

Exploring Communicative Language Teaching and English Proficiency in Rural Sikkim: A Case Study of MSU

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Abstract

This paper investigates the challenges and opportunities associated with English language education in rural Sikkim, focusing specifically on the efficacy of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) methods. Despite Sikkim's notable literacy rate and increasing Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) in higher education, students from rural government schools enrolled in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) tend to exhibit weaker English communication skills largely due to the prevalent use of traditional, grammar-focused teaching strategies rather than imparting practical communication skills. Conducted at Medhavi Skills University, Sikkim, the research involves a comprehensive case study of CLT methods in enhancing students' proficiency in listening, speaking, reading, and writing. The baseline evaluation conducted for LSRW skills revealed significant disparities including widespread public speaking anxiety and low confidence in oral communication, with most students falling within CEFR levels A2 and B1. In response, the university implemented a CLT-based pedagogy aimed at prioritizing real-world communication skills, resulting in considerable improvement across all language skills, reduced fear of public speaking, and increased engagement with non-academic English resources following a 15-week intervention period. This study advocates for a fundamental pedagogical shift within Sikkim's Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) aimed at better aligning with the Learning Outcomes for Communication Skills outlined in the National Education Policy 2020, particularly emphasizing this attribute for undergraduate students. The findings highlight CLT as a transformative approach

capable of addressing the disparity between current curricula and desired learning outcomes, ultimately enabling rural students in Sikkim to access global opportunities through improved English proficiency.

Keywords: Language proficiency, rural Sikkim, communicative language teaching, Medhavi Skills University

Introduction

Sikkim, a small northeastern state in India, is renowned for its natural beauty and rich cultural heritage. Boasting a population of merely 610,577, Sikkim prioritizes education, achieving a literacy rate exceeding 81.42 per cent (Office of the Registrar General and Census Commissioner, 2011). The state government has implemented substantial efforts to promote education among women and rural communities, resulting in increased enrollment rates in schools and colleges. As per the report published by the All India Survey of Higher Education (2019-20), the Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) for higher education in Sikkim stands at an impressive 75.8 per cent, making it the highest in India.

The history of English language education in Sikkim reflects the state's journey towards modernity. While the predominant languages spoken in Sikkim are Nepali, Bhutia, and Lepcha, English was introduced as a compulsory subject from the primary level, exposing students to Academic English from an early stage. This decision was influenced by Sikkim's historical connection to both colonial (English) and indigenous educational practices (Monastic). Over the years, English education has grown, with an emphasis on improving English language proficiency. "There is also a high status and respectability attached to the English language. Several English learning schools or centres have been mushrooming in the capital city of Gangtok which promises to offer a quick fix solution to people keen on learning the language." (Chamling, 2022, p. 23)

The state has two primary educational boards—CBSE and CISCE—with students enrolled in CISCE schools exposed to higher levels of English from early education. Those enrolled in private CBSE schools also have substantial exposure to English. Students pursuing primary education in private schools and secondary education in government schools demonstrate adequate English language skills. "However, students who attend rural government schools exclusively tend to

exhibit comparatively weaker English communication abilities. The overall quality of classroom instruction is similar in both schools, but the integration of English is significantly higher in the private school. Guardians universally favour the private school, believing that private school teachers work harder.” (Toney, 2015, p. 5)

With one central university, two state public universities, fourteen state private universities, fourteen government colleges, and four private colleges, Sikkim is home to a large number of higher education establishments (Darjee, 2023, p. 2144). All of these institutions—engineering, medical, paramedical, and degree colleges—mandate English language teaching as a requirement. Nevertheless, during an interaction with the students, it was observed that there is a significant disconnect between the curriculum and the intended communication objectives for students, even with this emphasis on English.

