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Effective Measures to Develop Undergraduates' Communicative Competence in English as a Foreign Language: A Systematic Review

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Abstract. Communicative competence is a key ability that English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners should master in their second language acquisition; as such it has received great attention in academia. Despite abundant studies exploring ways to develop students' communicative competence, there has been no study to date synthesizing findings on the effective measures to develop EFL undergraduates' communicative competence in a tertiary context and how these findings affect EFL teaching. This systematic review analyzes 30 full-text articles that were published between 2005 and 2024, selected from six databases after a comprehensive search and assessment. The articles were scrutinized according to Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses 2020 guidelines and carefully assessed by the Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool. Five categories of effective measures were identified from the synthesis of the selected articles - teaching approaches, teaching activities, teaching materials, curriculum in teaching, and language skills and strategies. Evidence from the findings of the synthesis demonstrates three features: (1) high interest in teaching approaches, teaching materials, and teaching activities; (2) greater focus on pragmatic competence than the other three competences; (3) increasing focus on technology integration with the development of EFL undergraduates' communicative competence. Practical suggestions for future studies are elaborated, based on these three aspects.

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1. Introduction

As an integral ability in the current interconnected world and a pivotal concept in English learning and teaching pedagogy, communicative competence (CC) is regarded as an important target of L2 acquisition. It has gained worldwide attention from researchers and educators, and EFL college undergraduates are required not only to acquire content knowledge of English, but also communicative competences and skills to survive in a challenging employment market. Moreover, the rapid development of technology, blended learning, flipped learning, and synchronous learning via live stream and online meetings make English learning and communication an omnipresent global concern. Thus CC has become either a pivotal competence (Rahman, 2020) or a prominent motivation for studying in English-speaking countries (Zhai & Razali, 2021). The urgent need to master CC sharply contrasts with the low level of CC demonstrated by many EFL undergraduates. For example, CC among Bangladeshi undergraduates is considered quite low owing to their low English proficiency, use of their mother tongue, passivity in learning, lack of authentic materials and class sizes (Ibna Seraj et al., 2021). A body of research has emerged to explore effective measures to develop the communicative competence of EFL undergraduates.

However, a gap still remains; namely, in synthesizing the findings on how to improve EFL undergraduates' CC and shedding light on this issue for future study. On the one hand, numerous studies have been undertaken on improving EFL undergraduates' CC, that is, their linguistic competence (e.g., Mohamed & El-Nagar, 2022; De la Peña et al., 2023), pragmatic competence (e.g., Salimi & Karami, 2019; Alsuhaibani, 2020; Makruf et al., 2021), discourse competence (e.g., Jeong, 2018) and strategic competence (e.g., Rabab'ah, 2016; Vurdien, 2019). Researchers have also explored different ways to develop EFL/English as a second language (ESL) students' CC, through teaching approaches (e.g., Jeong, 2018; Ahmed, et al., 2021; Makruf et al., 2021), teaching materials (e.g., Alsuhaibani, 2020; Rustipa et al., 2021), and teaching activities (e.g., Xue, 2013; Salimi & Karami, 2019; Berezenko et al., 2022). However, no systematic review papers from 2005 to 2024 have to date provided an overview of CC development. Huang (2018) focused on synchronous communication tools but did not address blended learning approaches for EFL learners. Garcia-Martinez et al. (2020) reviewed CC among teacher training students but could not fully present findings for all EFL undergraduates. Wu et al. (2024) focused on the effect of blended learning, but their methodology was not clearly elaborated. Mootosamy and Aryadoust (2024) stressed the contribution of technology to CC studies but focused on the definition and operationalization of the CC construct. To sum up, none of the four reviews targeted findings on effective measures to develop EFL undergraduates'

CC. Moreover, in terms of publication time span, two reviews didn't cover the span from 2005 to 2024 (Huang (2018): 1990s–2017; Garcia-Martinez et al. (2020): 2009-2019), and the rest two didn't include clear span of publications in their methodology (e.g. Wu et al., 2024; Mootoosamy & Aryadoust, 2024). Obviously, a review of studies within a time span of 20 years may capture significant shifts in teaching methodologies, the use of teaching materials and activities, among other factors. Therefore, there is a justification for systematically reviewing measures taken by EFL teachers which are effective in developing undergraduates' CC.

The purpose of this systematic review is to explore the features of effective measures to foster EFL undergraduates' CC, and the consistencies and inconsistencies among such studies. The researchers aim to synthesize the overall development of studies on the effective measures used by EFL teachers from 2005-2024 and probe their typical features. This systematic review aims to answer the following questions:

1. What is the research background of the studies on effective measures to develop EFL undergraduates' CC?
2. What effective measures do EFL teachers use to develop their undergraduates' CC?
3. What are the features of the studies on effective measures to develop EFL undergraduates' CC?

2. Methodology

To guarantee the quality and transparency of data reporting, this systematic review followed the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) 2020 guidelines' statement for the identification, selection, appraisal, and synthesis of studies. Page et al. (2021) proposed a 27-item checklist and a four-phase flow diagram which includes identification, screening, eligibility and inclusion of studies.

2.1 Systematic Searching Strategy

In this systematic review, the researchers followed the four-step process set out in the PRISMA 2000 flow diagram: identification, screening, eligibility and inclusion.

