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Challenges in Applying Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) to Grammar Instruction for Non-English Major Students at the Tertiary Level in Vietnam

VUONG THI HAI YEN
Faculty of Foreign Languages, Hanoi Metropolitan University, Vietnam
Author email: vthyen@hnmu.edu.vn

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Abstract

This study examines the challenges faced by English lecturers at Hanoi Metropolitan University (HNMU) when applying Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) to grammar instruction for non-English major students. It also brings out the practical responses that lecturers themselves take to be feasible in this setting. The study rested on a mixed-methods design. Questionnaire data came from 28 English lecturers, and these were followed up with interview data from 10 of them, all gathered over the first semester of the 2024–2025 academic year. The questionnaire carried both closed and open-ended items, putting questions to lecturers about how they understood CLT, how they went about teaching grammar, what constraints they perceived, and what solutions they would suggest. As for the findings, they indicate that CLT-based grammar instruction comes up against several constraints: training that is too thin on the practical side, classes that are large and mixed in level, assessment that leans toward grammar, students whose English proficiency remains limited, and a frequent falling back on Vietnamese during pair or group work. The interview findings further suggest that lecturers do not reject CLT in principle. Rather, they tend to adapt it cautiously because institutional conditions and student readiness make full implementation difficult. The study contributes a context-specific account of CLT implementation in grammar teaching for non-English major students in Vietnamese higher education. It argues for gradual, locally responsive integration of communicative activities, supported by teacher development, assessment adjustment, and student orientation.

INTRODUCTION

In the context of globalization and regional integration, English proficiency has become important for Vietnamese university students, not only as grammatical knowledge but also as the ability to use language in social and academic communication. In this study, traditional methodologies refer mainly to grammar-translation and audio-lingual practices that give priority to rule explanation, sentence-level accuracy, translation, repetition, and controlled drills. Modern communicative needs refer to the growing expectation that students can use English for interaction, problem solving, and meaning exchange beyond written examinations.

From this perspective, Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) offers a useful alternative to form-dominant instruction. However, its use in Vietnam requires careful adjustment rather than direct transplantation, since local classroom culture, assessment practices, and learner readiness shape what teachers can realistically do.

Grammar occupies a central place in language learning, and its importance is not easily set aside. Peck (1988, p. 127) puts the matter sharply, observing that without a grammatical framework, "speech is no more than sounds, writing is no more than hieroglyphics." Thornbury (2000, p. 15) makes a comparable case, treating grammar as the structural foundation of language competence. Much of this comes back to communication. Grammar helps speakers and writers get their meaning across, and the effect shows most clearly in writing. Speech can absorb a fair amount of grammatical slippage without breaking down, yet formal settings ask for a higher degree of accuracy. Ellis (2006, p. 84) points to the underlying mechanism, explaining that grammatical knowledge allows learners to combine lexical elements so that the result carries genuine meaning. Seen in these terms, grammar contributes to language teaching on more than one front. The first has to do with precision, since it sharpens accuracy where accuracy matters most, above all in formal writing. Beyond that, grammar gives learners the means to handle more complex ideas, because some structural footing is needed before thought of any subtlety can be expressed. At a more advanced stage, it supplies an underlying framework, and sophisticated language use depends heavily on that framework. Larsen-Freeman (2003, p. 142) enters an important qualification here. For her, grammar is best taught inside meaningful communicative situations rather than as a body of rules handled on its own.

These general claims take on a sharper edge at Hanoi Metropolitan University (HNMU). Here the teaching of English grammar to non-English major students raises a particular set of problems, most of all when the work is carried out through CLT. CLT has earned a strong reputation as an approach to language instruction, but bringing it to bear on grammar is far from straightforward. It calls for attention to pedagogical questions as much as to practical ones. Joining a communicative orientation to more conventional grammar work asks teachers to strike a careful balance, and that task becomes all the more demanding under the conditions of Vietnamese higher education.

This study looks closely at the experiences of English lecturers at HNMU during the first semester of the 2024–2025 academic year. The attention falls on two things in particular: the way they bring CLT to bear on grammar instruction for non-English major students, and the way they cope with the constraints that surface along the way. The evidence comes from two sources, namely questionnaire responses from 28 lecturers and in-depth interviews with 10 of them. On this basis, the study takes up two research questions:

1. What are the primary challenges that English lecturers at HNMU face when they apply CLT approaches to grammar instruction for non-English major students?
2. What data-informed and context-appropriate solutions can help strengthen communicative grammar teaching in this educational setting?

In pursuing these questions, the study sets out to clarify the local conditions under which CLT can serve grammar instruction. This clarifying aim, however, does not displace an earlier concern, since the place of grammatical accuracy in university English courses still needs to be kept in view.

The contribution of this single-site study is a context-specific account of how lecturers describe the challenges of using CLT for grammar instruction. HNMU is not presented as representative of Vietnamese higher education as a whole. Instead, the study examines reported adaptations under constraints of class size, assessment, learner proficiency, and expectations for participation. These adaptations remain lecturers' accounts rather than independently observed teaching practices.

LITERATURE REVIEW

An overview on language teaching methods in teaching grammar

Language teaching methods have evolved through different views of grammar, language use, and classroom participation. The four approaches discussed below are relevant to the present study because they continue to shape grammar teaching practices in Vietnam in different ways. Grammar-translation and audio-lingual practices remain visible in many examination-oriented classrooms, while CLT is often promoted as a way to connect grammar with meaningful communication.

The Grammar-Translation Method (GTM)

In the Grammar-Translation Method (GTM), grammar is usually introduced through explicit rules and explanations, often in the learners' first language. Learners then apply the rules to sentence translation and written exercises. This makes grammatical form and accuracy prominent, but offers relatively little opportunity to practise choosing forms during interaction (Larsen-Freeman, 1986; Richards & Rodgers, 2014). In grammar-focused tertiary courses, such procedures may help clarify difficult structures; they do not, by themselves, establish whether learners can use those structures in communication.

