

Navigating the "Culture of Learning": Institutional and Socio-Cultural Barriers to CLT Implementation by Non-Native English Teachers in Chinese Universities

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Abstract

This qualitative study examines the institutional and socio-cultural barriers faced by non-native English-speaking teachers (NNESTs) implementing Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) in Chinese universities, with particular attention to how teachers' empathetic understanding of student experience shapes their pedagogical practice. Drawing on semi-structured interviews and classroom observations with 18 non-native English teachers across five Chinese universities, the study identifies three categories of barriers: institutional constraints (examination-driven curricula, large class sizes, limited resources), socio-cultural factors (student expectations, face-saving concerns, hierarchical relationships), and teacher identity challenges (linguistic insecurity, credibility concerns, professional recognition). Significantly, the findings reveal that teachers' empathy—rooted in their own language learning experiences—serves as a distinctive resource for navigating these barriers and supporting student engagement in communicative activities. The study contributes to the literature by moving beyond deficit models of NNESTs to recognize their distinctive strengths and by positioning empathy as a core principle of student-centered CLT. Implications are discussed for teacher education, institutional policy, and classroom practice.

Keywords: Communicative Language Teaching, Non-Native English Teachers, Empathy, Chinese Universities, Language Teaching Barriers, Student-Centered Learning

Introduction

The global adoption of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) over the past four decades has fundamentally reshaped English language instruction worldwide. (Yu, 2001) CLT emerged in the 1970s and 1980s as a paradigm shift from traditional grammar-focused instruction, emphasizing instead the development of communicative competence—the ability to use language appropriately and effectively in authentic communicative situations. This philosophical reorientation has reshaped teacher education programs, curriculum

development, and classroom practices worldwide. However, the implementation of CLT remains uneven and contested, particularly in educational contexts where institutional structures, assessment systems, and cultural learning norms differ significantly from those in English-speaking countries.

The tension between CLT's student-centered philosophy and the realities of educational practice is especially pronounced in Chinese universities. Over the past two decades, national education policies have consistently promoted CLT as the recommended approach for university English instruction. Yet classroom practice often reflects competing demands and constraints: examination-focused curricula that prioritize test preparation, large class sizes that limit individual interaction, institutional policies that constrain pedagogical innovation, and deeply rooted cultural learning norms that emphasize teacher authority, collective harmony, and examination success. These institutional and socio-cultural factors create a complex landscape in which teachers must navigate competing priorities while maintaining their professional integrity and commitment to student learning.

Within this context, non-native English-speaking teachers (NNESTs), who comprise the majority of English instructors in Chinese universities, occupy a particularly complex position. NNESTs have historically faced professional marginalization rooted in native-speakerism—the ideological privileging of native speakers and native-like proficiency. This bias has resulted in lower salaries, fewer professional opportunities, and persistent questions about linguistic credibility and teaching effectiveness. Yet recent scholarship has begun to recognize that NNESTs bring distinctive strengths to language instruction, including shared language learning experience, empathy with learner struggles, multilingual awareness, and cultural and linguistic bridging capabilities. These strengths are particularly valuable in CLT contexts, where understanding student anxiety, creating psychologically safe environments, and adapting instruction to cultural contexts are essential for success.

Consider the experience of Chen, a non-native English teacher. During a pair work activity designed to promote oral communication, she notices her students sitting silently, waiting for instruction. Rather than forcing participation, she pauses and asks in Chinese, "I know this feels uncomfortable. I remember feeling exactly this way when I was learning English. Let's take this step by step." (Chen & Goh, 2011) Her empathetic acknowledgment creates a moment of connection—students nod, and gradually, hesitantly, they begin to engage. This moment captures both the challenges and the distinctive strengths non-native teachers bring to language instruction: they face significant institutional and cultural barriers to implementing CLT, yet they possess empathetic understanding of student struggles rooted in their own language learning journeys.

While research has documented the challenges faced by NNESTs in diverse contexts and the barriers to CLT implementation in Asian educational systems, limited research has examined how these issues intersect specifically for non-native teachers in Chinese universities. Moreover, existing research on NNESTs often emphasizes challenges and limitations rather than distinctive strengths. Even fewer studies have explored how teachers' empathetic understanding of student experience shapes their pedagogical practice and supports CLT implementation. This study addresses these critical gaps.

