

**THE MISSING LINK IN COMMUNICATIVE LANGUAGE TEACHING: RETHINKING TEACHER
PROFICIENCY IN INDIAN SECONDARY ESL CLASSROOMS**

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Abstract:

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) has significantly shaped English language education policy in India, particularly at the secondary school level. Curriculum frameworks emphasize communicative competence, learner interaction, and functional language use. Despite these policy commitments, classroom practices frequently remain grammar-oriented and examination-driven. While structural constraints such as large class sizes and assessment pressure are widely acknowledged, teacher communicative proficiency has received comparatively limited sustained analysis. This paper argues that teacher proficiency constitutes a central yet underexamined factor in the persistent gap between communicative policy and pedagogical practice. Drawing on research in teacher cognition, English-for-Teaching, teacher agency, and professional identity, the paper reconceptualizes proficiency as context-specific, functional, and developmental rather than native-like. It further examines how linguistic insecurity, cognitive load, and assessment misalignment constrain teachers' enactment of communicative pedagogy. The paper concludes that meaningful implementation of CLT in Indian secondary ESL classrooms depends on sustained investment in classroom-based language development, institutional support structures, and assessment reform. Communicative reform requires not only curricular change but also the linguistic empowerment of teachers as confident classroom practitioners.

Keywords: *Communicative Language Teaching, teacher proficiency, teacher cognition, teacher agency, Indian secondary education, ESL pedagogy*

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Introduction:

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) represents one of the most influential developments in modern English language education. Emerging as a response to grammar-translation and structural approaches, CLT shifted pedagogical emphasis from the mastery of grammatical forms to the development of communicative competence. Communicative competence includes not only grammatical accuracy but also sociolinguistic appropriateness, discourse organization, and strategic language use in authentic

contexts. Within this paradigm, classrooms are expected to function as sites of meaningful interaction rather than as spaces for rule memorization.

In India, CLT principles have shaped national and state-level English curriculum reforms for decades. English occupies a powerful social position as a language of higher education, economic mobility, and global participation. Secondary school students are therefore expected to develop the ability to use English effectively for academic and professional communication. Textbooks frequently include role-

plays, pair work, and discussion prompts intended to promote interactive learning.

However, the everyday reality in many secondary classrooms differs significantly from policy aspirations. English instruction often remains dominated by grammar explanation, translation, and preparation for written examinations. Students may perform well in structured assessments yet demonstrate limited confidence in spontaneous spoken interaction. The persistence of this policy–practice gap suggests that structural reform alone is insufficient.

Most scholarly explanations emphasize contextual barriers such as large class sizes, limited instructional time, and high-stakes board examinations (Wedell & Grassick, 2018). While these constraints are real, they do not fully account for the endurance of form-focused instruction. This paper argues that teacher communicative proficiency constitutes a central but underexamined factor in understanding this gap. Specifically, it proposes that communicative reform requires teachers who possess not merely theoretical knowledge of CLT but the ability to perform sustained classroom interaction in English. Without such proficiency, communicative pedagogy remains difficult to enact consistently.

Communicative Pedagogy and the Linguistic Demands of Teaching:

CLT reconceptualizes the teacher as a facilitator of communication rather than a transmitter of grammatical knowledge. In communicative classrooms, teachers design tasks that require learners to negotiate meaning, exchange information, and construct extended discourse. Such environments demand high levels of interactional competence from teachers.

Richards (2017) emphasizes that teaching English through English involves performance competence. Teachers must provide instructions clearly, adjust language complexity, respond to unexpected learner

contributions, and manage classroom discourse in real time. Unlike structured grammar explanation, communicative interaction is unpredictable. Teachers cannot fully script classroom dialogue; they must react spontaneously.

Freeman et al. (2015) distinguish between general English proficiency and English-for-Teaching. English-for-Teaching includes specialized classroom functions such as eliciting responses, reformulating learner utterances, providing corrective feedback, and managing transitions between activities. This framework highlights that classroom communication is a professional skill that can be developed systematically.

In contexts where teachers were trained primarily in grammar analysis and written accuracy, the shift toward interactive spoken facilitation represents a substantial professional adjustment. If communicative reform assumes that teachers already possess such interactional competence, implementation difficulties are likely.

Teacher Cognition and Instructional Decision-Making:

Teacher cognition research demonstrates that classroom practices are shaped by teachers' beliefs, experiences, and contextual interpretations (Borg, 2015). Teachers do not simply implement curricular directives; they interpret them through established pedagogical frameworks.

Many secondary English teachers in India were educated within examination-driven systems emphasizing grammatical correctness and written production. These experiences shape conceptions of effective teaching. Even when teachers endorse communicative principles, deeply rooted beliefs about accuracy and control may influence instructional choices.

Nguyen (2022) argues that inconsistencies between teacher beliefs and classroom practices often arise from

contextual mediation rather than ideological resistance. Teachers may support communicative interaction in theory but prioritize grammar exercises in practice because such exercises align more directly with examination formats and institutional expectations.

Proficiency interacts with cognition in subtle ways. Teachers who feel insecure about their spoken English may interpret communicative tasks as inefficient or risky. Over time, repeated avoidance of extended interaction can reinforce the belief that grammar-focused instruction is more practical. Thus, linguistic confidence shapes pedagogical belief through experience.

Teacher Agency, Identity, and Linguistic Confidence:

Teacher agency refers to educators' capacity to make intentional professional choices within structural constraints (Tao & Gao, 2021). Agency depends not only on external conditions but also on internal perceptions of competence.

