRAINING

Debby Rizky¹, Aulia Ukhtin², Muhammad Abdul Haris³

^{1,2,3}Sastra Inggris, Universitas Deztron Indonesia, Indonesia

Email: debbyrizky@udi.ac.id

ABSTRAK

Meningkatnya kebutuhan akan keterampilan komunikasi berbahasa Inggris di dunia kerja mendorong institusi pendidikan vokasi untuk menerapkan pendekatan pembelajaran yang lebih komunikatif. Salah satu pendekatan yang banyak digunakan adalah Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), namun penelitian mengenai persepsi siswa terhadap implementasi CLT dalam program pelatihan berbasis pengabdian kepada masyarakat masih terbatas. Penelitian ini bertujuan menginvestigasi persepsi siswa sekolah menengah kejuruan terhadap penerapan CLT dalam Workplace English Conversation Training yang dilaksanakan di SMK Negeri 1 Percut Sei Tuan, Indonesia. Penelitian menggunakan desain deskriptif kualitatif yang didukung data kuantitatif deskriptif dengan melibatkan 60 siswa kelas XI Program Keahlian Rekayasa Perangkat Lunak. Data dikumpulkan melalui observasi kelas, angket persepsi, catatan reflektif, dan dokumentasi. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa siswa memberikan persepsi positif terhadap implementasi CLT. Pendekatan ini meningkatkan kepercayaan diri dalam berbicara bahasa Inggris, mendorong partisipasi aktif, memperkuat interaksi dengan teman dan instruktur, serta meningkatkan pemahaman terhadap ungkapan bahasa Inggris yang relevan dengan dunia kerja melalui aktivitas komunikatif seperti role play, diskusi kelompok, dan simulasi kerja. Meskipun masih terdapat kendala berupa keterbatasan kosakata dan pengucapan, siswa menilai bahwa CLT menciptakan lingkungan belajar yang suportif dan mendorong keberanian untuk berkomunikasi tanpa takut melakukan kesalahan. Temuan ini menunjukkan bahwa integrasi CLT dalam pelatihan bahasa Inggris berorientasi dunia kerja efektif meningkatkan kompetensi komunikatif, keterlibatan, dan motivasi belajar siswa pendidikan vokasi, sekaligus memperkaya kajian English Language Teaching (ELT) melalui bukti empiris dari konteks pengabdian kepada masyarakat.

Kata Kunci: Communicative Language Teaching (CLT); Persepsi Siswa; Pendidikan Vokasi; Bahasa Inggris Untuk Dunia Kerja; Pelatihan Percakapan Bahasa Inggris; English For Specific Purposes (ESP).

ABSTRACT

The growing demand for English communication skills in the global workplace has encouraged vocational education institutions to adopt more communicative approaches to English language instruction. Although Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) is widely recognized for enhancing communicative competence, limited research has examined vocational students' perceptions of its implementation in community-based workplace English training. This study investigates students' perceptions of CLT in a Workplace English Conversation Training conducted as a community engagement program at SMK Negeri 1 Percut Sei Tuan, Indonesia. Using a descriptive qualitative design supported by descriptive quantitative data, the study involved 60 eleventh-grade Software Engineering students. Data were collected through classroom observations, perception questionnaires, reflective notes, and field documentation. The findings indicate that students perceived CLT positively, reporting increased confidence in speaking English, greater classroom participation, improved interaction with peers and instructors, and enhanced understanding of workplace-related English expressions through communicative activities such as role plays, group discussions, and workplace simulations. Authentic learning situations also made English learning more meaningful and engaging. Although vocabulary limitations and pronunciation difficulties remained challenges, most participants agreed that CLT fostered a supportive learning environment that encouraged active participation without fear of making mistakes. The findings suggest that integrating CLT into workplace-oriented English training effectively enhances students' communicative competence, engagement, and learning motivation in vocational education. This study contributes to the English Language Teaching (ELT) literature by providing empirical evidence from a community engagement context, an area that remains underexplored in previous CLT research.

Keywords: Communicative Language Teaching; Students' Perceptions; Vocational Education; Workplace English; English Conversation Training; English For Specific Purposes.

Article History:

Received: 06-06-2026

Revised: 13-06-2026

Accepted: 01-07-2026

Published: 20-07-2026

A. INTRODUCTION

The ability to communicate effectively in English has become an essential competency in today's global workforce. Globalization, technological advancement, and international business collaboration have transformed workplace communication, making English proficiency a key requirement for employees across various industries. Consequently, vocational high school graduates are expected not only to master technical skills but also to communicate effectively in English to support professional interactions, customer service, and career development.