Study Novelty and Contribution to the Field

This study makes several novel contributions to the field of language teaching and applied linguistics. First, it addresses a significant research gap by examining how institutional and socio-cultural barriers to CLT implementation intersect specifically for non-native teachers in Chinese universities—a context that has received limited scholarly attention despite its significance in global English language teaching. Second, and most importantly, this study moves beyond deficit models of NNESTs that emphasize limitations to recognize and systematically document distinctive strengths, particularly empathy rooted in shared language learning experience. This reframing is theoretically significant because it challenges the persistent native-speaker bias that has long marginalized non-native teachers in the field. Third, the study positions empathy as a core principle of student-centered CLT, rather than a peripheral concern. By demonstrating how teachers' empathetic understanding of student experience shapes pedagogical practice and supports CLT implementation, the research contributes to a more nuanced understanding of effective language teaching. Fourth, the study provides evidence-based understanding of how CLT can be adapted to align with cultural learning norms while maintaining communicative goals, contributing to the growing literature on culturally responsive pedagogy. Finally, the study contributes to localized knowledge about English language teaching in Chinese higher education, validating and elevating the contributions of non-native teachers whose empathetic practice is often overlooked in a field historically privileging native speakers.

From a social sciences perspective, this research contributes to broader discussions about professional equity, identity, and the valorization of diverse forms of expertise. It challenges the hierarchical positioning of native speakers over non-native speakers in the language teaching profession and demonstrates that linguistic nativeness is not the primary determinant of teaching effectiveness. Instead, the study highlights how teachers' empathetic understanding, cultural knowledge, and commitment to student learning create conditions for effective instruction. This has implications not only for English language teaching but for broader conversations about professional discrimination, the recognition of diverse expertise, and the creation of more equitable educational systems.

Research Questions

This study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What specific institutional and socio-cultural barriers do non-native English teachers encounter when implementing CLT in Chinese universities?
2. How do non-native teachers' empathetic understanding of student language learning struggles influence their pedagogical practice and CLT implementation?
3. How do non-native teachers balance institutional constraints with their empathetic commitment to student learning?
4. What contextual factors shape the nature and severity of these barriers, and how do teachers' empathy inform their responses?

Significance of the Study

This research contributes to the field in several important ways. First, it moves beyond deficit models of NNESTs that emphasize limitations to recognize distinctive strengths, particularly empathy rooted in shared language learning experience. Second, it positions empathy as a core principle of student-centered CLT, rather than a peripheral concern. Third, it provides

evidence-based understanding of how CLT can be adapted to align with cultural learning norms while maintaining communicative goals. Fourth, it validates and elevates the contributions of non-native teachers, whose empathetic practice is often undervalued in a field historically privileging native speakers. Finally, it contributes to localized knowledge about English language teaching in Chinese higher education, a context that deserves greater scholarly attention.

Literature Review

Communicative Language Teaching: Theory and Implementation

Communicative Language Teaching emerged in the 1970s and 1980s as a response to perceived limitations of grammar-focused, structural approaches to language instruction. (Hymes, D. (1972). CLT emphasizes communicative competence—the ability to use language appropriately and effectively in authentic communicative situations—rather than isolated grammatical accuracy (Pan & Nunan, 2025). The approach prioritizes learner-centered instruction, authentic communication, and meaningful interaction as central to language development.

Pan and Nunan (2025) reflect on CLT's evolution and future directions, noting that while CLT has become the dominant paradigm in English language teaching globally, its implementation remains contested and contextually variable. The authors emphasize that CLT is not a monolithic set of techniques but rather a philosophy that must be adapted to specific educational contexts. This recognition is particularly important for understanding CLT implementation in non-Western contexts, where educational traditions and institutional structures may differ significantly from those in English-speaking countries.

CLT Implementation in Asian Contexts

Implementation of CLT in Asian educational systems has been marked by both enthusiasm and challenges. While CLT principles have been widely adopted in policy documents and teacher training programs, classroom practice often reflects a more complex reality. Large class sizes, examination-focused curricula, limited resources, and cultural learning norms emphasizing teacher authority and collective harmony create significant constraints on communicative language teaching (Sun & Buripakdi, 2024). Sun and Buripakdi (2024) examine national English curricula in China from a global citizenship perspective, highlighting tensions between traditional educational values and contemporary pedagogical approaches. They argue for curricula that balance communicative competence with cultural education and global awareness.

