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Perceived Communicative Language Teaching and Self-Perceived English Proficiency: The Mediating Role of Classroom Engagement among Chinese University EFL Students

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Abstract

This study examined the relationships among perceived communicative language teaching (PCLT), classroom engagement (CE), and self-perceived English language proficiency (SELP) among non-English-major university students in Shandong, China. In particular, it investigated the direct association between PCLT and SELP and the indirect association involving CE. A cross-sectional questionnaire survey was conducted with 400 first- and second-year non-English-major university students from three universities in Shandong Province. Structural equation modelling (SEM) was performed using AMOS 28.0, and bootstrapping with 5,000 resamples was employed to assess the indirect association. The findings revealed that PCLT was positively and significantly associated with CE ($\beta = 0.785$, $p < 0.01$), while CE was positively and significantly associated with SELP ($\beta = 0.764$, $p < 0.01$). However, the direct association between PCLT and SELP was not statistically significant ($\beta = -0.110$, $p = 0.120$). In contrast, the indirect association between PCLT and SELP through CE was statistically significant ($\beta = 0.652$, 95% CI [0.511, 0.864], $p < 0.01$). These findings highlight the relevance of classroom engagement in understanding the relationship between students' perceptions of communicative language teaching and their self-perceived English language proficiency. By examining these three constructs within a single model, this study provides further insight into the role of classroom engagement in university EFL learning.

Keywords: Communicative Language Teaching, Perceived Communicative Language Teaching, Classroom Engagement, Self-Perceived English Language Proficiency, University EFL Students

Introduction

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) has played an important role in English language teaching by emphasizing meaningful communication, the use of language in context, and interaction among learners. Rather than focusing exclusively on the explanation and practice of grammatical forms, CLT encourages students to use English to express ideas, exchange information, and complete communicative tasks (Richards, 2006; Richards & Rodgers, 2001). These principles are particularly relevant to university English education, where students are expected to develop language abilities that can be applied to academic, professional, and everyday communication.

In China, College English education has increasingly emphasized communicative competence and practical language use. The College English Teaching Guidelines issued by the Ministry of Education highlight students' ability to apply English in academic, professional, and intercultural contexts (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2020). However, translating these educational objectives into classroom practice remains challenging, as established teaching practices and assessment demands may not fully align with the shift towards communication-focused instruction (Cheng & Wei, 2021; Liu & Ren, 2024). At the provincial level, Shandong Province has promoted College English teaching reform through specific initiatives (Shandong Provincial Department of Education, 2010), making it a relevant setting for examining how such communication-oriented objectives are translated into classroom practice.

Although communicative language teaching is widely recognized as an approach that promotes meaningful language use, its implementation may vary across educational and classroom contexts. Littlewood (2007), for example, discusses challenges associated with adopting learner-centred communicative approaches in East Asian educational settings. This suggests that the presence of communicative teaching objectives does not necessarily mean that students experience such practices in the same way in their classrooms. Therefore, students' perceptions of communicative teaching practices deserve attention, as they provide insight into how instructional approaches are experienced from the learners' perspective.

One important aspect of students' classroom experiences is classroom engagement (CE), which encompasses behavioural, emotional, and cognitive involvement in learning (Fredricks et al., 2004). In second language learning, engagement is also reflected in learners' participation in communicative activities, attention to language, and interaction with teachers and peers (Philp & Duchesne, 2016; Hiver et al., 2024). Given that CLT emphasizes interaction and purposeful language use, students who perceive their English classes as more communicative may also report greater involvement in classroom learning. Examining the relationship between perceived communicative language teaching and CE can therefore provide insight into how students' perceptions of instructional practices are associated with their participation in EFL learning.

Beyond classroom participation, students' evaluations of their own English abilities are also relevant to understanding their language-learning experiences. Self-perceived English language proficiency (SELP) refers to learners' evaluations of their English abilities across listening, speaking, reading, and writing (Li & Zhang, 2021; Winke et al., 2023). Although self-assessment is related to, but distinct from, performance-based proficiency assessment, it offers a complementary perspective on learners' perceived language competence (Winke et al., 2023). Previous research has examined self-assessed proficiency in relation to learner-related factors, including second language motivation (Welesilassie & Nikolov, 2024). However, students' evaluations of their language abilities may also be considered in relation to their classroom learning experiences, including the extent to which they engage in language-learning activities.

