
TEACHER COMPETENCE AND CLASSROOM REALITIES: NARRATIVES OF ENGLISH INSTRUCTION AT THE COLLEGES IN RURAL INDIA

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Abstract

This study employs a narrative inquiry methodology to explore the pedagogical beliefs and classroom practices of non-native English teachers in rural Indian colleges. Conducted over twenty months with three tertiary educators, the research reveals a significant gap between teachers' communicative and learner-centered philosophy and the teacher-dominated, exam-focused realities of their classrooms. Systemic issues such as infrastructural deficits, rigid curricula, socio-linguistic isolation, and limited professional development constrain innovative pedagogy. However, pockets of localized pedagogical innovation and teacher resilience emerge. Findings underscore the imperative for comprehensive reforms in curriculum design, teacher training, and institutional support to bridge the divide between aspiration and practice in rural ELT contexts. This study contributes to the understanding of context-sensitive teacher cognition and advocates for culturally responsive, resource-aware, and policy-aligned educational transformations.

Keywords: Teacher cognition, narrative inquiry, English Language Teaching, rural education, pedagogical beliefs, India, communicative competence.

Introduction

Teacher cognition—the beliefs, knowledge, and thought processes educators engage in about teaching and learning—has increasingly been recognized as pivotal in shaping classroom practices (Borg, 2003). In the context of English Language Teaching (ELT), understanding teacher cognition is especially important given the complex linguistic, cultural, and institutional environments teachers navigate. In India, where English holds immense socio-economic value yet functions variously as a second or foreign language depending on context, rural education presents distinct challenges and opportunities for ELT pedagogy (Annamalai, 2001; Ramanathan & Morgan, 2007).

This study investigates how ELT instructors at rural Indian colleges perceive and enact their roles, focusing on the dissonance between pedagogical beliefs and enacted classroom practices. Through a narrative inquiry lens, the research illuminates the interplay of institutional, socio-linguistic, and

infrastructural factors shaping these educators' professional experiences, beliefs, and strategies. The findings provide insights into the systemic barriers underpinning ELT in rural India and highlight emergent local innovations with implications for policy and practice.

Literature Review

Teacher Cognition and Pedagogical Beliefs

Teacher cognition encompasses not only explicit knowledge but also implicit beliefs, attitudes, and values influencing instructional choices (Borg, 2006). Extensive research documents the complexity of translating teacher beliefs into practice, particularly in second language classrooms where ideological, contextual, and practical factors intervene (Richards & Lockhart, 1996). Studies across diverse contexts reveal discrepancies between teachers' stated support for communicative, learner-centered approaches and the persistence of traditional, teacher-centered methods (Freeman, 1996; Goh & Burns, 2012).

ELT in the Indian Rural Context

ELT in rural India exists within a socio-linguistic ecology marked by multilingualism and English's limited functional use outside formal education (Annamalai, 2001). Teacher education in these regions often lacks access to updated pedagogical frameworks, exacerbating reliance on grammar translation methods (Rajagopalan, 2004). Research highlights infrastructural deficits, such as absence of language labs and digital resources, that further restrict active language learning (Dasgupta, 2013). Large class sizes and examination-centric curricula reinforce content-based instruction, limiting communicative competence development (Prabhu, 2005).

Narrative Inquiry in ELT Research

Narrative inquiry offers a powerful tool to capture the lived experiences and evolving identities of teachers (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). By collecting stories and reflections, researchers gain access to the often tacit cognitive and emotional dimensions influencing pedagogy (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007). In Indian ELT research, narrative inquiry remains underutilized despite its capacity to reveal contextualized understandings of teacher agency and constraints (Sharma, 2014).

Methodology

Research Design

This qualitative study used a narrative inquiry design to explore teacher cognition and classroom enactments in rural Indian tertiary ELT settings. Narrative inquiry was chosen for its strength in providing rich, temporally and contextually situated accounts of teacher experience (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). The twenty-month duration enabled longitudinal data capture, affording depth over time.

Participants and Setting

Three non-native English teachers from rural colleges in South India participated. All instructors taught undergraduate English courses with student cohorts exceeding seventy learners, situated within institutions facing significant resource constraints.

Data Collection

Data comprised multiple interconnected sources:

- **Narrative interviews** conducted at regular intervals to explore teachers' beliefs, reflections, and professional identities
- **Classroom observations** documented instructional strategies, teacher-student interactions, and resource use.
- **Lesson plans and teaching diaries** offering insights on pedagogical intentions and reflections on lesson effectiveness.
- **Post-lesson reflections** where teachers articulated immediate perceptions of classroom successes and challenge

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed thematically with an iterative, inductive approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Cross-case comparison identified patterns and divergences between professed beliefs and observed practices. Narrative segments were examined for evidence of teacher agency, system constraints, and innovation.

The Rural Indian ELT Context and Institutional Realities

Understanding rural English language teaching in India demands an appreciation of the broader institutional and socio-cultural environment within which instruction occurs. Teachers in rural colleges typically hold academic qualifications in English literature or linguistics, indicating strong theoretical backgrounds. However, most lack formal training in modern pedagogical approaches, particularly communicative language teaching methodologies that prioritize learner interaction and practical language use. This pedagogical gap is exacerbated by limited institutional emphasis on ongoing professional development, with few opportunities for teachers to update their skills or integrate new technologies into their instruction.

Infrastructure in rural colleges is frequently inadequate, with many institutions lacking essential language learning resources such as audio-visual aids, language laboratories, or multimedia classrooms. The scarcity of reliable internet access further limits the use of digital tools that could enrich classroom engagement and foster learner autonomy. Additionally, the prescribed curricula remain heavily literature-centric and examination-focused, primarily geared towards rote-learning rather than communicative competence. Large class sizes compound these constraints by limiting individualized attention and diminishing opportunities for active learning.