The "Culture of Learning" in China

Chinese educational traditions, deeply influenced by Confucian values, emphasize respect for teacher authority, collective harmony, and examination success. (Li & Peng, 2022) These values shape what researchers term the "culture of learning"—the shared beliefs, norms, and practices that characterize educational experiences in particular cultural contexts. In Chinese universities, this culture manifests in several ways: students expect explicit instruction and detailed note-taking opportunities; public speaking and risk-taking are constrained by face-saving concerns; and hierarchical teacher-student relationships position teachers as knowledge authorities rather than facilitators.

Zhao and Baharom (2023) investigate autonomy-supportive teaching and its effects on Chinese students' intrinsic motivation and oral English achievement. Their findings suggest that while autonomy-supportive teaching (which aligns with CLT principles) can enhance student motivation and achievement, successful implementation requires careful attention to how autonomy is framed and supported within Chinese cultural contexts. The researchers note that Chinese students may require more explicit guidance and structure than autonomy-supportive models typically provide, highlighting the need for culturally responsive adaptations of CLT.

Non-Native English Teachers: Identity, Challenges, and Strengths

Non-native English-speaking teachers comprise the majority of English instructors globally, yet they have historically faced professional marginalization rooted in native-speakerism—the ideological privileging of native speakers and native-like proficiency (L. (Evelyn) Wang & Fang, 2020). This bias has resulted in lower salaries, fewer professional opportunities, and persistent questions about linguistic credibility and teaching effectiveness for NNESTs.

However, recent scholarship has begun to recognize distinctive strengths that NNESTs bring to language instruction. These include shared language learning experience, empathy with learner struggles, multilingual awareness, and cultural and linguistic bridging capabilities. Xu (2025) examines racialized English language teaching in China, documenting how African English teachers experience identity insecurity and professional marginalization despite their linguistic and pedagogical qualifications. While Xu's focus is on racialized dimensions of English teaching in China, the study's findings regarding identity insecurity and the persistence of native-speaker bias despite policy commitments to diversity are relevant to understanding NNEST experiences more broadly.

Xu and Knijnik (2024) explore how English can serve as a "world opener" in Chinese universities, fostering intercultural awareness and community among learners. Their work emphasizes that effective English teaching requires teachers who can bridge linguistic and cultural differences, a capability that NNESTs often possess through their own multilingual and multicultural experiences. The authors argue for teaching approaches that help students see English as a tool for intercultural communication rather than a gateway to native-like proficiency.

Empathy in Language Teaching

Empathy—the capacity to understand and respond to others' emotional and psychological experiences—is increasingly recognized as central to effective teaching across disciplines. (F. Wang, 2024) In language teaching specifically, empathy is particularly important because language learning involves not only cognitive development but also emotional and psychological dimensions. Students learning to communicate in a new language often experience anxiety, self-doubt, and concerns about making mistakes or losing face.

Teacher empathy operates on multiple dimensions: cognitive empathy (understanding students' perspectives and concerns), affective empathy (sharing in students' emotional experiences), and empathetic action (responding to students' needs in supportive ways). In CLT contexts, where students must take communicative risks and engage in authentic

interaction, teacher empathy becomes especially important for creating psychologically safe environments where students feel supported in their efforts.

Teacher Well-Being and Professional Development

Zhang (2024) examines teacher well-being in English language teaching from an ecological approach, emphasizing that teacher effectiveness and student learning are influenced by the broader systemic context in which teaching occurs. Zhang argues that supporting teacher well-being requires attention not only to individual factors (such as stress management and professional development) but also to institutional and systemic factors (such as class size policies, assessment systems, and professional recognition). This ecological perspective is particularly relevant for understanding the experiences of NNESTs, whose well-being is often constrained by institutional marginalization and professional discrimination.

Research Gap

While research exists on CLT implementation barriers, NNEST challenges, and empathy in teaching separately, limited research examines how these issues intersect specifically for non-native teachers in Chinese university contexts. Moreover, existing research on NNESTs often emphasizes challenges and limitations rather than distinctive strengths. This study addresses these gaps by examining how non-native teachers' empathetic understanding of student experience—rooted in their own language learning journeys—shapes their pedagogical practice and supports CLT implementation, even within significant institutional and cultural constraints.

Methodology

Research Design

This qualitative study employs an interpretivist research paradigm, recognizing that understanding complex social phenomena such as CLT implementation requires attention to participants' meanings, experiences, and interpretations. The study combines semi-structured interviews and classroom observations to triangulate data and develop rich understanding of how non-native teachers navigate barriers to CLT implementation while exercising empathy in their teaching practice.

