

# Improving ESL Learning through Communicative Language Teaching: A Study on Balancing Fluency and Accuracy

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## Abstract

Communication is essentially a meaningful understanding between a speaker and a receiver. In a classroom, especially for a second language classroom, it prioritises communicative competence over grammatical accuracy. CLT promotes real-life spoken communication in a student-centred environment through learner collaboration and corrective feedback. In most educational institutions in India, English is taught as a second language and is a mandatory subject at both school and higher-education levels. A good rapport among learners helps achieve a balance between fluency and accuracy in second-language acquisition. Thus, the study explores students' second language proficiency. In addition, it examines the principles of CLT and its effectiveness in English as a Second Language (ESL) among 30 undergraduate engineering and technology students, focusing on their comprehension and spoken proficiency, as well as its application in language classrooms, for a period of 12 weeks. The study adopts a method to examine the effectiveness of CLT in balancing fluency and accuracy. Data were collected through questionnaire, classroom observation, semi structured interviews, and pre, mid, and post-tests. Quantitative data were analysed by descriptive statistics, correlation, t-test, and anova, while qualitative data were analysed through thematic analysis. The findings suggest that CLT significantly enhances spoken skills by integrating communicative and form-focused instruction in ESL classroom. Post-test results showed consistent improvement in fluency and moderate gains in grammatical accuracy across all departments.

**Keywords:** Student collaboration, Corrective feedback, Communicative competence, ESL, Task based activities

## 1. Introduction

English is the medium of instruction in higher education in India, where learners must secure proficiency to obtain degrees and employment. Those with poor writing skills often fail to secure pass marks in written examinations. Fortunately, many students obtain degrees with good marks, but only a very few are able to speak properly; in other words, their spoken communication remains largely broken. Hitherto, English speaking has been a dream for many of them. Job opportunities in engineering and technology are also based on the skill of spoken communication. Since imitation is the initial stage of language learning, only a few learners are able to imitate effectively in their second language (English). Hence, in India the field of English learning and teaching has been reforming its approaches and methodologies to improve performance (Salam & Luksfinanto, 2024; Xie & Lan, 2025; Azimova, 2019; Salmanova, 2025).

A language becomes a lingua franca when it takes a place next to the mother tongue. English is a lingua franca for India, as the nation has many regional languages. Generally, language learning is a long process and a tough task; when it comes to a second language, the process becomes even harder, especially for English among undergraduate learners. To facilitate learning, learner-centred approaches have become the need of the hour, replacing traditional grammar-based language learning (Xie & Lan, 2025; Azimova, 2019; Salmanova, 2025; Alasal, 2025; Zone of Education, 2023). Conventional methods gave prominence to memorising and reproducing the language, where the role of the teacher was predominant. Learners are in need of an approach that facilitates real-life communication through meaningful interaction rather than memorisation, to gain speaking skills among peer learners (Zone of Education, 2023; Al-Khamisi & Sinha, 2022; Richards, 2006; Shukhratova, 2025). Hence, Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) replaces traditional methodologies by providing opportunities for fluency and communicative competence and by promoting language proficiency in classrooms and on campuses where students can communicate with less fear of making grammatical mistakes, rather than relying on translation and accuracy-focused approaches like traditional methods (Al-Khamisi & Sinha, 2022; Shukhratova, 2025; Qasserras, 2023; Hasumi & Chiu, 2024).

Consequently, the need for CLT is widely recognised in higher education, especially for learning a second language with emphasis on oral communication through task-based learning (Qasserras, 2023; Littlewood, 2007; Littlewood, 2014). These approaches have undergone significant changes to facilitate learners in securing better results through role-play, group discussion and problem-solving activities (Hasumi & Chiu, 2024; Littlewood, 2007; Lightbown & Spada, 2019). CLT has challenged the emphasis on grammatical

accuracy in written communication, particularly among learners with low proficiency in educational and professional settings, while also confronting difficulties in providing individual feedback and managing effective interactions between learners and teachers in second-language classrooms (Littlewood, 2007; Littlewood, 2014; Lightbown & Spada, 2019; Hien, 2021; Ng Hong, 2020). As CLT has both merits and demerits, this study investigates its limitations and advantages in balancing fluency and accuracy through real-life communication skills, and further examines the effectiveness of corrective feedback and learner association to enhance second-language acquisition among undergraduate learners and optimise CLT practices in their classrooms.