This paradox results from HEIs’ persistent reliance on conventional, grammar-focused teaching strategies. This method is in opposition to the standards outlined in the UGC Curriculum Framework, as per NEP 2020 which places a high value on the development of effective communication skills. Student experiences highlight this gap even more, as their lack of fluency indicates that the current curriculum and approach are not meeting NEP 2020’s targeted learning outcomes. The Framework itself emphasizes the value of encouraging critical thinking, clear communication, and conversation involvement while in a way endorsing Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approaches. To bridge this gap, a fundamental change in pedagogy is required in Sikkim’s HEIs. To meet the current demand of the job market, a shift from a theoretical approach to a CLT-based approach that emphasizes practical communication skills is necessary.

Study Area

Medhavi Skills University (MSU), established through the Medhavi Skills University, Sikkim Act, 2021, is a state university recognized by the University Grants Commission (UGC) under Section 2(f) of the UGC Act, 1956. The university operates across two campuses in Sikkim, located in Singtam (East Sikkim) and Bermiok (West Sikkim). Medhavi Skills University, Bermiok Campus West Sikkim, the institute of the area of this research catering primarily to the passed-out students from

rural government senior secondary schools from all corners of Sikkim, exemplifies the challenges faced by students lacking prior exposure to communicative English. During their first semester, students undertake a compulsory English and Communication 'Ability Enhancement Course' as mandated by NEP 2020. To assess their entry level proficiency in listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills, a baseline evaluation was conducted for 72 students, revealing that most of the students experience public fear in speaking.

The baseline evaluations revealed a significant disparity in student proficiency. The majority of students exhibited public speaking anxiety, suggesting a lack of confidence in oral communication. While a small number achieved B2 or C1 levels on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) scale, the overall average fell within the A2 and B1 range, indicating a low level of proficiency. Interestingly, students with some background in private English-medium schooling demonstrated stronger speaking, reading, writing, and grammar skills, particularly in spoken and written expression. The potential reason being that the students were exposed to an environment where they could communicate in English thereby enhancing their speaking skills.

This finding aligns with the broader observation that exposure to communicative approaches can significantly enhance language acquisition. Furthermore, the evaluation identified a near-universal lack of engagement with non-academic reading materials, such as newspapers or literature. This limited exposure to diverse forms of written English further hinders their overall proficiency. This case study of Medhavi Skills University underscores the critical need for a shift towards Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) methods within Sikkim's HEIs. By prioritizing real-world communication skills and fostering a culture of spoken English, CLT can empower students to overcome public speaking anxieties and develop the confidence to express themselves effectively.

Literature Review

The education of rural students in India presents a unique set of challenges, particularly in the domain of English language acquisition. Scholars like Sharma (2022) advocate for a shift towards Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) methods, highlighting its effectiveness in

fostering practical communication skills and overcoming anxieties. This emphasis on real-world application aligns with Cuong's (2021) call for addressing the complexities of rural education through measures like improved teacher training and fostering a collaborative learning environment. However, research by Chauhan (2021) paints a concerning picture of the current state of English language education in rural areas, where inadequate teaching methods disadvantage students and hinder their future prospects.

This gap between policy and practice underscores the need for a comprehensive approach. While Bhutia's (2005) historical examination provides a valuable context for understanding Sikkim's educational landscape, the present study focuses on the lived experiences of students and the efficacy of current pedagogical methods. Building on Kumar's (2017) insights into the challenges faced by rural students, particularly their lack of exposure to advanced learning resources and their perception of English as a hurdle rather than a tool, this research investigates the potential of CLT to bridge this gap. Furthermore, it acknowledges the broader societal issues highlighted by Rajasekaran and Anburaj (2015), recognizing that improved English language proficiency can be a key driver of development in rural areas. By examining the case of Medhavi Skills University, this study aims to contribute to the ongoing conversation about effective English language instruction in rural Sikkim.