Participants

Participants were 18 non-native English-speaking teachers recruited from five universities in different regions of China (Shanghai, Beijing, Chengdu, Guangzhou, and Wuhan). Participants met the following criteria: (a) non-native English speakers with L1 other than English; (b) teaching oral English or communicative English courses; (c) employed at Chinese universities at the undergraduate level; (d) minimum of two years teaching experience; and (e) willingness to participate in interviews and classroom observations. The sample included 11 women and 7 men, with ages ranging from 26 to 52 years ($M = 35.4$ years). Teaching experience ranged from 2 to 18 years ($M = 7.2$ years). Participants' L1 languages included Mandarin Chinese ($n = 16$), Cantonese ($n = 1$), and Mongolian ($n = 1$). All participants held master's degrees in English, Applied Linguistics, or related fields.

Data Collection

Interviews: Each participant participated in two semi-structured interviews lasting 45-60 minutes each. The first interview explored participants' teaching background, CLT

understanding, perceived barriers, and empathetic understanding of student experience. The second interview, conducted after classroom observations, allowed participants to reflect on observed teaching and discuss how they navigate barriers while maintaining empathetic connection with students. All interviews were conducted in English and audio-recorded with participant consent.

Classroom Observations: Each participant was observed teaching 2-3 classes (50-90 minutes each), for a total of 48 classroom observations. Observations focused on teacher-student interactions, communicative activities, classroom management, student engagement, and empathetic responses to student difficulties or anxiety. An observation protocol guided systematic data collection, with attention to empathy indicators including emotional attunement, shared experience references, psychological safety creation, cultural responsiveness, individual attention, relationship building, and advocacy for student needs. Selected observations were video-recorded (with consent) to allow detailed analysis of empathetic moments.

Supplementary Data: Curriculum documents, course syllabi, and institutional policy documents were reviewed to understand institutional contexts shaping CLT implementation. Brief student surveys (n = 156 students across all classes) asked about teacher empathy, support, and engagement in communicative activities.

Data Analysis

Interview transcripts were coded using thematic analysis. Initial codes were developed inductively from the data, then organized into focused codes and axial codes representing broader themes. A coding framework specifically attended to empathetic dimensions of teaching practice, including codes for shared struggle, understanding student anxiety, cultural understanding, individual attention, psychological safety, relationship building, and advocacy. Classroom observation data were coded using a similar framework, with attention to how empathy manifested in teacher-student interactions and classroom activities.

Data from interviews, observations, and supplementary sources were triangulated to develop case narratives for each participant, then cross-case analysis identified common themes regarding barriers to CLT implementation and how teachers' empathy shaped their responses. Analysis was conducted using NVivo 12 software.

Trustworthiness and Ethical Considerations

Trustworthiness was enhanced through member checking (participants reviewed and confirmed interpretations), peer debriefing (findings were discussed with colleagues in the field), and prolonged engagement (data collection occurred over eight months). A detailed audit trail documented all research decisions and procedures. The study received institutional review board approval, and all participants provided informed consent. Confidentiality was maintained through use of pseudonyms and removal of identifying information.

Table 1

Participant Demographics and Teaching Context (N = 18)

Characteristic	Category	n (%)
Gender	Female	11 (61%)
	Male	7 (39%)
Age Range	26-35 years	7 (39%)
	36-45 years	8 (44%)
	46-52 years	3 (17%)
Teaching Experience	2-5 years	6 (33%)
	6-10 years	7 (39%)
	11-18 years	5 (28%)
L1 Language	Mandarin Chinese	16 (89%)
	Cantonese	1 (5%)
	Mongolian	1 (5%)
Educational Background	MA in English	9 (50%)
	MA in Applied Linguistics	7 (39%)
	Other MA	2 (11%)
University Location	Shanghai	4 (22%)
	Beijing	4 (22%)
	Chengdu	3 (17%)
	Guangzhou	4 (22%)
	Wuhan	3 (17%)

