

## An Analytical Study of English Communicative Competence Among Tribal Learners: A Case Study of Eklavya Model Residential Schools (EMRS) in Odisha

<sup>1</sup>Bijaya Kumar Sahu, <sup>2</sup>Dr. E. S. S. Narayana Trimurthy, <sup>3</sup>Dr. Priya S.

<sup>1</sup>Ph.D Scholar, Dept. Of English, Gandhi Institute of Engineering and Technology University Gunupur,

Rayagada, Odisha

<sup>2</sup>Supervisor, Associate Professor, Department of English (BSH)

Gandhi Institute of Engineering and Technology University, Gunupur, Rayagada, Odisha

<sup>3</sup>Co- Supervisor, Assistant Professor, Government College of Engineering Bhawanipatna,

Kalahandi, Odisha

### Abstract

This study analyzes the English communicative competence of tribal students in Eklavya Model Residential Schools (EMRS) across Odisha. Using a mixed-methods approach, it evaluates linguistic, sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic competencies among 400 secondary school learners. The findings reveal a significant gap between structural knowledge (grammar and vocabulary) and functional language utilization. This divergence stems from first-language (L1) interference, socio-cultural anxiety, and a systemic lack of immersive English environments. While reading and writing skills show moderate development due to exam-centric pedagogy, oral communication and listening comprehension remain severely underdeveloped. The paper concludes with actionable structural and pedagogical interventions to bridge these communication gaps.

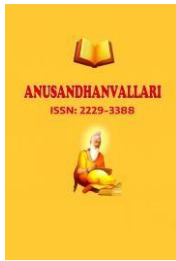
Keywords: English Communicative, tribal learners, socio linguistics, environment, first language (L1), exam centric, writing skills, EMRS

### 1. Introduction

#### 1.1 Background of the Study

English has transitioned from a colonial legacy to a vital instrument of socio-economic mobility, academic advancement, and global integration in contemporary India. However, access to quality English education remains unevenly distributed across demographic segments. Tribal populations—officially designated as Scheduled Tribes (STs) under the Indian Constitution—face profound marginalization within the mainstream educational architecture.

To bridge this educational disparity, the Ministry of Tribal Affairs, Government of India, introduced the Eklavya Model Residential School (EMRS) scheme in 1997-98. These schools aim to provide free, high-quality middle and secondary education to tribal students in remote areas. While EMRS infrastructures have expanded access to formal education, a critical curricular challenge persists: enabling first-generation tribal learners to attain functional communicative competence in English.



## 1.2 Statement of the Problem

Tribal learners entering the EMRS ecosystem navigate a complex multilingual landscape. Most speak distinct indigenous languages (such as Santhali, Ho, Saura, or Kui) at home. They encounter Odia as the regional lingua franca and are simultaneously expected to master English as a primary medium for academic and professional advancement.

Despite securing passing grades in standardized written examinations, graduating EMRS students consistently exhibit low functional proficiency in spoken and interactive English. This disconnect between structural knowledge and communicative implementation restricts their performance in higher education and limits their employment opportunities. Consequently, there is an urgent need to systematically diagnose the components of English communicative competence among these learners.

## 1.3 Research Objectives

To assess the four dimensions of English communicative competence (linguistic, sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic) among EMRS students in Odisha.

To identify the primary socio-demographic, cultural, and pedagogical barriers hindering oral and written communication proficiency.

To analyze the extent of first-language (L1) and second-language (L2) interference on English acquisition.

To propose an empirical, context-specific framework for enhancing English language teaching (ELT) within tribal residential school networks.

## 1.4 Critical Research Questions

RQ1: What are the specific performance variances across the four pillars of communicative competence among EMRS tribal learners?

RQ2: How do institutional residential factors influence the out-of-classroom language acquisition patterns of these students?

RQ3: What structural pedagogies must be implemented to transition EMRS classrooms from rote grammatical paradigms to functional, communicative language teaching?