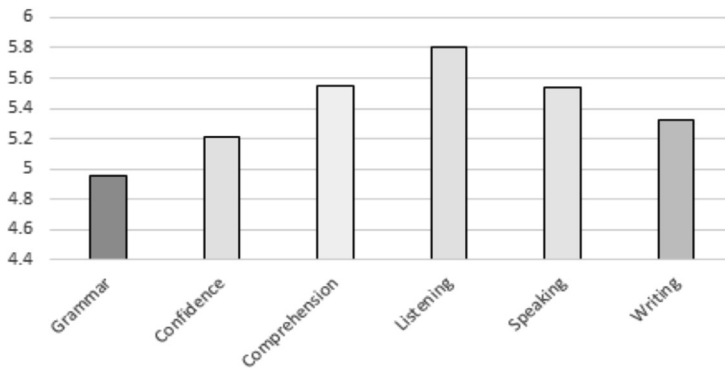
Baseline Assessment of the Students

To evaluate the students' level of proficiency in the English language and identify their strengths and weaknesses, a comprehensive baseline assessment of LSRW skills was conducted at the beginning of the semester for 72 students. This assessment served as a foundation for designing tailored teaching strategies and interventions to address the specific needs of the students at Medhavi Skills University, Sikkim.

The baseline assessment covered the four essential language skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing marked on six different components (grammar, listening, comprehension, confidence, speaking and writing). Each skill was assessed using various tasks and activities designed to gauge the students' abilities effectively and was rated on a scale of 0-10.

Listening skills were evaluated through audio recordings, or Ted Talks where students were required to listen to a speech and the same had to be comprehended and written which formed the basis for evaluating grammar and writing skills. Speaking skills were assessed through individual presentations or group discussions on various topics, allowing the students to express their thoughts and ideas in English after reading and comprehending the passages and texts.

Figure 1: Bar Diagram Showing Baseline Average Results



The results of the baseline assessment revealed that most of the students had a fear of speaking in public, which negatively impacted their speaking skills. Only a few of the students could speak at an average level, indicating a need for increased focus on developing oral communication skills. The students who had spent some years of their schooling in English medium private schools demonstrated a comparatively better proficiency in speaking, reading, writing, and grammar. This finding underscores the importance of quality English language education from an early age.

Furthermore, the assessment revealed that the majority of students had never read a newspaper, book, or novel beyond their academic syllabus. This lack of exposure to diverse forms of literature and authentic language use significantly limits the students' ability to develop a comprehensive understanding of the English language and hampers their overall language proficiency.

Teaching Methods Adopted to Improve English Language Proficiency

The language pedagogy employed at Medhavi Skills University is

oriented towards cultivating proficient communication skills with the specific objective of equipping students for better career opportunities, international travel and overseas job pursuits. Within this educational framework, the principles and methodologies inherent to Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) becomes particularly pertinent. To address the challenges and complexities associated with English language instruction for students, a practical teaching methodology was implemented in the classroom. This approach incorporated various interactive activities, such as role play, extempore speaking, vlogging, and group discussions focusing on local issues. Moreover, a tailored syllabus was developed to meet the specific requirements of the region. The rationale behind adopting this practical approach was to foster an environment that would encourage students to actively participate and practice the language in a non-judgmental and supportive setting.

The effectiveness of this teaching method was subsequently evaluated, and positive outcomes were observed. The engagement levels of the students increased significantly, and their overall English language proficiency showed continuous improvement. The interactive nature of the activities allowed the students to enjoy the learning process while honing their language skills simultaneously. This combination of enjoyment and progress further motivated the students to become more interested in their language learning journey.

Nonetheless, it was noted that some students required additional support to fully embrace this new approach. Encouragement and guidance were frequently provided to help these students step out of their comfort zones and actively participate in the interactive learning activities. By doing so, educators aimed to create an inclusive and encouraging atmosphere that empowered every student to overcome their personal challenges in language acquisition.

The practical teaching approach adopted in this context proved to be a valuable strategy in overcoming the complexities of teaching English to students. The emphasis on interactive activities facilitated a positive and supportive learning environment, resulting in increased student engagement and notable advancements in language proficiency. However, acknowledging the varying needs of students, some individuals necessitated further encouragement to fully benefit from this approach.

