

The Impact of Communicative Language Teaching Activities on English Vocabulary on Secondary Students in Ecuador

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ABSTRACT

Vocabulary is one of the most important linguistic aspects when learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL), since it is the tool to communicate, and with a large vocabulary, people are able to convey their ideas easily. Therefore, this research aimed at developing English vocabulary through four Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) activities among eighth-grade students at an Ecuadorian public institution. This mixed-method study used an action research design among 21 participants by convenience sampling. Pre- and post-tests were used to determine to what extent the CLT activities (opinion-sharing activities, information-gathering activities, information transfer activities, information-gap activities) were effective in the development of English vocabulary. These results were interpreted using descriptive statistics and revealed a slight improvement concerning the pre and post-tests. In addition, a questionnaire with a combination of open and closed-ended questions was applied and field notes were utilized to describe the students' perceptions about the implementation of the CLT activities. The qualitative data were analyzed with thematic analysis and the findings revealed a general acceptance of the student towards the established strategy.

Keywords: *CLT activities; communication skills; foreign language learning; teaching methods; vocabulary aspects.*

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El Impacto de las Actividades de Enseñanza Comunicativa de la Lengua en el Vocabulario en Inglés en Ecuador

RESUMEN

El vocabulario es uno de los aspectos lingüísticos más importantes a la hora de aprender inglés como lengua extranjera (EFL), ya que es la herramienta para comunicarse, y con un amplio vocabulario, las personas podrán transmitir sus ideas fácilmente. Por lo tanto, esta investigación tuvo como objetivo desarrollar el vocabulario en inglés a través de actividades de Enseñanza Comunicativa del Lenguaje (Communicative Language Teaching CLT por sus siglas inglés) entre estudiantes de octavo grado de una institución pública de Loja. El diseño de investigación acción de este estudio utilizó un método mixto entre 21 participantes por muestreo de conveniencia. Se utilizaron pruebas previas y posteriores para determinar hasta qué punto las actividades CLT (actividades de intercambio de opinión, actividades de brecha de información, actividades de recopilación de información, actividades de transferencia de información) fueron efectivas en el desarrollo del vocabulario en inglés. Los resultados se interpretaron mediante estadística descriptiva y revelaron una leve mejora con respecto a las pruebas previas y posteriores. Además, se aplicó un cuestionario de tipo mixto con preguntas abiertas y cerradas y se utilizaron notas de campo para describir las percepciones de los estudiantes sobre la implementación de las actividades CLT. Los hallazgos fueron analizados con análisis temático y mostraron una aceptación general del estudiante hacia la estrategia establecida.

Palabras clave: actividades CLT; aprendizaje de lenguas extranjeras; aspectos del vocabulario; habilidades de comunicación; métodos de enseñanza.

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INTRODUCTION

With the progressive return to in-person instruction, the loss of student learning has become evident (World Bank, 2021), and therefore, students have not developed the expected language skills. The researchers observed during the teaching practicum that most of the difficulties were due to the lack of interest of the students and not using activities to put the new vocabulary into practice. This was the case of eighth-grade students from a public institution in the city of Loja, Ecuador, whose deficiencies in vocabulary learning were identified. To/In this regard, several researchers (Yuliawati & Aprillia, 2019; Asrul & Dahlan, 2022; Patmi, & Sabaruddin, 2021) have reported problems that affect students in terms of vocabulary: students were not given any training to memorize the words with their definitions, the words were not used in context, the passivity of the students and the motivation to learn English became a great challenge to build vocabulary. The National English Language Curriculum favors the presence of the Communicative Approach and Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) to develop communicative skills. However, taking into account the students' English level, difficulties in mastering English, and low English vocabulary knowledge, it was necessary to explore the use of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) activities in English vocabulary learning.