The Direct Method (DM)

The Direct Method (DM) approaches grammar inductively. Rather than beginning with a rule or translation equivalent, teachers present examples in the target language and guide learners to infer the underlying pattern. Questions, demonstrations, and everyday situations provide contexts for grammatical forms. The approach gives learners opportunities to connect form with meaning, although grammatical generalisations may remain unclear when sufficient guided attention to form is absent (Larsen-Freeman, 1986; Richards & Rodgers, 2014).

The Audio-Lingual Method (AM)

In the Audio-Lingual Method (AM), grammatical structures are introduced through model dialogues and practised mainly through repetition, substitution, and transformation drills. Rules are not usually the starting point; instead, repeated production is intended to establish accurate language patterns. Such practice can support control of sentence forms, but successful completion of drills does not necessarily show that learners can select those forms appropriately in spontaneous communication (Brumfit, 1983; Richards & Rodgers, 2014).

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT)

CLT has come to occupy a prominent place in language instruction, and the way scholars characterise it varies with the aspect each chooses to foreground. For Doff (1988) and Savignon (1983, pp. 156–172), language is at bottom a system for expressing meaning. Canale and Swain (1980, pp. 1–47) direct attention instead to communicative competence. Finocchiaro and Brumfit (1983, pp. 91–106) take a further step, putting weight on interaction carried out through pair and group work. From a different angle, Richards and Rodgers (1986, pp. 153–177) describe CLT as learner-centred, and Taylor (1983, pp. 69–83) draws out the importance of a supportive learning environment. This study follows Li (1998, pp. 678–685) and treats CLT as an approach that attends to the following:

1. Focus on communicative functions
2. Emphasis on meaningful tasks over linguistic form
3. Use of authentic, real-life materials
4. Group-based activities
5. Creation of supportive learning environments

When it comes to grammar teaching, CLT does not call for explicit grammar instruction to be swept away. What it changes is rather the sequence and the purpose of grammar work. Doff (1988) offers a structured route here. A teacher may introduce a structure through a situation or a visual cue, lead students to notice its meaning, its form, and its use, and then carry them from controlled practice toward freer use. Grammar stays in view throughout, and at the same time students gain the chance to put the target structure to communicative work.

From there the work opens out into freer practice. At this stage students draw on the new structures together with language met earlier, using both to talk about their own experiences. This is where the approach parts company with more traditional methods, since it rests on authentic language use and on scenarios that feel close to life, and in doing so it readies students for communication in the world beyond the classroom. Within such a CLT framework, the teacher comes to occupy a different position, that of a facilitator who guides students as they engage meaningfully with the target language.

Unlike GTM and pattern-drill approaches, CLT places grammar in real or realistic contexts. In the Vietnamese context, this does not mean that translation, explanation, or controlled practice must disappear. A more realistic interpretation is that these familiar practices can be

used as support before learners move toward pair work, problem-solving tasks, role-play, or short exchanges linked to the grammar point.

Previous studies

Research on grammar teaching, both internationally and in Vietnam, has moved away from a simple choice between form and communication. The more productive question is how teachers can keep grammar visible while giving learners a reason to use it for meaning. This question is especially relevant in examination-oriented EFL settings, where communicative goals may be officially valued but classroom routines still reward rule knowledge and accurate sentence production.

Recent international work supports this balanced position. Collins and Ruivivar (2021) argue that grammar-teaching research needs closer attention to classroom contexts, teacher roles, peer interaction, spoken grammar, and learner access to grammar resources. Their agenda is important for the present study because it treats grammar not as isolated rule transmission but as a pedagogical problem situated in real classrooms. Experimental work also suggests that explicit grammar support can be placed inside task cycles without cancelling the communicative purpose of the task. Michaud and Ammar (2023) offer a case in point. They found that explicit instruction, once embedded in task work, lent support to the growth of both explicit and implicit knowledge. What mattered less, on their account, was the precise moment at which that instruction arrived; the real condition was that learners be genuinely caught up in meaningful task engagement. Calzada and García Mayo (2021) reach a kindred conclusion from another direction, showing how collaborative writing can pull learners' attention toward grammar even as they push on toward a communicative product. Lloyd and Lee (2026) enter a more pointed caution, drawn from research on the English article system. Metalinguistic explanation may well feed into explicit knowledge, yet whatever form-focused instruction yields turns out to depend on learner variables and on the particular combinations of instruction in play. These studies do not suggest that explicit grammar teaching should disappear. They suggest that grammar instruction can be sequenced so that attention to form serves language use rather than replacing it.

A second line of recent research concerns teacher cognition. Sun and Zhang (2021) found that university EFL teachers may give their endorsement to focus-on-form instruction in principle, only to drift toward more form-focused teaching once the pressures of the classroom set in. Several things tend to push them that way: the demands of the lesson itself, the expectations laid down by the institution, and the readiness, or lack of it, that learners bring to communicative work. Zhang and Sun (2022) carry the inquiry a step further, showing how much can be gained from studying teachers' cognitions about grammar teaching on a larger scale. The point holds with particular force in settings where grammar stays tightly bound to high-stakes assessment. This line of work helps frame the HNMU findings. Lecturers' cautious use of CLT should not be read simply as resistance to innovation. It may reflect the practical mediation of beliefs by class size, assessment pressure, proficiency range, and the need to maintain lesson control.

Recent Vietnamese scholarship points toward a tension of much the same kind. Lam et al. (2021) examined task-based language teaching among lecturers at Vietnamese universities, and what they found was a gap between belief and practice. The lecturers thought well of communicative task work, yet the classroom told a different story once they set about implementing it. TBLT and CLT are not identical, but they lean the same way, both giving prominence to purposeful language use, to learner participation, and to activity organised around meaning. The bearing of this on the present study is accordingly conceptual as well as contextual. Vietnamese lecturers may grant communicative principles in the abstract, while adapting them with some caution where institutional and learner conditions offer less than full support. Thao and Mai (2022) report something similar, observing that reforms in English language teaching in Vietnam pass through the filter of teachers' perceptions and through contextual factors that bear on how reform comes to be enacted. Set together, these studies back a local reading of CLT implementation, taking it for negotiated practice rather than the straightforward adoption of a method.