Critical Observations and Analysis

English language education in rural Sikkim is a complex issue that requires multifaceted interventions to address the challenges faced by educators and students. Addressing the shortage of qualified teachers, developing appropriate teaching materials, and engaging communities can enhance the provision of quality education in rural areas. The way forward requires collaborative efforts from policymakers, educators, and communities to ensure equitable access to education for all students in Sikkim. As per the classroom observation and analysis listed below are some of the challenges faced in teaching English language in rural Sikkim:

Limited Exposure to English Language: The lack of exposure to English language outside the academic syllabus is a significant hurdle in improving the students' English language proficiency. In rural Sikkim, students do not have access to English language newspapers, books, or literature. This lack of exposure to different forms of literature and language outside the academic syllabus limits the students' ability to learn and practise the language. As compared to the learners from urban areas, learners from rural areas face more difficulties during the process of language acquisition. In urban areas parents are mostly educated. So, the domestic environment helps the students from urban areas acquire the language quickly (Kumar, 2017, p. 34).

Inadequate Infrastructure: Rural areas in Sikkim have limited infrastructure, including inadequate access to technology and libraries. These resources are crucial for improving the students' proficiency in the language. Schools of rural areas generally lack basic amenities and trained teachers in the field of English language teaching. Lack of infrastructure and trained teachers place them at the bottom line. It also questions the validity of the state's effort and its commitment to the upliftment of rural students (Chauhan, 2021, p. 214).

Fear of Public Speaking: The majority of students in rural Sikkim have fear of speaking in public. They lack self-confidence and are hesitant to speak in public. This is a common issue faced by students in rural areas due to the limited exposure and opportunities available to them. However, it was also observed that though some schools offered a platform for public speaking, only a handful of students took part in it.

Limited Access to English Speaking Environment: Many students in rural

Sikkim come from government schools, where the mode of teaching is primarily Nepali. This limits their exposure to English medium education, which is essential for improving their proficiency in the language.

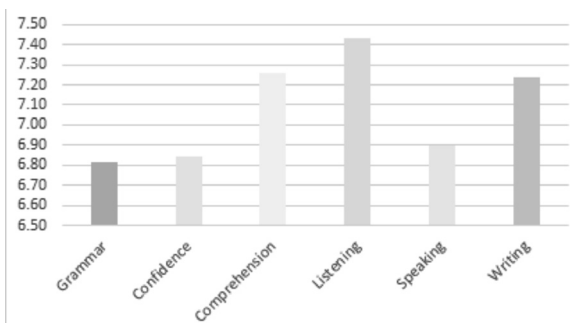
Findings and Discussions

To measure the progress and effectiveness of the tailored teaching strategies and interventions implemented throughout the semester, an end line assessment was conducted after 15 weeks of the commencement of the course. This comprehensive evaluation aimed to determine the extent of improvement in the students' English language proficiency and to identify areas that may require further attention or support.

Similar to the baseline assessment, the end line assessment focused on the four essential language skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Each skill was assessed using a variety of tasks and activities designed to gauge the students' abilities effectively.

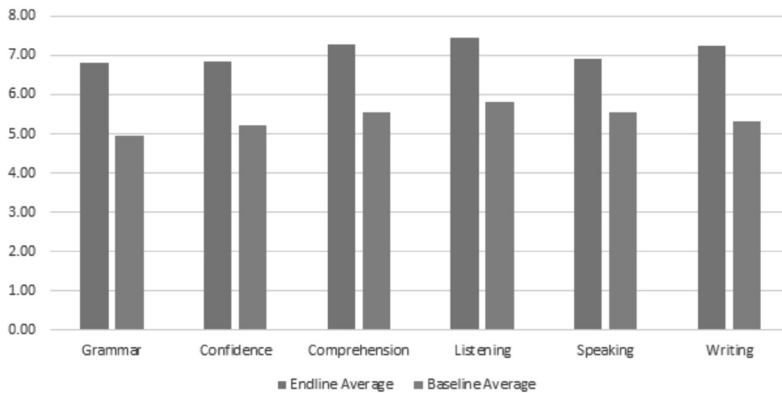
Listening skills were evaluated through audio recordings, where students were required to listen to more complex passages or conversations than those in the baseline assessment, followed by answering comprehension questions. Speaking skills were assessed through individual presentations, debates, or group discussions on a range of topics, allowing the students to showcase their improved oral communication skills. Reading skills were examined through more advanced passages and texts, where students were asked to read and analyze the content critically. Writing skills were assessed through essays, reports, or short compositions on a given topic, focusing on enhanced grammar, vocabulary, organization, and coherence.

