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CRITICAL LISTENING IN LANGUAGE CLASSROOMS: A COMMUNICATIVE APPROACH

Nargiza Khodjakulova

Tashkent Institute of Irrigation and Agricultural Mechanization Engineers

National Research University

nargiza.khodjaqulova.tuit@gmail.com

Tashkent, Uzbekistan

ABOUT ARTICLE

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Abstract: This study explores the integration of critical listening into Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) to enhance learners' interpretive, analytical, and reflective listening skills in second language classrooms. Drawing on theoretical frameworks of communicative competence and metacognitive listening, the research investigates how CLT-based instructional strategies can foster higher-order thinking in listening comprehension. The mixed-method study was conducted across four higher education institutions in Uzbekistan and involved 160 intermediate EFL learners. Data were collected through pre- and post-tests, classroom observations, learner questionnaires, and semi-structured interviews. The findings reveal that students exposed to CLT-integrated critical listening tasks demonstrated significant

improvements in their ability to evaluate speaker intent, identify bias, and apply reasoning during listening activities. Additionally, learners reported increased use of metacognitive strategies such as monitoring and inference-making. The results underscore the pedagogical value of embedding critical thinking in listening instruction and advocate for a shift from passive listening models to more interactive, cognitively engaging approaches. The study offers practical implications for curriculum design, teacher training, and language policy development aimed at cultivating critically literate language users.

Introduction

The role of listening in language acquisition has traditionally been viewed as a receptive skill, often overshadowed by speaking and writing. However, in recent years, there has been increasing attention to critical listening—an active, evaluative, and metacognitive process that plays a vital role in learners' communicative competence. This literature review examines how critical listening is positioned within Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and explores key theoretical, pedagogical, and empirical developments that support the integration of critical listening into language classrooms.

Foundations of Communicative Language Teaching

Communicative Language Teaching emerged in the 1970s as a response to the limitations of structural and audiolingual methods. CLT emphasizes real-life communication, functional language use, and the development of communicative competence (Canale & Swain, 1980; Savignon, 2002). Communicative competence, as first proposed by Hymes (1972), consists of more than grammatical knowledge; it includes sociolinguistic, strategic, and discourse competencies.

Canale (1983) extended this model by identifying strategic competence as essential in enabling learners to cope with breakdowns in communication—a point that aligns closely with the processes involved in critical listening. The core idea of CLT is that language should be learned through authentic interaction, which creates opportunities to engage in interpretation, evaluation, and response—all central to critical listening.

Understanding Critical Listening

Critical listening goes beyond understanding surface-level meaning; it involves evaluating messages, identifying biases, analyzing intentions, and making informed judgments (Brownell, 2010). Field (2008) distinguishes between bottom-up (sound-to-meaning) and top-down (context- and schema-driven) listening processes. Critical listening predominantly falls under the top-down category, requiring active cognitive involvement, including inferencing, prediction, monitoring, and reflection (Vandergrift & Goh, 2012).

While often underrepresented in foreign language instruction, critical listening is vital in academic, professional, and civic domains. In EFL contexts, where learners must interpret language embedded in diverse social and cultural discourses, the capacity to listen critically becomes especially important.

Theoretical Connections: CLT and Critical Listening

Although traditional CLT has focused primarily on fluency and meaningful interaction, recent scholarship argues that the framework can be expanded to encompass critical thinking and listening. Bax (2003) proposes a contextual approach to CLT, advocating for methodological flexibility that accommodates learners' cognitive and sociocultural needs.

This aligns with Kumaravadivelu's (2006) concept of postmethod pedagogy, which emphasizes teacher autonomy, learner empowerment, and context-sensitive teaching. Critical listening fits within this paradigm by encouraging learners to question information, challenge assumptions, and develop intellectual autonomy—objectives that mirror the broader aims of communicative competence.

Furthermore, Richards (2006) underscores that modern CLT should incorporate higher-order thinking and content-based tasks, including listening to news reports, debates, and academic lectures. These forms of input provide ideal material for cultivating critical listening skills.