Assessment remains a central contextual pressure in Vietnam. Yen and Thao (2024) show that Vietnamese EFL instructors meet with opportunities and constraints alike as they work with competency-based assessment in higher education. Phuong et al. (2025) take the story closer to the present, describing the way Vietnamese EFL teachers find their footing amid washback. Their account has these teachers edging, in part at least, away from the routines of the test and toward assessment that is more formative and more task-oriented in character. These studies are directly relevant to the present data because all HNMU lecturers identified grammar-based examinations as a barrier to CLT-based grammar teaching. The implication is modest but important: communicative grammar teaching is more likely to be sustained when assessment includes opportunities for learners to use grammatical forms accurately in meaningful contexts. Bunyarit and Mofreh (2026) reported that Thai university students saw grammatical competence as relevant to communication, while identifying needs in communicative grammar assessment. Thuratham (2024) examined grammar and vocabulary alongside communicative activities with Thai university learners. These studies have different designs from the present lecturer survey, but they help place grammar instruction and its assessment within an English for general education setting. Matyakhan et al. (2024) further demonstrate the relevance of learning-oriented assessment to communicative performance, although their study concerns oral communication rather than grammar instruction specifically. These comparisons provide contextual perspectives, not evidence that the approaches proposed by HNMU lecturers are effective.

Taken together, the recent literature suggests three points for the present study. First, grammar and communication need not be treated as competing aims. Second, teacher cognition is shaped by institutional and classroom conditions, not by individual belief alone. Third, assessment alignment is central to the feasibility of communicative grammar work. The present study builds on these points by examining how lecturers at HNMU understand CLT, what prevents them from using it more fully in grammar lessons for non-English major students, and what forms of gradual adaptation they consider workable in their own setting.

Research gaps

Although previous Vietnamese studies have documented general CLT challenges, fewer studies have focused closely on grammar instruction for non-English major students in large and mixed-level university classes. This study addresses that gap by examining how lecturers understand CLT, what prevents them from using it more fully in grammar lessons, and what forms of gradual adaptation appear feasible in this context.

METHODS

Participants

The study used purposive sampling. The participants were 28 English lecturers at HNMU who met three criteria: they had at least four years of teaching experience, they taught non-English major students, and they had some familiarity with CLT concepts through previous study, training, or teaching experience. The sample included 18 full-time lecturers and 10 visiting lecturers. Their ages ranged from 25 to 55. Twenty-six participants were female and two were male. Twenty-five held master's degrees and three held doctoral degrees in English. Each lecturer taught two or three first-year classes, and each class had more than 30 students. The lecturers followed Life A2-B1 by Hughes, Stephenson, and Dummett (2019) within a 90-period training program.

Instrumentation and procedures

Data were collected between September and December 2024 through a lecturer questionnaire and follow-up interviews. The questionnaire was available in Vietnamese and English and distributed using Google Forms and Zalo. It comprised 11 numbered questions (Appendix A). Question 1 requested age, gender, and teaching experience. Questions 2 and 3 contained five and four response options on previous CLT training and retraining. Question 4 offered four statements about the value of grammar mastery. Question 5 listed five instructional aims and an 'Other' field. Question 6 contained eight teaching-practice options and an 'Other' field; Question 7 offered five error-correction options and an 'Other' field. Question 8 presented ten statements about CLT with an 'Other' field. Question 9 listed 15 potential challenges and an 'Other' field, adapted from Li (1998). Question 10 provided 13 recommendations and an 'Other' field. Question 11 listed six suggested grammar activities without an 'Other' field. Respondents were instructed that more than one option could be selected. The closed-ended questions therefore used multiple-response checkboxes, not binary yes/no or Likert-type agree/disagree scales. Before distribution, two lecturers in the Faculty of Foreign Languages reviewed the researcher-developed instrument for clarity, accuracy, and suitability. Both judged it suitable for use without changes. Their appraisal was a preliminary content review, not evidence of statistically established reliability or construct validity; no reliability coefficient was calculated or reported. The design drew on Canale and Swain (1980) and Li (1998).

Ten lecturers were selected for follow-up interviews from the questionnaire participants. They were chosen to represent different levels of teaching experience and CLT training

background. The interviews were used to clarify the questionnaire findings and to obtain more detailed accounts of the challenges and solutions reported by lecturers.

Data analysis

The questionnaire responses were summarised using option-level frequencies and percentages, with 28 lecturers as the denominator. Because respondents could select more than one option, percentages within a question need not sum to 100%. Interview accounts were organised by recurring challenge and suggestion themes. For transparency, theme frequencies were taken from the participant-by-theme coding matrix for the ten interviewees, with each checked entry counted once (Table 9). These frequencies indicate how many interviewees raised a theme; they do not quantify severity. Results from the two sources were compared descriptively. No verbatim interview statements are available for quotation. The analysis was descriptive and exploratory. It did not estimate population prevalence, test the effectiveness of the proposed activities, or establish causal relationships. The qualitative coding matrix permits transparent theme counts, but does not document independent double-coding or inter-rater agreement. These procedures are therefore not claimed.

Ethical considerations

Participation in the study was voluntary, and the data were used for academic research purposes only. No personal names are reported, and the findings are presented in aggregate form or as synthesized accounts. The study did not involve vulnerable participants, sensitive personal data, invasive procedures, deception, or any intervention beyond ordinary educational research activities. It was reviewed by the Faculty of Foreign Languages at the University for compliance with institutional research regulations and was classified as low-risk educational research. In accordance with institutional practice, it was therefore exempt from formal ethics review by an external ethics board, and a confirmation of ethics review exemption was issued by the Faculty for submission purposes.

RESULTS

Findings from the questionnaire

The lecturers' age and their teaching experience

Question 1 is about the lecturers' age and their teaching experience.

Table 1
Lecturers' age and their teaching experience

Lecturers' age	Number (N)	Percentage (%)
25–35 years old	7	25
35–45 years old	14	50
> 45 years old	7	25

Lecturers' teaching experience	Number (N)	Percentage (%)
1–10 years of teaching	7	25
11–20 years of teaching	14	50
> 20 years of teaching	7	25

Table 1 shows that the participants were not novice lecturers. Half were between 35 and 45 years old, and half had 11 to 20 years of teaching experience. This profile is relevant to the study because the reported challenges cannot be attributed simply to a lack of general teaching experience. Rather, the issue concerns the practical use of CLT for grammar teaching in a specific institutional setting.

