

Original Article

Enhancing Communicative English Skills: Innovative Teaching Strategies for Undergraduate Students

Dr. Vinod Zalte

Associate Professor, Dept. of English Smt. P. N. Doshi Women's College (Autonomous) Ghatkopar (W), Mumbai

Email: vinod.zalte@spndoshi.com

Manuscript ID: **Abstract**

JRD -2025-171115

ISSN: 2230-9578

Volume 17

Issue 11

Pp. 83-86

November. 2025

The English language is known as the language of technology in today's world. It has an indispensable role in various professions. So, Communicative competency in English is the need of the hour for career growth. When a student of the vernacular medium searches for a job, he fails to bridge the gap between the theory-based knowledge of English and its practical usage. This paper aims to scrutinise advanced English language teaching strategies like Task-Based Learning (TBL), Role Play, and Technology-based Learning. These methods of English language teaching have proved to enhance communicative fluency and learner self-sufficiency. Further, the paper explores the methods and the opinions of Nunan, Littlewood, Canale, Swain, Savignon, Willis, and others to evaluate how these methodologies are instrumental in enhancing learners' competency. Additionally, it also focuses on the challenges of teaching communicative English and foregrounds the crucial role of the teacher as the facilitator rather than merely a source of knowledge.

Keywords: Communicative Competence, Task-Based Learning, Role-Play, Group Discussions, Technology in Language Learning, Learner Autonomy, Pedagogical Strategies

Submitted: 16 Oct. 2025

Revised: 27 Oct. 2025

Accepted: 11 Nov. 2025

Published: 30 Nov. 2025

Introduction

The entire world is aware of the role of the English language due to the pivotal role of the English language in education, business, and international association. For the students who studied in the vernacular medium, it is important to communicate in English using proper grammar. In India, mostly rote memorization and sticking to grammar are the keys in teaching English, but these methods hinder the real-life communication aspect of the English language. According to David Nunan, language is best learned when it is used as a vehicle for doing something meaningful rather than as an object of study (Nunan 1989, 107). Nunan's observation helps to create the solid base for the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) method. It proves helpful for English language learners to achieve the purpose - communication in English.

The important footing in teaching the English language is in sociolinguistics and the functional approach. While commenting on the communicative teaching aspect, William Littlewood opines that the communicative teaching "pays systematic attention to functional as well as structural aspects of language, combining these into a more fully communicative view" (Littlewood 2010, 1). Further, Canale and Swain's model on communicative competence emphasizes four interconnected parts, and they are: grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic competencies (Canale and Swain 1980, 1-47). Later, this idea was improvised and developed by Sandra Savignon, who thinks that communicative competence is a dynamic, interpersonal construct that can only be examined by means of overt performance in a particular context. The language teaching theories are instrumental in bringing great change in English language teaching, i.e., from transmission-based instruction to learner-centered engagement. To emphasize the communicative ability in English language learners, language teaching should incorporate interactional contexts, boost collaboration, and integrate technology for greater input



Quick Response Code:



Website:

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DOI:

10.5281/zenodo.17839324



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Address for correspondence:

Dr. Vinod Zalte, Associate Professor, Dept. of English Smt. P. N. Doshi Women's College (Autonomous) Ghatkopar (W), Mumbai

How to cite this article:

Zalte, V. (2025). Enhancing Communicative English Skills: Innovative Teaching Strategies for Undergraduate Students. *Journal of Research and Development*, 17(11), 83-86.
<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17839324>