Together, these structural and institutional realities create a challenging context for teachers, directly shaping their agency and instructional choices. The resulting educational environment influences not only what is taught but also how it is delivered, requiring teachers to negotiate between the demands of the syllabus, infrastructural limitations, and learners' needs.

Socio-Linguistic Influences on English teaching

The socio-linguistic environment in rural India further complicates ELT efforts. English predominantly functions as a foreign language in these regions, with students exposed to it mainly within academic settings rather than through everyday communication. Regional languages

dominate local discourse, administration, and social interaction, creating a linguistic isolation that makes immersive English practice difficult. This isolation contributes to learners' anxiety and reluctance to speak English, often due to fears of making mistakes or facing ridicule.

Within this context, teachers frequently prioritize grammar instruction and exam preparation, which are perceived as more immediately relevant to students' academic success and institutional expectations. While most teachers recognize the importance of developing communicative competence, systemic pressures—such as rigid exams and curricular requirements—force them to focus on memorization of grammar rules, vocabulary, and literary analysis. This mismatch between communicative aspirations and practical implementation places significant tensions on classroom dynamics, limiting students' active engagement and authentic language use.

Classroom Observation Findings

Classroom observations conducted throughout the study consistently highlighted a teacher-centered, lecture-based instructional style. Lessons predominantly involved grammar translation exercises, vocabulary drills, and reading comprehension tasks. Such approaches-maintained control firmly in the hands of instructors, who dictated pacing, content, and participation with minimal space for spontaneous student interaction or peer collaboration.

Supplementary teaching materials were occasionally used to clarify textbook concepts, yet the overall learning atmosphere remained dominated by transmission of content rather than interactive knowledge construction. Students were often passive recipients, with engagement levels spiking primarily during exam-focused discussions, reflecting their priority to succeed in high-stakes university assessments. Opportunities for oral skills development, group work, or spontaneous communication were limited, revealing a classroom culture oriented towards examination performance rather than communicative competence.

Comparative Analysis of Beliefs and Practices

A key insight of this study was the prominent disconnect between teachers' professed pedagogical beliefs and their enacted classroom behaviors. In interviews, teachers frequently expressed support for learner-centered, communicative language teaching methods, emphasizing language use, interaction, and practical skills. However, classroom observations showed that traditional, teacher-dominated approaches prevailed, characterized by content-heavy instruction and a focus on written exams.

Several factors contributed to this divergence. Institutional mandates stressed examination success as the overriding priority, limiting curricular flexibility and innovation. Infrastructural deficits and lack of technical support hindered efforts to employ interactive or technology-enhanced teaching methods. Furthermore, the absence of sustained professional development opportunities meant that many teachers continued replicating instructional models experienced during their own education, perpetuating teacher-centric traditions. Socio-cultural norms and language insecurities among learners also influenced teachers' cautious pedagogical choices, favoring established, less risky approaches over experimental communication-based activities.

Teacher Motivation, Identity and Innovation

Despite these challenges, teacher narratives revealed remarkable motivation and pockets of innovation. Several participants demonstrated agency by adapting teaching methods creatively to their contexts. For instance, using storytelling and local folklore connected students with English learning in culturally meaningful ways. Some incorporated bilingual instruction or code-switching to scaffold comprehension and ease linguistic isolation. Extracurricular initiatives such as English clubs provided informal spaces where students could practice speaking without the pressure of examinations.

Teachers also leveraged low-cost digital resources such as mobile applications and social media platforms to supplement classroom instruction, thereby overcoming some technological barriers. These efforts illustrate the resilience and professionalism of rural ELT teachers, who strive to provide enriching learning experiences despite systemic constraints. However, such innovations were largely individual and isolated, underscoring the urgent need for institutional support and systemic reform to scale up effective pedagogical practices.

Student Voices and Learning Experiences

From the learner perspective, English remains a valuable gateway to social mobility and employment opportunities. Nonetheless, many students begin tertiary education with minimal prior exposure to English, especially in vernacular-medium schooling contexts. This linguistic gap contributes to anxiety, low confidence, and hesitation in speaking English.

Students reported that classroom atmospheres often lacked encouragement for oral participation, with teacher-student interactions tending to be hierarchical and dominated by teacher talk. While students appreciated empathetic teachers, who fostered conversational and less judgmental environments, such pedagogical styles were uncommon. The prevailing exam-centric culture further inhibited communicative practice, as students prioritized memorization and correct answers over language experimentation.

Implications for Policy and Reform

This study's findings highlight the necessity for comprehensive systemic reforms to enhance rural English education in India. The establishment of teacher training centers focused on communicative pedagogy, technology integration, and reflective practice is essential for professional growth and instructional innovation. Curricular redesign should promote functional language use and incorporate locally relevant content to improve learner engagement and contextualization.

Assessment mechanisms must evolve to include oral, listening, and interactive skill evaluations that reflect authentic language use and encourage communicative teaching approaches. Significant investment in rural educational infrastructure is also critical to provide language labs, multimedia tools, and internet connectivity. Institutions need to develop supportive ecosystems that recognize and reward pedagogical creativity and foster collaboration among teachers through workshops, mentoring, and peer observation.

Conclusion

The study underscores the complex interplay among teacher cognition, structural constraints, and

classroom realities in rural Indian ELT settings. While systemic limitations perpetuate a rift between teachers' communicative ideals and entrenched exam-orientation, educators nonetheless display resilience and adaptable creativity. Narrative inquiry reveals the nuanced lived experiences shaping pedagogy and emphasizes the importance of culturally responsive, context-sensitive reforms. Addressing infrastructural, curricular, and professional development deficits is paramount to aligning rural ELT with learner needs and global communication imperatives.

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