2.1.1 Identification

As the first stage of the PRISMA 2000 search strategy, identification is used "to improve the significance of the keywords that are employed" (Yusop et al., 2022). The researchers used the following six databases to search for open-access sources of articles: Scopus, Education Resources Information Center (Eric), Google Scholar, SAGE, Wiley, and Springer. As a world-class database of multi-disciplinary abstract and citation, Scopus provides more than 21,000 peer-reviewed journals, and 97.3 million search records from over 7,000 publishers. With its online library of education research and information, Eric offers easy-to-use and searchable full-text access. Google Scholar is a robust online database that provides a simple way to identify free full-text academic literature in a whole range of disciplines, and the SAGE platform helps readers to locate, explore, visualize, and share multi-disciplinary data from the

most reliable sources globally. Wiley contains the most authoritative online journals, books, and research resources from a variety of disciplines. Springer is an open-access publisher that has more than 2,900 journals and 2 million books and produces a wide range of academic journals. All the Springer research articles are peer-reviewed.

2.1.2 Screening

During the search process, the researchers also employed Boolean operators (i.e., AND, OR, NOT, or AND NOT), phrase searching, and field code functions as searching techniques. All the search techniques were used separately or together to meet the search need. In addition, the researchers relied on manual searches to obtain relevant articles from the databases mentioned above. In this phase, CC and communicative ability were used interchangeably to refer to students' ability to communicate in English. Tertiary or higher education and EFL were also used to narrow down the scope of the literature. The researchers also found that "intercultural communicative competence" appeared very frequently when searching for literature on "communicative competence". Therefore, the researchers used "AND NOT intercultural" to exclude all relevant studies on intercultural communicative competence. Table 1 gives a panorama of different keywords used to locate sources from these databases.

Table 1: Keywords used to find the relevant literature

Database	Keywords
Scopus	TITLE-ABS-KEY ("communicative competence" OR "communicative ability") AND EFL AND ("tertiary education" OR "higher education")
Eric	communicative competence OR communicative ability AND EFL
Google scholar	communicative competence OR communicative ability AND NOT intercultural
SAGE	communicative competence OR communicative ability AND EFL
Wiley	communicative competence OR communicative ability AND EFL
Springer	communicative competence OR communicative ability AND EFL

2.1.3 Eligibility

With the combination of searching strategies and query strings, the researchers collected fairly substantial preliminary data. In the screening stage, the researchers followed the inclusion and exclusion criteria to locate more relevant data. As stated in 2.1.1, the researchers only chose open-access articles from the six databases. All the selected articles can be downloaded directly from the databases with full-text versions for review and analysis. In addition, to locate empirical studies, the reviewers scrutinize only journal articles with first-hand data. Figure 1 is an illustration of all the stages involved in this section. Firstly, the timeline of this systematic review was set from 2005 to 2024, when this systematic review was conducted. Articles published before 2004 were excluded and a total of 1,127 articles were identified from the six databases, including books, book chapters, book review articles, journal articles, systematic review articles, theses, editorials, and conference proceedings.

In the screening stage, the researchers first excluded 37 duplicate articles, and 359 articles published before 2004 from the six databases, leaving 731 articles for the next stage, screening. Secondly, the review excluded any studies not focused on L2 learning or not published in the English language. The researchers identified 167 studies on L2 learning written in English and excluded all 564 non-English publications. Thirdly, to locate findings from empirical studies, the researchers excluded 64 publications from the remaining 167 publications in the form of books, book chapters, book review articles, systematic review articles, theses, editorials, and conference proceedings. Only journal articles with empirical approaches were retained to guarantee the objectivity and quality of the sources of literature, though articles screened for systematic reviews could be either theoretical or empirical studies to minimize the chance of bias and arbitrariness (Li & Wang, 2018). Fourthly, since this review targeted only studies on CC among EFL tertiary learners, the researchers excluded studies in high schools or ESL contexts for two reasons: there is limited exposure to English in EFL tertiary education compared with the exposure of ESL students, and the job market is such that there is an urgent demand for EFL at tertiary level. Additionally, since this review targets EFL teaching and learning, the researchers excluded cultural factors such as intercultural CC, communicative skills, willingness to communicate, et cetera, after reviewing the titles and abstracts. A total of 30 articles were finalized for inclusion after the exclusion criteria had been applied. Table 2 provides the inclusion and exclusion criteria used for the selection of articles appropriate for this systematic review.

Table 2: Eligibility

Criteria	Inclusion	Exclusion
Time range	2005-2024	2004 and earlier
Language	English	Non-English
Literature type	Open access journal articles	Books, book chapters, book reviews, systematic review articles, theses, editorials, conference proceedings
Scope	CC; EFL; tertiary education	Not related to CC of tertiary EFL learners

2.1.4 Inclusion

Based on the eligibility criteria, the researchers scrutinized a total of 30 full-text articles for the systematic review. The specific process is illustrated in Figure 1 which follows a PRISMA 2020 flow diagram.

