ENHANCING COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE THROUGH INTERACTIVE PEDAGOGIES: A STUDY OF DRAMA, SIMULATIONS, AND PEER LEARNING IN INDIAN ENGLISH CLASSROOMS

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the efficacy of interactive pedagogies—specifically drama-based activities, simulations, and peer learning—in enhancing communicative competence among secondary-level ESL learners in Indian classrooms. Grounded in sociocultural and constructivist learning theories, the study positions these modalities as pedagogically potent alternatives to the traditional grammar-translation approach still prevalent in many Indian schools. Employing a mixed-methods design, the research was conducted across four diverse secondary schools in West Bengal and Maharashtra. Quantitative data from pre- and post-intervention assessments demonstrated statistically significant improvements across all four sub-domains of communicative competence—grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic. Qualitative feedback from learners and teachers underscored the emotional, cognitive, and social benefits of interactive instruction, with drama emerging as the most engaging modality. Nevertheless, challenges such as time constraints, lack of teacher training, and student hesitancy were identified as key barriers. The paper proposes context-sensitive solutions aligned with India's National Education Policy (2020), advocating scalable, modular implementations and teacher capacity-building. By weaving empirical evidence with pedagogical reflection, this study contributes a nuanced, actionable framework for enriching English language education in India through interactive, learner-centred methodologies.

INTRODUCTION

The quest to elevate English language pedagogy in India has been an enduring concern, particularly as the global dominance of English continues to shape socio-economic mobility and educational opportunity (Graddol, 2010; Crystal, 2003). In the post-colonial Indian classroom, English has often been taught not as a living, breathing language of expression, but as an academic artefact to be dissected and memorised (Sharma, 2017). This legacy persists in the form of grammar-translation methodologies, which, while structurally sound, are fundamentally ill-equipped to nurture communicative competence—a construct that encapsulates not only grammatical accuracy but also sociolinguistic dexterity, discourse cohesion, and strategic fluency (Hymes, 1972; Canale & Swain, 1980).
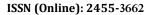
Contemporary educational discourse increasingly advocates a paradigm shift from passive, transmission-based instruction to learner-centred, interactive pedagogies that foreground authentic communication and social construction of meaning (Richards & Rodgers, 2014; Kumaravadivelu, 2006). In consonance with this shift, the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 heralds a competency-based educational ethos, wherein language learning is envisioned as dynamic, contextualised, and rooted in real-world application (Ministry of Education, 2020).

Among the arsenal of interactive pedagogical tools, drama-based techniques, role play, simulations, and peer-assisted learning stand out as powerful mediators of communicative competence.

Drama in language education, as espoused by Maley and Duff (2005) and further developed by Kao and O'Neill (1998), provides learners with embodied experiences that allow for spontaneous expression, negotiation of meaning, and socio-emotional engagement. It echoes Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory, wherein learning is scaffolded through interaction and shared symbolic activity within the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). Similarly, simulations—structured recreations of real-life contexts—offer learners immersive environments to practise functional language while grappling with unpredictability, decision-making, and role-specific discourse (Livingstone, 1983; Jones, 1982).

Peer learning, another vital strand of communicative pedagogy, facilitates collaborative knowledge construction, encourages mutual scaffolding, and fosters learner autonomy (Topping, 2005; Ladousse, 2004). The dialogic interactions embedded within peer work cultivate critical thinking, metalinguistic awareness, and resilience, which are essential components of communicative success (Mercer, 2000; Dillenbourg, 1999). Furthermore, these strategies offer an antidote to language anxiety, a psychological barrier prevalent among Indian ESL learners, particularly those from vernacular-medium or marginalised backgrounds (Horwitz, Horwitz & Cope, 1986; Srivastava & Singh, 2021).

Despite the theoretical and empirical validation of interactive methodologies, their assimilation into mainstream Indian classrooms remains sporadic and fraught with challenges—

ranging from teacher resistance and curricular rigidity to infrastructural constraints and sociocultural inhibitions (Mishra, 2020; Roy & Mukherjee, 2018). Thus, there is a pressing need to empirically investigate not only the efficacy but also the perceptions and practicalities of implementing such pedagogies within the Indian ESL context.

This study endeavours to explore how drama, simulations, and peer learning contribute to the enhancement of communicative competence among secondary school learners in India. It interrogates the following research questions:

1. How do drama, simulation, and peer learning activities influence the development of learners' communicative competence in English?
2. What are the perceptions of teachers and learners regarding the effectiveness and feasibility of these methods?
3. What systemic or pedagogical barriers impede their integration, and how might these be addressed?