I. Task-Based Learning (TBL)

This method of teaching the English language is most effective in improving communicative skills in English. In this method of teaching, the learners are given tasks based on real-life situations, which are totally different from the grammar-based rote learning. To define it concisely, Nunan thinks that it is: a piece of classroom work which involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing, or interacting in the target language while their attention is focused on meaning rather than form (Nunan 1989, 10). To add to this, Rod Ellis believes that this method improves fluency and accuracy as this method exposes the learner to use language in genuine, real-life communicative situations. Further, he opines that the learners get an advantage as “tasks provide the opportunity for natural language use, which facilitates interlanguage development through negotiation of meaning” (Ellis 2003, 9-10). The learners use the language through real-life topics such as conducting and appearing in an interview, solving problems jointly, event planning, etc. It supports and enhances linguistic and pragmatic competence simultaneously. Jane Willis added a new dimension to this method by bringing a structured three-phase framework, which includes the pre-task, the task cycle, and the language focus. In the pre-task phase, the learners are exposed to the theme and vocabulary, whereas in the task cycle, focus is on performance and interaction. In the third cycle, that is, language focus, the learners focus on reflection and analysis. Jane Willis adds that such a sequence balances fluency and accuracy work and allows learners to internalize new forms through use (Willis 1996, 53). N. S. Prabhu’s work titled *Bangalore Project* reveals that using this method in India can help to improve language learning even without obvious grammar instruction. According to Prabhu: there is no best method.... “Because it all depends,” meaning that what is best depends on whom the method is for, in what circumstances, for what purpose, and so on. That there is no best method therefore, means that no single method is best for everyone, as there are important variations in the teaching context that influence what is best. (Prabhu 1990, 162) Prabhu’s conclusions strongly assert that in vernacular medium classrooms, this method not only improves communication but also inspires collaboration amongst the students despite varied linguistic backgrounds. This is one side of the coin. We need to look at the other as well. Here, Littlewood’s opinion needs to be considered. He said that this method has to be employed in a local context and not in a context to which learners are not familiar. According to him, tasks must be graded and sequenced carefully to avoid cognitive overload (Littlewood 2004, 323). The success of this method lies in teacher expertise, adequate preparation, and continuous feedback.

II. Role-Play Method

It is one of the effective methods of language teaching, especially for non-English speaking students, as it fosters communicative skills in English. It helps the learners to use language in a social context, such as ordering food, negotiating, interviewing, asking directions, etc. According to Gillian Porter Ladousse, this method of language teaching is a way of bringing situations from real life into the classroom, which encourages learners to experience the language as living communication. This method has many benefits for language learners. One of them is the psychological benefit. When the learner uses language in an imaginary real-life situation, he/she overcomes barriers like anxiety and fear of making mistakes while communicating in English. Gillian Porter Ladousse thinks that this method “helps many shy students by providing them with a mask” (Ladousse 1987, 4). This lessens inhibition and fosters spontaneous speech. To add to this method, William Littlewood highlights this method’s role in enhancing pragmatic competence. He further evaluates that apart from knowing the form of language, he/she should also know when, where, and how to use them appropriately. The learners adapt to use necessary skills like adjusting tone, register, and politeness strategies as needed for the situation. Further, it helps the learner to use body language, facial expressions, and gestures as required for the situations. In other words, this method helps the learner to combine verbal and non-verbal communication skills. The holistic development of communicative competency achieved by the learners through learning a language using this method aligns with Hymes’s original notion of communicative competence as the ability to use language “appropriately to context”. (Hymes 1972, 277) As discussed for the previous method of teaching the English language, this method too may fail if enough preparation is not done, and it will result in mere artificial performance. If it is well-planned and then it will result in an impactful teaching tool to learn a language, which will successfully transform language learning from abstract grammar study into a lived experience.

III. Group Discussions

Group Discussion is one of the effective methods of teaching the English language to the vernacular students. This method, as a pedagogical tool, has been drawn from Lev Vygotsky’s theory of social constructivism. This theory foregrounds that learning is integrally social and mediated through communication. According to Lev Vygotsky, “every function in the child’s cultural development appears twice: first, on the social level, and later, on the individual level” (Vygotsky 1978, 57). When applied in teaching the English language, this dictum suggests that dialogue and collaboration are essential for developing communicative competency. Zoltan Dorney and Tim Murphey stressed the importance of motivation and cooperative aspects of group dynamics in the class. They think that group coherence, collaboration, and common purpose contribute significantly to learners’ willingness to communicate. The benefits of group discussion in teaching the English language are many. Some of them are students who negotiate meaning, express opinions, and develop listening and turn-taking skills. Michael Byram is of the view that group discussion is vital for developing intercultural communicative competence. He evaluates it as the ability to interact effectively with

people from other cultures, building on both linguistic and cultural awareness. This method is effective in India as Indian UG classes are a multicultural hub, and through the group discussion method, students indulge in discussions on varied topics, which exposes them to different kinds of opinions, and it results in fostering empathy and adaptability of the learner. To get the correct and effective results of this method, the important part is strategic facilitation. The facilitator should ensure that all students are participating in the group discussion and that talkative students are not owning the stage. In this regard, Dornyei puts forth that without careful structuring, group work may reinforce passivity rather than promote autonomy. So, to get the desired results while using this method, two things are important - balance of structure and freedom, which are the backbone of communicative pedagogy.