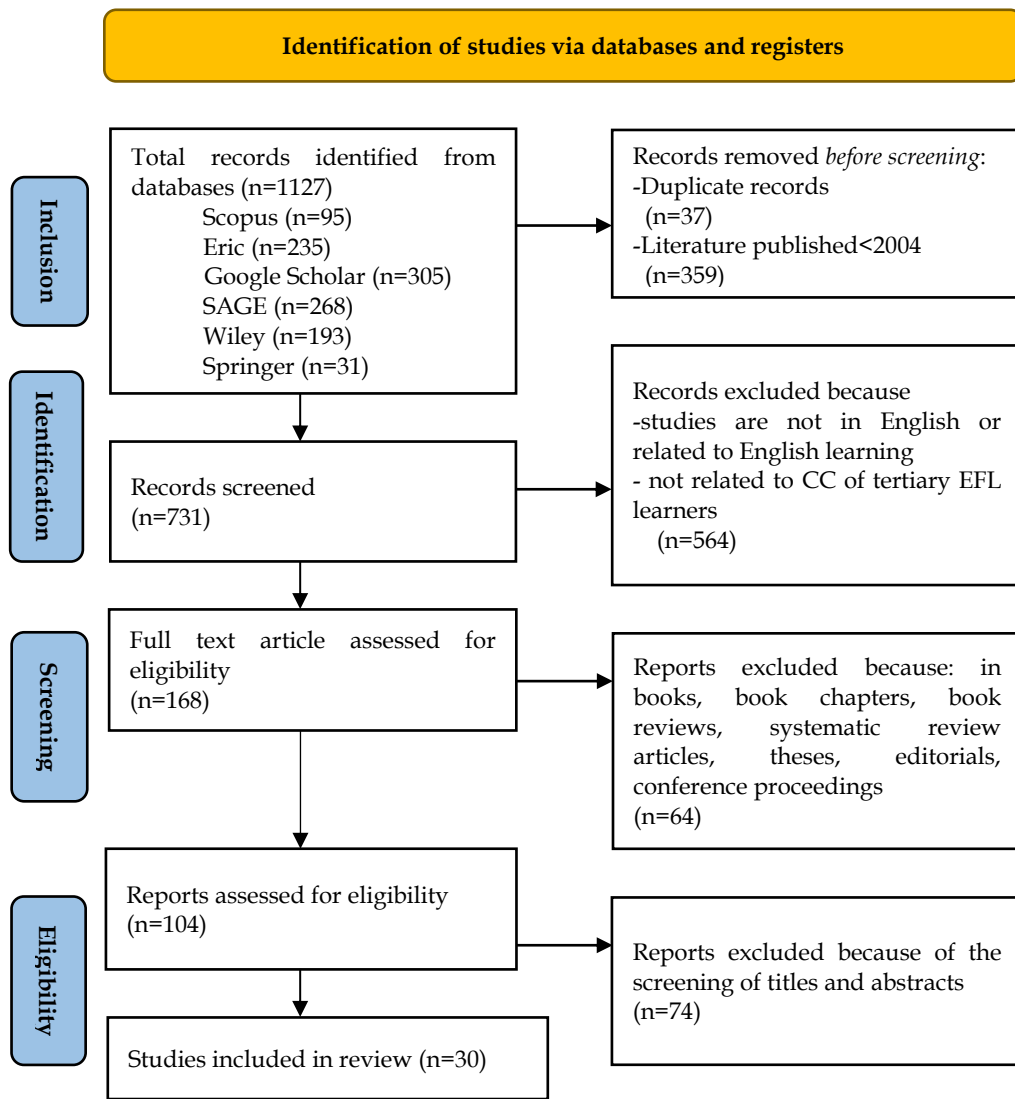


Figure 1: The PRISMA 2020 flow diagram for this systematic literature review

2.2 Evaluation of the Selected Articles

To guarantee the quality of the selected articles, the researchers assessed them using the Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT) version 2018. As an appraisal tool for systematic mixed studies reviews, MMAT can be used to assess the quality of empirical studies in terms of two features: research questions and research methods. MMAT offers four levels of article quality: low, average, above average and high (Yusop et al, 2022). Using the MMAT guidelines, the researchers evaluated the 30 articles and identified 17 articles as high quality and 13 as above average. For example, Ho's (2020) study went through two steps to be identified as a high-quality article. The first step assessed the clarity of the research questions and the richness of data to address the research questions. The second step included five aspects of assessment, that is, adequate rationale for using mixed methods to address the research questions, effective integration of both the qualitative and quantitative parts, abundant

interpretation of the outputs, adequate addressment of the divergences and inconsistencies, and adherence to the quality of criteria.

2.3 Data Extraction and Analysis

Data from the 30 articles were carefully extracted, coded and analyzed after the appraisal. Firstly, the researchers reviewed the abstract, findings and discussions of the papers to extract themes and patterns. Secondly, the themes were categorized and coded for thematic analysis. The researchers created three major themes based on the research questions: general background of the articles, effective measures to develop EFL undergraduates' CC, and features of the selected studies. The researchers conducted a thematic analysis to further locate the sub-themes within the three main themes. In order to triangulate the data, the researchers revisited the themes in the context of other themes and findings, and then further renamed and revised the themes to guarantee correctness and relevance. Finally, the researchers identified all the sub-themes for each main theme, as is shown in Figure 2 below.