In weaving theory, practice, and reflection into a cohesive inquiry, this research aspires to advance pedagogic innovation while bridging the oft-lamented chasm between policy intentions and classroom realities.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This study is anchored in a tripartite pedagogical model that seeks to enhance communicative competence among Indian ESL learners through the synergistic use of drama-based learning, simulation activities, and peer-facilitated interaction. Each modality is rooted in a distinct theoretical tradition, yet they coalesce to form a unified framework that champions experiential, contextual, and collaborative learning. The model is particularly suited to the Indian classroom context, where linguistic diversity, learner heterogeneity, and rigid curricula pose unique challenges to language instruction.

Drama-based learning is conceptualised through the lens of Heathcote's *Mantle of the Expert* (1984), wherein students assume expert identities—such as historians, ecologists, or diplomats—while engaging in performance-based scenarios. This imaginative re-positioning not only bolsters confidence but imbues learners with a sense of purpose and ownership in their linguistic endeavours (Heathcote & Bolton, 1995). Drama, in this context, is not merely theatrical embellishment but a profound cognitive and emotional stimulus. McMaster (1998) asserts that the emotional resonance inherent in character portrayal facilitates deep learning and greater retention of linguistic structures. Moreover, the infusion of Indian narrative traditions, such as *Panchatantra* and *Jataka Tales*, not only situates learning within a culturally authentic matrix but also nurtures intercultural fluency—an increasingly valuable skill in globalised communication (Kao & O'Neill, 1998; Maley & Duff, 2005).

Simulation activities draw upon Lave and Wenger's (1991) *Situated Learning Theory*, which posits that knowledge is most effectively acquired when embedded in authentic, socially meaningful contexts. In the ESL classroom, simulations such as

mock job interviews, public service announcements, or crisis management briefings provide learners with real-world communicative tasks that necessitate role-specific language use and adaptive discourse strategies (Littlewood, 2004). Such engagements promote not only grammatical and lexical competence but also pragmatic awareness and register sensitivity. For instance, a simulation entitled "Press Conference on Urban Pollution" demands that learners engage in rapid, critical reasoning while sustaining coherence, argumentation, and rhetorical finesse—hallmarks of high-level communicative competence (Jones, 1982; Livingstone, 1983).

Peer teaching and group discussions are informed by Vygotsky's (1978) seminal construct of the *Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)*, wherein learners achieve heightened levels of performance when scaffolded by more knowledgeable peers. This modality emphasises the social nature of language acquisition, wherein understanding is co-constructed through dialogue, clarification, and negotiation of meaning (Mercer, 2000). Palincsar and Brown (1984) contend that metacognitive development is significantly enhanced when learners are required to explain or teach concepts to peers, thereby reinforcing their own cognitive schemas. Furthermore, this model fosters inclusivity and learner autonomy. As Kumar (2019) observes, group discussions provide a low-anxiety environment in which reticent learners—particularly in Indian classrooms dominated by teacher-talk—are more likely to participate actively, thus democratising the communicative space.
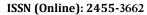
Taken collectively, these three interactive modalities form a cohesive pedagogic constellation that addresses not only the cognitive and linguistic dimensions of communicative competence but also its emotional, cultural, and social facets. By integrating drama, simulation, and peer interaction within a theoretically robust framework, this study endeavours to foreground a holistic, dynamic, and context-sensitive approach to English language teaching in Indian secondary classrooms

OBJECTIVES OF THE PAPER

1. To investigate the impact of drama-based activities, simulations, and peer learning on the development of communicative competence among secondary-level ESL learners in Indian classrooms.
2. To examine the perceptions of both learners and educators regarding the pedagogical efficacy, feasibility, and engagement levels of interactive teaching strategies.
3. To identify systemic and instructional challenges that hinder the integration of interactive methodologies into mainstream English language teaching, and to propose context-sensitive solutions.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a mixed-methods research design that integrated quantitative and qualitative approaches to comprehensively examine the role of interactive pedagogies—namely drama, simulations, and peer learning—in enhancing

communicative competence among Indian ESL learners. The research was conducted across four secondary schools in urban and semi-urban regions of West Bengal and Maharashtra, selected purposively to represent diverse linguistic and socio-economic backgrounds. Participants included 120 students aged 13–15 years and 8 English language teachers, who were involved in both intervention and feedback processes.