Previous research has examined relationships between communicative or task-based language teaching and language-learning outcomes (Hancock et al., 2023; Triwibowo, 2023), as well as between classroom engagement and English achievement (Feng & Hong, 2022; Liu

et al., 2023). While these studies provide useful insights into the relationship between instructional approaches, learner engagement, and language-learning outcomes, they do not fully explain how students' perceptions of communicative teaching are associated with their self-perceived English proficiency. In particular, relatively limited attention has been given to examining the relationships among perceived communicative language teaching (PCLT), CE, and SELP within a single analytical framework, or to investigating whether CE is involved in the association between PCLT and SELP. This gap is particularly relevant to university EFL settings, where students' experiences of communicative instruction and their evaluations of their language abilities warrant further examination.

To address this gap, the present study examines the relationships among PCLT, CE, and SELP among first- and second-year non-English-major university students in Shandong Province, China. Specifically, it investigates the associations between PCLT and CE, between CE and SELP, and between PCLT and SELP, as well as the indirect association between PCLT and SELP through CE, using questionnaire data and structural equation modelling (SEM). By bringing instructional perceptions, classroom engagement, and self-perceived language proficiency together within an integrated model, this study extends previous research that has generally examined these relationships separately. In particular, it considers the role of classroom engagement in understanding the association between students' perceptions of communicative teaching and their evaluations of their English abilities.

By examining these relationships together, this study contributes to a broader understanding of how instructional practices, learner engagement, and perceived learning outcomes are connected in university EFL settings. By focusing on self-perceived English proficiency rather than relying solely on academic achievement or objective proficiency measures, the study draws attention to students' own evaluations of their language abilities as an important aspect of language-learning research. Its findings may also offer practical insights for university English teachers into the role of communicative classroom practices and learner engagement in students' language-learning experiences.

Literature Review and Hypotheses Development

Perceived Communicative Language Teaching and Classroom Engagement

The relationship between PCLT and CE can be understood in terms of how students experience and respond to classroom learning opportunities. From a communicative perspective, students need to do more than receive linguistic information; they must also take part in activities that require them to use and develop their language skills. These processes provide a basis for expecting that students who perceive greater opportunities for communicative participation may also report stronger engagement in their English classes.

Empirical studies of related instructional approaches offer indirect support for this expectation. Li and Li (2022) found that a flipped English course was associated with improvements in learner engagement, which they linked to features such as peer interaction, learner autonomy, and teacher presence. Wei (2021) also examined engagement in a flipped translation classroom, highlighting the role of teacher-student interaction. These studies are relevant because they examine learning environments that encourage active participation and interaction. However, flipped instruction is a distinct instructional model, and neither study directly tests whether students' perceptions of communicative language teaching are

associated with engagement in regular EFL classrooms. These studies therefore provide contextual support for, but do not directly test, the PCLT-CE relationship examined here.

The importance of examining students' perceptions is also apparent in the challenges of implementing communicative approaches in different educational contexts. As noted earlier, Littlewood (2007) discusses tensions that may arise when teachers adopt communicative and learner-centred practices—approaches that share an emphasis on active learner participation—in East Asian classrooms, including examination pressures and students' reluctance to participate. This suggests that the opportunities intended by an instructional approach may not be experienced in the same way by all learners. Accordingly, the relationship between PCLT and CE needs to be examined empirically rather than inferred from the stated aims of communicative teaching alone. Although previous research has examined engagement in language-learning tasks and instructional contexts (Aubrey et al., 2020; Hiver et al., 2024), less is known about how students' overall perceptions of communicative teaching relate to their engagement in regular university EFL classrooms. Based on the preceding theoretical rationale and related empirical evidence, the following hypothesis is proposed:Perceived communicative language teaching is positively associated with classroom engagement.