Lecturers' perspectives on grammar mastery

Table 2

Lecturers' perspectives on the value of grammar mastery (Question 4; N = 28)

Lecturers' perspectives on grammar mastery	Number (N)	Percentage (%)
Grammar proficiency enables students to effectively analyze linguistic structures and utterances	28	100.0
Grammatical competence enhances students' performance across all four language skills	22	78.6
Successful communication and accurate translation	6	21.4

Question 4 examined lecturers' perspectives on the value of grammar mastery. All 28 lecturers (100%) selected the statement that grammar enables learners to analyse grammatical elements in utterances and sentences. Twenty-two lecturers (78.6%) regarded grammar mastery as helpful in developing the four language skills. The available aggregated results associate grammar mastery with successful communication and accurate translation for 6 of 28 lecturers (21.4%). These two ideas appeared as separate options in the questionnaire, but their individual response counts are unavailable. The combined figure cannot be assigned to either response option individually. Taken together, the responses indicate that lecturers valued grammatical knowledge while not necessarily viewing it as sufficient for successful communication or translation.

The lecturers' aim in teaching grammar

Question 5 asked lecturers to identify their aims in teaching grammar. Table 3 presents the response frequencies.

Table 3

The lecturers' aim in teaching grammar

Aim of teaching grammar	(N)	(%)
Enable students to understand and analyze grammatical structures	28	100.0
Enable students to make grammatically correct questions as well as answers	6	21.4
Enable students to use structures correctly in appropriate context	22	78.6
Enable students to use structures automatically without stopping to think	6	21.4
Enable students to read and write simple texts in English	19	67.9
Others: enable students to do well in the exams	22	78.6

Question 5 addressed lecturers' aims for grammar instruction. All 28 participants selected understanding and analysing structures. Twenty-two (78.6%) selected appropriate grammatical use in context, and the same number selected examination success under 'Other.' These responses show that structural understanding, contextual use, and examination preparation were all represented among the stated aims. Because several options could be selected, the results do not establish a hierarchy of two competing priorities or show how individual lecturers balanced them in lessons.

The lecturers' ways of teaching grammar

Question 6 asked lecturers which approaches they used when teaching grammatical structures.

Table 4

The lecturers' ways of teaching grammar

Lecturers' ways of teaching grammar	(N)	(%)
Always teach in Vietnamese	0	0
Always teach in English	0	0
Teach in English first and then in Vietnamese	25	89.3
Present the structure, analyze the structure and then give examples to illustrate	22	78.6
Give the situation, present the new structure, give examples and then let students do the practice	24	85.7
Give examples, then let your students practice using substitution drills	22	78.6
Use visual aids to present the structure, let your students to figure out the form and then give examples to illustrate	28	100.0
Sometimes teach in English and sometimes teach in Vietnamese	15	53.6

Table 4 indicates that lecturers combined communicative and traditional practices. Most participants taught first in English and then in Vietnamese, which may reflect mixed proficiency levels in the same class. All participants reported using visual aids and guiding students to notice form, but many also used structure presentation, analysis, examples, and substitution drills. These patterns suggest that CLT was not used as a replacement for traditional techniques. It was used selectively within a grammar-oriented course.

Lecturers' preferences for grammatical error correction

Question 7 examined lecturers' views on the timing and approach to correcting grammatical errors. All 28 participants considered correction necessary. Of these, 22 (78.6%) favoured immediate correction, 11 (39.3%) selected correction during form-focused practice, 17 (60.7%) supported delayed correction during communicative practice, and 6 (21.4%) favoured learner self-correction. These choices describe reported preferences, not the effectiveness or observed use of the approaches.

Lecturers' prior CLT training and perceptions

Questions 2 and 3 elicited prior exposure to and retraining in CLT; Question 8 elicited selection of ten statements about CLT. The training items and the perception statements are reported separately because they describe different constructs.

The aggregated results for Questions 2 and 3 indicate that 21 of 28 lecturers had encountered formal CLT training during university study, while seven had not received formal training. The summary also records 23 lecturers as having participated in subsequent learning opportunities, including workshops or postgraduate study. Option-level frequencies for the five responses in Question 2 and the four responses in Question 3 are unavailable, so the reported totals cannot be disaggregated by questionnaire option. The questionnaire does not itself name a particular workshop or date.

Table 5 reports Question 8 only: ten selectable statements describing lecturers' perceptions of CLT.

Table 5

Lecturers' selections of statements about CLT (Question 8; N = 28)

Lecturers' opinions on CLT	(N)	(%)
CLT emphasizes language functions more than form.	11	39.3
CLT creates a lot of opportunities for students to communicate.	28	100.0
CLT always emphasizes on both fluency and accuracy.	11	39.3
CLT creates a secure, non- threatening atmosphere in the classroom.	11	39.3
CLT uses authentic materials.	19	67.9
In CLT, language items are necessarily contextualized.	22	78.6
Translation may be used where students need or benefit from it.	22	78.6
The final goal of CLT is students' communicative competence.	28	100.0
Students can work on four skills from the beginning.	19	67.9
CLT reduces lecturers' work.	11	39.3

In Question 8, all 28 lecturers selected the statements that CLT creates opportunities for communication and aims to develop communicative competence. Twenty-two (78.6%) selected contextualised language items and the possible use of translation when helpful. Eleven (39.3%) selected the statement about balancing fluency and accuracy. These frequencies describe endorsement of questionnaire statements. They do not independently validate lecturers' knowledge of CLT or establish how they taught.

The lecturers' problems when applying CLT in teaching grammar to non-English major students at the school

Question 9 attempts to find out the lecturers' problems when adopting CLT in teaching grammar to non-English major students at the school. The results are stated as below.