In communicative classrooms, teacher talk functions as both model and scaffold. Teachers are publicly evaluated through their use of English. When teachers fear making linguistic errors in front of students, communicative teaching may be experienced as exposure rather than empowerment. This anxiety can influence instructional decisions.

Richards (2017) notes that classroom language teaching involves public performance. Teachers must respond quickly, reformulate incomplete student utterances, and maintain interactional flow. When linguistic automaticity is limited, cognitive load increases. Teachers must devote attention to language formulation while simultaneously managing classroom behaviour and lesson progression.

Under such cognitive pressure, reverting to structured grammar explanation may appear safer and more manageable. These decisions are rational responses to perceived constraints. However, over time, they restrict

opportunities for communicative practice, reinforcing the policy–practice gap.

The Indian Secondary Context and Assessment Pressures:

English in India functions as a link language across diverse linguistic communities and as a pathway to socio-economic mobility. Consequently, secondary English education carries significant expectations from parents, administrators, and policymakers.

Board examinations exert strong influence over classroom priorities. Most assessments emphasize reading comprehension, grammar exercises, and essay writing. Listening and speaking components are often marginal or absent. As Wedell and Grassick (2018) argue, alignment between assessment and pedagogical goals is essential for sustainable reform.

When examinations prioritize written accuracy, teachers naturally focus on preparing students for these outcomes. Even when textbooks include communicative tasks, time constraints and accountability pressures encourage emphasis on examinable content. In such contexts, communicative teaching may be perceived as supplementary rather than central.

Rose et al. (2021) caution that global English teaching reforms must consider local sociolinguistic realities. In many Indian classrooms, exposure to spoken English outside school is limited. Teachers may therefore function as primary language models. This responsibility increases pressure and may heighten performance anxiety.

The Proficiency–Practice Gap in Classroom Interaction:

The proficiency–practice gap becomes visible in everyday classroom discourse. Communicative theory suggests that teacher talk should facilitate student talk. However, when teachers lack confidence in extended spoken interaction, they may increase explanatory monologue instead.

For example, during a comprehension discussion, a teacher might reformulate every student answer immediately to ensure grammatical correctness. While corrective feedback is valuable, excessive control can reduce learner autonomy. Similarly, teachers may shorten group discussions if they perceive interaction as linguistically unpredictable.

Cognitive load plays a crucial role. Spontaneous interaction requires rapid processing, monitoring of accuracy, and management of turn-taking. Teachers with limited automaticity in spoken English must allocate additional mental resources to linguistic formulation. Across multiple daily classes, this demand can be exhausting.

Nguyen (2022) emphasizes that contextual and affective factors shape the enactment of communicative pedagogy. When communicative lessons are experienced as cognitively demanding or time-consuming, teachers may gradually prefer structured exercises that provide visible progress within limited timeframes.

Addressing the proficiency–practice gap therefore requires more than motivational appeals. It requires systematic support for building linguistic automaticity and interactional competence.

Reconceptualizing Teacher Proficiency:

A central argument of this paper is that teacher proficiency should be defined functionally rather than normatively. Native-speaker standards are neither necessary nor appropriate benchmarks for effective classroom communication.

Freeman et al. (2015) propose identifying core classroom language functions, including framing instructions, checking understanding, managing repair sequences, and facilitating discussion. These functions can be practiced through targeted professional development.

Viewing proficiency as developmental reduces anxiety. Teachers can improve interactional skills gradually

without striving for unattainable perfection. Richards (2017) argues that teaching through English resembles other professional performance skills that strengthen through rehearsal and reflection.

Professional learning communities, peer observation, and micro-teaching sessions can create supportive environments for language practice. When teachers perceive institutional commitment to their linguistic growth, agency increases.

Implications for Professional Development and Policy:

Sustainable communicative reform requires systemic investment in teacher language development. Short workshops are insufficient. Instead, long-term programs should integrate classroom language practice, reflective analysis, and collaborative planning.

Assessment reform is equally important. Introducing structured speaking and listening components into secondary examinations would signal alignment between policy goals and evaluative measures. Even modest oral assessment can influence classroom priorities.

Policy frameworks should articulate realistic classroom-based proficiency expectations rather than abstract communicative ideals. Teachers need clear guidance and institutional backing to integrate interaction meaningfully into daily instruction.

Conclusion:

Communicative Language Teaching has profoundly shaped English education policy in India. Yet its classroom implementation remains uneven, particularly at the secondary level. Structural constraints such as large classes and examination pressures are significant, but teacher communicative proficiency represents a critical and underexplored dimension of reform.

Drawing on research in teacher cognition (Borg, 2015), English-for-Teaching (Freeman et al., 2015),

pedagogical performance (Richards, 2017), teacher beliefs (Nguyen, 2022), teacher agency (Tao & Gao, 2021), global English policy (Rose et al., 2021), and reform implementation (Wedell & Grassick, 2018), this paper has argued for a reconceptualization of proficiency as functional, developmental, and classroom-specific.

Communicative reform cannot be achieved through curricular change alone. It requires sustained linguistic investment in teachers, alignment between assessment and pedagogy, and institutional recognition of interactional competence as professional capital. Empowering teachers as confident communicative practitioners is not a peripheral goal but the central condition for realizing the promise of CLT in Indian secondary ESL classrooms.

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