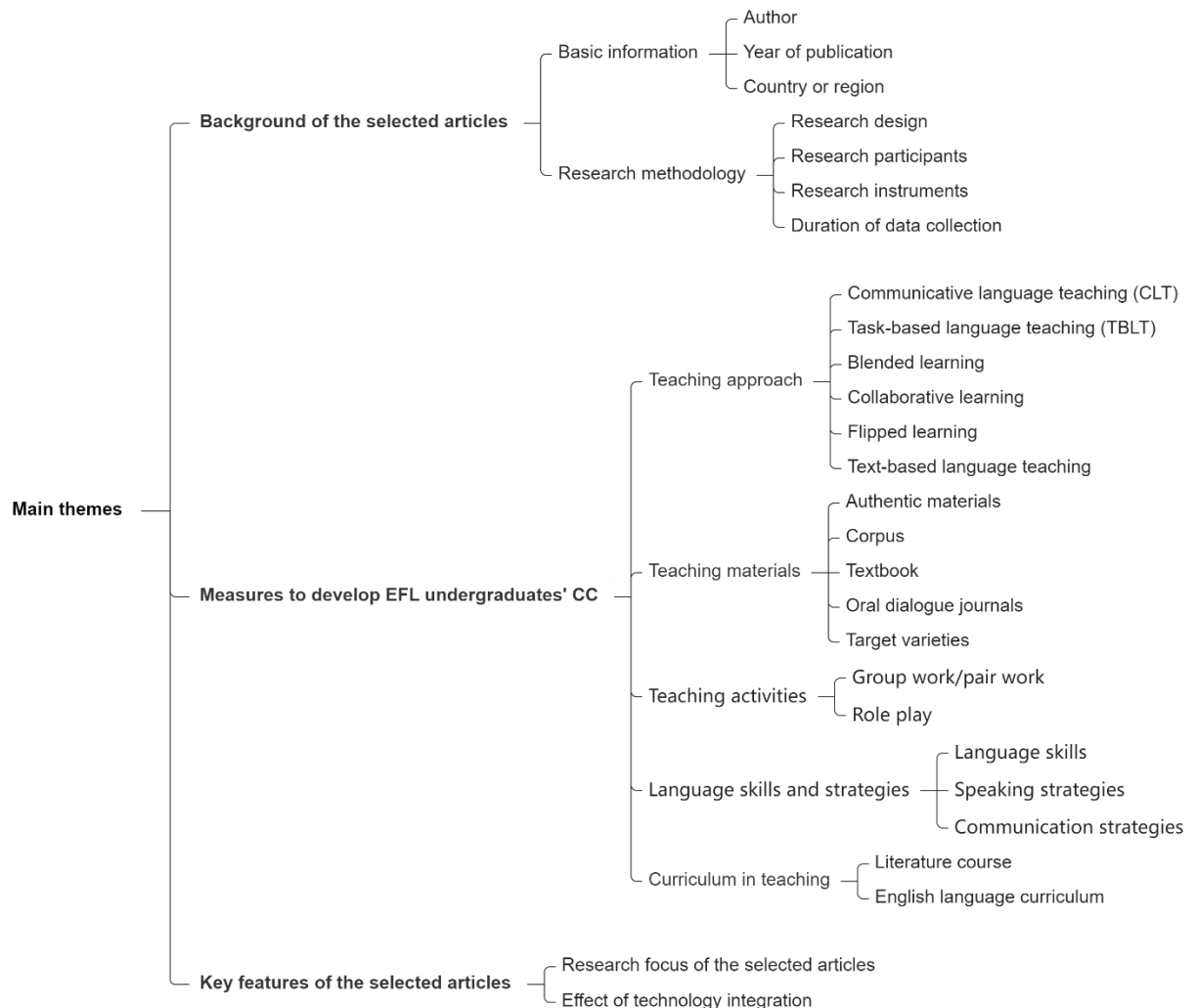


Figure 2: The three main themes and sub-themes

3. Findings

This section offers a comprehensive review of the 30 selected full-text articles, including the general profile, research methods, and research foci that can contribute to the knowledge of studies on CC in EFL tertiary context.

3.1 Research Question 1

Research question 1 (What is the general background of the studies on effective measures to develop EFL undergraduates' CC?) aimed to establish a comprehensive picture of the studies. The first main theme elaborated in Figure 2 answered the research question according to two aspects. The first related to basic information such as author, year of publication, and country or region. The second related to the research methodology including research design, participants, instruments, and the duration of data collection.

3.1.1 *Publication Information for the Selected Articles*

In terms of the basic information on the studies, the researchers have demonstrated a growing interest in EFL undergraduates' CC development over the past 20 years, but their interests varied greatly both chronologically and geographically. Chronologically, the second decade witnessed a sharp increase in the quantity of studies (n=26) compared with the first 10 years (n=4). Specifically, ten publications were published in 2019 and 2021, contributing nearly one third of the total volume. The great growth in number echoes the essential role of CC for EFL undergraduates and the strong emphasis of EFL teachers on CC development in their teaching practice. Geographically, Asia (n=19), the Middle East (n=5), and Europe (n=4) ranked as the top three regions on which the studies focused, with Indonesia (n=4) being the most productive Asian country. The high research output on CC in Asia may be due to teachers' acute alertness to students' minimal interactions with native speakers and the cultural norms and educational practices of a teacher-centered atmosphere (Wei et al., 2018).

3.1.2 *Research Methodology for the Selected Articles*

In terms of research methodology, the uneven distribution of research design also varied with location. As shown in Figure 3 below, mixed-method design was the most commonly used approach (n=13), with Asia contributing most (n=10) of the mixed-method studies. This finding corresponds with Sharma et al. (2023) who indicate that a mixed-methods design offers a more comprehensive understanding of a research phenomenon, and answers research questions with greater certainty and more implications. Quantitative design ranked as the second most adopted design with 12 studies, and Asia contributed six studies. Qualitative design came third (n=5), with three of these studies based in Asia.

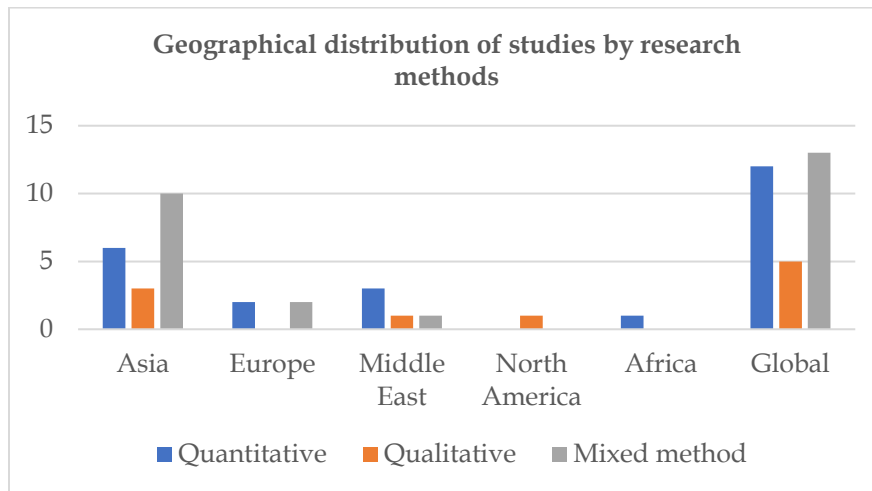


Figure 3: Geographical distribution of the selected studies according to research methods