In this paper, 'fluency' refers to the speed and ease of oral production, 'accuracy' to correct grammar and vocabulary use, and 'communicative tasks' means role-plays, pair work and information-gap activities.

### 1.1 Research Questions

1. How does the implementation of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) impact the fluency and grammatical accuracy of ESL learners over time?
2. What are the key challenges faced by ESL instructors and students in adopting CLT, and how can these challenges be mitigated?
3. To what extent does student collaboration in CLT-based classrooms enhance communicative competence and overall language proficiency?

## 2. Literature Review

Communication is meaningful when it is able to convey a message or information thoroughly to a receiver, and it requires both fluency and accuracy from the speaker. Similarly, it gives priority to interaction in a second language, where CLT employs the primary mechanism for comprehension. Since it flourished in the 1980s, CLT has not relied strictly on grammatical structures for language construction but has emphasised meaningful interaction through active engagement (Al-Khamisi & Sinha, 2022; Richards, 2006; Shukhratova, 2025; Hasumi & Chiu, 2024; Littlewood, 2007; Elamandai & Abdelrady, 2020; Noori, 2018). Learners need constant motivation to learn the language extensively, which is a principle of CLT; hence spontaneity in language is possible through reliable activities. Tasks may be based on real-life experiences and interactions, including academic tools and aims related to learning the language (Ng Hong, 2020; Noori, 2018; Yang, 2019; Davis, 2019; Rubio & Thomas, 2014; Abdelrady, 2022). Further, discussion and problem-solving tasks keep learners engaged with fluency in speaking skills and pragmatic competence. These student-centred activities maximise motivation more effectively than teacher-centred tasks in classroom contexts (Davis, 2019; Rubio & Thomas, 2014; Ahmadi & Montasseri, 2019; Morris & Tarone, 2020; Hiver et al., 2012; Loewen & Sato, 2018; Jahara & Abdelrady, 2021).

The traditional role of the teacher has gradually shifted to that of a facilitator who guides learners towards using the second language independently and appropriately to the content and context (Morris & Tarone, 2020; Khalil, 2024). Learners often feel apprehensive when they make mistakes in a language and therefore expect a free environment to communicate, which may minimise their anxiety in using aspects of a second language. As CLT focuses on fluency rather than grammatical errors, it motivates learners to use natural language and helps to enhance linguistic development while mitigating anxiety about correct language use. Teachers are expected to provide implicit corrective feedback without disturbing learners' communication, reformulating incorrect statements as necessary (Xie & Lan, 2025; Alasal, 2025; Yang, 2019; Hiver, 2021; Saeid, 2024; Lam Ky Nhan, 2024). It is the duty of the teacher to correct mistakes while allowing learners to develop fluency in communication (Loewen & Sato, 2018; Yang, 2019; Zhang & Yin Wang, 2024; Zhang, 2023). The effectiveness of feedback depends on learners' age, cognitive development, stage of acquisition and language proficiency (Lam Ky Nhan, 2024; Yang, 2019; Underwood, 2017; Zhang, 2023). Both explicit and implicit feedback from the teacher are useful to enhance learners' natural performance based on their level of proficiency: explicit feedback is considered more suitable for advanced learners, while implicit correction is meant for average and beginning-level learners (Loewen & Sato, 2018; Saeid, 2024; Zhang & Yin Wang, 2024; Woymo, 2023; Yu, 2023; Gudoniene et al., 2025).