Table 2

Barriers to CLT Implementation and Teachers' Empathetic Responses

Barrier Category	Specific Barrier	Teachers Reporting (n)	Empathetic Response Strategy
Institutional	Exam-driven curriculum	16	Frame communicative activities as test prep; show connection to exam success
Institutional	Large class sizes	14	Use strategic grouping; learn student names; provide individual feedback; hold office hours
Institutional	Limited resources	12	Create authentic materials; use free online resources; incorporate student experiences
Socio-Cultural	Student anxiety & expectations	18	Acknowledge anxiety; share own struggles; create low-stakes opportunities; praise effort
Socio-Cultural	Face-saving concerns	15	Use pair/small group work before whole-class; allow

			preparation time; normalize mistakes
Teacher Identity	Linguistic insecurity & credibility	13	Model error correction; share own language learning journey; demonstrate continued learning

Barriers to CLT Implementation by Non-Native English Teachers

in Chinese Universities

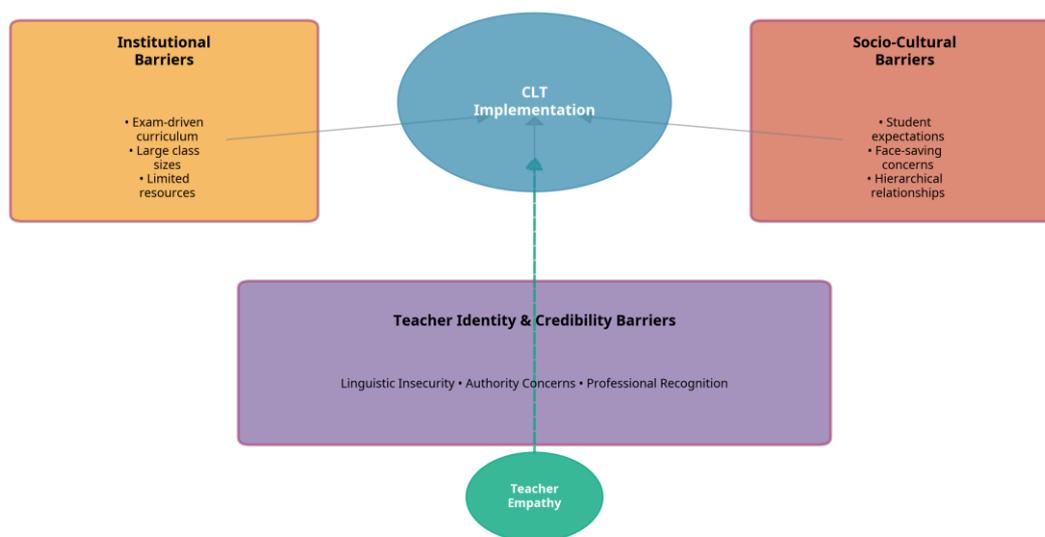


Figure 1: Barriers to CLT Implementation by Non-Native English Teachers in Chinese Universities