In Indonesia, vocational high schools (Sekolah Menengah Kejuruan or SMKs) are designed to prepare students for employment by equipping them with occupational knowledge and practical skills aligned with industry demands. Besides technical competence, students are expected to develop workplace communication skills. However, English instruction in many vocational schools still emphasizes grammar, reading comprehension, and examination-oriented learning, providing limited opportunities for authentic oral communication. As a result, many students possess adequate grammatical knowledge but lack confidence and fluency in speaking English.

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) has been widely recognized as an effective approach for addressing these challenges. Unlike traditional teacher-centered instruction, CLT emphasizes meaningful communication, learner interaction, authentic language use, and the development of communicative competence rather than grammatical accuracy alone (Richards, 2022). Through activities such as role plays, discussions, simulations, and pair work, students are encouraged to use English in realistic situations, leading to improved speaking ability, learner motivation, classroom participation, and communicative confidence.

Previous studies have consistently reported positive outcomes of CLT in English as Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms, including increased willingness to communicate, reduced language anxiety, and greater learner engagement. However, most studies have focused on regular classroom instruction, while limited attention has been given to CLT implemented through community engagement programs that provide intensive workplace-oriented English training. Such programs differ from conventional English classes because they emphasize authentic workplace communication rather than textbook-based learning.

This issue is particularly relevant to vocational education, where English instruction should reflect the principles of English for Specific Purposes (ESP). Integrating CLT into workplace-oriented training enables students to practice communication skills directly related to their future professions. Nevertheless, empirical evidence regarding students' perceptions of this approach in Indonesian vocational education remains limited.

To address this gap, the Department of English Literature, Universitas Deztron Indonesia, conducted a Workplace English Conversation Training program as a community engagement initiative at SMK Negeri 1 Percut Sei Tuan. The program employed CLT through communicative activities such as workplace simulations, role plays, pair discussions, customer service interactions, telephone conversations, and job interview practices. Rather than measuring students' language achievement, this study investigates their perceptions of these learning experiences.

Students' perceptions are essential for evaluating instructional effectiveness because attitudes and learning experiences influence engagement, motivation, and willingness to communicate. The novelty of this study lies in examining CLT within a community engagement-based workplace English training program rather than a formal classroom setting. By exploring students' perceptions in authentic workplace communication contexts, this study extends the literature on Communicative Language Teaching and demonstrates its potential contribution to improving English language instruction in vocational education.

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT)

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) is a learner-centered approach that emphasizes meaningful communication rather than the mastery of grammatical rules alone. Rooted in Hymes' concept of communicative competence, CLT encourages learners to use English in authentic situations through interactive activities such as role plays, discussions, simulations, and problem-solving tasks (Richards, 2022). In this approach, teachers act as facilitators while students actively negotiate meaning and develop communicative competence (Brown & Lee, 2015). This approach is particularly relevant to vocational education, where students require practical English skills for workplace communication.

The core principles of CLT include meaningful interaction, authentic materials, learner-centered instruction, and collaborative learning (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). According to Harmer (2015), communicative activities promote both fluency and accuracy while encouraging learners to participate without excessive fear of making errors. These principles align closely with Long's Interaction Hypothesis and Canale and Swain's model of communicative competence, which emphasize that language acquisition develops through meaningful interaction and the integration of grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic competence.

Students' Perceptions and Workplace English

Students' perceptions represent their beliefs, attitudes, and learning experiences, which strongly influence motivation, engagement, and willingness to communicate. Previous studies have shown that learners generally respond positively to CLT because communicative activities increase speaking confidence, classroom participation, and interaction with peers. Positive perceptions therefore serve as an important indicator of instructional effectiveness.

Within vocational education, English instruction is expected to follow the principles of English for Specific Purposes (ESP), focusing on communication skills required in professional settings (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987). Integrating CLT into Workplace English enables students to practice authentic tasks such as customer service interactions, meetings, presentations, and job interviews, thereby strengthening their workplace readiness.