Classroom Engagement and Self-Perceived English Language Proficiency

Classroom engagement may be associated with SELP because students' involvement in learning activities provides opportunities to use English and evaluate their language abilities. Through participation in classroom tasks, learners may gain experience in expressing ideas, understanding language input, and assessing their ability to communicate. These experiences provide a basis for examining how classroom engagement relates to learners' own evaluations of their English proficiency.

A range of empirical studies has examined the relationship between engagement and language-learning outcomes. Feng and Hong (2022) found that behavioural engagement mediated the relationships between foreign language enjoyment, foreign language classroom anxiety, and self-reported English achievement among Chinese EFL learners. Liu et al. (2023) also identified significant relationships between student engagement and English achievement among Chinese university students majoring in fields other than English. Similarly, Kang and Wu (2022) found that behavioural engagement contributed to English achievement in an EFL setting. Khajavy (2021) further reported a mediating role for foreign language engagement in the relationship between perseverance and L2 reading achievement. Taken together, these studies link engagement to English achievement and L2 reading outcomes, although their outcomes are mainly achievement- or performance-based rather than learners' self-evaluations of proficiency.

More directly relevant evidence comes from studies that have included perceived proficiency as an outcome. Kim (2024) examined the relationships among language mindsets, self-efficacy, engagement, and perceived English proficiency among 257 university students in Korea. The path analysis identified an indirect relationship involving self-efficacy, engagement, and perceived proficiency, although the indirect effect was relatively weak. This study is particularly relevant because it incorporates learners' subjective evaluations of their English abilities into a model that also includes engagement. However, the model also

includes other learner variables, whereas the present study focuses on the association between classroom engagement and students' self-perceived English proficiency in relation to students' perceptions of communicative teaching.

Tsao (2024) provides another relevant perspective by examining EFL learners' engagement with teacher written corrective feedback in relation to self-reported writing proficiency. The findings indicated that cognitive engagement was directly associated with writing proficiency in the model examined. This research links a form of engagement with a self-reported language outcome. However, engagement with written corrective feedback is narrower than engagement across regular classroom learning, and writing proficiency represents only one aspect of English proficiency.

Taken together, previous research suggests that engagement is relevant to English-learning outcomes, while studies directly examining its association with learners' self-perceived proficiency remain more limited. In particular, less is known about how overall classroom engagement relates to students' self-perceived proficiency across listening, speaking, reading, and writing in Chinese university EFL contexts. The present study therefore examines the association between classroom engagement and SELP among university EFL learners in Shandong, China. Accordingly, the following hypothesis is proposed: Classroom engagement is positively associated with self-perceived English language proficiency.

The Direct and Indirect Associations Between PCLT and SELP

The previous sections examined the associations between PCLT and CE, and between CE and SELP, respectively. Building on these relationships, this section considers whether PCLT is directly associated with SELP and whether CE may also be involved in an indirect association between the two constructs.

Research on communicative and task-based instruction has primarily examined language-learning outcomes such as achievement and performance (Hancock et al., 2023; Triwibowo, 2023). Although these studies are relevant to understanding the relationship between instructional approaches and language learning, they provide limited direct evidence concerning students' perceptions of communicative teaching and their own evaluations of English proficiency. Research on language self-assessment has examined the relationship between learners' self-evaluations and performance-based measures (Li & Zhang, 2021; Winke et al., 2023), while SELP has also been investigated in relation to learner factors such as motivation (Welesilassie & Nikolov, 2024). Taken together, these studies provide relevant background for examining SELP but leave the direct association between PCLT and learners' perceived proficiency insufficiently understood. The present study therefore examines whether this association remains when CE is included in the model.

Research has also examined engagement in relation to learner characteristics, instructional practices, and language-learning outcomes. Feng and Hong (2022) and Khajavy (2021) investigated engagement in models involving learner-related factors, while Kim (2024) examined engagement and perceived proficiency alongside language mindsets and self-efficacy. Studies of flipped instruction have further explored the relationship between instructional arrangements and learner engagement (Li & Li, 2022; Wei, 2021). These studies provide relevant evidence about engagement in language-learning contexts, but they do not

directly examine the specific indirect association between students' perceptions of communicative teaching and their self-perceived proficiency through classroom engagement. Examining this pathway may therefore extend existing research by bringing instructional perceptions, classroom engagement, and perceived proficiency together within a single model.