Table 6

The lecturers' problems when adopting CLT in teaching grammar to non-English major students at the school

Lecturers' problems	(N)	(%)
Misconceptions about CLT	22	78.6
Lack of training or retraining in CLT	28	100.0
Few opportunities to learn how to use CLT	19	67.9
Deficiency in strategic and sociolinguistic competence in English	22	78.6
Lack of authentic teaching materials	5	17.9

Lecturers' problems	(N)	(%)
Students' low English proficiency	22	78.6
Students' lack of good attitudes to learning Grammar	28	100.0
Students have passive styles to evaluate communicative competence	19	67.9
Students' uneven participation in class activities	19	67.9
Too little time and expertise to develop CLT materials	6	21.4
Teaching facilities are poor	11	39.3
Class sizes are too large to conduct CLT	28	100.0
Multi-level classes	28	100.0
The school's grammar- based exams do not justify using CLT	28	100.0
Students use Vietnamese in work- group or pair- work	28	100.0

Table 6 identifies the most salient barriers to CLT-based grammar teaching. Six items were selected by all participants: insufficient CLT training or retraining, students' weak attitudes toward grammar learning, large classes, mixed-level classes, grammar-based examinations, and students' use of Vietnamese during pair or group work. In addition, 78.6% of participants reported misconceptions about CLT, limited strategic and sociolinguistic competence, and students' low English proficiency. Less frequently reported but still relevant barriers included poor facilities, limited authentic materials, and limited time or expertise for material development.

The lecturers' recommendations for the difficult situations they met

Question 10 elicited lecturers' recommendations for addressing the difficult situations they experienced. The results are presented in Table 7.

Table 7

Lecturers' recommendations for the difficult situations they met

Lecturers' recommendations	(N)	(%)
Have further training on teaching methods	19	67.9
Be trained and retrained on sociolinguistic competence	22	78.6
Motivate students more to learn English	28	100.0
Attend workshops or seminars on CLT so that lecturers can share their teaching experience	28	100.0
Follow the guide for the lecturer	19	67.9
Have self- improvement in their English level and teaching methods	28	100.0
Be provided with sufficient teaching facilities	11	39.3
Encourage collaborative work from students	28	100.0
Give open – ended questions that allow weaker students to give their answers too	28	100.0
Give encouragement and positive correction and feedback on their students' mistakes	28	100.0
Use more authentic materials	22	78.6
Use the language which is suitable with the students' level in the classroom	22	78.6
Divide the class into pairs or groups and point out the monitor to control the group	22	78.6

Table 7 shows that lecturers' recommendations correspond closely to the difficulties reported in Table 6. All participants emphasized student motivation, lecturer self-improvement, CLT workshops or seminars, collaborative work, open-ended questions for weaker students, and positive feedback. A large proportion also recommended more authentic materials,

level-appropriate classroom language, and clearer group organization. These suggestions are practical rather than radical. They point to gradual classroom adjustment and professional support rather than a complete replacement of existing grammar teaching practices.

The lecturers' suggestions for grammar lessons

Question 11 asked about six activities that lecturers considered capable of making grammar lessons more interesting and effective. All 28 lecturers (100%) selected each of the six: using boards, realia, work cards and worksheets, picture description, stories, and AI tools (Table 8). The unanimous selections indicate endorsement of these proposed activities. They do not demonstrate effectiveness in actual lessons, establish how frequently any activity was used, or identify particular AI applications.

Table 8

Lecturers' perceptions of six grammar-lesson activities (Question 11; N = 28)

Proposed grammar-lesson activity	n	%
Using boards	28	100.0
Realia	28	100.0
Work cards and worksheets	28	100.0
Picture description	28	100.0
Stories	28	100.0
AI tools	28	100.0

Across the questionnaire, the most frequently selected challenge options in Question 9 were inadequate CLT training, students' attitudes, class size, mixed proficiency levels, grammar-oriented examinations, and students' use of Vietnamese during peer work, each selected by 28 lecturers (100%; Table 6). These barriers span lecturer development, learner participation, classroom conditions, and institutional assessment. The categories provide an organising description of respondents' selections rather than a tested ranking of causes. Question 10 records suggestions for addressing constraints (Table 7); Question 11 records perceptions of six possible classroom activities (Table 8).

Findings from in-depth interviews

Table 9 summarises the participant-level interview coding matrix (*N* = 10). Counts represent lecturers whose accounts were coded under each theme. The matrix does not preserve verbatim transcripts; the findings below therefore paraphrase themes without attributing direct quotations. A theme identified by all interviewees should not be treated as necessarily more severe than one identified by fewer interviewees.

Table 9

Interview themes identified in the coding matrix (N = 10)

Interview theme (N = 10)	n	%
Insufficient CLT training / retraining	4	40.0
Students' attitudes toward grammar	7	70.0
Large and mixed-level classes	10	100.0

Interview theme (N = 10)	n	%
Grammar-oriented examinations	8	80.0
Vietnamese in pair/group work	10	100.0
Lecturers' strategic/sociolinguistic competence	7	70.0
Misconceptions about CLT	2	20.0
Students' low English proficiency	8	80.0
Additional issues (combined category)	10	100.0
Suggested: practical CLT training	10	100.0
Suggested: reconsidering classroom roles	10	100.0
Suggested: shaping students' attitudes	10	100.0

Challenges faced by the lecturers in teaching grammar communicatively

The ten interviews were coded under nine broad challenge themes and three suggested responses (Table 9). The most widely raised challenge themes were large and mixed-level classes (10/10), Vietnamese use in pair or group work (10/10), and an aggregate category for additional issues involving materials, preparation time, or facilities (10/10). The aggregate category does not provide separate counts for each constituent problem.

Insufficient training or retraining in Communicative Language Teaching

In the interview coding matrix, 4 of 10 lecturers raised this theme. Four interviewees raised concerns about insufficient practical CLT training. Although many lecturers had encountered CLT during university study or professional development, they reported limited opportunities to practise CLT techniques in real grammar lessons. Their accounts suggest that knowing the concept of CLT is different from managing communicative tasks, adapting materials, giving feedback, and balancing accuracy with fluency in large classes.