Although previous studies have demonstrated that CLT improves speaking proficiency, motivation, and communicative competence, most have been conducted in formal classroom settings and primarily measured language achievement. Limited research has explored students' perceptions of CLT implemented through community engagement programs emphasizing Workplace English for vocational students. This study addresses that gap by examining students' perceptions of Workplace English Conversation Training, focusing on motivation, engagement, confidence, interaction, and perceived learning effectiveness. It seeks to answer the following research question: How do vocational students perceive the implementation of Communicative Language Teaching during Workplace English Conversation Training?

B. METHOD

This study employed a descriptive qualitative design supported by descriptive quantitative data to investigate vocational students' perceptions of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) during a “Workplace English Conversation Training” program. The qualitative approach was chosen to explore students' learning experiences, attitudes, and perceptions, while descriptive quantitative data from questionnaires complemented the qualitative findings (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The research was conducted as part of a community engagement program organized by the Department of English Literature, Universitas Deztron Indonesia, at SMK Negeri 1 Percut Sei Tuan, Deli Serdang, North Sumatra, Indonesia. The training, held on 15 July 2026, involved 60 eleventh-grade Software Engineering students** selected through purposive sampling because they were preparing for future workplace communication. Preliminary observations indicated that most participants possessed basic grammatical knowledge but limited speaking confidence due to vocabulary and pronunciation constraints.

The training adopted Communicative Language Teaching principles through workplace-oriented topics, including professional self-introduction, workplace greetings, customer service, telephone communication, and job interview simulations. Learning activities consisted of role plays, pair work, group discussions, workplace simulations, collaborative problem-solving, and other communicative tasks designed to reflect authentic professional situations.

Data were collected using four instruments: classroom observations, students' perception questionnaires, reflective responses, and field documentation. Classroom observations examined students' willingness to communicate, classroom participation, interaction with peers and instructors, confidence during communicative tasks, use of English, and collaborative learning behavior. Students' perceptions were measured using a five-point Likert-scale questionnaire covering five dimensions: learning motivation, classroom engagement, speaking confidence, classroom interaction, and perceived effectiveness of CLT. At the end of the training, participants completed open-ended reflective responses regarding their learning experiences, challenges, and opinions of communicative activities. Supporting documents, including photographs, attendance records, training modules, presentation materials, and field notes, were also collected.

Data collection was conducted in four stages: preliminary observation, implementation of CLT-based training, questionnaire administration, and reflective documentation. Qualitative data from observations and reflections were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis, including familiarization, coding, theme development, review, definition, and reporting. Questionnaire data were analyzed descriptively using frequencies, percentages, mean scores, and standard deviations. Finally, qualitative and quantitative findings were triangulated to enhance the credibility and comprehensiveness of the study.

C. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Students' Overall Perceptions of Communicative Language Teaching

The findings indicate that vocational students generally perceived the implementation of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) during the Workplace English Conversation Training positively. Throughout the training, students demonstrated enthusiasm toward communicative learning activities and actively participated in classroom interactions. The communicative nature of the training encouraged learners to engage in meaningful conversations rather than focusing solely on grammatical accuracy, creating a learning environment that was perceived as supportive and less intimidating.

Students expressed that the learning activities differed considerably from their previous English learning experiences, which had predominantly emphasized grammar exercises and textbook-based instruction. The integration of workplace-related communication tasks enabled students to experience English as a practical communication tool rather than merely an academic subject. Consequently, participants perceived the learning process as more meaningful because they could directly relate classroom activities to situations they might encounter in future professional environments.

Furthermore, students appreciated the opportunity to practice English continuously throughout the training sessions. Instead of listening passively to teacher explanations, they were encouraged to communicate, negotiate meaning, collaborate with classmates, and solve communicative tasks together. Such experiences contributed to a more engaging classroom atmosphere where students felt comfortable participating despite making occasional language mistakes.

These findings support Richards' (2022) assertion that CLT promotes communicative competence by providing learners with authentic opportunities to use language in meaningful contexts. The workplace-oriented activities implemented during the training appeared to strengthen students' perceptions that English learning should prioritize communication rather than memorization.

Theme 1: Increased Speaking Confidence

One of the most prominent themes emerging from the students' reflections concerned the development of speaking confidence. Prior to participating in the training, many students reported feeling hesitant whenever they were required to speak English. They often worried about making grammatical mistakes, mispronouncing words, or being judged by their classmates. Such concerns frequently discouraged them from participating in classroom discussions.