Tests (n=13) and closed-ended questionnaires (n=13) were the most commonly used quantitative research instruments. In particular, a quasi-experimental design with pre-tests and post-tests was most popular among researchers. Four of the 13 mixed-method studies and seven of the 13 quantitative studies involved quasi-experimental interventions with pre-tests and post-tests. Five studies used both in the data collection process: Rodphotong (2018), Vurdien (2019), Ho (2020), Makruf et al. (2021), Berezenko et al. (2022). This approach was most often apparent in studies conducting quantitative research, followed by questionnaires. For example, Ho (2020) adopted Cheng and Mckimm's (2015) paper-based test for pre-tests and post-tests and a self-designed questionnaire with a five-point Linkert scale to investigate how communicative language teaching facilitates undergraduates' English learning and CC development in Taiwan. Berezenko et al. (2022) conducted entry and final tests to compare the change in EFL students' communicative skills after the experiment, and a questionnaire to explore students' attitudes towards a communicative language teaching approach.

As to qualitative design, an interview was the most commonly used instrument, followed by observations and then reflective notes. Fifteen studies conducted interviews to gather qualitative data, and five of them were marked as high-quality articles. Interviews were mainly used to explore the effect of teaching approaches, such as communicative language teaching (Farooq, 2015; Ho, 2020), task-based teaching (Ahmed et al., 2021) and blended learning (Mahalli & Haryanto, 2021) and teaching activities such as debate (Zare & Othman, 2015) and role play (Wulandari, 2019; Chanh, 2023).

3.2 Research Question 2

Research question 2 (What measures do EFL teachers use to develop their undergraduates' CC?) targeted effective measures found in the synthesis of the selected articles. As is shown in Figure 2 in Section 2.3, a total of 18 measures were

scrutinized in the 30 articles. After further classification, the researchers identified five major categories: teaching approaches, teaching materials, teaching activities, language skills and communication strategies, and curriculum in teaching according to the number of studies. The quantity of measures was not directly in line with the number of articles since some articles involved more than one measure (e.g., Saeed & Bostancı, 2022). The top three categories were teaching approach, teaching materials, and teaching activities (n=9), followed by language skills and speaking strategies (n=3) and curriculum in English teaching (n=2).

3.2.1 Teaching Approaches

Six different teaching approaches were found in investigating measures to develop EFL undergraduates' CC with three quantitative studies, three qualitative studies and four mixed-methods studies, as is shown in Table 3 below. Communicative language teaching (CLT) and task-based language teaching (TBLT) accounted for 60% of the total, followed by collaborative learning, blended learning, text-based language learning, and flipped learning.

Table 3: Studies on the effect of teaching approaches on EFL undergraduates' CC

Measure	Number	Study	Research design
Communicative language teaching (CLT)	5	Farooq (2015); Al-Garni & Almuhammadil (2019)	Quantitative
		Ho (2020); Berezenko et al. (2022); Yuan (2022)	Mixed methods
Task-based language teaching (TBLT)	2	Waluyo (2019) Ahmed et al. (2021)	Quantitative Qualitative
Collaborative learning	1	Rodphotong (2018)	Quantitative
Blended learning	1	Mahalli & Haryanto (2021)	Qualitative
Flipped learning	1	Makruf et al. (2021)	Qualitative
Text-based language	1	Rustipa et al. (2021)	Qualitative

The effect of CLT on EFL undergraduates' CC was discussed in three mixed studies and two quantitative studies. Firstly, all the selected CLT studies justified the effectiveness of CLT on students' CC development. For example, Ho (2020) favored CLT due to the abundant interactions and communicative opportunities it provided for students' CC development. However, researchers varied in their opinions in terms of gender differences and the teaching of grammar. Farooq (2015) demonstrated a gender difference in teachers' perceptions of CLT and the dominance of listening and speaking over reading and writing. Female teachers disagreed with their male counterparts' view that grammar teaching was neglected in CLT. This view contradicted Berezenko et al.'s (2022) finding that CLT improved EFL

undergraduates' grammar by providing them with rich input and therefore enhanced their linguistic competence. Farooq (2015) also mentioned teachers' contradictory views on native-like pronunciation. Female teachers who favored the notion of non-use of L2 and talking like a native speaker outweighed those who disapproved of it. Secondly, challenges relating to CLT were apparent in terms of students' limited opportunities to practice English when socializing (e.g., Farooq, 2015), proficiency levels, motivation (Al-Garni & Almuhammadil, 2019; Berezenko, 2022), and self-esteem (Ho, 2022).

Two studies investigated the effect of task-based language teaching (TBLT) on EFL undergraduates' CC based on specific tasks the researchers selected. On the one hand, both studies confirmed the advantages of TBLT for students' CC development, that is, in terms of promotion of oral production and facilitation of meaning negotiation (Waluyo, 2019), interactive communication, its student-centered nature, and enhancement of collaborative learning (Ahmed et al., 2021). On the other hand, TBLT may be affected by factors related to the group of learners, like knowledge of and proficiency in the English language, motivation, and other factors like class size and time allocated for tasks. For example, slow and low-proficiency students would not benefit much in communicative activities dominated by proficient students.

The other four approaches (i.e., blended learning, flipped learning, text-based teaching, and collaborative learning) indicate a hotspot for current CC studies. Mahalli and Haryanto (2021) justified two effects of blended learning on learners' CC: linguistic fitness using web-based media resources, and sociolinguistic capability using blended learning tasks. Makruf et al. (2021) adopted two questionnaires to elicit data: the Discourse Complete Task for assessment, and Technology Acceptance Model for perception. Flipped learning was proven to be effective on learners' pragmatic competence and helped to reduce their stress and increase their participation. Rustipa et al. (2021) identified four problems EFL teachers face when adopting this approach: text selection, text adaptation or modification, task design and overcoming learners' boredom. Rodphotong's (2018) study identified the effectiveness of collaborative learning on students' self-development with English language training and activity appropriateness.