Students' deficiency in positive attitudes for learning grammar

In the interview coding matrix, 7 of 10 lecturers raised this theme. Interviewed lecturers also emphasized students' weak motivation for grammar learning. They described many students as examination-oriented and reluctant to see English as a tool for communication. This attitude makes communicative grammar activities difficult because students may participate only when they believe an activity is directly linked to tests. The finding is consistent with the questionnaire result that all participants viewed students' attitudes toward grammar learning as a major obstacle.

Large and mixed-level classes

In the interview coding matrix, 10 of 10 lecturers raised this theme. Large classes were reported as a practical barrier. A typical class had more than 30 students, which made it difficult for lecturers to monitor pair work, manage noise, check participation, and provide timely feedback. In this situation, lecturers may return to teacher-fronted explanation because it appears easier to control and more efficient for covering required grammar content. Mixed-level classes created another difficulty. In the same class, stronger students could complete tasks

quickly while weaker students struggled to participate. This unevenness complicated group work. It also made lesson planning more demanding, since one communicative task could be too easy for some students and too difficult for others. Because English is a non-major subject, placement by proficiency level was not always feasible.

Grammar-oriented examinations as a constraint on CLT implementation

In the interview coding matrix, 8 of 10 lecturers raised this theme. The assessment structure also limited CLT implementation. The course used Life A2-B1 by Hughes, Stephenson, and Dummett (2019) across two semesters in a 90-period program. According to the course outline reported by the lecturers, assessment placed strong emphasis on grammar. This encouraged teachers and students to give priority to structural accuracy and test preparation, even when they recognized the value of communicative practice.

Students' use of Vietnamese during pair and group work

In the interview coding matrix, 10 of 10 lecturers raised this theme. Students' use of Vietnamese during pair and group work was another recurring concern. Lecturers reported that students often shifted to Vietnamese when the task required discussion or negotiation. This tendency was linked to limited English proficiency, fear of making mistakes, and the convenience of using the first language with peers. As a result, pair work did not always lead to meaningful English use.

Limited strategic and sociolinguistic proficiency in English

In the interview coding matrix, 7 of 10 lecturers raised this theme. Lecturers' strategic and sociolinguistic competence also affected implementation. Communicative grammar teaching requires teachers to respond to questions about use, appropriacy, and context, not only form. Some lecturers felt less confident when students asked about real-life English use or sociolinguistic meanings. This helps explain why they sometimes preferred grammar-centered explanation, where their expertise felt more secure.

Misunderstandings about CLT

In the interview coding matrix, 2 of 10 lecturers raised this theme. Misunderstandings about CLT also appeared in the interview accounts. Some lecturers associated CLT mainly with speaking activities, while others worried that CLT left little space for explicit grammar instruction. Such assumptions made CLT appear incompatible with grammar teaching and examination preparation. The findings suggest that lecturer resistance may come less from rejection of communication and more from uncertainty about how grammar and communication can be combined.

Students' inadequate English proficiency

In the interview coding matrix, 8 of 10 lecturers raised this theme. Students' low English proficiency was identified as a further barrier. When students lacked basic vocabulary and

sentence control, they had difficulty using new grammar in communicative tasks. In such cases, they often relied on Vietnamese or remained silent. This explains why lecturers tended to combine controlled practice with limited communicative activities rather than move directly to freer communication.

Additional issues

In the interview coding matrix, 10 of 10 lecturers raised this theme. Other issues included limited access to authentic materials, uneven participation in group activities, insufficient time to prepare communicative grammar tasks, and inadequate facilities. Separate counts for these constituent issues are unavailable, but they still shaped lecturers' willingness and ability to use CLT in regular grammar lessons. Taken together, the interview matrix records variation across themes: misconceptions about CLT were coded for two lecturers, practical CLT training as a challenge for four, and several classroom and learner challenges for seven to ten. These counts complement the questionnaire figures but should not be treated as equivalent measures: the questionnaire records selections from prompted options, whereas the interview matrix records themes in qualitative accounts.

Some suggestions for overcoming the difficulties in teaching grammar communicatively

Providing practical CLT training and retraining

In the interview coding matrix, 10 of 10 lecturers raised this theme. Lecturers' first recommendation was practical professional development. They emphasized training that demonstrates how to design communicative grammar tasks, manage pair or group work, and give feedback without discouraging students. Administrative support is important here, but lecturer initiative also matters. Self-study, peer sharing, and classroom experimentation can help lecturers move from knowing CLT as a concept to using it as a manageable teaching practice.

Reconsidering classroom roles

In the interview coding matrix, 10 of 10 lecturers raised this theme. A second recommendation concerns classroom roles. CLT requires students to act not only as recipients of explanation but also as communicators. It also requires lecturers to act not only as transmitters of rules but also as facilitators, activity managers, advisors, and co-communicators (Littlewood, 1981). In the HNMU context, however, this role shift should be gradual. Students need time to understand why participation matters, and lecturers need support to manage interaction without losing lesson focus.

Shaping students' attitudes toward English learning

In the interview coding matrix, 10 of 10 lecturers raised this theme. A third recommendation concerns students' attitudes toward English and grammar. Lecturers need to show students that grammar is not only an examination subject but also a resource for clearer communication.

Short communicative tasks, achievable speaking opportunities, and positive correction can help students experience grammar as useful language. This does not remove the need for accuracy. It places accuracy within a communicative purpose.

DISCUSSION

The findings can be read through teacher cognition and context-sensitive implementation (Borg, 2003). Lecturers' beliefs about grammar, examinations, student ability, and classroom control shaped the way they used CLT. This pattern is consistent with Sun and Zhang's (2021) observation that teachers may endorse meaning-oriented, focus-on-form principles but move toward safer form-focused routines when institutional and classroom pressures become strong. At HNMU, lecturers did not appear to reject communicative grammar teaching. Rather, they treated it as something that had to be adjusted to class size, learner proficiency, available time, and the grammar-oriented assessment regime.