However, the communicative learning environment gradually reduced these anxieties. Students explained that repeated opportunities to practice speaking through pair work and role-play activities helped them become more comfortable expressing themselves in English. They recognized that making mistakes was accepted as a natural part of language learning, which encouraged them to communicate more freely without excessive fear of failure.

The supportive atmosphere established by the instructors also contributed to the development of learners' confidence. Rather than emphasizing linguistic accuracy, the instructors encouraged students to prioritize communication and interaction. This instructional approach allowed students to focus on conveying meaning while gradually improving their language use through continuous practice.

These findings align with Harmer (2015), who argues that communicative classrooms foster confidence by encouraging learners to experiment with language in low-anxiety environments. Similarly, Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis suggests that reduced anxiety facilitates language acquisition because learners become more willing to receive and produce linguistic input.

Theme 2: Enjoyable and Meaningful Learning Experiences

Another recurring theme identified from students' reflections was the perception that communicative learning activities made English classes more enjoyable. Participants frequently described the training as interactive, engaging, and different from conventional classroom instruction. Activities such as role plays, workplace simulations, pair discussions, and collaborative speaking tasks created opportunities for students to actively participate rather than simply listening to explanations. Students particularly appreciated role-play activities because these simulations enabled them to imagine

themselves performing authentic workplace responsibilities. Acting as job applicants, receptionists, customer service officers, or colleagues provided meaningful contexts in which English could be practiced naturally. As a result, students perceived learning as both enjoyable and relevant to their future careers.

The practical orientation of the training also increased students' intrinsic motivation to learn English. Instead of viewing English merely as a compulsory school subject, participants began to recognize its practical importance in workplace communication. This perceived relevance contributed to greater engagement throughout the learning process. These findings reinforce Brown and Lee's (2015) argument that meaningful communication tasks enhance learners' motivation because students understand the real-life purposes of language use. When learning activities closely resemble authentic communication situations, learners become more willing to participate actively.

Theme 3: Authentic Workplace Communication Enhanced Learning Relevance

Students consistently emphasized that workplace-oriented communication scenarios represented one of the most valuable aspects of the training. The learning materials, including professional self-introduction, workplace greetings, customer service interactions, telephone conversations, and job interview simulations, were perceived as directly applicable to future employment situations. Participants expressed that these activities provided practical knowledge rarely encountered during regular English lessons. They appreciated learning expressions that could immediately be used when seeking employment or interacting within professional environments. Consequently, students regarded the training as highly relevant to their educational background as vocational learners.

The findings demonstrate the importance of contextualizing English instruction according to learners' occupational needs. Within vocational education, students tend to value learning experiences that directly support career preparation. Integrating workplace communication into English instruction therefore increases learners' awareness of the practical significance of English proficiency. These findings are consistent with Hutchinson and Waters' (1987) principles of English for Specific Purposes (ESP), which emphasize that instructional content should be developed according to learners' future professional needs. Workplace English training represents an effective example of ESP implementation because language learning is closely connected to authentic occupational communication.

Theme 4: Enhanced Classroom Interaction through Communicative Activities

The implementation of CLT also encouraged greater classroom interaction. Throughout the training, students actively communicated with classmates during pair discussions, collaborative tasks, and workplace simulations. Unlike teacher-dominated classrooms, communicative learning required learners to negotiate meaning, exchange ideas, ask questions, and respond to one another. Students perceived these interactions as beneficial because they enabled them to practice English more frequently while simultaneously learning from peers. Collaborative learning reduced feelings of isolation and encouraged mutual support among participants. Students frequently assisted one another when encountering unfamiliar vocabulary or pronunciation difficulties, creating a cooperative learning atmosphere.

The instructors' role shifted from knowledge transmitters to facilitators who guided interaction rather than dominating classroom discourse. Such learner-centered instruction encouraged greater student autonomy while maintaining active classroom participation. These findings support Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, which emphasizes that learning

develops through social interaction. The collaborative nature of CLT enables learners to construct knowledge collectively while developing communicative competence through meaningful exchanges.

Theme 5: Remaining Challenges during CLT Implementation

Although students expressed overwhelmingly positive perceptions toward CLT, several challenges remained apparent throughout the training. The most frequently reported difficulty concerned limited vocabulary. Many participants indicated that they occasionally struggled to express ideas because they lacked appropriate lexical knowledge related to workplace communication. Pronunciation also emerged as another challenge. Students often hesitated before speaking because they were uncertain whether particular words were pronounced correctly. Despite recognizing that mistakes were acceptable, some participants still experienced nervousness during their initial speaking performances.