3.2.2 *Teaching Materials*

Five types of teaching materials were found to be useful for developing EFL undergraduates' CC. The main types included authentic materials, corpus, textbook, target varieties, and oral dialogue journals. Methodologically, studies with a quantitative design (n=7) outnumbered the other two methods for studying the effect of teaching materials on EFL undergraduates' CC development, as is shown in Table 4.

Table 4: Studies on the effect of teaching materials on EFL undergraduates' CC

Measure	Number	Study	Research design
Authentic materials	3	Gilmore (2011); Sutudena and Ramazanzadeh (2011) Jeong (2018)	Quantitative Mixed method
Corpus	3	Aşık (2015) Assassi & Benyelles (2016); Alsuhaibani (2020)	Mixed method Quantitative
Textbook	2	Waluyo (2019) Ahmed et al. (2021)	Quantitative Qualitative
Target varieties	2	Forsberg et al. (2019) Salimi & Karami (2019)	Quantitative Mixed method
Oral dialogue journals	1	Sutudena & Ramazanzade (2011)	Quantitative

Authentic teaching materials were widely acknowledged as promoting EFL students' CC. The early researchers before 2015 demonstrated the importance of authenticity of materials for EFL students' CC development and rich, comprehensible input (Gilmore, 2011; Sutudena & Ramazanzadeh, 2011). This view was further supported by Aşık (2015), who identified an inconsistency between the classroom and actual use of language. Tape recording of oral dialogue journals (Sutudena & Ramazanzade, 2011) and multimedia-assisted resources (Jeong, 2018) served as evidence of authentic materials used for teacher-student interaction to develop EFL graduates' CC.

Three articles from 2015 to 2020 investigated the effect of corpus in developing EFL learners' CC. Aşık (2015) claimed corpus could be highly effective in EFL teaching for its authentic language and materials. Assassi & Benyelles's (2016) use of formulaic language served as an example of corpus to develop EFL undergraduates' CC, and proved to be effective in enhancing students' CC, especially fluency. Using compliment responses as a corpus, EFL learners' pragmatic competence was obviously improved (Alsuhaibani, 2020). Despite the advantages of corpus in language teaching, corpus use was not common due to teachers' lack of knowledge, access, time and confidence in using it.

Researchers' views on textbooks and target varieties also varied. The importance of textbooks in EFL teaching were discussed, alongside a recognition for the need for content enrichment and updates. On one hand, Saeed & Bostancı (2022) found that coursebooks were good and fitted the students' English level. On the other hand, Aşık (2015) claimed the promotion of textbooks to include pragmatic input would better improve students' pragmatic competence. Salimi & Karami (2019) justified the

inadequacy of pragmatic information in textbooks. Ahsan et al. (2021), moreover, listed the negative effect of textbooks due to insufficient materials, lack of words which are used every day, and lengthy sentences. For target varieties, there were inconsistencies between teachers' perceptions and students' preferences for British English (BrE) and American English (AmE). Forsberg et al. (2019) showed that German teachers prefer BrE while their students prefer a mixture of the two. Swedish teachers prefer either AmE or BrE, while their students prefer either a mixture or only AmE. This was supported by Salimi & Karami (2019) who found that students preferred AmE to BrE.

3.2.3 Teaching Activities

Group work/pair work and role play were the two major teaching activities investigated for developing EFL undergraduates' CC with 11 studies devoted to this approach. Five quantitative studies, four mixed-method studies, and two qualitative studies were involved, as shown in Table 5.

Table 5: Studies on the effect of teaching activities on EFL undergraduates' CC

Measure	Number	Study	Research design
Group work/pair work	6	Xue (2013)	Qualitative
		Farooq (2015); Al-Garni & Almuhammadil (2019); Mahalli & Haryanto (2021)	Quantitative
		Zare & Othman (2015); Saeed & Bostanci (2022)	Mixed methods
		Al-Garni & Almuhammadil (2019); Waluyo (2019)	Quantitative
		Gilmore (2011); Bakan et al. (2022)	Mixed methods
		Wulandari et al. (2019)	Qualitative

Group work was a double-edged sword in developing EFL undergraduates' CC. On the one hand, group work was effective for improving students' CC because it offers an authentic language learning context (Xue, 2013), opportunities for target language practice (Koç, 2018) and is preferred by students (Li & Mu, 2014). Zare & Othman (2015) and Ahmed et al. (2021) discussed the effect of classroom debate on promoting learners' critical thinking skills and oral communication abilities. This was also supported in Ahmed et al.'s (2021) study. Group work also stimulated students' confidence and helped them to overcome their shyness (Saeed & Bostanci, 2022). On the other hand, the learning of slow and low-proficiency students may be hampered by low understanding of group task instructions and the domination of high-

proficiency students (Farooq, 2015; Ahmed, et al., 2021) and (Hanh & Trang, 2023).

As a popular teaching activity, role play enables students to practice communication in different social contexts and participate to the maximum degree in group tasks to solve problems (Wijaya, 2018; Dwiyantri & Lolita, 2023). Wulandari et al. (2019) noted the effect of role play on EFL students' vocabulary, pronunciation and appropriateness in expressions, and the new atmosphere for classroom teaching. Bakan et al. (2022) discussed synchronous learning from massively multiplayer online games and how greatly enhanced students' learning proficiency was. However, the effects of role play were subject to learners' skills, language proficiency and confidence (Wulandari et al., 2019). Waluyo (2019) suggested three ways to solve the difficulties: role play design, defining the student's role for each individual and group member, and teachers' support.