Teacher Empathy as Bridge to Effective CLT Implementation

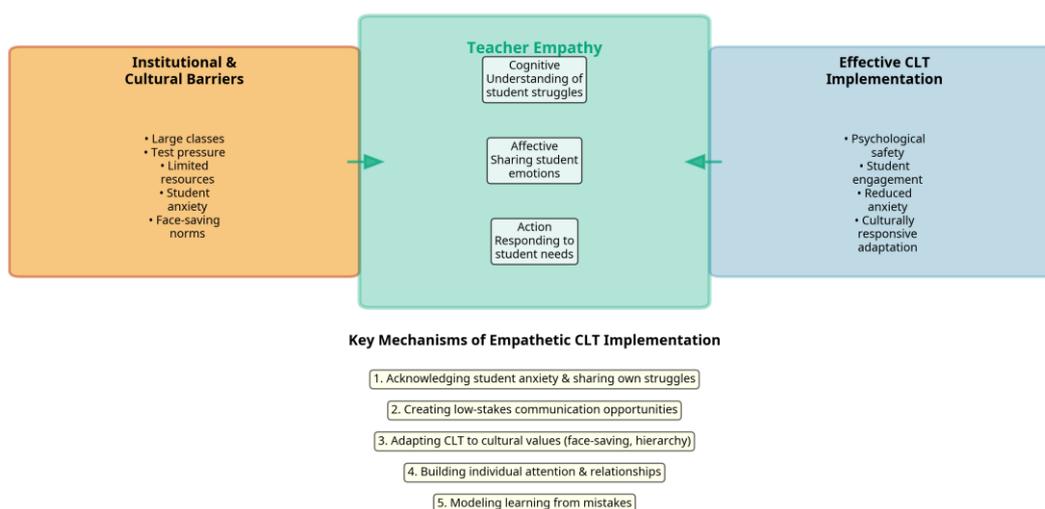


Figure 2: Teacher Empathy as Bridge to Effective CLT Implementation

Findings

Institutional Barriers and Teachers' Empathetic Responses

Examination-Driven Curriculum

The most frequently cited barrier was institutional emphasis on standardized English proficiency tests (CET-4, CET-6, TOEFL, IELTS). Sixteen of 18 participants reported that test-focused curricula created pressure to prioritize grammar and vocabulary over communicative competence. As one teacher, Mr. Wang, explained: "The students know they need to pass CET-4 to graduate. They ask me, 'Will this speaking activity help us pass the exam?' When I say no, they lose motivation. But I understand their anxiety because I felt the same pressure when I was taking English exams."

Significantly, teachers' empathetic understanding of test anxiety motivated them to develop strategies balancing test preparation with communicative development. Ms. Liu described her approach: "I know students are terrified of failing the exam. I remember that fear. So I try to show them that speaking practice actually helps with the test. I frame communicative activities as test preparation strategies—for example, I teach them how to organize their thoughts quickly, how to recover from mistakes, how to speak fluently under pressure. These are both communication skills and test-taking skills."

Classroom observations confirmed this approach. In Mr. Zhang's class, a communicative activity involved students discussing solutions to hypothetical problems. Mr. Zhang explicitly connected the activity to test preparation: "This kind of discussion appears in CET-6 speaking tests. When you practice now, you're preparing for the exam while developing real communication skills."

Large Class Sizes

Fourteen participants taught classes of 40-80 students, creating logistical challenges for implementing pair work, group discussions, and individualized feedback. Yet rather than abandoning communicative activities, teachers developed creative adaptations motivated by empathy with students' desire for individual attention. Ms. Chen explained: "I know students feel lost in large classes. I remember feeling that way. So I use strategies to make them feel seen—I learn their names, I give individual feedback on written work, I create opportunities for small group interaction."

Classroom observations documented these strategies. In one class of 65 students, Ms. Chen used strategic grouping to create smaller interactive units within the large class. She circulated among groups, providing individual feedback and encouragement. She also held optional office hours where students could receive individual attention and feedback on their speaking.

Limited Resources

Twelve participants reported insufficient access to technology, audiovisual equipment, and authentic materials. Yet their empathy with students' limited exposure to authentic English motivated creative solutions. Ms. Wang described her approach: "I know many of my students don't have access to English media outside class. So I spend extra time creating materials and finding free online resources. It's not ideal, but I understand their situation because I was in it too."

Teachers created authentic materials by incorporating students' own experiences as communication topics. In one observed class, students discussed their experiences with social media, online shopping, and digital communication—topics relevant to their lives and interests. This approach made communicative activities more engaging while requiring fewer external resources.

Socio-Cultural Barriers and Teachers' Empathetic Understanding

Student Expectations and Communication Anxiety

All 18 participants reported that students expected teacher-centered instruction and experienced anxiety about communicative activities. Students viewed pair work and group discussions as less rigorous than grammar instruction. One student survey respondent wrote: "Speaking activities feel like playing games, not real learning."

However, teachers' empathy with communication anxiety—rooted in their own language learning experiences—shaped their responses. Mr. Huang explained: "When I was learning English, I was terrified to speak. I would rehearse in my head for hours. I understand that fear completely. So I don't force students to speak; I create conditions where they feel safe enough to try."

Classroom observations documented how teachers created psychological safety. Teachers explicitly acknowledged student anxiety ("I know this feels uncomfortable"), shared their own language learning struggles ("When I was learning English, I made so many mistakes"), and created low-stakes communication opportunities (private conversations before whole-class discussion). Teachers also praised effort and risk-taking, not just accuracy. In Ms. Chen's class, when a student made a grammatical error while attempting a complex communicative task, Ms. Chen responded: "Great effort! You tried a difficult structure. Let me show you one small adjustment, but your communication was clear and natural."

Face-Saving and Classroom Participation Norms

Fifteen participants explicitly discussed cultural norms emphasizing face-saving and collective harmony as barriers to participation in communicative activities. Yet teachers' empathy with students' concerns about losing face—rooted in their own cultural background—led them to develop culturally responsive CLT strategies.

Ms. Li explained: "In Chinese culture, making mistakes publicly can damage your face. I understand this deeply because I'm Chinese. So I don't put students on the spot. Instead, I create activities where they can practice with partners first, then share if they want to."