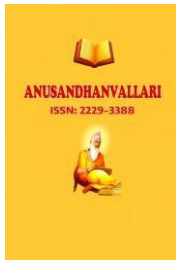
## 2. Theoretical Framework & Literature Review

### 2.1 The Canale and Swain Model of Communicative Competence

This study anchors its empirical analysis in the foundational Communicative Competence Framework established by Canale and Swain (1980), later expanded by Canale (1983). This model shifts the definition of language proficiency away from Noam Chomsky's narrow concept of linguistic competence (abstract grammatical knowledge) toward a holistic capacity for functional interaction.

The statements segregate communicative competence into four distinct, interdependent domains:

**1. Grammatical (Linguistic) Competence:** Knowledge of lexical items and rules of morphology, syntax, sentence-grammar semantics, and phonology.



## **2. Sociolinguistic Competence:**

The understanding of the social context in which language is used, including role relationships, shared information, and the communicative intent of the interaction.

## **3. Discourse Competence:**

The ability to connect sentences in stretches of discourse and to form a meaningful whole out of a series of utterances.

## **4. Strategic Competence:**

The coping strategies that communicators employ to initiate, terminate, maintain, repair, and redirect communication when it breaks down.

### **2.2 Tribal Education and the Linguistic Dilemma in Odisha**

Odisha contains a high concentration of ethnically diverse indigenous populations, featuring 62 distinct Scheduled Tribes, including 13 Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs). Research indicates that tribal education policies frequently default to subtractive bilingualism. In this scenario, the learner's indigenous mother tongue is completely displaced by institutional languages rather than serving as a cognitive scaffold.

Scholars emphasize that tribal students experience "double linguistic displacement." They shift from unwritten tribal dialects to the standardized, script-based regional language (Odia), and then attempt to learn English. This dual transition complicates standard English Language Teaching (ELT) strategies, requiring a deeply nuanced, culturally responsive pedagogy.

## **3. Research Methodology**

### **3.1 Research Design**

This study employs an explanatory sequential mixed-methods research design. Quantitative data was collected through standardized language testing instruments to establish clear baseline competence profiles. This was followed by qualitative inquiries using classroom observations and semi-structured interviews to identify the underlying socio-pedagogical reasons for the recorded scores.

### **3.2 Setting and Sample Selection**

The field research was conducted across three distinct EMRS institutions in Odisha, selected via stratified random sampling to represent different tribal dominance zones:

Institution Code

District Location

Dominant Tribal Groups in Cohort

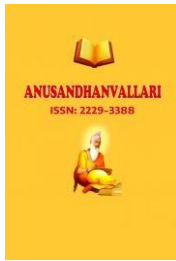
Sample Size

EMRS-A

Sundargarh

Oraon, Munda, Kisan 100

EMRS- B



Rayagada

Kondh, Saura 60

EMRS- C

Bikrampur

Kondh, Saura 60

The target sample consisted of 220 Class XI and XII students aged 15–17. Selecting students at this stage allowed for an assessment of learners who had spent a minimum of three years within the residential EMRS ecosystem. Additionally, 9 English language teachers (3 from each school) were interviewed to gather pedagogical insights.

### 3.3 Data Collection Instruments

**Communicative Competence Assessment Battery (CCAB):** A customized, four-part diagnostic test designed around the Canale and Swain framework. It included a 30-item multiple-choice test for grammatical structures, an interactive role-play scenario for sociolinguistic contextualization, a controlled paragraph-writing exercise for discourse analysis, and an oral problem-solving task to evaluate strategic communication repair.

**Classroom Observation Protocols:** A non-participatory, structured rubric utilized over 24 distinct class periods to monitor teacher-student dynamics, L1/L2/L3 distribution ratios, and student engagement patterns.