3.2.4 Language Skills and Communication Strategies

Three studies discussed English language skills and teaching strategies, especially oral English skills. Saeed and Bostancı (2022) claimed that the integration of listening and speaking skills together is important in developing EFL students' CC. Chanh's (2023) investigation of 10 speaking strategies showed that images and design in the pre-speaking phase, alongside idea expression and word utility in the while-speaking phase were major factors affecting students' CC performance. Rabab'ah's (2016) experimental study indicated improvement of EFL learners' oral communication ability with the acquisition of achievement strategies (circumlocution/paraphrasing and self-repair) and interactional strategies such as clarification requests, confirmation checks, asking for repetition, guessing and appealing for help.

3.2.5 Curriculum in Teaching

Two studies focused on the English course and curriculum. Alami's (2014) experimental study concluded that a literature course significantly improved Arabian EFL students' communicative critical reading and writing competence. Ahsan et al.'s (2021) study, on the other hand, proposed two suggestions to revise poorly designed curricula; namely, well-designed curricula to meet learners' practical needs, and teachers' selection of textbooks and supporting material.

3.3 Research Question 3

Research question 3 (What are the features of the studies on effective measures to develop EFL undergraduates' CC?) targeted locating the features demonstrated in the selected articles. Two main features are elaborated in the following section, namely, research focus and the effect of the integration of technology.

3.3.1 Research Focus of the Articles

As shown in Table 6, pragmatic competence attracted more attention from studies than linguistic competence, discourse competence or strategic competence. In addition to Xue's (2013) study of group work on all four components of CC, Aşık (2015) elaborated on both pragmatic competence and discourse competence.

Although pragmatic competence is considered to be difficult to develop owing to its strong tie to two interlocutors and its social nature (Tarawneh, 2023), three studies justified the effectiveness of their measures in developing this competence. Aşık (2015), Assassi and Benyelles (2016) and Alsuhaibani (2020) justified the effectiveness of corpus in developing students' pragmatic competence by using formulaic language and compliment responses. Makruf et al. (2021) demonstrated the effect of flipped learning on learners' pragmatic competence for real face-to-face interactions and tangible evidence of conveying requesting acts in daily communication. Moreover, multimedia-assisted materials (Jeong, 2018) were effective for helping students to develop linguistic competence, and corpus and role play were effective in developing discourse competence. Waluyo (2019) justified the effect of theme-based role play in advancing EFL learners' meaning negotiation and English fluency and complexity. However, compared with the total selection of 30 articles, studies on the specific component of CC were not only insufficient in number but also not up to date, especially for studies on strategic competence. The paucity of studies on strategic competence suggests the possible need to explore strategies to overcome communication breakdowns

Table 6: Different competences of CC clearly discussed in the selected articles

Competences	Number of studies	Author & year
Linguistic competence	3	Xue (2013); Jeong (2018); Berezenko et al. (2022)
Pragmatic competence	6	Gilmore (2011); Xue (2013); Aşık (2015); Assassi & Benyelles (2016); Alsuhaibani (2020); Makruf et al. (2021)
Discourse competence	3	Xue (2013); Aşık (2015); Waluyo (2019)
Strategic competence	1	Xue (2013)

3.3.2 Effect of Technology Integration

As is shown in Table 7, the second noticeable feature was the growing integration of technology with EFL teaching to develop EFL students' CC. This trend has been developing quickly, especially in the 2020s since COVID-19. On the one hand, integration of technology develops over time. For example, Jeong (2018) highlighted that authentic multimedia resources improved learners' pronunciation and rhythm, but the specific software or tools were not named. When it comes to the area of e-learning or blended learning, more recent studies have explored the use of cutting-edge tools like Zoom, Google Classroom, and massively multi-player online role-playing games (MMORPGs), which became prominent during and after COVID-19 (Vurdien, 2019; Makruf et al., 2021; Bakan et al., 2022; Haryanto, 2021). Yuan (2022) extended the concept of e-learning to regard it as an ecosystem and include online feedback for self-correction and assessment for synchronous interaction between teachers and students. Additionally, recent research on the use of immersive learning environments, MMORPGs, can provide a fresh perspective. Bakan et al. (2022) found

that dynamic interface and synchronous action and collaboration through MMORPGs enable EFL learners to practice real-time communication, making the learning experience more dynamic and effective. Makruf et al. (2021) pinpointed learner autonomy in e-learning for it stimulated learners' self-learning or independent learning. However, Makruf et al.'s (2021) study also claimed that researchers should be alert to possible problems with e-learning, such as technical problems, learners' silence during interactions and an absence of personal contact in virtual communication. This finding corresponds with Alshumaimeri & Alhumud (2021) that communication could be affected by the lack of face-to-face interaction, body language and eye contact.

Table 7: Different technologies used in developing EFL students' CC

Author & year	Technology
Sutudena & Ramazanzade (2011)	Tape recording
Jeong (2018)	Multimedia
Vurdien (2019)	Videoconferencing through Zoom
Makruf et al. (2021)	Google classroom
Bakan et al. (2022)	Massively multiplayer online role-playing game
Mahalli & Haryanto (2021)	Web-based learning
Yuan (2022)	WeChat, Moodle, XiaoXiaoQianDao

4. Discussion

The following section discusses the gaps in the three major findings of the synthesis in terms of the general profile and effective measures to develop EFL undergraduates' CC from 2005 to 2024, the limitations of the current research, and the implications for future research.

4.1 Gaps in the General Background of the Selected Articles

Based on the synthesis of the general profile of the 30 selected articles, uneven distribution can be found chronologically, geographically and methodologically, as illustrated in Table 8.