Figure 2: Bar Diagram Showing Endline Average Results



The results of the end line assessment revealed that the students showed considerable improvement in their English language proficiency across all four language skills. The fear of speaking in public had significantly reduced, with a higher percentage of students demonstrating increased confidence and fluency in their oral communication. Students' reading and writing abilities had also improved, with better comprehension, critical thinking, and written expression.

Figure 3: Bar Diagram Showing the Comparison Between Baseline and Endline Average for Different Attributes



Moreover, it was observed that students had become more engaged with English language resources outside their academic syllabus, such as newspapers, books, and novels. This increased exposure to diverse forms of literature and authentic language use contributed to the enhancement of their overall language proficiency.

Despite the noticeable progress, some students still faced challenges in specific areas, such as advanced grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation. These areas require continued support and targeted interventions to ensure that all students achieve a comprehensive mastery of the English language.

The Way Forward

Improving English language education in rural Sikkim requires a concerted effort by the government, educational institutions, and the community. Here are some potential ways to improve English language education in rural Sikkim:

Comprehensive Language Education Approach: To address the challenges of English language instruction in rural Sikkim, it is crucial to adopt a comprehensive approach. This approach encompasses a practical teaching methodology that goes beyond traditional lectures, emphasizing interactive activities like role-playing, extemporaneous speaking, vlogging, and group discussions. This practical approach aims to create a non-judgmental and supportive environment where students actively participate and practice the language. Additionally, a tailored syllabus should be developed, one that considers the specific requirements and cultural context of rural Sikkim. This curriculum should prioritize practical language skills needed for daily life and employment opportunities while incorporating local themes and topics that resonate with the students.

Technology plays a vital role in modern language education. Schools and universities should leverage technology to enhance language learning by providing access to audio-visual materials, language learning apps, and online resources. This approach is especially beneficial in areas where access to native English speakers is limited. Continuous assessment should be implemented to track students' progress, enabling timely interventions to address learning gaps. Teachers, too, require specialized training not only in the subject matter but also in effective language teaching methods. Workshops and seminars should focus on practical techniques for making language learning engaging and interactive, with opportunities for peer-to-peer learning among educators.

Enriching Language Learning Ecosystem: Creating a rich language learning ecosystem is equally important in rural Sikkim. Language labs can be established in educational institutions to provide students with dedicated spaces for language practice. These labs can be equipped with audio and video resources, pronunciation guides, and language software to enhance learning. Peer learning initiatives, such as study groups, language exchange programmes, and conversation clubs, can be promoted to create a supportive environment for students to build confidence in using the language. Local languages should not be overlooked; they can serve as a bridge to learning English, especially in the early stages, promoting bilingual education and cultural preservation.

A feedback culture is essential, where students feel comfortable providing inputs on their language learning experiences. This feedback

helps educators refine their teaching methods and curriculum. Continuous evaluation of the effectiveness of the pedagogy and curriculum is necessary. Adjustments can be made based on student outcomes and feedback, and best practices should be shared among educational institutions in rural areas. By focusing on these aspects of the language learning ecosystem, rural Sikkim can make significant strides in improving English language education, opening doors to global opportunities while honouring its unique cultural identity and local knowledge.