Previous studies have documented links between Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) activities to improve English vocabulary within an enjoyable learning environment which inspires students to learn (Anggraheni et al., 2020, Yuliawati & Aprillia, 2019), as well as working in a collective way to develop vocabulary mastery (Patmi & Sabaruddin, 2021). At the same time, other researchers have found positive perceptions of students who were taught these CLT activities (Asrul & Dahlan, 2022). Although the aforementioned authors have shown the effectiveness of Communicative Language Teaching to improve English Vocabulary, they did not mention the type of CLT activities they used, since their research was based on the application of CLT principles together with other resources such as Zoom, Realia, Flipped Classroom (Anggraheni et al., 2020; Patmi & Sabaruddin, 2021; Phoeun & Sengsri, 2021). Likewise, they did not explore the improvement in each of the aspects of the vocabulary (form, meaning, and use). This research was intended to fill this gap by applying four CLT activities suggested by Richards (2006) and their effects on the three aspects of vocabulary: form, meaning, and use.

The main purpose that guided this research was to develop English vocabulary through Communicative Language Teaching activities among EFL learners at a public institution in Loja. Based on this general objective, the researchers included two specific objectives: to determine to what extent the Communicative Language Teaching activities are effective in the development of English vocabulary and to describe the students' perceptions of the implementation of the Communicative Language Teaching activities to enhance English vocabulary among eighth-grade students at a public institution.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this literature review is to provide a clearer understanding of the concepts involved in this study which are CLT activities and vocabulary. Firstly, different authors have proposed definitions of CLT in terms of their points of view. One definition of CLT is provided by Richards (2006), who considers that CLT is a set of principles that guide the development of the class for students to foster communicative competence. Additionally, CLT has an active role in the classroom because it encourages students to communicate real meaning as a way of learning and emphasizes language use (Harmer, 2007). The importance of Communicative language teaching relies on the use of authentic material within a real context for learners to work collaboratively. Phoeun and Sengsri (2021) and Li and Peng (2022) highlight the importance of CLT, as they state that CLT seeks language acquisition to take place in a meaningful context with authentic language as input. Furthermore, Itmeizeh and Saleh (2022) advocate for the use of CLT activities in the classroom where students take part collectively and feel more comfortable in this setting. For the purpose of this study, four CLT activities were used: Information-gap Activities. These activities have the purpose of obtaining information that students do not hold. For that reason, they are based on tasks that learners have to develop according to the newly learned vocabulary. Opinion-sharing Activities. These activities are developed with the use of vocabulary that students know or are learning to compare opinions, thoughts, and views. The activities are interactive because they prompt students to be experts on a relevant issue (Courtney, 2020). The teacher's role is to bring discussion topics and set students into small groups where they talk and express whether they agree or disagree with classmates' viewpoints. Information Gathering Activities. These types of activities require students to use the language to ask for information that is needed to complete the task. In the same way, these activities allow students to look for words that they need to ask. The

four skills are developed, for instance, when learners ask questions, they are developing speaking skills, and the information collected has to be written after listening to the classmate's answer. Information Transfer Activities. According to Richards (2006), students are given information presented in one way, to transfer into a different way, for example, reading about a zoo. This type of activity requires students to transfer the information in another way, for instance, a drawing explaining the different positions of the animals inside the zoo. Therefore, the information is the same, but the presentation changes.

As for the second concept pertaining to this study which is vocabulary, Lessard-Clouston (2021), defines it as “the words of a language, including single items and phrases or chunks of several words that convey a particular meaning” (p. 2). That is to say, vocabulary should be learned not only word by word but also within phrases taking into account the context. Likewise, “vocabulary is all the words that people know and use in their communication.” (Anggraheni et al., 2020, p. 11). For that reason, students need to enrich their vocabulary, to develop speaking and writing skills. Vocabulary becomes relevant to perform any social interaction, and this competence has to be developed from an early stage.