The present study consequently examines both the direct association between PCLT and SELP and the indirect association involving CE among university EFL learners in Shandong, China. The direct path is retained to determine whether PCLT remains associated with SELP after CE is included in the model, while the indirect path examines whether PCLT is associated with SELP through CE. Therefore, the following two hypotheses are proposed: PCLT is positively associated with SELP after controlling for CE in the model and PCLT is indirectly associated with SELP through CE.

Research Methodology

This study employed a quantitative cross-sectional survey design. Data were collected through a structured questionnaire from first- and second-year non-English-major university students in Shandong Province, China. Structural equation modeling (SEM) was used to examine the hypothesized associations among PCLT, CE, and SELP, including the indirect association between PCLT and SELP through CE.

Participants and Data Collection

The study involved 400 first- and second-year non-English-major undergraduate students from three universities in Shandong Province, China, including comprehensive and application-oriented institutions. All participants were enrolled in compulsory English courses and had studied English for at least five years. Of the 400 participants, 255 (63.7%) were first-year students and 145 (36.3%) were second-year students. In terms of academic disciplines, 94 participants (23.5%) were from humanities and social sciences programmes, while 306 (76.5%) were from science and engineering programmes.

A multi-stage sampling approach was adopted in this study. The main survey was administered online through Wenjuanxing, a widely used questionnaire platform in China. The questionnaire was presented in Mandarin Chinese. Its Chinese version was translated and back-translated by bilingual experts to support linguistic accuracy and conceptual equivalence. The survey link was distributed through English instructors and class communication groups. Before accessing the questionnaire, participants were provided with an informed consent statement explaining the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, the confidentiality of their responses, and their right to withdraw at any time. Participants were required to indicate their consent before proceeding. No personally identifiable information was collected, and all responses were submitted anonymously.

A total of 540 questionnaires were initially collected. Following data screening, 140 responses were excluded because they were incomplete or showed invalid response patterns, such as straight-line answering. The remaining 400 questionnaires were retained for analysis, representing a valid response rate of 74.1%.

Measures

The data were collected using a 28-item 5-point questionnaire ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The measurement items were developed and adapted based on relevant theoretical frameworks and previous empirical studies. Specifically, the 9 items of PCLT was informed by the principles of communicative language teaching (Canale & Swain, 1980; Savignon, 1997; Richards & Rodgers, 2014); the 10 items of CE drew on the engagement framework of Fredricks et al. (2004) and related studies; and the 9 items of SELP was developed with reference to established perspectives on English language proficiency and self-assessment, including the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (Council of Europe, 2020).

Before the main survey, a pilot study was conducted to examine the clarity and preliminary reliability of the questionnaire. Based on 35 valid pilot responses, the Cronbach's alpha coefficients were 0.894 for PCLT, 0.940 for CE, and .961 for SELP, indicating satisfactory internal consistency across the three scales. Minor wording adjustments were made following the pilot study. Then the formal survey was conducted and the results of validity and reliability is shown in Table 1. Except Cronbach's α, the results of Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA), which includes composite reliability (CR), and average variance extracted (AVE), is necessary to ensure the reliability and validity of the instrument.

From the table below we can see that all constructs demonstrated good reliability, exceeding the recommended thredhold of 0.7 (Scheweizer， 2011). Cronbach's alpha and CR were used to evaluate the internal consistency of the measurement items. In particular, CR considers the standardised factor loadings of individual items and provides an assessment of the overall reliability of each construct. Following the recommendations of Fornell and Larcker (1981) and Hair et al. (2019), CR values above 0.70 indicate satisfactory composite reliability. As presented in Table 1, the CR values for PCLT, CE, and SELP were 0.937, 0.955, and 0.948, respectively, demonstrating satisfactory internal consistency. Furthermore, AVE was used to assess convergent validity by indicating the proportion of variance in the measurement items explained by their underlying constructs. All three AVE values exceeded the recommended threshold of 0.50 (Fornell & Larcker, 1981), with values of 0.622 for PCLT, 0.682 for CE, and 0.688 for SELP. These results provide evidence of adequate convergent validity for all three measurement scales.