Increase Access to English Language Resources: To improve the students' exposure to the English language, it is essential to increase access to resources such as English language newspapers, books, and literature. This can be done by setting up language labs and libraries in rural schools and universities. The government and educational institutions should also provide access to online resources such as e-books and e-newspapers.

Train Teachers: Providing training and professional development to English language teachers in rural areas is crucial. Teachers should be trained to use modern teaching methods and technologies to make language learning more engaging and effective. The government and educational institutions can provide training workshops and seminars to teachers to improve their teaching skills. "A teacher's role in rural areas is immense as compared to urban areas because in an urban setting a learner has other models like family, peers, society, technology etc. to imitate. A rural student has only a teacher to imitate and learn from. The educational institutions in rural areas are considered as temples of learning. That means school or college is considered a very sacrosanct, ideal place. And it is the responsibility of the teachers to keep the places sacred with devotion towards teaching and educating the students. The classes may be over crowded, but the teacher should try the level best to attend to each and every student and develop his or her language skills." (Shrikhande, 2017, p. 721)

Encourage Community Participation: The community plays a crucial role in promoting English language education in rural areas. Parents and community members should be encouraged to support and participate in language learning activities such as reading clubs and language exchange programmes. This will create a supportive environment for

language learning and help improve the students' confidence in using the language. Several NGOs like Sikkim Youth Federation (SYF) and Wandering Souls of Sikkim (WSOS) have been organizing interschool and intercollege scholastic competitions including debate, extempore, elocution, essay and creative writing and also upgrading the library across rural areas. More NGOs should take this up on priority.

Conclusion

This study investigated the challenges and opportunities surrounding English language acquisition in rural Sikkim, with Medhavi Skills University serving as a microcosm of the broader issues. The findings highlight the significant disparity in student proficiency, with many lacking confidence in spoken English and limited exposure to diverse forms of the language. These limitations can hinder their academic and professional prospects in an increasingly globalized world.

The research posits Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) as a transformative pedagogical approach. CLT prioritizes the development of real-world communication skills, fostering a dynamic learning environment where students actively use English for self-expression, rather than simply memorizing grammatical structures. Imagine classrooms abuzz with role-playing scenarios, impromptu speaking exercises, and collaborative discussions centered on relevant topical issues. These engaging activities not only enhance language proficiency but also empower students to overcome public speaking anxieties and cultivate the confidence to actively participate in discourse.

The positive outcomes observed at Medhavi Skills University serve as a compelling testament to the efficacy of CLT methods. By embracing a CLT-based pedagogy, the university witnessed a demonstrably significant improvement across all four key language skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Students who previously exhibited public speaking apprehension found their voices, actively engaging in debates and group discussions. This demonstrably successful implementation underscores the transformative potential of CLT in rural contexts.

However, the true strength of CLT lies not only in its effectiveness, but in its student-centric approach that fosters empowerment. By prioritizing communication over rote memorization, CLT equips students with the necessary tools to navigate the complexities of the contemporary world.

Imagine a student from a rural background, once hesitant to speak English, confidently expressing themselves during an international internship. This is the transformative potential of CLT—unlocking opportunities and fostering a sense of agency in young minds.

The path forward for rural Sikkim hinges on an unwavering commitment to the core principles of CLT. Teacher training programmes focused on interactive and communicative methodologies are crucial. Curriculum development should prioritize tasks that encourage the application of language in real-world contexts, integrating local themes and contexts to foster student engagement. Furthermore, creating a supportive learning environment where mistakes are viewed as stepping stones towards fluency is paramount.

In conclusion, this research presents a compelling argument for CLT as the cornerstone of effective English language education in rural Sikkim. By prioritizing communication and empowering students to use their voices, CLT has the potential to bridge the gap between the current curriculum and the desired communication objectives. This shift is not merely about acquiring a new language; it is about unlocking a world of possibilities for rural students in Sikkim.

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