Nation (2019) presents three aspects of vocabulary knowledge: form, meaning, and use. “Form” refers to the capacity to understand how to use morphology and phonology to express a word while enhancing language abilities like speaking and writing. Additionally, it has to do with how the words are spelled (Nation, 2001). “Meaning” refers to the learner understanding the context in which a word is used while also taking into account its form, referents, and word associations. This aspect facilitates students' comprehension of the meaning within a particular situation (Nation, 2001). “Use” determines the type of speech a word belongs to and the grammatical structures it can be used in. In other words, the proper use of a word in a sentence is what the usage of a term refers to (Nation, 2001).

OBJECTIVES

- To determine to what extent the Communicative Language Teaching activities are effective in the development of English vocabulary among eighth-grade students.
- To describe the students' perceptions about the implementation of the Communicative Language Teaching activities to enhance English vocabulary among eighth-grade students.

METHODOLOGY

This research employed a mixed method integrating qualitative and quantitative instruments at the same time to obtain a greater understanding of the influence of Communicative Language Teaching activities on English vocabulary. In the same vein, the study adopted a basic action research model proposed by Richards and Lockhart (2007), which was based on the seminal work of Kemmis and McTaggart, to identify a problem and develop an action plan to improve students' learning. This design promotes the construction of an intervention plan, where teachers work with their classroom students addressing difficulties and developing abilities.

Participants were selected through convenience sampling due to geographic proximity, the availability of participants' time in the mornings, and their willingness to participate in the study. The researchers of this study formally requested the permission of the principal of the educational institution to implement the intervention proposal. Permission was granted and the course was selected by the researcher. Participants' parents were asked to sign an informed consent to allow their children to be part of the study. Although the intervention proposal was applied to the whole class, the information was collected only from students who had agreed to take part in the study.

The quantitative data was collected through a testing technique by using the pretest and posttest instruments which were based on criterion-referenced scoring. This test included six questions with selection items such as multiple-choice, matching, completion, and gap-filling that assessed the aspects of vocabulary: form, meaning, and use. This instrument was applied before and after the implementation of the intervention proposal in order to obtain real data about the improvement of English vocabulary through the application of Communicative Language Teaching activities in the teaching-learning process.

In addition, a survey technique was created to gather qualitative and quantitative data through a mix-type questionnaire instrument, which was structured according to the Likert scale from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree" to measure students' perceptions about the use of CLT activities.

The seven items were designed around some CLT characteristics and activities such as the use of authentic material, cooperative work, information-gap activities, opinion-sharing activities,

information-gathering activities, and information-transfer activities. It is important to remark that this instrument was applied in Spanish to avoid any misunderstandings related to English proficiency.

Finally, to support the qualitative data, the researcher applied the observation technique with the use of field notes taking the role of participant observer. Data were collected in a total of eight field notes based on the protocol provided by Gay et al. (2012). This instrument was filled out after each class and included descriptive and reflective information to explore students' progress, interaction, and participation during the intervention proposal.

RESULTS

This section presents statistical information about the pretest application to twenty-one participants before using CLT activities. The test assessed students' vocabulary in three aspects (form, meaning, and use) out of 10 points.