Table 1
Confirmatory Factor Analysis Results.

	PCLT	CE	SELP
Cronbach's α	0.935	0.955	0.947
CR	0.937	0.955	0.948
AVE	0.622	0.682	0.688

Structural Equation Modeling

This study employed structural equation modelling (SEM) using AMOS 28.0, with parameter estimation performed through the maximum likelihood method. SEM is a multivariate statistical technique that allows researchers to examine multiple relationships among latent constructs simultaneously. It is particularly appropriate for the present study because it

enables the examination of the direct associations among PCLT, CE, and SELP, as well as the indirect association between PCLT and SELP through CE. The SEM Model results are shown in Figure 1. Following the two-step approach proposed by Anderson and Gerbing (1988), the measurement model was evaluated first, followed by the assessment of the structural model.

The model fit was assessed using several goodness-of-fit indices, including the chi-square to degrees-of-freedom ratio (CMIN/DF), the Comparative Fit Index (CFI), the Tucker–Lewis Index (TLI), and the Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA). These indices were considered collectively to evaluate how well the proposed model fitted the observed data. The structural relationships were subsequently examined through standardised path coefficients and their associated significance levels. The indirect association was tested using bootstrapping with 5,000 resamples and a 95% bias-corrected confidence interval.

The goodness-of-fit indices indicated that the proposed structural model achieved an acceptable fit to the observed data. Specifically, as shown in Table 2, the CMIN/DF value was 3.384, while the CFI and TLI values were 0.917 and 0.909, respectively. The RMSEA value was 0.077, which was below the recommended threshold of 0.08. Although the CMIN/DF value was slightly above the more stringent criterion of 3.00, it remained within the commonly accepted threshold of 5.00. Overall, these indices suggested that the structural model demonstrated an acceptable level of fit, supporting further examination of the hypothesised relationships.