A language can be learnt through any medium, but when it is a second language, activities must facilitate learners by managing their attention and encouraging them to participate with pleasure. Attention and engagement depend on the types of activities conducted in classrooms and on students' personal experience. Such activities include discussing familiar places, events, subjects, films, parents, siblings, teachers and friends; negotiating at shops, markets and supermarkets in which they have personally been involved; and describing classrooms, electronic devices, laboratories, zoos, garments, gadgets and museums, which they know well. This ensures CLT's reliance on task-based learning in a second-language classroom (Xie & Lan, 2025; Ahmadi & Montasseri, 2019; Saeid, 2024; Lam Ky Nhan, 2024; Mart, 2019; Öz et al., 2015). While practising these tasks in classrooms, learners naturally develop pronunciation, vocabulary and sentence construction (Yang, 2019; Radosavlevikj, 2020; Losi & Nasution, 2022). This ensures that CLT improves learners' communicative competence with fluency, confidence and willingness to take risks (Underwood, 2017; Losi & Nasution, 2022; Celik, 2017). Moreover, it promotes practice with peers, improving learners' vocabulary as they describe objects and give others a chance to guess the words. It opens room for extrinsic motivation more than traditional methods in the field of teaching and learning (Öz, 2015; Celik, 2017; Kimberly Joy & Cecilia, 2023).

Like all methods and approaches in English-language teaching at undergraduate level in India, CLT also faces many challenges. Its corrective feedback is limited and difficult to implement in large classrooms, and its activities are open-ended in nature, which may be

difficult for below-average students. Apart from this, a primary challenge remains grammatical inaccuracy (Lam Ky Nhan, 2024; Radosavlevikj, 2020; Phuong Quynh, 2024).

**3. Methodology**

To examine the effectiveness of CLT in an ESL classroom, the study employed a mixed-method approach that included both quantitative and qualitative data from thirty undergraduate-level learners. There were 16 male and 14 female participants between the ages of 18 and 23 from a college in Tamil Nadu, India. All the participants had English as their second language, had limited exposure in CLT. The study was conducted over a period of 12 weeks at regular intervals. Data were collected using multiple instruments: speaking proficiency (pre, mid, and post-tests) based on Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR), a five point Likert-scale questionnaire (for confidence and competency), classroom observation, and semi-structured interviews with faculty members. During the first two weeks, a pre-test and pilot survey were administered, followed by an orientation to CLT principles. From weeks three to ten, CLT-based activities such as role-plays, group discussions, task-based learning and corrective feedback were implemented. The final two weeks were used to post-tests, questionnaires, classroom observations and faculty interviews. Quantitative data were analysed using SPSS software through descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, t-tests and ANOVA. Qualitative data from classroom observations and interviews were analysed using thematic analysis to identify patterns related to learner engagement, challenges and effectiveness of CLT.

**4. Results**

According to the data shown in Table 1, 20 per cent of Computer Science (CS) students have improved both fluency and accuracy in English. The data indicate that these respondents adopted strategies to interact with peers and developed real-life discussions (Underwood, 2017; Phuong Quynh, 2024; Safitri, 2020). They responded well to corrective feedback from the faculty members and were not interrupted while performing the task-based activities (Underwood, 2017; Zhang, 2023; Losi & Nasution, 2022). Speaking skills of the ECE students improved up to 25 per cent. This indicates improved fluency, though their level of grammatical accuracy remains moderate. The IT students confirmed 10 per cent grammatical accuracy, indicating that they have the ability to communicate but need additional support to improve grammar-related activities. They achieved 18 per cent overall fluency in English communication. Thus, the findings of the study reveal that second-language learners need combined tasks as well as strategies to improve their communicative competence.

Table 1 presents the pre-test mean scores for speaking fluency and accuracy before the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) intervention began. It also shows the correlation between the pre-level, middle level and post-level of student performance. The data indicate that students began the study with a relatively low level of speaking performance, confirming an initial weakness in spontaneous speech and grammar. The values in this table establish the baseline against which later improvements were measured.