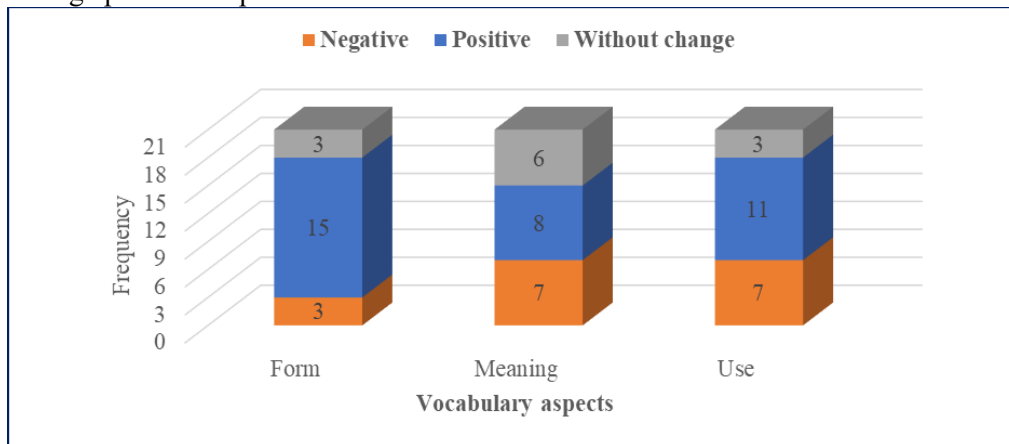
Table 1
Pretest and posttest results

Vocabulary aspect	Number of students	Pretest	Posttest	Difference
Form 3/3	21	0.67	1.48	0.81
Meaning 4/4	21	2.40	2.45	0.05
Use 3/3	21	1.67	1.79	0.12
Total mean	N/A	4.74	5.71	0.98

Table 1 compares the mean of every vocabulary aspect, as well as the difference between the Pretest and Posttest test results. "Form" was the vocabulary aspect of the pretest that participants had the greatest trouble with, with a mean average of 0.67/3 because they did not know how to write certain words correctly and did not know other terms. In spite of the fact that the "meaning" component had the highest mean score average (2.40/4), the majority of students had trouble connecting some of the meaning's terms to their forms. Finally, learners scored a mean average of 1.67/3 on the 'use' component; their answers showed that they were unable to write the word in the correct place to form a sentence. Based on these results, the main reason why the intervention plan was implemented was based on the low lexical performance of the students.

At the end of the intervention, participants were given a posttest whose results are presented in Table 1. It can be observed that the “form” was the most developed vocabulary aspect (M=1.48) which had an increase of 0.81, representing the aspect with the greatest progress, with an increase in correct answers in 15 participants. By contrast, the aspects “meaning” and “use” had an average difference of 0.05 and 0.12 points respectively; seven participants had no sign of variation as described in Figure 1.

Figure 1
Change pretest and posttest



The questionnaire and field note data were analyzed to describe students’ perceptions of the implementation of Communicative Language Teaching activities to improve English vocabulary among students at a public institution. To complete the questionnaire, students had to mark their agreement or disagreement with each statement and justify their choices in some of them. The findings are presented below.

Figure 2
Student choice about the most interesting CLT activity.

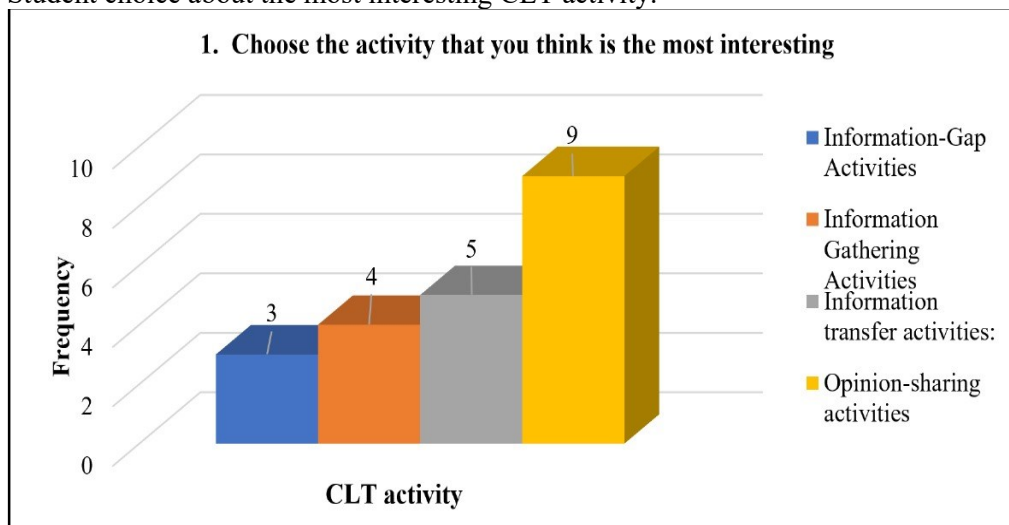


Figure 2 illustrates the students' answers to the first statement, "Choose the most interesting activity." A range of nine participants selected the opinion-sharing activities, five preferred the information transfer activities, four opted for the information-gathering activities and three students took the information gap activities as the most interesting. This is consistent with the field notes recordings, which indicated that most students completed the classification phase but had little development during the speaking phase of the opinion-sharing information activity, which required participants to classify daily routines and explain their classification.