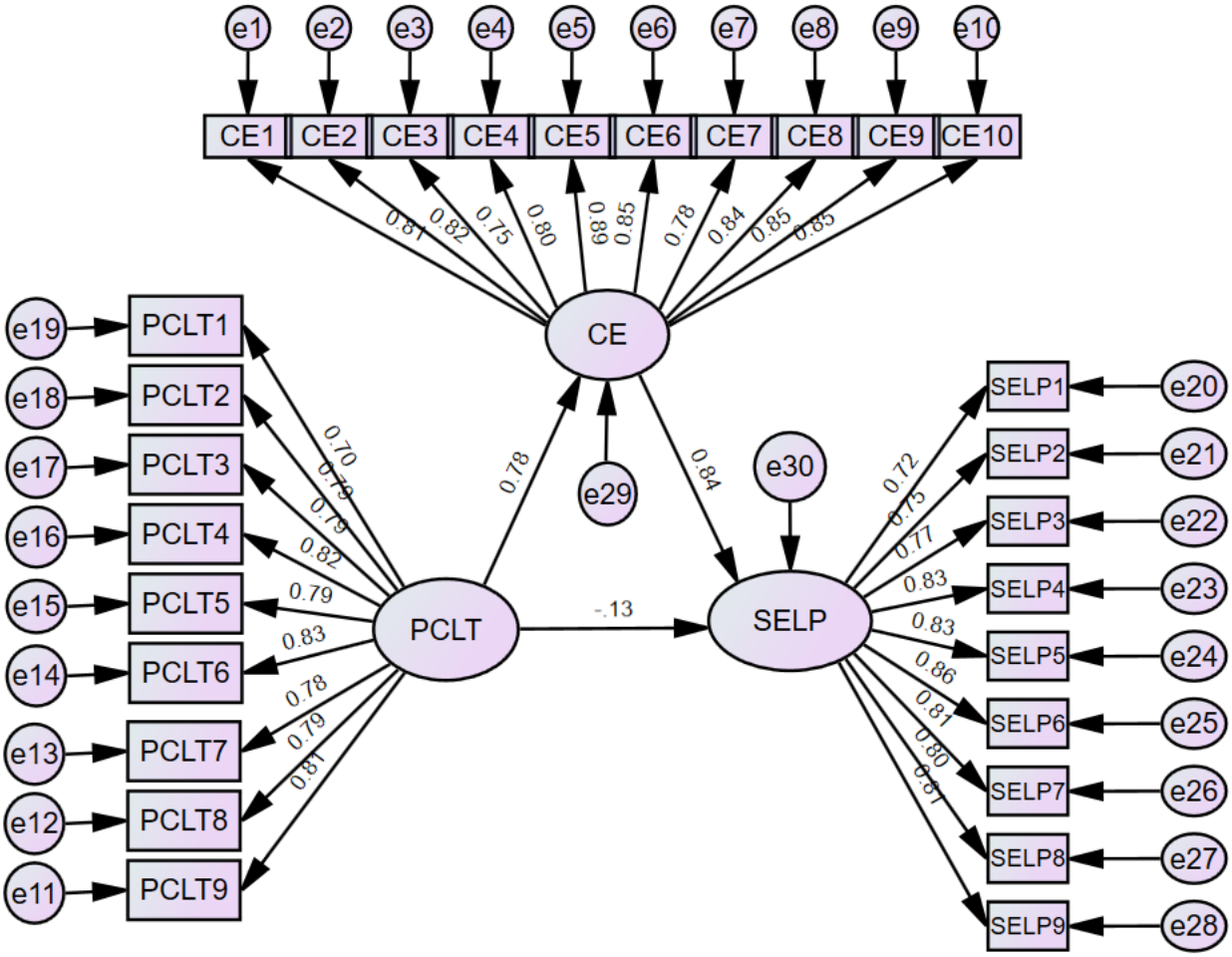


Figure 1 SEM Model Results

Table 2
Key Fitting Parameters of SEM Model

	Fitting Result	Standard Level
CMIN/DF	3.384	< 5.00
CFI	0.917	≥ .90
TIL	0.909	≥ .90
RMSEA	0.077	<0.08

Results

Following the assessment of the measurement model, SEM was conducted to examine the hypothesised relationships among PCLT, CE, and SELP. The overall model fit was evaluated using several goodness-of-fit indices, including CMIN/DF, CFI, TLI, and RMSEA. The results indicated that the proposed structural model demonstrated an acceptable fit to the observed data, supporting the subsequent evaluation of the hypothesised relationships.

Table 3
Fitting Results of the SEM Model

Path		Standardized Coefficient	95% CI	p
Direct	PCLT-CE	0.785	[0.646, 0.859]	<0.01
	CE-SELP	0.764	[0.686, 1.010]	<0.01
	PCLT-SELP	-0.110	[-0.299, 0.046]	0.120
Indirect	PCLT-CE-SELP	0.652	[0.511, 0.864]	<0.01

As presented in Table 3, PCLT was positively and significantly associated with CE (β = 0.785, 95% CI [0.646, 0.859], p < 0.01). This result indicates that students who reported more positive perceptions of communicative language teaching also tended to report higher levels of classroom engagement. Therefore, H1 was supported. Similarly, CE was positively and significantly associated with SELP (β = 0.764, 95% CI [0.686, 1.010], p < 0.01), suggesting that students reporting higher classroom engagement also tended to perceive their English language proficiency more positively. Thus, H2 was supported.

However, the direct association between PCLT and SELP was not statistically significant (β = −0.110, 95% CI [−0.299, 0.046], p = 0.120). The confidence interval included zero, further indicating that the direct association was not statistically significant. Therefore, H3 was not supported. This finding suggests that PCLT was not significantly associated with SELP directly when CE was included in the structural model.

The indirect association between PCLT and SELP through CE was examined using bootstrapping with 5,000 resamples (Preacher & Hayes, 2008). As shown in Table 3, the standardized indirect effect was 0.652, with a 95% bias-corrected confidence interval ranging from 0.511 to 0.864 (p < 0.01). Since the confidence interval did not include zero, the indirect association was statistically significant. Therefore, H4 was supported.