Metacognition and Critical Listening

Research has shown that learners who are aware of their listening strategies perform better on comprehension tasks. Vandergrift and Goh (2012) identify metacognitive awareness as a key factor in developing skilled listeners. They outline strategies such as:

- Planning (setting listening goals)
- Monitoring (checking understanding during the task)
- Problem-solving (repairing breakdowns in comprehension)
- Evaluating (assessing one's listening performance)

Rahimi and Katal (2012) found a positive correlation between learners' metacognitive awareness and their listening comprehension. Similarly, Nakatani (2010) observed that learners who use metacognitive strategies demonstrate better interactional competence in oral communication. Integrating these strategies into CLT-based instruction supports both communicative and critical listening goals.

Task-Based Language Teaching and Critical Listening

Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT), often considered a branch of CLT, provides an ideal framework for implementing critical listening activities. According to Littlewood (2007), tasks that involve decision-making, problem-solving, or evaluating opinions inherently require critical engagement. For instance, students may be asked to listen to conflicting viewpoints on a social issue and formulate their own arguments, encouraging both comprehension and critical reflection.

Garton (2014) emphasizes that even with young learners, tasks involving stories, role-play, and group discussion can be designed to promote inferential and evaluative thinking.

When tasks require active meaning-making and decision-making, they simultaneously develop language and cognitive skills.

Authentic Listening Materials in CLT

The use of authentic materials—such as podcasts, interviews, and news broadcasts—is central to CLT and critical listening alike. Harmer (2007) argues that authentic texts provide exposure to natural language use and pragmatic cues, essential for understanding intention and context.

In the realm of critical listening, authentic materials present ambiguity, nuance, and bias that challenge learners to interpret and evaluate rather than simply decode. Brown (2007) recommends the use of materials that present controversial or debatable issues, as they stimulate engagement and critical dialogue.

However, Holliday (1994) warns of the cultural embeddedness of authentic materials, arguing that without careful scaffolding, they may overwhelm learners. Therefore, teacher mediation and pre-/post-listening activities are crucial to support comprehension and critical analysis.

Teacher Roles and Classroom Practices

Teachers play a pivotal role in fostering critical listening by designing tasks that prompt evaluation and interpretation. Richards and Rodgers (2014) describe the CLT teacher as a facilitator and co-communicator, rather than a knowledge transmitter. This role aligns well with the demands of critical listening instruction.

Effective practices include:

- Pre-listening tasks to activate schema and set purposes
- While-listening tasks that require evaluation (e.g., agree/disagree, identify bias)
- Post-listening tasks that promote reflection and discussion

Savignon (2002) advocates for teacher education programs that emphasize critical literacy and critical pedagogy, arguing that teachers must themselves be critically aware to guide learners in developing similar capacities.

Empirical Evidence on CLT and Critical Listening

Empirical research supporting the integration of critical listening into CLT is growing. A study by Vandergrift and Goh (2012) found that students trained in metacognitive strategies within CLT environments improved significantly in listening comprehension and learner confidence.

Similarly, Richards (2005) notes that students benefit more from listening activities that require them to respond critically, rather than those that focus solely on decoding information. In a more recent study, a CLT-based intervention with critical listening tasks resulted in statistically significant improvements in Iranian EFL learners' performance on evaluative listening assessments (Rahimi & Katal, 2012).

Although quantitative studies remain limited, the qualitative data from interviews and classroom observations consistently show increased learner motivation, deeper engagement, and improved communicative ability when critical listening is integrated into instruction.

Challenges and Gaps

Despite the pedagogical potential, several challenges persist. One concern is the lack of teacher training in designing and delivering critical listening tasks. Many language teachers are not formally introduced to critical thinking frameworks or to listening instruction beyond comprehension checks.

Another issue is the assessment of critical listening, which is inherently subjective and context-dependent. Standardized tests often fail to capture learners' evaluative or inferential abilities.

There is also a gap in longitudinal and cross-cultural research on how critical listening develops over time and in different linguistic environments. The literature remains skewed toward English and higher education contexts, leaving a gap in studies on younger learners or under-resourced settings.