Table 8: Summary of basic information of the articles

Gaps	Classification	No. of Studies	
Chronological	2005-2014	4	
	2015-2024	26	
Geographical	Asia	19	
	Middle East	5	
	Europe	4	
	North America	1	
	Africa	1	
Methodological	Mixed Methods	13	
	Types	Quantitative	12
		Qualitative	5
		Test	13
	Instruments	Closed-end questionnaire	13
		Interview	15
		Observation	3
		Reflective notes	3
		Open-ended questionnaire	3

Chronologically, the number of publications in the second decade (n=26) greatly outnumbered those in first one (n=4), which suggested possible inadequate attention paid to research into effective measures to develop EFL undergraduates' CC at that time. The proliferation of studies in the second decade justified the statement, and with the abundant studies on this problem, EFL undergraduates' CC development can be thus developed effectively.

Geographically, Asian publications dominated other regions; Asia accounted for 64% of all articles, followed by 17% for the Middle East, 13% for Europe and 3% for both North America and Africa. The abundant number of publications in Asia reflects researchers' keen interest in the topic and the important role of CC in Asian EFL college teaching, while the small number of publications in other areas potentially indicates insufficient effort or somewhat different interests in terms of CC studies. Only two publications from North America and Africa and none from South America indicate a paucity of studies on CC in these areas, which could point to a useful area for future efforts.

Methodologically, research design and instruments were also unevenly distributed. In terms of research design, mixed methods and quantitative design accounted for 83.3% of the total, leaving only 17.2% for qualitative studies. In terms of instruments, quantitative instruments such as tests and closed-end questionnaires were used in 56% of the articles. The interview method outweighed the other three instruments in qualitative designs with 32% of all qualitative articles using this approach. The low proportion of articles following a qualitative design indicates a paucity of thick and in-depth exploration of the patterns, themes and categories of analysis for EFL undergraduates' CC development.

4.2 Gaps in Effective Measures to Support EFL Undergraduates' CC Development

Researchers placed more emphasis on teaching approaches, teaching activities and teaching materials than on language skills, speaking strategies and teaching curricula. Besides, they were more concerned with output skills such as listening and speaking than reading and writing (i.e., Rabab'ah, 2016; Saeed & Bostancı, 2022; Chanh, 2023). It was also apparent that new research approaches such as blended learning, flipped learning and collaborative learning can be more widely used to explore learners' CC and input skills. Moreover, exposure to more up-to-date authentic materials in the target language and training for teachers with an interest in corpus can stimulate learners' acquisition of comprehensible input and equip teachers with skills that allow them to better select teaching materials. In addition, more attention should be paid to improving the CC of low-proficiency students owing to their need for more time to understand teachers' instructions and fewer opportunities in groups dominated by high-proficiency students, and anxiety in collaboration and interaction with others (Ahmed et al., 2021). On the other hand, the generality of the curriculum limits researchers' endeavors to fully discuss its effectiveness in terms of developing learners' CC. The reliance of the English curriculum on a systematically, well-defined English teaching program makes it hard to complete an all-round and in-depth investigation of the English curriculum, despite the need for curriculum revision and modification to enhance learners' CC (Salehi et al., 2015).

4.3 Gaps in Features of the Selected Articles

Two features emerged in synthesizing features of the selected articles. Firstly, only corpus and flipped learning were new studies on factors to develop learners' pragmatic competence (Alsuhaibani, 2020; Makruf et al., 2021). The lack of discussion on strategic competence and the paucity of studies on discourse competence in the last 10 years suggests a need to explore effective measures on how to compensate for communication breakdown and maintain smooth communication, and how to maintain cohesion and coherence in communication. Secondly, the articles bore witness to a growing immersion of technology in studies on EFL learners' CC. The simultaneous and natural interaction, ample linguistic and cognitive virtual environment, and the "feeling of being there" were identified as enabling technology to shape the way forward for language learning (Yudintseva, 2024). Makruf et al. (2021) indicated improvements in learners' language performance, active participation and interaction with teachers and students in flipped learning. Bakan et al. (2022) exemplified the function of games on learners' autonomy and awareness of learning; however, problems remain with regard to immersion in learning with the latest technologies such as AI, virtual reality and holographic projection. Moreover, learners' mental health in relation to issues such as internet loneliness and boredom, and feelings of distance due to a lack of real face-to-face communication is yet to be investigated.

5. Conclusion

The current review synthesized 30 selected articles on effective measures to develop ELF undergraduates' CC from three aspects: the general background of the selected

articles, five main categories of measures in students' CC development and the two features of the studies. On the one hand, mixed-methods approaches outnumbered quantitative methodologies as the most frequently used design, providing CC students with more comprehensive insights. On the other hand, CLT still remains the most commonly used approach for CC studies, but with the rapid development of technology, e-learning which involves the integration of online and offline approaches is becoming prevalent; this involves approaches such as flipped learning, blended learning and virtual reality learning. Additionally, teaching materials and activities have also been upgraded with the application of synchronous communication and interaction. However, the synthesis shows a lack of studies on how to develop learners' strategic competence and discourse competence and how to better integrate technology in EFL studies without causing boredom, loneliness and feelings of distance. This review may be helpful for EFL practitioners with an interest in CC studies, and EFL students who have problems with their CC. Researchers who are interested in EFL/ESL CC studies can explore the effective measures identified for developing learners' strategic competence and discourse competence or investigate the integration of technology with EFL learning such as AI applications, virtual reality, holographic projection or gamification.

There are also some limitations in this review. Firstly, since this review was set within an EFL tertiary context, literature on ESL students and students from high schools and primary schools was not included. Secondly, despite the synthesis undertaken in this review, there are still other measures that this review did not cover owing to the limited number of articles selected from the database, such as further in-depth analysis of other teaching approaches like collaborative learning, and other communicative activities such as interviews and storytelling.

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