This result indicates that students' positive perceptions of communicative language teaching were associated with higher classroom engagement, which was, in turn, associated with higher self-perceived English language proficiency. Although the direct association between PCLT and SELP was not statistically significant, the indirect association through CE was

significant. This pattern highlights the relevance of classroom engagement in understanding the relationship between students' perceptions of communicative teaching and their self-perceived English language proficiency.

Discussion

Compared with traditional teacher-centred approaches, which tend to emphasise the transmission of linguistic knowledge and explicit instruction, CLT places greater emphasis on meaningful communication, interaction, and active learner participation (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). This shift changes the roles of both teachers and students, with teachers acting more as facilitators and learners taking greater responsibility for their classroom learning (Littlewood, 2007). Such characteristics suggest that students' perceptions of communicative teaching practices may be closely related to their engagement in classroom activities. As engagement involves behavioural, emotional, and cognitive involvement in learning (Fredricks et al., 2004), it is also relevant to understanding how students participate in communicative language learning.

Furthermore, students' classroom engagement may be associated with how they evaluate their own English language abilities. Through active participation and interaction, learners have opportunities to use English, exchange ideas, and reflect on their learning experiences (Philp & Duchesne, 2016). These experiences may be related to their perceptions of proficiency across different language skills. Therefore, the present study examined whether perceived communicative language teaching was associated with students' self-perceived English language proficiency through classroom engagement, providing an integrated perspective on the relationships among teaching practices, learner engagement, and perceived language proficiency.

First of all, the positive association between PCLT and CE can be understood in relation to the learning opportunities created by communicative instruction. Unlike approaches that tend to place greater emphasis on teacher explanation and the transmission of linguistic knowledge, CLT encourages learners to use language for meaningful communication through interaction and collaborative activities (Richards, 2006; Richards & Rodgers, 2014). Such practices provide students with opportunities to participate in classroom tasks, exchange ideas, and use English in purposeful contexts. When students perceive these communicative practices as regular features of their English classes, they may be more willing to participate and invest effort in learning activities. This interpretation is consistent with Philp and Duchesne's (2016) view that engagement in language learning involves not only participation but also attention, cognitive involvement, and interaction with others.

The finding also corresponds with previous research highlighting the relationship between instructional conditions and learner engagement. Aubrey et al. (2020), for example, found that learners' engagement during speaking tasks varied according to task characteristics and classroom interaction, with meaningful and socially interactive tasks providing favourable conditions for engagement. Similarly, Hiver et al. (2024) emphasised that engagement is context-dependent and responsive to classroom learning conditions. Although these studies did not directly examine students' overall perceptions of CLT, they provide relevant evidence that the nature of classroom activities and interaction can be associated with learners' involvement. Nevertheless, as Littlewood (2007) noted, implementing communicative

approaches in East Asian classrooms may involve challenges related to examination pressures and students' reluctance to participate. The present finding therefore suggests that, within the university EFL classrooms examined, students who perceived communicative teaching more positively also tended to report higher classroom engagement. It highlights the relevance of learners' perceptions of instructional practices when examining engagement in communicative language learning.

Additionally, classroom engagement is also relevant to understanding how students evaluate their own English language abilities. Students who are actively involved in classroom learning have more opportunities to use English, exchange ideas, respond to others, and reflect on their learning experiences. Such involvement may help them recognise their ability to communicate and complete language-related tasks, thereby shaping their perceptions of proficiency. From this perspective, engagement represents not only students' involvement in classroom activities but also an important part of their experience of learning a language (Philp & Duchesne, 2016). This interpretation is also consistent with Fredricks et al. (2004), who highlighted the behavioural, emotional, and cognitive dimensions of student engagement.