The literature reviewed illustrates a growing consensus that critical listening is not only compatible with Communicative Language Teaching but also enhances its core aims. By

fostering active engagement, interpretation, and strategic comprehension, critical listening supports the development of communicative competence in its fullest sense.

Integrating critical listening into CLT requires pedagogical innovation, metacognitive strategy instruction, and access to authentic materials. It also necessitates shifts in teacher education and curriculum design. As global communication becomes more complex and multimodal, language classrooms must prepare learners not just to understand, but to question, critique, and respond thoughtfully—skills at the heart of both critical listening and CLT.

Methodology

1. Research Design

This study employed a mixed-methods research design, combining quantitative and qualitative approaches to comprehensively investigate the impact of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) on the development of critical listening skills among English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners. The rationale for this design was to capture both the measurable outcomes of instructional interventions and the nuanced perspectives of learners and teachers regarding critical listening practices.

The study followed a quasi-experimental model with pre-test and post-test assessments, along with focus group discussions and classroom observations. The intervention involved implementing CLT-based listening instruction over a 10-week period, focusing on tasks designed to promote critical listening, such as evaluating opinions, identifying bias, and drawing inferences.

2. Research Questions

The study was guided by the following research questions:

1. To what extent does CLT-based instruction enhance critical listening skills among EFL learners?
2. What metacognitive strategies do learners employ during critical listening tasks in a CLT environment?

3. How do learners and teachers perceive the effectiveness of CLT in fostering critical listening?

3. Setting and Participants

3.1 Research Sites

The study was conducted across four higher education institutions in Uzbekistan:

- TIAME National Research University
- Bukhara State Pedagogical Institute
- Namangan State Foreign Languages Institute
- Gulistan State University

These institutions were selected due to their curricular emphasis on English for Academic Purposes and their ongoing incorporation of CLT strategies into language instruction.

3.2 Participants

A total of 80 undergraduate students (N=80), aged 18–23, participated in the study. All were enrolled in English language degree programs and had intermediate English proficiency (B1–B2 level, based on CEFR guidelines).

Participants were divided into two groups:

- Experimental Group (n=40): Received CLT-based listening instruction emphasizing critical listening.
- Control Group (n=40): Received traditional listening instruction based on comprehension-only activities.

Additionally, 8 English language instructors who taught the participants were involved in post-intervention focus groups.

4. Sampling Procedures

A purposive sampling method was used to select participants based on their academic standing, language proficiency, and availability during the research period. Group allocation was based on intact classes to ensure continuity and minimize instructional disruption. Consent

was obtained from both participants and institutions, and ethical approval was secured from the university research ethics board.

5. Instructional Intervention

5.1 Duration and Structure

The instructional intervention lasted 10 weeks, with two 90-minute sessions per week. The curriculum for the experimental group was designed according to CLT principles and included:

- Authentic listening materials (e.g., interviews, debates, news reports)
- Pre-, while-, and post-listening tasks targeting critical thinking (e.g., identifying speaker intent, comparing viewpoints)
- Group discussions and pair-work tasks for collaborative interpretation
- Reflective journals to encourage metacognitive awareness

The control group received traditional instruction, focused on vocabulary recognition, factual recall, and multiple-choice comprehension checks, with minimal emphasis on discussion or critical evaluation.

5.2 Teacher Training

Instructors teaching the experimental group underwent two workshops on CLT principles and critical listening task design. These workshops covered:

- Communicative competence and CLT methodologies
- Task-based language teaching
- Metacognitive strategy instruction
- Assessment of critical listening tasks

6. Data Collection Instruments

6.1 Quantitative Instruments

a. Critical Listening Pre- and Post-Tests

A custom-developed Critical Listening Assessment Tool (CLAT) was used to evaluate learners' ability to analyze speaker intent, detect bias, and draw inferences. The test included:

- Multiple-choice inference questions
- True/false bias detection items
- Short-answer evaluative questions

The test was piloted with a similar student cohort (n=20) for reliability, yielding a Cronbach's alpha of 0.83, indicating high internal consistency.

b. Metacognitive Awareness Listening Questionnaire (MALQ)

Adapted from Vandergrift and Goh (2012), this self-report instrument measured learners' awareness of five key areas: planning/evaluation, directed attention, problem solving, mental translation, and person knowledge. It was administered pre- and post-intervention to the experimental group.