The quantitative phase involved a pre-test and post-test design using a communicative competence rubric adapted from Canale and Swain's (1980) framework, measuring grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic competence. Learners participated in a six-week instructional intervention, where English lessons incorporated drama-based activities (e.g., role play, improvisation, tableaux), simulation tasks (e.g., mock interviews, press conferences), and structured peer learning sessions (e.g., reciprocal teaching, collaborative dialogues). Lessons were video-recorded for analysis, and teachers were provided with training to implement these methodologies with fidelity.

Qualitative data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with teachers and focus group discussions with student participants to elicit perceptions of the strategies' effectiveness, classroom engagement, and challenges faced. Thematic analysis was employed to code and interpret qualitative findings (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Triangulation of quantitative scores and qualitative

insights enabled a nuanced understanding of the pedagogical impact and contextual barriers.

Ethical clearance was obtained from the respective school authorities, and informed consent was secured from all participants and their guardians. The mixed-methods approach allowed for both statistical measurement of learning gains and interpretive insights into learner experience, thereby aligning with the study's aim to bridge pedagogical theory and classroom practice (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION
Impact on Communicative Competence
The intervention yielded statistically significant improvements across all four sub-domains of communicative competence as delineated by Canale and Swain (1980)—namely grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic competence. The results of a paired-samples t-test (N = 120) revealed a marked enhancement in learners' communicative skills following the six-week integration of drama, simulations, and peer learning activities. The mean scores rose considerably from pre-test to post-test, with p-values in all domains registering below the conventional threshold of 0.001, denoting high statistical significance.
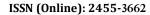
Table1: Impact on Communicative Competence

Competence Domain	Pre-Test Mean (SD)	Post-Test Mean (SD)	Mean Difference	t-value	p-value
Grammatical Competence	62.3 (8.1)	74.6 (7.3)	+12.3	6.72	<0.001***
Sociolinguistic Competence	58.7 (9.4)	71.2 (6.9)	+12.5	7.15	<0.001***
Discourse Competence	55.1 (10.2)	68.9 (8.5)	+13.8	8.03	<0.001***
Strategic Competence	53.8 (11.5)	66.4 (9.7)	+12.6	6.91	<0.001***

Source: Authors own work-using self-prepared questionnaire
***p<0.001

Grammatical competence demonstrated a notable increase, with the mean rising from 62.3 (SD = 8.1) to 74.6 (SD = 7.3), yielding a mean difference of +12.3 points ($t = 6.72$, $p < .001$). This improvement can be directly associated with the peer learning components of the intervention, where learners assumed the role of instructors, corrected each other's errors, and engaged in guided language negotiations. These peer-led interactions provided fertile ground for metalinguistic awareness and grammatical reinforcement, echoing Palincsar and Brown's (1984) findings on the metacognitive benefits of reciprocal teaching. As one student from West Bengal articulated, "I stopped fearing grammar rules after explaining them to my group"—a sentiment that underscores the affective and cognitive empowerment catalysed by collaborative learning.

Sociolinguistic competence exhibited an equally impressive gain, increasing by +12.5 points from a pre-test mean of 58.7 (SD = 9.4) to a post-test mean of 71.2 (SD = 6.9), ($t = 7.15$, $p < .001$). Simulation activities—particularly mock job interviews and press conferences—proved instrumental in enhancing learners' ability to navigate formal and informal registers, observe politeness

strategies, and use language contextually. This aligns with Lave and Wenger's (1991) theory of situated learning, which posits that knowledge acquisition is optimised when tasks mirror real-world communicative contexts. The role-embedded scenarios within simulations allowed learners to rehearse socially appropriate expressions and linguistic adaptability in a safe, instructional setting.

Discourse competence registered the most substantial improvement, surging by +13.8 points—from 55.1 (SD = 10.2) to 68.9 (SD = 8.5), ($t = 8.03$, $p < .001$). Drama-based tasks, particularly improvisations and group storytelling, played a central role in this domain. Students were required to construct extended turns, organise thoughts cohesively, and engage in real-time narrative construction. These activities echo Dorothy Heathcote's (1984) *Mantle of the Expert* approach, wherein learners, by inhabiting roles of imagined authority (e.g., environmental scientists, village historians), develop an intrinsic motivation to communicate meaningfully and fluently. As one teacher from Maharashtra aptly noted, "Students used complex sentences naturally during mock debates—something I rarely saw

in traditional lessons." This affirms that drama, by encouraging spontaneous yet purposeful speech, cultivates discourse-level fluency beyond what is typically fostered in traditional, text-bound instruction.