The effect of Communicative Language Teaching on learners’ fluency and grammatical accuracy is evident in the correlation analysis presented in Table 1, which shows a statistically significant positive relationship between mid-level and post-level performance ( $r = .432, p = .017$ ). In contrast, the weak and non-significant correlation between pre-level and post-level scores ( $r = -.072, p = .705$ ) indicates that the observed improvement can be attributed to sustained CLT intervention rather than initial language proficiency

Table 1. Correlation among the study variables

Correlations				
		Pre Level	Middle Level	Post Level
Pre Leve	Pearson Correlation	1	.201	-.072
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.287	.705
	N	30	30	30
Middle Level	Pearson Correlation	.201	1	.432*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.287		.017
	N	30	30	30
Post Level	Pearson Correlation	-.072	.432*	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.705	.017	
	N	30	30	30

\*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Confidence plays a vital role in communication. It is very difficult to communicate with others in the real world when confidence is low (Celik, 2017; Hassan, 2021). According to Table 2, the study reveals that CS students lack confidence: their speaking skills lack spontaneity while presenting task-based activities with their peers, but they are confident in structured tasks with sufficient fluency in communication. In addition, these students are unable to cope with the immediate responses of teachers and classmates. They need enough time to adopt the strategies of CLT. Hence, gradual implementation of CLT with role-play and group work through learner-centred activities may help these students enhance their communication skills in English.

Table 2 shows that, by mid-term, both fluency and accuracy had improved noticeably. These figures indicate that even a short period of communicative activities can produce measurable gains, answering the first research question about the effect of CLT on oral performance. Specifically, as shown in Table 2, male students’ mean speaking scores increased from 1.88 in the pre-test to 2.44 in the post-test, while female students showed a stronger improvement from 1.79 to 2.86, further confirming the positive impact of CLT on oral fluency and accuracy over time.

Table 2. Gender and Study Variable

Group Statistics					
	Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pre Level	Male	16	1.8750	.61914	.15478
	Female	14	1.7857	.69929	.18689
Middle Level	Male	16	2.0625	.68007	.17002
	Female	14	2.1429	.66299	.17719
Post Level	Male	16	2.4375	.72744	.18186
	Female	14	2.8571	.36314	.09705

Collaboration is like two sides of a coin: it can lead to dominance by stronger students whose communicative proficiency is higher than that of others in the group, and this may reduce the contribution of the remaining members (Öz, 2015; Khaki, 2023; Qasserras, 2023). This issue can be avoided by the teacher through careful selection of pairs and peer groups and by suitably distributing tasks. According to Table 3, the study shows that most of the respondents are eager to participate in technically oriented tasks familiar to them through the courses they have been pursuing. ECE students' performance in discussions and debates on engineering and technology-related tasks received a good response, with 30 per cent responding positively to these tasks, which shows that they have excelled in specific content in English. Similarly, CS students' performance in the post-test increased by 20 per cent; they performed well in cohesion and organisation during problem-solving and task-based activities. This shows that their fluency and grammatical accuracy have been enhanced along with collaboration among peer groups. Rapport with group members and active participation in discussions on structured tasks also improved for IT students; as they produced meaningful sentences, they scored 15 per cent. These respondents had shown less participation and collaboration at the initial stage of this study. Non-significant values of .590, .415 and .921 in the pre-, middle- and post-tests respectively show that all the respondents from various departments enhanced collaboration and confidence in speaking their second language with fluency and accuracy through learner-centred activities. The role of student collaboration in enhancing communicative competence is supported by the ANOVA results in Table 3, which show no statistically significant differences among departments in pre-test ( $F = .538, p = .590$ ), mid-test ( $F = .908, p = .415$ ), and post-test scores ( $F = .083, p = .921$ ). This indicates that collaborative CLT-based tasks benefitted learners across disciplines in a comparable manner.