The strongest institutional tension concerns assessment. When all participants identified grammar-focused examinations as a barrier, the data pointed to a mismatch between communicative objectives and the forms of evaluation used in the course. This finding resonates with recent Vietnamese work on assessment reform and washback. Yen and Thao (2024) show that competency-based assessment can open space for richer language learning, but implementation remains difficult when teachers work within established assessment cultures. Phuong et al. (2025) similarly show that moving from tests to tasks is gradual and mediated by teacher professional learning. For the present study, this means that grammar tests need not be removed. A more realistic step would be to include modest assessment tasks that reward accurate grammar use in short, meaningful exchanges or written products.

The findings also refine how CLT should be understood in this setting. Recent grammar-teaching research does not support a binary opposition between explicit instruction and communication. Collins and Ruivivar (2021) call for research that looks at how grammar work actually sits within real classrooms, and Michaud and Ammar (2023) go some way toward answering that call, showing that explicit instruction can be folded into task cycles. Translated into everyday teaching, this points to a workable route for HNMU lecturers. They might open with a brief explanation, move on to guided noticing and a stretch of controlled practice, and only then turn to pair work, role-play, information exchange, or short problem-solving tasks. Ordered in this fashion, the lesson keeps grammatical accuracy intact, and at the same time it takes some of the threat out of communication for students whose proficiency is still on the lower side.

The interview coding provides a more differentiated picture than the questionnaire checkboxes alone. While ten interviewees raised class composition and students' use of Vietnamese, only four mentioned inadequate CLT training and two were coded as reporting misconceptions about CLT. This does not negate the questionnaire results; it shows the difference between endorsing a prompted challenge and elaborating it in an interview. Any interpretation of the 'strongest barriers' must specify which data source supports that claim. Bunyarit and

Mofreh (2026) also underscore the importance of aligning grammatical competence with communication-oriented assessment, but their student-centred findings should not be treated as direct corroboration of lecturers' accounts at HNMU.

For teacher development, the study points to a practical rather than purely theoretical need. Lecturers need opportunities to observe, design, try, and revise communicative grammar activities. This aligns with Vietnamese research showing that teachers' positive beliefs about task-based or communicative work do not automatically become classroom practice (Lam et al., 2021; Thao & Mai, 2022). Peer discussion may be especially useful because lecturers can share strategies that work within the same curriculum, class size, and proficiency range. Professional development should therefore focus on manageable routines: grouping procedures, task instructions, language support, feedback after fluency work, and ways to limit unnecessary Vietnamese use without making interaction artificial.

Student-level support also matters. If students view grammar only as test content, they may not invest effort in communicative activities. Orientation at the beginning of the course, careful task sequencing, and positive feedback can help students understand their changing role. The discussion should remain cautious here. The present data cannot show that these measures will produce large proficiency gains. It can only suggest that they are compatible with lecturers' reported constraints and with recent work that treats communicative grammar teaching as gradual, mediated, and context-dependent.

PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

The study also suggests that teacher development should be organized around routines that lecturers can try immediately. Workshops on CLT are useful only when they move beyond general principles. Lecturers need sample task sequences, language-support sheets, ways to assign roles in groups, strategies for monitoring several pairs at the same time, and feedback procedures that separate fluency work from accuracy repair. Peer observation may be especially useful in this setting because lecturers share the same curriculum and many of the same constraints. A colleague's workable solution may be more persuasive than a general methodological recommendation.

The use of Vietnamese during pair and group work requires a similarly balanced response. Treating all first-language use as failure would ignore students' proficiency level and the social reality of the classroom. At the same time, unrestricted Vietnamese use can weaken the communicative value of the task. A more realistic approach is to prepare short English frames, model the task before pair work, assign simple interaction roles, and reserve Vietnamese for brief clarification when it supports later English use. This kind of boundary-setting is compatible with the lecturers' reported concerns. It also avoids an unrealistic expectation that lower-proficiency non-English majors will sustain extended English interaction without support.

At the institutional level, the findings also point to the importance of coherence among curriculum aims, assessment design, and professional support. Lecturers may be asked to teach communicatively, yet the course may still reward mainly discrete grammar knowledge. Under this condition, CLT can appear pedagogically desirable but practically risky. A coherent response would not require removing existing grammar content. It would require a clearer connection between the grammar point, the classroom task, and the assessment evidence. For example, a lesson on conditionals could begin with form clarification, move to guided examples, and end with a short decision-making task in which students explain possible outcomes. Assessment could then include a brief item that values both accurate form and appropriate use. This type of alignment is small, but it gives lecturers a practical rationale for communicative work. It also helps students see that grammar knowledge and communicative performance belong to the same learning trajectory. The study's data support this implication only at the level of perceived feasibility. They do not prove that such alignment will improve achievement. Still, they show why isolated teacher training is unlikely to be enough when assessment and classroom conditions continue to pull teachers back toward form-only instruction. This final point is especially relevant for non-English major courses, where limited contact hours make every classroom decision consequential. A small assessment adjustment may therefore support larger pedagogical change without demanding a complete redesign of the course. This form of gradual change also respects the lecturers' professional judgement. It treats them as agents who interpret reform demands through everyday constraints, rather than as passive implementers of a method. That stance is consistent with the teacher-cognition orientation used in the discussion.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The study was conducted at one university and involved lecturers rather than students as the primary source of evidence. The findings therefore describe lecturers' perceptions and reported practices. They do not measure student learning gains or compare CLT-based grammar instruction with other instructional models. The sample is also modest, although it is appropriate for the study's exploratory and context-specific purpose. Another limitation concerns the interview data. As verbatim interview transcripts are not available in the research records used for this analysis, the manuscript presents synthesised thematic accounts rather than direct quotations. This reduces the granularity of participant voice, but it prevents the introduction of reconstructed speech as if it were exact quotation.