**Semi-Structured Interview Guides:** Qualitative tools used to gather insights regarding teacher training profiles, systemic pedagogical constraints, and students' subjective language anxieties

## 4. Granular Breakdown of Competence Deficits

**4.1. Grammatical Competence:** Students demonstrated a firm grasp of explicit rule mechanics, showing high accuracy in direct tense identification and vocabulary matching. However, systematic errors emerged in syntax construction and subject-verb agreement during production-heavy assessment tasks.

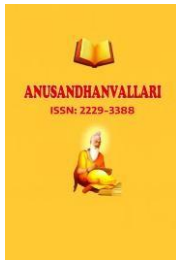
A primary driver of these errors is structural interference from the students' native languages (L1). For instance, Munda and Santhali languages feature distinct word-order patterns and lacks the specific gender-inflected pronominal systems found in English. This structural mismatch led to frequent pronoun reversals (e.g., using "he" for female referents) and tense errors in students' open-ended writing.

**4.2. Sociolinguistic Competence:** The sociolinguistic assessments evaluated how effectively students adjusted their register, politeness levels, and stylistic choices across different social contexts. Students struggled to distinguish between formal academic registers and informal conversational settings.

In role-play tests requiring interactions with authority figures, such as bank managers or physicians, 72% of the participants used overly informal phrases or direct imperatives like "Give me form" instead of polite modal requests like "Could you please provide the form?" This challenge stems from a lack of exposure to diverse sociolinguistic contexts within rural residential school environments.

### 4.3 Discourse Competence

The discourse evaluation measured structural cohesion and logical coherence in written text. While students could construct independent, grammatically isolated sentences, they struggled to link those sentences into coherent paragraphs.



The misuse or omission of logical connectors (such as furthermore, consequently, or conversely) resulted in fragmented, repetitive writing. Structural analysis of student essays revealed that ideas were often organized according to the rhetorical patterns of Odia narrative structures. This cross-linguistic interference led to circular arguments and redundant phrasing in their English writing.

#### **4.4 Strategic Competence**

Strategic competence recorded the lowest overall scores across the cohort. When faced with an unfamiliar English word or a breakdown in understanding during interactive tasks, students rarely used compensatory strategies like paraphrasing, circumlocution, or structural modification.

Instead, 68% of the assessed students chose to completely disengage or remain silent. This high rate of non-performance points to severe language anxiety. It also highlights a lack of explicit instruction in communication repair strategies, which are essential for navigating real-world English environments.

### **5. Qualitative Findings and Pedagogical Analysis**

#### **5.1 The Structural Limitations of Classroom Instruction**

Classroom observations across the four EMRS locations revealed an entrenched reliance on the traditional Grammar-Translation Method (GTM). English lessons are frequently conducted as teacher-centered lectures, with teachers spending up to 75% of class time talking. Instructors often read directly from textbooks and translate passages word-for-word into Odia or a dominant local tribal language.

This pedagogical approach treats English as a static subject to be memorized for written examinations, rather than a dynamic system for live communication. Students rarely have opportunities to practice authentic, peer-to-peer verbal interaction. As a result, they develop passive reading comprehension skills while their active speaking and listening abilities remain underdeveloped.

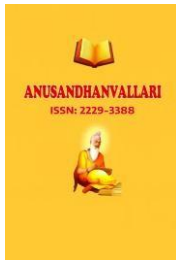
#### **5.2 Teacher Profiles, Training Gaps, and Socio-Cultural Realities**

Interviews with EMRS English educators revealed that few teachers hold a Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.) degree, less than 13% have received specialized training in English Language Teaching (ELT) or communicative methodologies for multilingual classrooms. Teachers reported feeling constrained by rigid, exam-driven schedules that prioritize completing dense literature syllabi over developing functional language skills.

Additionally, the residential nature of EMRS institutions presents unique social challenges. While these schools provide a safe environment that shields students from external economic pressures, they can also function as linguistic silos. Outside of formal class hours, students speak their native tribal languages or regional Odia dialects in the dormitories and dining halls. The lack of a structured, supportive English-speaking environment outside the classroom limits opportunities for natural language acquisition.