Table 3
Perceptions about the use of authentic material.

Statement	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
2. Using authentic material encourages me to speak up and participate in class.	7	13	1	0

Table 3 demonstrates that there was favorable feedback on the use of authentic material in the CLT activities to engage in class; in fact, seven participants "strongly agreed" and 13 participants "agreed" with this statement. The responses of the students to the open-ended question, which indicated that "it was comfortable and easier for me to speak and participate more in class" are in support of this statement. This response was given since the topics were familiar, as some students stated that they "I talked about the dearest people, and I express things about him or her". the field notes revealed that students were familiar with the topic (relatives' routine) and found it easy to develop the speaking activity. Moreover, it was found that they had been engaged and motivated to learn by the use of familiar images. On the contrary, only participant 11 had the opposite view, who wrote in the open-ended question that "it was not easy for me". It is a valid observation, as the field notes also indicate that some students did not pay attention and took part. Overall, these results showed that the majority of students concurred that using authentic material is useful for participation in class.

Figure 3
Students' considerations of collective participation

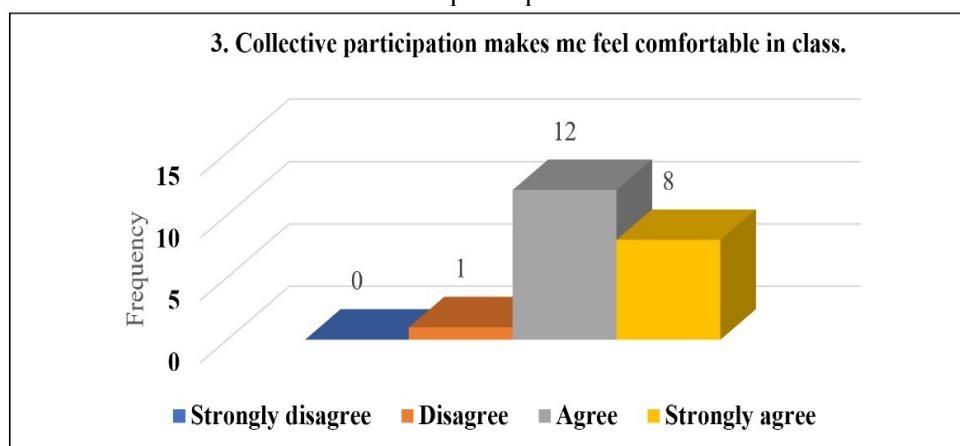


Figure 3 includes participant perceptions about this claim revealing that most students “agreed” (12) and “strongly agreed” (8) that taking part in class discussions made them feel at ease. This can be illustrated by Participant 6's comment, in which he said “If I was wrong, my classmates could help me”. Another opinion expressed by participant 12 was that “my classmates would be more well-equipped to understand new words and exchange ideas”. However, it was noted from the field notes that some students did not want to remain in their group when they were assigned to work, affecting the development of some CLT speaking activities.

Table 4
Perceptions about CLT activities to practice vocabulary.