Classroom observations confirmed this approach. Teachers used pair work and small group work extensively before whole-class discussion. They allowed students to prepare before speaking and framed mistakes as normal and valuable. In Mr. Chen's class, he introduced a communicative activity by saying: "We're going to practice together. Mistakes are how we learn. In fact, if you're not making mistakes, you're not pushing yourself hard enough."

Hierarchical Teacher-Student Relationships

All 18 participants discussed tensions between CLT's student-centered philosophy and traditional hierarchical relationships. Yet rather than abandoning their authority, teachers

reframed their role to create space for student voice while maintaining their position as guides and mentors.

Mr. Wang explained: "I can't just become a 'facilitator' and disappear. My students expect me to be a teacher, to guide them. But I can be a teacher who listens, who asks questions, who values their ideas. I can use my authority to create space for student voice."

Classroom observations showed teachers maintaining their role as authority while creating space for student input. Teachers asked genuine questions and responded to student ideas. They positioned themselves as guides rather than sole knowledge sources. In Ms. Liu's class, when discussing a reading, she asked: "What do you think the author meant? I have an interpretation, but I want to hear yours first. Your perspective is valuable."

Teacher Identity, Empathy, and Credibility

Linguistic Insecurity and Empathetic Connection with Students

Thirteen participants reported anxiety about their own English proficiency, particularly pronunciation and spontaneous speech. However, this shared vulnerability created empathetic connection with students experiencing language learning anxiety.

Mr. Huang reflected: "I'm not a perfect English speaker, and I used to see that as a weakness. But now I see it as a strength. When I make mistakes in class and correct myself, students see that mistakes are normal. When I tell them about my own pronunciation struggles, they feel less alone in theirs."

Classroom observations documented teachers modeling error correction and learning from mistakes. In Ms. Wang's class, when she mispronounced a word, she caught herself, laughed, and said: "Did you hear that? I said 'pronunciation' wrong. Even after 15 years of teaching, I still make mistakes. That's how we learn." Students visibly relaxed, and participation increased.

Authority and Credibility Through Empathy

Some participants initially felt their authority was questioned due to their non-native status. However, they discovered that empathetic connection and genuine care for students' learning built credibility more effectively than native-like pronunciation.

Ms. Chen shared: "At first, I thought students didn't respect me because I'm not a native speaker. But I realized they respect me because I care about them, because I understand their struggles, because I'm invested in their learning. That matters more than my accent."

Student survey responses supported this observation. When asked "How much do you trust your teacher to support your English learning?" 89% of students (139/156) responded "very much" or "quite a bit." Comments included: "Teacher understands what we're going through," "She remembers my name and my progress," and "He explains things in a way that makes sense to me."

Professional Recognition and Empathy with Students

Participants reported lower status and fewer opportunities compared to native speakers. Yet their empathy with experiences of marginalization motivated them to create inclusive, supportive classrooms.

Ms. Li explained: "I know what it feels like to be undervalued because of your accent or background. So I work hard to make sure my students never feel that way. I celebrate their progress, I show them they can succeed, I help them believe in themselves."

Classroom observations showed teachers providing extensive positive feedback and encouragement. Teachers highlighted student progress and achievements. In Mr. Liu's class, he maintained a "progress board" where he recorded each student's improvements over the semester. He regularly referred to this board to show students their development.

Discussion

Synthesis: Empathy as Both Challenge and Resource

The findings reveal a central paradox: while non-native teachers face distinctive barriers to CLT implementation, their empathetic understanding of student experience—rooted in their own language learning journeys—provides distinctive resources for navigating these barriers and supporting student engagement.

Empathy as Challenge: When institutional barriers prevent teachers from responding empathetically to students (for example, when large class sizes make individual attention impossible, or when test-focused curricula conflict with communicative goals), teachers experience tension and frustration. This empathetic concern for students' well-being, combined with institutional constraints, creates emotional labor.

Empathy as Resource: When teachers can exercise empathy—by acknowledging student anxiety, sharing their own struggles, creating psychologically safe environments, and adapting CLT to cultural contexts—they create conditions where students engage more fully in communicative activities. Empathy becomes a bridge between institutional barriers and CLT implementation.