#### **5.3 Psychological Barriers: The Impact of Language Anxiety**

Qualitative interviews with students highlighted a profound level of foreign language anxiety, which directly hinders communicative performance. Tribal learners frequently reported feeling a "triple alienation." They expressed fear of making grammatical errors, anxiety about being mocked by peers, and a deeper cultural concern that adopting English styles might alienate them from their community identities. This psychological stress triggers an emotional barrier that causes students to shut down during unexpected verbal interactions, which explains the low strategic competence scores recorded in the quantitative assessments.



## 6. Discussion and Synthesized Model

### 6.1 Rethinking the Communicative Mismatch

The empirical findings of this study demonstrate a clear mismatch within the EMRS educational system. The system relies on a traditional curriculum that prioritizes grammatical form, yet students need functional, real-world communicative abilities.

The high mean score in grammatical knowledge proves that tribal students possess the cognitive capacity to master complex linguistic rules. Their lower scores in sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic competencies are not due to learning deficiencies, but are direct results of an unsupportive instructional environment.

To address these gaps, the EMRS language curriculum must transition from an input-only model to an interactive, output-oriented framework. This evolution requires moving away from rigid grammatical instruction and toward a balanced approach that nurtures all four dimensions of communicative competence.

## 7. Recommendations and Actionable Interventions

To systematically improve the English communicative competence of tribal learners within the EMRS framework in Odisha, this study proposes a series of targeted structural, pedagogical, and policy interventions.

### 7.1 Curricular and Pedagogical Restructuring

**Transition to Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT):** Replace traditional teacher-centered lectures with interactive, task-based learning. Classrooms should prioritize pair work, role-plays, and group problem-solving activities derived from real-world scenarios.

**Integrate Culture into the ELT Curriculum:** Incorporate tribal folklore, indigenous histories, and local narratives into English reading and writing assignments. Using familiar cultural contexts reduces cognitive load and mitigates identity alienation, allowing students to focus on mastering English structures.

**Incorporate Strategic Training:** Explicitly teach communication repair strategies. Students should learn how to use circumlocution, paraphrasing, and contextual guessing to help them navigate vocabulary gaps without shutting down.

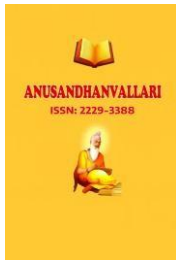
### 7.2 Institutional and Environmental Enhancements

**Establish Immersive Language Spaces:** Create low-stakes English environments outside the classroom, such as English Drama Clubs, Debating Societies, or Interactive Media Labs. Designated "Communicative Zones" within residential campuses can encourage voluntary English use without the fear of academic grading.

**Deploy Digital Language Laboratories:** Equipped language labs with interactive audio-visual software to provide automated pronunciation support, listening comprehension exercises, and individualized speaking practice.

### 7.3 Teacher Capacity Building

**Implement Continuous Professional Development:** Collaborate with specialized institutions like the English and Foreign Languages University (EFLU) or the Regional Institute of English (RIE) to provide EMRS teachers with targeted training in communicative language methodologies.



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Promote Multilingual Awareness Training: Train teachers to understand the basic structural differences between local tribal languages and English. This knowledge allows instructors to anticipate and constructively address specific L1 grammatical interference errors.

## **8. Conclusion**

Achieving true English communicative competence within Eklavya Model Residential Schools in Odisha is essential for promoting educational equity and socio-economic empowerment among tribal youth. This study highlights a critical gap: students can memorize abstract grammatical rules for written exams, but they struggle to use English effectively in real-world, dynamic interactions.

To bridge this divide, educational policy must evolve beyond a focus on simple school access and address the nuances of language pedagogy. By adopting communicative language teaching methodologies, introducing culturally relevant curricula, and establishing supportive, low-stakes language environments, EMRS institutions can empower tribal learners to become confident, globally competent communicators.

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