Additionally, several students explained that transitioning from passive learning habits to communicative participation required time and adjustment. Learners who had previously experienced predominantly teacher-centered instruction initially found it difficult to actively initiate conversations or participate in discussions. However, continuous communicative practice gradually reduced these barriers throughout the training sessions. These findings suggest that successful implementation of CLT requires sustained exposure rather than one-time instructional interventions. While communicative activities effectively increase learners' confidence and engagement, vocabulary development and pronunciation support should continue receiving instructional attention.

The present study demonstrates that vocational students generally perceived Communicative Language Teaching as an effective instructional approach for Workplace English Conversation Training. Students viewed communicative learning not only as an opportunity to improve English speaking ability but also as a practical preparation for future employment. Their positive perceptions were primarily associated with increased confidence, enjoyable learning experiences, authentic workplace relevance, collaborative classroom interaction, and opportunities for meaningful communication.

These findings extend previous CLT research by demonstrating that communicative pedagogy can be effectively implemented beyond regular classroom instruction through community engagement programs. Whereas earlier studies primarily examined CLT within formal English classes, this study highlights how workplace-oriented training provides authentic communication experiences that strengthen learners' motivation and engagement. The integration of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) principles with CLT created learning experiences that were perceived as both meaningful and professionally relevant by vocational students.

Overall, the findings suggest that students' positive perceptions were shaped not only by the instructional approach itself but also by the authenticity of learning activities. Communicative tasks situated within workplace contexts enabled learners to recognize the practical value of English communication, thereby increasing their willingness to participate actively. This indicates that contextualized communicative learning may represent an effective pedagogical strategy for vocational English education, particularly when supported through collaborative community engagement initiatives involving higher education institutions and vocational schools.

D. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

This study explored vocational students' perceptions of the implementation of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) during a Workplace English Conversation

Training conducted as part of a university community engagement program. The findings indicate that students generally perceived CLT as an engaging, meaningful, and practical instructional approach that supported their English communication development within authentic workplace contexts.

The communicative learning activities provided opportunities for students to actively participate in English conversations through role plays, workplace simulations, collaborative discussions, and problem-solving tasks. These experiences contributed to increased confidence, greater classroom engagement, and improved interaction among learners. More importantly, students recognized the relevance of the learning materials to their future professional careers, suggesting that contextualized communication activities can strengthen the connection between English learning and vocational education.

The findings also demonstrate that the implementation of CLT extends beyond improving linguistic competence. Communicative learning experiences appear to foster positive learning attitudes, encourage active participation, and create supportive classroom environments in which students feel comfortable expressing ideas despite making language errors. Such conditions are particularly important for vocational learners who require practical communication skills for future employment.

Despite these positive perceptions, several instructional challenges remain. Students still experienced limitations related to vocabulary mastery and pronunciation, indicating that communicative activities should be accompanied by systematic language support. Furthermore, some learners required time to adapt to learner-centered instructional practices because they had previously been accustomed to more teacher-centered approaches.

Overall, this study contributes to the growing body of literature on Communicative Language Teaching by demonstrating its implementation within a community engagement-based Workplace English program. Unlike many previous studies conducted in conventional classroom settings, this research highlights how CLT can effectively support vocational students' workplace communication readiness through authentic, interactive, and contextually relevant learning experiences.

Based on the findings of this study, several recommendations are proposed.

First, English teachers in vocational schools are encouraged to integrate Communicative Language Teaching more consistently into classroom instruction. Learning activities should emphasize authentic communication through workplace simulations, collaborative speaking tasks, role plays, and problem-solving activities that reflect students' future professional contexts.

Second, curriculum developers should strengthen the integration of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) principles within vocational English curricula. Learning materials should be designed according to students' occupational needs to ensure that English instruction remains relevant to workplace communication demands.

Third, higher education institutions are encouraged to continue implementing community engagement programs that provide workplace-oriented English training for vocational schools. Such collaborations not only contribute to students' communicative competence but also strengthen partnerships between universities and educational institutions in preparing graduates for industry.

Finally, future researchers are recommended to conduct longitudinal or mixed-method studies involving larger participant groups from various vocational schools. Further investigations may also examine the influence of Communicative Language Teaching on speaking performance, communication anxiety, workplace readiness, learner autonomy, or intercultural communication competence to provide a broader understanding of communicative pedagogy within vocational education.

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