Theoretical Implications

Beyond Deficit Models: Recognizing NNEST Strengths

The findings challenge deficit models of NNESTs by documenting the distinctive strengths they bring to language teaching, particularly empathy rooted in shared language learning experience. This reframes the conversation from "How can NNESTs overcome their limitations?" to "How can institutions support and leverage NNEST strengths?"

Empathy as Core CLT Principle

The findings suggest that empathy should be recognized as a core principle of CLT, alongside communicative competence and student-centeredness. Student-centered CLT requires not just learner-focused activities, but teachers who understand and respond to students' emotional, psychological, and cultural needs. Non-native teachers' empathy demonstrates this principle in practice.

Culturally Responsive CLT

Rather than viewing Chinese educational traditions as obstacles to overcome, empathetic teachers negotiate between CLT principles and cultural values, creating culturally responsive CLT. As Zhao and Baharom (2023) note, successful implementation of student-centered approaches in Chinese contexts requires careful attention to how autonomy and participation

are framed within cultural values. The teachers in this study demonstrate how empathetic understanding of cultural norms enables such adaptations.

Practical Implications

For Teacher Education and Professional Development

Teacher education programs should explicitly recognize and develop empathy as a core teaching competency. Programs should help teachers understand how empathy can support CLT implementation and develop strategies for exercising empathy within institutional constraints. Programs should validate non-native teachers' empathetic strengths and help them see these as professional assets.

For Institutional Policy

Institutions should recognize that supporting CLT implementation requires supporting teachers' capacity for empathy. Class size policies should be reconsidered for communicative courses. Assessment systems should be reformed to include communicative competence, reducing pressure on teachers to choose between empathetic responses to student anxiety and institutional test-prep demands. Hiring and promotion policies should value non-native teachers' contributions.

For Classroom Practice

Teachers can leverage empathy as a core teaching strategy, explicitly acknowledging student struggles and sharing their own language learning experiences. Teachers can adapt CLT activities to align with cultural values while maintaining communicative goals. Teachers can create psychologically safe environments where students feel supported in taking communicative risks.

Limitations

The study has several limitations. First, qualitative findings are not generalizable to all contexts. Second, the sample, while diverse geographically, represents only 18 teachers; findings may not represent all non-native teachers in Chinese universities. Third, self-reported data may be subject to social desirability bias. Fourth, the study focuses on teachers perceived as empathetic; findings may not represent all non-native teachers. Fifth, the study does not directly measure student learning outcomes; further research is needed to establish causal links between teacher empathy and student achievement.

Directions for Future Research

Future research should investigate: (a) how teacher empathy influences student engagement and learning outcomes over time; (b) how empathy operates differently across cultural contexts; (c) how to develop empathy in teacher education programs; (d) student perspectives on non-native teachers' empathy; and (e) how institutional factors support or constrain teachers' capacity for empathy.

Conclusion

This study examined the barriers non-native English teachers encounter in implementing CLT in Chinese universities, with particular attention to how teachers' empathetic understanding of student experience shapes their pedagogical practice. The findings identify three categories of barriers: institutional constraints (examination-driven curricula, large class sizes, limited resources), socio-cultural factors (student expectations, face-saving concerns, hierarchical relationships), and teacher identity challenges (linguistic insecurity, credibility concerns, professional recognition).

Significantly, the study reveals that teachers' empathy—rooted in their own language learning experiences—serves as a distinctive resource for navigating these barriers and supporting student engagement. Rather than viewing CLT implementation barriers for non-native teachers as primarily individual deficiencies or even systemic constraints alone, the findings suggest that the challenge lies in creating institutional and professional conditions that allow teachers to exercise empathy while implementing CLT. When empathy is constrained by institutional barriers, CLT implementation suffers. When empathy is supported and valued, CLT flourishes.

This research contributes to the field by moving beyond native-speaker bias to recognize the distinctive strengths non-native teachers bring to language instruction. It positions empathy as a core principle of student-centered CLT and provides evidence-based understanding of how CLT can be adapted to align with cultural learning norms while maintaining communicative goals. Most importantly, it validates and elevates the contributions of non-native teachers, whose empathetic practice is often overlooked in a field historically privileging native speakers.

As the field of English language teaching continues to evolve, we must move beyond the native-speaker bias that has long marginalized non-native teachers. We must recognize that empathy—the capacity to understand and respond to others' experiences—is as important as native-like pronunciation or grammar accuracy. And we must create institutional and professional conditions that allow non-native teachers to exercise this empathy in service of their students' learning and development.

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