IV. Technology-Enhanced Language Learning (TELL)

Technology has proved to be beneficial for the teaching and learning process. It has brought many positive results in English language teaching techniques. The technology has enabled language teachers to access original materials and interactive communication tools. According to Eva Golonka et al, technology can increase learner engagement, provide immediate feedback, and support individualized learning paths (Golonka, Eva and et. 72). There are different kinds of websites, software, and tools that are instrumental in making teaching more effective and result-oriented. One of them is Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL). In this regard, Carol Chapelle thinks that it offers opportunities for meaningful practice, experimentation, and reflection (Chapelle 2003). To add to this, many online platforms help the UG students to achieve Communicative competency in English, the examples are online forums, video conferencing, and gamified apps like Duolingo or Babbel. Such apps and platforms help the students to learn the language at their convenience. It complements classroom instructions. The advancement of technology is a boon for vernacular UG students to achieve communicative competency in the English language. The social media platforms and apps like HelloTalk and Tandem help students to communicate directly with native speakers. This helps in creating a conducive atmosphere to learn the English language, as the communication is spontaneous and informal, which is the crux of getting fluency and pragmatic awareness. This doesn't mean that the English language teacher's role ends here. The language teacher must integrate technology into teaching language to achieve the pedagogical goals. According to Golonka, "technology is only as effective as the methodology it supports" (84). It is important to remember that we cannot rely solely upon technology without human intervention; otherwise, it will result in superficial engagement rather than deep learning.

VI. The Role of the Facilitator

English language teaching has changed a lot, and now traditional methods are clubbed with advanced technology, and with this, the role of the English language teacher has changed- from information provider to facilitator. Richards and Rodgers bring forth the primary task of the teacher as to "Learners engage in meaningful communication when classrooms emphasize real interaction, authentic tasks, learner-centred facilitation, and opportunities for negotiation of meaning — rather than rote practice of structure" (Richards and Rodgers, 2021). It includes designing interactive activities, managing group dynamics, and providing constructive feedback. An English language facilitator should be adaptive to new changes. According to Tony Wright, effective language teaching requires sensitivity to learners' needs, interests, and cultural backgrounds" (Wright 2010). It makes clear that the English language facilitator should be flexible, create learning tasks suitable for the learners' proficiency and motivation levels. The most important in communicative pedagogy is reflective practice. The English language teacher should continuously assess the effectiveness of his/her classroom teaching techniques and methodologies and keep on improving, and should also consider students' feedback and self-assessment. This makes the role of the English facilitator more effective and improves both teaching quality and learner autonomy.

Challenges in Implementing Communicative English Instruction

It is evident through the documented proofs that there are theoretical benefits of communicative approaches, but when implementing them in reality, there are certain challenges. In this matter, Penny Ur hints that big classes limit opportunities for individual participation and meaningful interaction (*A Course in Language Teaching* 232). In many third-world countries, the teachers are not getting adequate digital tools and materials to achieve the desired pedagogical goals. On the other hand, B. Kumaravadivelu warns against using 'method' in language teaching. He thinks that the teachers should concentrate on "post-method pedagogy." This helps the language teachers to familiarize techniques contextually (*Understanding Language Teaching* 171). It is effective in multicultural classrooms as the students may differ widely in proficiency and motivation. The English language teacher's role is pivotal in teaching English language competency. The teachers should be well-trained and well-prepared, or else the final result will not achieve the decided goals. Apart from this, there are other factors one needs to think are result oriented syllabus, low motivation, etc. These are the barriers to achieving the final goal of the language pedagogy, and the vernacular UG students fail to get the expertise in communicative English. These challenges can be overcome by systematic reforms and language teacher development programs, by avoiding overcrowded classes, the inclusion of the latest technology in pedagogy, and assessment aiming at communicative performance.

Conclusion

To conclude, it is a need of the hour to think seriously about changing the focus from rote learning to experiential and interactive learning. As discussed earlier, it is essential to focus on communicative competency, which encompasses not only linguistic correctness but also contextual correctness, strategic flexibility, and intercultural awareness. The pedagogical methods like Task-Based Learning, role-play, group discussion, and technology integration are instrumental for developing English communicative competency amongst the UG students. The role of the teacher is most important in this process as he/she is not only a facilitator but a motivator and reflective practitioner. Though there are certain institutional limitations, adapting to the context and due use of technology and strategies can improve the English communicative competency amongst the vernacular background UG students.

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