6.2 Qualitative Instruments

a. Classroom Observation Protocol

A structured observation tool was developed based on Richards and Rodgers' (2014) CLT indicators. Observations were conducted weekly using field notes and audio recordings to document learner interactions, listening strategies, and task engagement.

b. Focus Group Interviews

Separate semi-structured focus groups were conducted with students (n=16) and teachers (n=8) from the experimental group. Questions explored:

- Perceptions of CLT's role in promoting critical listening
- Task difficulty and engagement
- Strategic approaches to critical listening

All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and thematically coded.

7. Data Analysis Procedures

7.1 Quantitative Analysis

- Paired-sample t-tests were conducted to compare pre- and post-test scores within each group.

- Independent-sample t-tests were used to assess differences between the control and experimental groups.

- Descriptive statistics (means, SDs) and effect sizes (Cohen's d) were reported.

MALQ responses were analyzed using repeated-measures ANOVA to track changes in metacognitive strategy use over time.

7.2 Qualitative Analysis

Thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase model. Coding categories were initially derived from the research questions and refined inductively:

1. Learner engagement
2. Critical listening behaviors
3. Metacognitive strategies
4. Perceptions of authenticity and task design

Data triangulation was ensured by comparing observation data, interview transcripts, and student reflections.

8. Validity and Reliability

- Instrument reliability was confirmed through pilot testing and internal consistency measures.

- Content validity was established by expert review (three applied linguistics faculty members) who evaluated the relevance of test items and observation criteria.

- Triangulation of data sources enhanced trustworthiness.

- Inter-rater reliability for qualitative coding achieved 88% agreement across two independent raters.

9. Ethical Considerations

- Informed consent was obtained from all participants.

- Data confidentiality was maintained via coded identifiers.

- Participation was voluntary, and students could withdraw without penalty.

- Teachers were not involved in the scoring of their own students to prevent bias.

10. Limitations of the Methodology

While the study employed rigorous procedures, some limitations are acknowledged:

- The sample size, while sufficient for within-group analysis, may limit broader generalizability.
- Cultural factors specific to the Uzbek EFL context may affect the transferability of findings to other settings.
- Listening assessments, while carefully constructed, may not fully capture the dynamic nature of real-time critical listening.

This methodology provides a robust framework for investigating how CLT can foster critical listening in language classrooms. By combining quantitative assessments and qualitative inquiry, the study captures both the cognitive and experiential dimensions of learner development. The next section will present and interpret the findings in light of the stated research questions.

Results and discussion

1. Quantitative Results

1.1 Critical Listening Test Scores

The pre- and post-test results of the Critical Listening Assessment Tool (CLAT) demonstrated a statistically significant improvement in the experimental group, which received CLT-based listening instruction. The control group, taught through traditional comprehension-based methods, showed minimal progress.

Group	Pre-Test Mean (SD)	Post-Test Mean (SD)	Mean Difference	p- value	Cohen's d
Experimental (n=40)	61.25 (8.43)	78.10 (6.92)	+16.85	< .001	1.38
Control (n=40)	60.75 (9.02)	63.40 (8.76)	+2.65	.082	0.29

These results confirm that CLT-based instruction had a large effect size ($d = 1.38$) on students' critical listening performance. In contrast, the control group showed only a marginal, non-significant increase.