Future research could build on this study in three ways. First, classroom observation would make it possible to examine how communicative grammar tasks are actually enacted, especially in large and mixed-level classes. Second, student data could show how learners interpret communicative grammar work, how they respond to feedback, and when they shift from English to Vietnamese during interaction. Third, small-scale intervention studies could test whether adjusted assessment tasks, peer-supported lesson design, or staged task sequences improve participation and grammatical use over time. Such work would extend the present findings without treating them as evidence for broad causal claims.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the challenges faced by English lecturers at HNMU when applying CLT to grammar instruction for non-English major students and identified practical responses proposed by lecturers. The findings show that the main challenges include insufficient practical CLT training, large and mixed-level classes, grammar-oriented assessment, students' limited English proficiency, weak motivation for grammar learning, and frequent use of Vietnamese during group or pair work. The study also shows that lecturers' solutions are mostly gradual and context-sensitive. They include hands-on professional development, selective use of communicative grammar tasks, level-appropriate materials, positive feedback, clearer group organization, and student orientation toward communication. The study does not claim that CLT can be implemented fully under all conditions. Rather, it suggests that communicative grammar teaching in Vietnamese higher education is more realistic when it is adapted to local constraints and supported by assessment, teacher training, and classroom management practices.

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THE AUTHOR

Dr. Vuong Thi Hai Yen is Dean of the Faculty of Foreign Languages and manager of the English Language undergraduate programme at Hanoi Metropolitan University, Vietnam. Her research interests include English language teaching (ELT), language policy, applied linguistics, and English for Specific Purposes (ESP). She has published four books and textbooks, and she is the first and corresponding author of nearly ten articles in Q1 journals (Scopus), indexed in SSCI and ESCI. Scopus Author ID: 60679852300. ORCID: 0009-0005-9163-5128.
vthyen@hnmu.edu.vn

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Appendix A
Lecturer Questionnaire

The questionnaire aims at surveying Challenges in Applying Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) to Grammar Instruction for Non-English Major Students at the Tertiary Level in Vietnam

Your completion in this questionnaire is highly appreciated. The data collected are used in the research paper only, not for any purposes. Thank you for your help.

Please complete the following questions and requirements. You may tick more than one option.

1. About you:
Your age:…… Your gender:…….. Your teaching experience:……..

2. Have you ever trained in Communicative Language Teaching (CLT)?
☐ Never
☐ Yes, in University method course
☐ Yes, in English teaching conferences
☐ Yes, in English teaching journals
☐ Other, please list here

3. Have you ever been retrained in CLT?
☐ Never ☐ Once ☐ Twice ☐ Many times

4. From your point of view, mastery of grammar:
☐ Enhance students' four language skills
☐ Enables students to analyze grammatical elements of utterances, sentences …
☐ Enables students to translate books, magazines and other documents from English into Vietnamese perfectly
☐ Is a key to successful communication

5. In your opinion, the aim of teaching grammar at your school is to enable the students:
☐ to understand and analyze grammatical structures
☐ to make grammatically correct questions as well as answers
☐ to use structures correctly in appropriate context
☐ to use structures automatically without stopping to think
☐ to read and write simple texts in English
☐ Others: ……

6. When you teach a grammar structure, you
☐ always teach in Vietnamese
☐ always teach in English
☐ teach in English first and then in Vietnamese
☐ present the structure, analyze the structure and then give examples to illustrate

☐ give the situation, present the new structure, give examples and then let students do the practice
☐ give examples, then let your students practice using substitution drills
☐ Use visual aids to present the structure, let your students to figure out the form and then give examples to illustrate
☐ sometimes teach in English and sometimes teach in Vietnamese
☐ Others: ……

7. When your students make grammar mistakes, you
☐ always ignore students' mistakes
☐ always stop them and correct the mistake immediately because mistakes lead to the formation of bad habits
☐ correct students' mistakes during focused practice so that students can control the correct form
☐ not correct their mistakes but get them to self- correct by asking them to make a choice
☐ not interrupt students to correct their mistakes during communication practice, but correct later because interrupting students discourages them to speak and prevent them from speaking fluently
☐ Others: ……

8. In your viewpoint, CLT:
☐ CLT emphasizes language functions more than form.
☐ CLT creates a lot of opportunities for students to communicate.
☐ CLT always emphasizes on both fluency and accuracy.
☐ CLT creates a secure, non- threatening atmosphere in the classroom.
☐ CLT uses authentic materials.
☐ In CLT, language items are necessarily contextualized.
☐ Translation may be used where students need or benefit from it.
☐ The final goal of CLT is students' communicative competence.
☐ Students can work on four skills from the beginning.
☐ CLT reduces teachers' work.
☐ Others: ……

9. Please tick the difficulties that you have experienced when adopting CLT in teaching grammar to non- English major students at the school. (Adapted from Li, 1998)
☐ Misconceptions about CLT
☐ Lack of training and retraining in CLT
☐ Few opportunities to learn how to use CLT
☐ Deficiency in strategic and sociolinguistic competence in English
☐ Lack of authentic teaching materials
☐ Students' low English proficiency
☐ Students' lack of good attitudes to learning Grammar
☐ Students have passive styles to evaluate communicative competence
☐ Students' not participating in class activities
☐ Too little time and expertise to develop CLT materials

☐ Teaching facilities are poor
☐ Class sizes are too large to conduct CLT
☐ Multi-level classes
☐ The school's grammar- based exams do not justify using CLT
☐ Students use Vietnamese in work- group or pair- work
☐ Others: ……

10. To improve teaching English in general and teaching English grammar in particular to non-English-major students at the school, teachers should……..
☐ have further training on teaching methods
☐ be trained and retrained on sociolinguistic competence
☐ use more authentic materials
☐ motivate students more to learn English
☐ attend workshops or seminars on CLT so that teachers can share their teaching experience
☐ follow the guide for the teacher
☐ have self- improvement in their English level and teaching methods
☐ be provided with sufficient teaching facilities
☐ encourage collaborative work from students
☐ Give open – ended questions that allow weaker students to give their answers too
☐ give encouragements and positive correction and feedback on their students' mistakes
☐ use the language which is suitable with the students' level in the classroom
☐ divide the class into pairs or groups and point out the monitor to control the group
☐ Others: ……

11. To make a grammar lesson more interesting and effective, teachers can apply the following activities:
☐ using boards
☐ realia
☐ Picture description
☐ using work cards and worksheets
☐ Using stories
☐ Using AI tools

Thanks for your cooperation!