Previous empirical studies have provided evidence of the relevance of engagement to language-learning outcomes. Guo et al. (2022) reported positive associations between classroom engagement and English achievement among Chinese university students, while Kang and Wu (2022) found that behavioural engagement contributed to English achievement in an EFL context. More directly related to the present study, Tsao (2024) identified an association between cognitive engagement with teacher written corrective feedback and learners' self-reported writing proficiency. Although these studies differ in their outcome measures and learning contexts, they collectively highlight the relevance of learner engagement to language-related outcomes. The present finding further extends this discussion by showing that overall classroom engagement was positively associated with students' self-perceived proficiency across listening, speaking, reading, and writing. However, this relationship concerns students' evaluations of their own abilities and should not be interpreted as evidence of higher objectively measured English proficiency.

Taken together, the findings on PCLT and CE, and CE and SELP provide a basis for understanding the relationship between students' perceptions of communicative teaching and their self-perceived English proficiency. However, the results revealed an important distinction: PCLT was not significantly associated with SELP directly when CE was included in the model, whereas the indirect association through CE was statistically significant. This suggests that students' positive perceptions of communicative teaching do not necessarily correspond directly to more positive evaluations of their English proficiency. Instead, the relationship appears to be more closely connected to how actively students engage in classroom learning. Although communicative teaching provides opportunities for meaningful language use and interaction (Richards & Rodgers, 2014), students' perceptions of their proficiency may be more closely related to their actual involvement in these learning experiences.

This pattern also highlights the importance of considering learner engagement when examining the relationship between instructional practices and perceived language

proficiency. Communicative activities may create opportunities for students to practise English, but students need to participate in these activities and invest effort in learning to make use of such opportunities. This interpretation is consistent with Philp and Duchesne's (2016) emphasis on the role of engagement in language-learning activities. The present findings therefore extend the discussion by showing that classroom engagement statistically accounts for the indirect association between PCLT and SELP in the proposed model. Nevertheless, given the cross-sectional and self-reported nature of the data, this indirect relationship should not be interpreted as evidence that communicative teaching causes greater engagement or improves students' actual English proficiency.

Limitations and Future Research

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the study employed a cross-sectional research design, with all data collected at a single point in time. Although the results revealed significant associations among PCLT, CE, and SELP, the design does not allow conclusions to be drawn about causal relationships or changes over time. Future research could adopt longitudinal or experimental designs to examine how students' perceptions of communicative teaching and their classroom engagement develop and how these changes relate to their perceived English proficiency.

Second, the data were collected through self-reported questionnaires. Therefore, the findings reflect students' perceptions of teaching practices, their reported engagement, and their own evaluations of English proficiency rather than direct observations of classroom practices or objective assessments of language ability. In particular, SELP may not fully correspond to students' actual English proficiency. Future studies could combine questionnaire data with classroom observations, teacher assessments, and standardised English proficiency tests to provide a more comprehensive understanding of these relationships.

Finally, the participants were first- and second-year non-English-major university students recruited from three universities in Shandong Province, China. The selection of participating institutions was influenced by accessibility and institutional cooperation, which may limit the generalisability of the findings to students in other regions, educational settings, or academic years. Future research could involve larger and more diverse samples from different regions and types of higher education institutions to examine whether the observed relationships are consistent across different EFL learning contexts.

Conclusion

This study examined the relationships among perceived communicative language teaching (PCLT), classroom engagement (CE), and self-perceived English language proficiency (SELP) among non-English-major university students in Shandong, China. By examining these constructs within a single structural model, the study sought to understand how students' perceptions of communicative teaching practices were related to their classroom engagement and evaluations of their English proficiency.

The findings showed that PCLT was positively associated with CE, and CE was positively associated with SELP. However, the direct association between PCLT and SELP was not statistically significant when CE was included in the model. In contrast, the indirect association

between PCLT and SELP through CE was statistically significant. These findings highlight the relevance of classroom engagement in understanding the relationship between students' perceptions of communicative teaching and their self-perceived English proficiency.

Overall, this study contributes to research on communicative language teaching by bringing instructional perceptions, classroom engagement, and self-perceived language proficiency together in an integrated model. It suggests that understanding students' evaluations of their English abilities requires attention not only to the teaching practices they experience but also to their involvement in classroom learning. Although the findings do not establish causal relationships or demonstrate improvements in objectively measured proficiency, they provide a basis for further research into the role of classroom engagement in university EFL learning.

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