Statement	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
5. The information-gap activities helped me practice vocabulary.	6	14	1	0
7. The information transfer activities helped me practice new words.	8	13	0	0

Regarding the effect of CLT exercises on vocabulary practice, Table 4 displays items number five and seven. Since the information-gap activities required students to utilize new terms to complete the exercise, more than half of the students (14 students) “agreed” and almost one-quarter of the students (6) “strongly agreed” that the activities helped them develop their vocabulary. These findings demonstrate that a considerable portion of the students (20) recognized the value of using information-

gap exercises for students to practice vocabulary. In this regard, in the comments taken from the open questions participant 5 wrote “we exchanged answers”. Another student wrote “we see and write what we have learned” while participant 8 said, “I had fun”. The field notes also provided evidence that most students reviewed the given vocabulary before writing their examples. On the other hand, only one student “disagreed” saying the task was too "difficult" (response from participant 1).

Table 4 also shows a positive trend in the utilization of information transfer activities to facilitate word practice. The majority of the class (13 students) “agreed” and almost half of the class (8) “strongly agreed” that the information transfer activities benefited learners in practicing new vocabulary. These findings demonstrated that all 21 participants in the group were able to practice new words. Participant 12 underlined that “it helps me to practice vocabulary with the ideas or words that my partner wrote”. Besides this opinion, another reason was “because this activity helps us ask questions” from student 20. The field notes indicate that the students were able to apply new expressions for describing a relative’s daily activities.

Table 5
Perceptions about CLT activities to identify words.

Statement	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
4. The opinion-sharing activities help me remember when to use those words	0	1	13	7
6. The information-gathering activities help me recognize words	0	4	11	6

Based on the data in Table 5, it has emerged that the perception of CLT activities as a means of identifying words is generally positive. The majority of respondents (13) agreed that the opinion-sharing activities helped them to remember when to use words, and nearly a third of respondents (7) “strongly agreed”. These results show that there is a favorable perception of the class (20) with an opposing view held by only one participant. Additionally, almost a quarter of students (6) “strongly agreed” and just over half of students (11) “agreed” that performing information-gathering tasks helped them recognize terms. These findings demonstrated that a significant number of class members (17) recognized that the

information-gathering exercises facilitated word recognition. In light of this, the field notes revealed that while students completed the writing exercise where they practiced vocabulary, the majority of them did not participate in the speaking exercise where they were expected to learn new terms.

Table 6
Students' opinions on the usage of CTL activities for vocabulary development (open-ended questions).

Category	1. Positive Aspects	Times Mentioned	2. Aspects to be improved	Times Mentioned
Codes	Fun	4	Difficult activities	2
	I felt comfortable and happy.	4	I do not like them	1
	Help learn words	15		
	Use familiar topic	5		
	Mutual help	8		

From the analysis of the information collected from the students' answers to the open-ended questions, two groups are depicted in Table 6: positive aspects with five codes and, aspects to be improved with two codes. It must be noted that the open-ended questions were not answered by all 21 participants.

DISCUSSION

This research sought to determine to what extent the Communicative Language Teaching activities are effective in the development of English vocabulary among eighth-grade students, in the results from the pretest presented in Table 1, the average score of the students was 4.74/10 points, while after the application of the treatment the students reached an overall average of 5.71/10. This finding demonstrated a slight growth of approximately 0.98 points in the students' overall vocabulary after communicative language teaching. This result is in line with Asrul and Dahlan (2022), who stated that the use of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) is expected to help students actively understand certain vocabulary through activities in the classroom that involve working individually, in groups, or pairs.

Three vocabulary aspects were set to identify students' vocabulary master: form, meaning, and use. In the pretest, students demonstrated more difficulties in the "form" aspect with an average score of 0.67/3.

However, the average result in the posttest for this aspect was 1.48/3, being the most developed aspect. It might be because the students performed the CLT writing activities more frequently, which helped them to know how to write the words correctly. Regarding “meaning”, the results in the pretest reached an average score of 2.4/4, while in the posttest it was 2.45/4. In the last aspect “use”, the pretest and posttest means were 1.67/3 and 1.79/3, respectively. Consequently, it could be observed that the results did not reflect a significant difference. Similarly, Çiftci and Ozcan (2021) found that the participants used more vocabulary in their written than in their spoken productions. That is why there was no discernible development in the characteristics of “meaning” and “use” since the students actively exercised the form, but there was minimal oral practice where their objective was to associate the word with its meaning and use.