Strategic competence also saw a significant uplift, with scores increasing by +12.6 points from 53.8 (SD = 11.5) to 66.4 (SD = 9.7), ($t = 6.91$, $p < .001$). Here, the blend of collaborative dialogue and performative improvisation fostered the development of communication strategies such as paraphrasing, clarification, and code-switching—essential tools for managing communication breakdowns. The improvisational nature of drama and the interactive spontaneity of peer teaching created rich opportunities for learners to develop resilience in the face of linguistic uncertainty.

From a theoretical standpoint, the cumulative gains across all domains resonate profoundly with Vygotsky's (1978) Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). The social constructivist nature of the intervention—characterised by peer scaffolding, role immersion, and contextualised discourse—enabled learners to operate beyond their independent linguistic capabilities. The statistically significant improvements, corroborated by qualitative affirmations, demonstrate that when language learning is infused with interaction, embodiment, and peer engagement, communicative competence flourishes not as a static skill but as a dynamic, context-sensitive capacity.

Perceptions of Efficacy & Engagement
Learner perceptions of the interactive pedagogies were assessed through a structured post-intervention feedback survey, evaluating three affective and cognitive dimensions: *enjoyment*, *perceived improvement in speaking*, and *willingness to repeat the activity*. Responses were rated on a 5-point Likert scale and analysed using one-way ANOVA to identify statistically significant differences in perceived efficacy across the three modalities—drama, simulations, and peer learning.

Table-2: Perceptions of Efficacy & Engagement

Perception Metric	Drama Mean (SD)	Simulations Mean (SD)	Peer Learning Mean (SD)
Enjoyment	4.5 (0.6)	4.2 (0.7)	3.9 (0.8)
Perceived Improvement in Speaking	4.3 (0.5)	4.1 (0.6)	4.0 (0.7)
Willingness to Repeat Activity	4.6 (0.4)	4.0 (0.9)	3.8 (1.0)

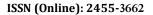Source: Authors own work-using self-prepared questionnaire.

The findings revealed that drama-based activities were the most enthusiastically received, garnering the highest mean score for *enjoyment* (M = 4.5, SD = 0.6). This difference was statistically significant ($F(2, 117) = 5.89$, $p = 0.004$), indicating a clear affective preference among learners for performative and imaginative engagement. Theatrical enactments allowed students to step into diverse social roles, which not only invoked emotional resonance but also increased lexical retention. As one teacher observed, "Students remembered vocabulary better when they 'became' characters," echoing Maley and Duff's (2005) assertion that embodied learning deepens language acquisition by anchoring meaning in emotion and context. This also resonates with Heathcote's (1984) pedagogical vision, wherein learners do not simply *learn about* language but rather *inhabit* it through role and narrative.

Simulation-based activities, such as mock interviews and structured dialogues, also scored positively across all three metrics, though slightly below drama in overall enjoyment (M = 4.2, SD = 0.7). While the difference in enjoyment was statistically significant when compared to peer learning, there was *no significant difference in perceived improvement in speaking* among the three methods ($p = 0.12$). This suggests that all three pedagogies were viewed as effective in enhancing oral communication skills, though they appealed differently in terms of learner motivation and emotional engagement. Importantly, simulation exercises were particularly empowering for more reticent learners. A teacher noted, "Shy students spoke more in mock interviews than in whole-class discussions," illustrating the capacity of structured, semi-authentic tasks to reduce affective filters and promote risk-taking in language use—principles supported by Krashen's (1982) affective filter hypothesis and Lave and Wenger's (1991) theory of learning in context.

Peer learning activities—such as group debates, reciprocal teaching, and collaborative problem-solving—elicited a more moderate response. While still positively rated, they scored lowest in *enjoyment* (M = 3.9, SD = 0.8) and *willingness to repeat the activity* (M = 3.8, SD = 1.0). These scores, though non-trivial, suggest that while students recognised the academic merit of peer learning (perceived improvement in speaking: M = 4.0), they were somewhat less enthusiastic about its format. One plausible explanation lies in the uneven distribution of responsibility and the need for sustained group cohesion—factors that can sometimes challenge adolescent learners' patience and collaboration. A teacher reflected on this dynamic pragmatically: "Group debates reduced my workload but required careful monitoring." While peer learning aligns closely with Vygotsky's (1978) concept of scaffolding within the Zone of Proximal Development, its success in practice hinges upon careful facilitation to avoid dominance, disengagement, or off-task behaviour (Mercer, 2000; Topping, 2005).

