The purpose of this qualitative multicase study was to examine how college foreign language instructors implement communicative language teaching (CLT) to teach beginner-level classes across six foreign languages: Arabic, Chinese, French, German, Russian, and Spanish. Multiple data collection methods were used to gather the data: one electronic survey, 48 classroom observations, document analysis, and a semi-structured interview with each participant.

Findings revealed that the instructors’ implementation of CLT was limited as a few CLT features occurred across the six classes, including providing positive feedback and accepting students’ errors. Only two instructors (Chinese and German) used the target language extensively and used visual aids to support students’ comprehension. There were several factors that hindered the instructors’ ability to implement CLT: lack of teaching preparation and experience, lack of teaching freedom, the predominance of structure-based activities in the textbooks, the instructor’s domination of the classroom communication and interaction, the instructor’s explanation of language rules explicitly, and the classroom layouts. The findings also revealed that language differences played a role in implementing CLT. Five language instructors (Arabic, French, German, Russian, and Spanish) reported
that it was challenging to implement CLT when teaching inflections in these highly inflected languages. By contrast, the Chinese instructor reported that the simplicity of Chinese grammar helped her engage students in communicative activities. The Chinese instructor’s concern was teaching pronunciation and to what extent her implementation of CLT was effective in giving students feedback on their pronunciation errors.

The implications of this study point to the need for strategies and techniques, such as using visual aids and follow-up questions to maximize the use of the target language and enhance the implementation of CLT in the classroom. There is a need for research on helping novice instructors critically evaluate and implement the best practices of CLT and for more studies like this one in which CLT is examined across languages.