Due to these factors, this teaching approach presented a slight effectiveness in the development of English vocabulary among eighth-grade students at a public institution in Loja. Although there was an improvement in the “form” aspect, most participants had problems connecting words with their meanings and placing them correctly in sentences due to various restrictions since the students are in the early stages of acquiring a foreign language. and the use of English vocabulary was passive.

Regarding the second objective of this study, which was to describe the students’ perceptions about the implementation of the Communicative Language Teaching activities to enhance English vocabulary among eighth-grade students, findings indicated that most of the participants had an overall positive perspective on CLT activities. For instance, students commented that these activities helped them to “exchange answers, practice vocabulary with the ideas or words from another partner, and ask questions”. This finding confirms what Phoeun and Sengsri (2021) and Asrul and Dahlan (2022) found in their research that students not only improved their linguistic skills but also their attitudes about learning English also changed, which was consistent with their positive perception of CLT instruction. Moreover, the students’ perception of the use of authentic material and collective participation was generally positive. In particular, the students indicated that “it was comfortable and easy for them to carry out the task” since the students already had information and it was something from their real life, as the participants mentioned in the answers to the open questions: “I talked about my most beloved relatives and I express things about them”. These findings corroborate the ideas of Richards (2006) and

Yuliawati and Aprillia (2019) who suggested that practicing language within a real communicative context motivates learners to learn vocabulary. In addition, the participants were in favor of the use of collaborative work. For example, they highlighted the help they gave each other when something was difficult for them. This outcome is in agreement with Anggraheni et al. (2020) and Patmi and Sabaruddin (2021) findings which indicated that positive effects may be shown when students overcome their learning challenges by cooperating and looking for answers within their group in an interactive learning environment. Consequently, it can be said that due to these positive effects that CLT generated in the students, they perceived it as a useful approach to improving their vocabulary in English. However, this effect was not seen when some speaking activities were developed, therefore the posttest results did not show a significant increase in vocabulary. It is worth mentioning that none of the six primary empirical studies that serve as the foundation for this research—Anggraheni et al. (2020), Asrul and Dahlan (2022), Çiftci and Ozcan, (2021), Patmi and Sabaruddin (2021), Phoeun and Sengsri (2021), and Yuliawati and Aprillia (2019)—discuss the effectiveness and perception of students about CLT activities. This leaves room for future research involving EFL teachers, researchers, and stakeholders.

It is also important to note that some limitations of this study need to be recognized: First, due to time constraints, it was not possible to carry out another cycle according to the action-research model. Consequently, more research is needed to be undertaken by applying another cycle where, after having observed and reflected on the difficulties that arise, adjustments and changes are made to the action plan. Regarding instrumentation, to reduce the impact of prior knowledge and maturation effects on students' responses, it is strongly recommended to design and administer two identical tests with the same number of questions and content to address threats related to internal validity.

CONCLUSIONS

This study has shed light on the impact of the application of Communicative Language Teaching activities on the development of English vocabulary in eighth-graders. The findings showed that CLT activities allowed students to have a slight development in their posttest scores in comparison to their pretest. Additionally, they showed the highest growth in the vocabulary area of “form”, although there were still some difficulties in the areas of “meaning”, and “use” where the majority of participants had trouble matching words to their definitions and their placement in sentences. This can be attributed to

the little development of activities that addressed these aspects.

The findings of this study indicated that the majority of students in this group had positive perceptions towards the implementation of Communicative Language Teaching activities to improve English vocabulary. The students felt comfortable developing CLT activities around familiar themes and working in groups because they were able to support each other. Additionally, it was found that the CLT activities of “opinion-sharing information” were the most interesting for the participants since they expressed their opinions without worrying about being wrong.

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