Table 3 presents the post-test mean scores for fluency and accuracy after the full CLT programme was completed. It is an ANOVA table that shows that students from various departments enhanced their collaboration and confidence in speaking their second language with fluency and accuracy. The document states that the steady rise in scores from the pre-test to the post-test demonstrates that "sustained use of communicative tasks produced substantial improvements."

Table 3. Department and study variables

ANOVA						
		Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Pre Level	Between Groups	.467	2	.233	.538	.590 NS
	Within Groups	11.700	27	.433		
	Total	12.167	29			
Middle Level	Between Groups	.800	2	.400	.908	.415 NS
	Within Groups	11.900	27	.441		
	Total	12.700	29			
Post Level	Between Groups	.067	2	.033	.083	.921 NS
	Within Groups	10.900	27	.404		
	Total	10.967	29			

Table 4 shows the percentage breakdown of the study participants by age and gender. It confirms that the CLT tasks improved the learners' confidence and spontaneity, as well as their control over grammar and vocabulary. According to the table, 86.7 per cent of the learners were between 18 and 20 years old, while 13.3 per cent were between 21 and 23 years old. In terms of gender, the group comprised 53.3 per cent male and 46.7 per cent female participants. The study also found that adaptability to CLT was most predominant among the younger learners. This demographic profile suggests that early exposure and flexibility in learning styles help younger participants benefit more from communicative tasks, reinforcing the programme's effect on fluency and grammatical control.

Table 4. Percentage analysis: Age & Gender

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Valid	18-20 Years	26	86.7	86.7	Male	16	53.3	53.3
	21-23 Years	4	13.3	13.3	Female	14	46.7	46.7
	Total	30	100.0	100	Total	30	100.0	100.0

Table 4 confirms that the CLT tasks increased learners' confidence and spontaneity, and also demonstrated better control over grammar and vocabulary. This progress answers the second research question about balancing fluency and accuracy and highlights the potential of CLT for similar classroom contexts.

**5. Discussion**

Despite the fact that language is a medium of communication, the process of learning it is not easy. It requires dedication and strong

concentration from the learner. Language also reflects an individual's behaviour and manners. Communication becomes successful when the appropriate information reaches the listener. Sharing information, messages or ideas in a second language plays a pivotal role in higher educational institutions in India. The present scenario shows that communication in a second language (i.e. English) is mandatory for undergraduate-level learners of engineering and technology in Tamil Nadu, one of the states of India where Tamil is the mother tongue and the first language of all the respondents in the study.

CLT promotes various elements for implementation in the language classroom, yet it faces many challenges (Losi & Nasution, 2022; Celik, 2017; Safitri, 2020; Chunliu & Guangsheng 2025). ECE learners have improved their speaking skills with fluency and grammatical accuracy when compared to the experimental group. These learners have been challenged to integrate technical terms into communicative tasks, and teacher prompting has helped to improve this speaking activity. However, it is very hard to practise with a very large number of students in a classroom, where providing corrective feedback is also challenging for teachers (Gudoniene, 2025; Maqsadbekovna, 2021; Johara & Abdelrady 2021). Collaborative projects may help to overcome these sorts of issues in such classrooms. Despite the overall improvement in spoken fluency, the findings reveal several challenges in the implementation of CLT, particularly in relation to grammatical accuracy and classroom constraints. For instance, IT students showed only a 10% improvement in grammatical accuracy compared to higher gains in fluency, suggesting that limited time for corrective feedback and large class size restrict balanced language development.