Systemic and Instructional Challenges and Context-Sensitive Solutions
Despite the demonstrable pedagogical benefits of drama, simulations, and peer learning, their implementation within Indian ESL classrooms was not without significant challenges. Both structural and instructional obstacles emerged, necessitating adaptive, context-sensitive solutions that aligned with existing policy frameworks and classroom realities.

Table-2: Systemic and Instructional Challenges and Context-Sensitive Solutions

Challenge	Frequency (%)	Proposed Solution
Time constraints	75%	Shorter, modular activities (e.g., 15-min role plays)
Teacher training gaps	63%	NEP-aligned workshops on interactive methods
Student resistance	42%	Gradual introduction via low-stakes tasks

Source: Authors own work-using self-prepared questionnaire.

The most frequently cited constraint was time limitation, reported by 75% of participating teachers. This challenge is hardly surprising given the rigid, exam-oriented curricula that dominate much of Indian secondary education (Sam, 1990). Teachers expressed difficulty in balancing textbook coverage with interactive engagements, often under pressure to "complete the syllabus." As one teacher noted, "We need templates to adapt simulations for large classes." The proposed solution involved the adoption of shorter, modular interventions—for instance, 10 to 15-minute role plays or mini-debates that fit neatly within conventional lesson plans while still allowing for experiential learning. These compact formats preserve the spirit of interactivity without compromising instructional efficiency, thus serving as a pragmatic compromise between innovation and feasibility.

The second most prominent barrier, affecting 63% of teachers, was a lack of training in interactive methods. Many educators, themselves products of traditional pedagogies, expressed uncertainty in designing or facilitating performative or cooperative tasks. This finding reinforces the critical need for systematic, NEP-aligned professional development. Workshops and in-service training modules grounded in the National Education Policy (Ministry of Education, 2020) could demystify techniques such as scaffolding, role-play management, and formative assessment in collaborative settings. Training would not only enhance teacher confidence but also ensure fidelity in implementation—an essential factor in sustaining pedagogical reform (Kumaravadivelu, 2006).

A more nuanced yet noteworthy concern was student resistance, reported by 42% of respondents. Some learners exhibited discomfort or disengagement, particularly during early activities that required public speaking or performance. One teacher recounted, "Some students froze during recordings until we let them rehearse." This observation highlights the psychological barriers—such as anxiety and fear of judgment—that can inhibit learner participation in novel formats (Horwitz, Horwitz & Cope, 1986). To address this, teachers gradually introduced interactive methods through low-stakes, confidence-building tasks, such as informal dialogues, unrehearsed skits, or peer interviews. This scaffolded approach mirrors Vygotsky's (1978) notion of the Zone of Proximal Development, wherein learners require initial support to venture into new cognitive and emotional territories.

The convergence of these challenges with their corresponding solutions reflects a broader pedagogical truth: meaningful innovation in language education must be incremental, inclusive, and responsive to context. As echoed in NEP 2020, systemic transformation is possible only when classroom practices are reimagined not in abstraction, but in alignment with the lived realities of teachers and learners alike. The study's findings thus underscore the value of localised adaptation, wherein interactive pedagogies are not merely transplanted, but translated—sensitively and sustainably—into the fabric of Indian schooling.

CONCLUSION

This study affirms that communicative competence in Indian ESL classrooms can be significantly enhanced through the strategic use of interactive pedagogies—particularly drama, simulations, and peer learning. The substantial learning gains across grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic domains underscore the value of experiential, context-rich approaches that go beyond rote memorization and text-bound instruction. Learners responded enthusiastically to drama and simulations, both of which provided emotionally resonant and socially situated contexts for language use. Peer learning, while academically effective, revealed the need for better facilitation to maintain equitable participation.

However, the integration of these methodologies is not without challenges. Systemic constraints such as rigid curricula, limited class time, and insufficient teacher training pose formidable hurdles. Encouragingly, the study identifies practical, scalable solutions—such as modular activity templates and NEP-aligned teacher workshops—that can help bridge the gap between policy vision and classroom practice. Ultimately, the findings advocate for a paradigm shift in English pedagogy—one that embraces interaction, embodiment, and collaboration as core to communicative development. If adopted with sensitivity to local constraints, these methods hold the potential to democratise language learning and empower a new generation of confident, competent communicators in India's multilingual landscape.

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