1.2 Metacognitive Awareness (MALQ Results)

Participants in the experimental group completed the MALQ questionnaire before and after the intervention. The results, analyzed through a repeated measures ANOVA, revealed significant improvements in four of the five metacognitive domains:

Metacognitive Factor	Pre Mean	Post Mean	p-value
Planning and Evaluation	3.2	4.0	< .01
Directed Attention	3.4	4.1	< .01
Problem Solving	3.1	4.2	< .001
Person Knowledge	2.9	3.8	< .01
Mental Translation	3.7	3.6	> .05

The most notable gains were in problem-solving and planning/evaluation, suggesting that CLT activities not only improved comprehension but also fostered metacognitive control over listening processes. Mental translation showed no significant change, indicating a continued reliance on L1 thinking for some learners.

2. Qualitative Results

2.1 Classroom Observations

Field notes and audio recordings from the experimental classrooms highlighted several key features:

- Increased learner interaction: Students engaged actively in group discussions and collaborative analysis of audio texts.
- Critical questioning: Learners frequently asked and answered questions such as “What is the speaker trying to imply?” or “Is this opinion biased?”

- Reflection: Students referred to reflective journal entries during discussions, suggesting transfer of metacognitive strategies to real tasks.

In contrast, control classrooms displayed limited interaction and a focus on surface-level comprehension tasks.

2.2 Focus Group Interviews

Learner Perspectives:

Participants from the experimental group expressed that the CLT approach made them feel more “involved” and “alert” while listening. Several students reported that authentic materials (e.g., TED Talks, podcasts) helped them engage with real-life issues and practice evaluative listening.

“Before, I just listened to understand the words. Now I try to think what the speaker’s intention is.” — Student 7, Namangan State Foreign Languages Institute

Teacher Perspectives:

Teachers reported that students became more autonomous over time. One teacher noted:

“They stopped asking for translations. Instead, they discussed meanings with each other and tried to evaluate what they heard critically.”

However, some instructors noted challenges, such as time constraints and difficulty designing tasks that balance language practice with cognitive engagement.

3. Discussion

3.1 Effectiveness of CLT in Enhancing Critical Listening

The significant improvement in post-test scores among the experimental group aligns with prior research suggesting that CLT fosters higher-order thinking skills (Richards, 2006; Littlewood, 2007). The findings confirm that exposure to authentic tasks and interaction-rich settings allows learners to move beyond decoding linguistic input to interpreting, evaluating, and reflecting on spoken content.

This outcome supports Canale and Swain's (1980) model of communicative competence, particularly strategic competence, which enables learners to manage breakdowns in communication and extract meaning in ambiguous contexts.

3.2 Metacognitive Growth Through CLT

The gains in metacognitive domains such as problem-solving and planning/evaluation indicate that CLT can foster self-regulated learning, as theorized by Vandergrift and Goh (2012). Students in the experimental group demonstrated heightened awareness of how to approach listening tasks strategically—a key component of critical listening.

This result is important in the EFL context, where students often struggle with passive listening habits. By embedding metacognitive instruction within a CLT framework, the study shows a feasible way to develop autonomous, reflective listeners.

3.3 Learner Engagement and Motivation

Qualitative data indicated increased motivation and emotional engagement in the CLT classrooms. Learners described the materials as “relevant,” “interesting,” and “thought-provoking,” which echoes the findings of Nakatani (2010) and Savignon (2002) about the motivational benefits of meaningful communication tasks.

The combination of authentic input, peer collaboration, and reflection created a learning environment conducive to deep listening, contrasting with the more passive learning observed in the control group.

3.4 Implications for Language Pedagogy

The results reinforce the idea that listening should not be treated as a passive skill but rather as a dynamic, interpretative process. Integrating critical listening into CLT has several pedagogical implications:

- Curriculum designers should embed tasks that require evaluative and inferential thinking.
- Teacher training programs must include modules on critical listening and strategy instruction.

- Assessment models should move beyond multiple-choice comprehension questions to include tasks that assess interpretive and critical skills.

These shifts are especially relevant in academic and professional contexts where learners are expected not just to understand, but to critically engage with spoken content.

4. Limitations in research experiment

Despite the positive outcomes, several limitations must be acknowledged:

- The sample was limited to university-level learners in Uzbekistan, which may affect generalizability.

- Task difficulty varied depending on learners' prior exposure to authentic texts and cultural references.