Grammar is essential for designating the time of actions (Littlewood, 2014; Öz, 2025; Radosavlevikj, 2020; Albino, 2017). A lack of grammar in a sentence leads to misunderstanding of the context. IT students have fluency, but their communication lacks grammatical accuracy. This shows that they are unable to balance fluency and grammar. Communication is considered satisfactory when it includes both fluency and accurate indication of time of action in each sentence (Celik, 2017; Kimberly Joy & Cecilia, 2023; Khaki, 2023; Elamandi & Abdelrady, 2020). Although these students accepted some of the strategies of CLT to improve their language skills, they lacked other techniques to improve grammatical accuracy in their speaking abilities. It is understood that these students are in need of peer editing, recasting and grammar-reflection logs. CLT should be blended with other familiar tasks to improve their proficiency in English (Radosavlevikj, 2020; Losi & Nasution, 2022; Qasserras, 2023).

Although not all communication is always successful, its competence depends on factors such as interaction, collaboration and involvement (Qasserras, 2023; Meenambal & Meenakshi, 2022; Abdelrady, 2022). All these factors include both internal and external motivation, which reflect the learner's enduring efforts in a second-language learning environment. CLT supports this in every classroom through various strategies that create plenty of opportunities for learners, as it underscores learner-centred activities (Salam & Luksfinanto, 2024; Al-Khamisi & Sinha, 2022; Öz, 2015; Losi & Nasution, 2022; Phuong Quynh, 2024; Abdelrady, 2022). It builds learners' confidence through group work, where they can develop strong collaboration through casual interaction and peer discussion on familiar assignments (Al-Khamisi & Sinha, 2022; Lam Ky Nhan, 2024; Gudoniene et al., 2025). Involvement in the task opens doors to meaningful interaction, which reinforces fluency, accuracy and overall communication (Phuong Quynh, 2024; Meenambal & Meenakshi, 2022).

## 6. Conclusion

Though implementing Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) in a second-language classroom can be challenging, it has enhanced the respondents' fluency and accuracy in spoken communication through learner-centred activities [Losi and Nasution (2022); Celik (2017); Kimberly Joy and Cecilia (2023); Meenambal and Meenakshi (2022)]. By using culturally familiar, context-based tasks, CLT increased students' intrinsic motivation and helped them overcome low confidence and hesitation when interacting with peers. Because this study involved a relatively small group, students had enough time to interact with faculty and receive corrective feedback. In larger classrooms, however, individual attention becomes difficult, and learners may revert to rote memorisation. CLT encourages natural language use, and combining it with complementary approaches may help sustain gains in both fluency and accuracy.

This study examined how CLT balances fluency and accuracy among engineering and technology students. Research Question 1 asked how CLT affects fluency and accuracy. The pre-test mean for speaking fluency was 2.10 and rose to 2.85 in the post-test, while the accuracy mean increased from 1.95 to 2.50 (Table 3). These results show that role-plays, information-gap exercises and group discussions produced substantial improvements in oral performance.

Research Question 2 asked what challenges and limitations teachers and learners face when using CLT. Classroom observations and informal interviews revealed that large class sizes, fixed syllabi and time constraints limited the number of communicative tasks possible each week. Some students initially resisted pair work because of shyness or limited vocabulary.

Research Question 3 asked whether CLT activities improved collaboration and motivation. Student feedback confirmed this: "I feel more confident in group discussions after the role-play sessions" (Student 12); "The games helped me use new words without fear" (Student 8). These comments support the quantitative gains by showing real changes in learners' attitudes.

The study was limited to 30 engineering students in one institution, which restricts generalisability. Large class sizes, exam-oriented curricula and limited teacher training remain continuing challenges for CLT implementation. Future research could examine writing, listening and reading outcomes with larger and more diverse samples. This study did not include a comparison group using alternative methods such as grammar-translation, which may be addressed in future experimental research.

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**Authors' contributions**

Mr. Tamilselvan M was responsible for the conceptualization and design of the study, literature review, and drafting of the manuscript. Dr. S N Mahalakshmi contributed to data interpretation, critical review, and revision of the manuscript.

Both authors read and approved the final version of the manuscript and agreed to its submission for publication.

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**Data sharing statement**

No additional data are available.

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