- The intervention period, though intensive, lasted only 10 weeks; longer-term studies could reveal more sustained changes in listening behavior.

5. Summary

The findings demonstrate that integrating critical listening tasks into a CLT framework significantly enhances both the cognitive and metacognitive listening abilities of EFL learners. The combination of authentic input, meaningful interaction, and reflection fosters a classroom culture that supports active, evaluative listening, preparing students for the demands of academic and real-world communication.

These results offer valuable insights for language educators seeking to move beyond comprehension-focused instruction and toward a communicative, reflective pedagogy grounded in real-world listening and critical thinking.

Limitations

While this study provides meaningful insights into the integration of critical listening within a Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) framework, several limitations must be considered when interpreting the results:

1. Contextual and Demographic Constraints

The participants were drawn exclusively from four higher education institutions in Uzbekistan, limiting the generalizability of findings to broader or more diverse populations. Variables such as institutional resources, teacher expertise, and learner motivation could differ significantly in other regions or educational levels (e.g., secondary schools, private institutions, or different national education systems).

2. Duration of Intervention

The instructional intervention was conducted over a 10-week period. While this timeframe was sufficient to observe measurable changes in critical listening ability and metacognitive awareness, longer-term studies are needed to determine whether these improvements are sustainable and transferable to real-life contexts, such as academic or professional communication.

3. Instructional Variability

Although efforts were made to standardize lesson plans and provide teacher training across institutions, slight variations in teaching styles, classroom management, and task facilitation may have affected the consistency of CLT delivery. This variability may have influenced student outcomes, especially given the active, adaptive nature of CLT-based instruction.

4. Assessment Limitations

While the study employed validated tools (CLAT and MALQ), the assessment of “critical listening” remains complex and somewhat subjective. Some constructs—such as bias recognition or inferential judgment—are difficult to evaluate using standardized tests alone. Moreover, the reliance on self-report surveys for metacognitive awareness may be affected by social desirability bias or limited learner introspection.

5. Technology and Access Issues

Authentic materials such as podcasts and video lectures were key components of the CLT-based curriculum. However, not all classrooms were equally equipped with technology,

and inconsistent access to digital resources may have impacted the learner experience, especially in rural institutions.

Conclusion

This study examined the efficacy of a Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach in developing critical listening skills among EFL learners in Uzbekistani university classrooms. Grounded in theoretical perspectives from communicative competence (Canale & Swain, 1980) and metacognitive listening pedagogy (Vandergrift & Goh, 2012), the research explored how task-based, interaction-rich instruction influences both performance and self-regulated listening behavior.

Key Findings

1. **Significant Gains in Listening Performance:** The experimental group, exposed to CLT-based instruction, demonstrated statistically significant improvements in critical listening test scores compared to the control group.
2. **Enhanced Metacognitive Awareness:** Learners reported increased use of problem-solving and evaluative strategies, indicating a shift toward more reflective and intentional listening.
3. **Increased Learner Engagement:** Qualitative data revealed higher levels of motivation, autonomy, and participation among students who engaged in communicative tasks using authentic materials.
4. **Pedagogical Relevance:** The study reaffirms that listening is not merely a receptive skill but a dynamic, interpretive process that benefits from interactive, meaningful communication tasks.

Implications

The findings support the integration of critical thinking and metacognitive strategy instruction into listening pedagogy. Language educators are encouraged to:

- Use authentic, cognitively rich listening materials.
- Promote collaborative tasks that require analysis, inference, and evaluation.

- Incorporate reflection and strategy awareness into regular listening instruction.

By embedding critical listening within CLT, educators can prepare learners not only to comprehend spoken texts but also to question, reflect, and engage critically—essential skills for academic and global communication.

Future Research

To build on this work, future studies should consider:

- Longitudinal research designs to track sustained changes.
- Larger, more diverse samples across different educational settings.
- Comparative studies examining CLT's impact on other 21st-century skills, such as digital literacy or intercultural competence.
- Exploration of teacher training models that effectively integrate critical listening into professional development.

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