

Attitudinal Gaps in Secondary School English Language Teaching in Chennai: Teachers, Students, Parents Perspectives

¹J. Moses, ²Dr. M. Lawrence

¹Research Scholar, Postgraduate & Research Department of English, The American College (Affiliated to Madurai Kamaraj University) Madurai, Tamil Nadu, India

²Associate Professor, Postgraduates & Research Department of English, The American College, Madurai (Affiliated to Madurai Kamaraj University) Tamil Nadu, India

Abstract

The present study investigated differences in attitudes toward English Language Teaching (ELT) among secondary school teachers, students, and parents in Chennai. Although all groups value English for education, employment and social mobility their expectations diverge. Using an interpretive qualitative approach, the study draws on in-depth interviews with 14 teachers, 17 students from Grades 9 to 10 and 9 parents. Thematic analysis reveals a systemic misalignment among teachers, students, and parents. These gaps reinforce rote learning rather than communicative competence. The study recommends time-efficient communicative methods, low-anxiety peer interaction activities, and parent orientation programs clarifying the distinction between marks and proficiency.

Keywords: Attitude; Education; Chennai; ELT; Communicative Competence.

Introduction

The Chennai city is one of the largest corporate and Information Technology centre in India determines high hope of the English Language Teaching (ELT) among its residents (Shakthi, 2024). Even in these situation schools often fail to foster a clear vision for language learning, as stakeholders' attitudes shift dynamically with situational demands. Attitude is 'a relatively enduring organization of beliefs around which evaluations are made (Schwarz & Bohner, 2001). In most Indian schools, attitude is the main reason given for the focus on developing fluency in the language and teaching methods of the students. Teachers are supposed to focus only on syllabus coverage and written testing at the expense of their communicative competence, because of high numbers, lack of resources and as mandated by their institutions (Christ & Makarani, 2009). Communicative competence is hindered by a colonial reflex response to testing. Despite the promise of better work and greater social mobility in an Indian context owing to English use actual enabling features are lacking (Sayer, 2018).

In the condition, learners use English in an instrumental manner as a high-stakes requirement and prefer rote learning as a result of anxiety, peer pressure, language learning stalls and teacher dominated practices (Al Moghani, 2003). Hence, they may attain passable grades without learning how to use English for real communication. Similarly, parents consider mastery of grade-granting test passing criteria as equal to mastery of the language itself and regard English as a gate-way to economic and social mobility, and a solution for transition problems. Considered together, these contrasting views lead to a triadic mismatch among the teacher, learners and parents, entrenched rote learning. Overcoming the triadic mismatch is a fundamental step for successful ELT in Chennai.

Objectives And Research Questions

This study pursues four focused objectives to illuminate triadic dynamics such as (1) To explore teachers' attitudes toward English teaching practices and evaluation. (2) To examine learners' perceptions of English learning goals, challenges and preferences. (3) To investigate parents' beliefs about the role and outcomes of

English education for their children. (4) To identify attitudinal gaps among teachers, learners, and parents that influence ELT effectiveness. The following research questions will be the foundation for present study,

1. **RQ1:** What attitudes do teachers hold toward English teaching practices and evaluation?
2. **RQ2:** What are learners' perceptions of English learning goals, challenges, and preferences?
3. **RQ3:** What beliefs do parents hold about the role and outcomes of English education?
4. **RQ4:** How do these triadic attitudes impact communicative proficiency?

Problem Statement And Research Gap

Attitudinal differences of teachers, students and parents lead to ineffective ELT in Chennai secondary schools as they ponder over rote memorizing rather than communicative competence, making ELT an economically important, yet significant task. Existing research displayed gaps such as (Sekar, 2025) pointed that the differences among stakeholders in Tamil Nadu English Studies still the focus is only on the broad areas of teaching and evaluation rather than on the development of communicative skills, also missing the nationwide scenario. The prevailing study (Khairnar & Padmavat, 2024) identified the barriers faced by Maharashtra tribal learners in acquiring the language but do not take into account the parent-teacher perspectives, thereby failing to consider the familial impact on the interventions. The present study addresses these gaps by focusing on methods of Indian teachers, students and parents both collectively and individually. The study aspects mainly at the differences in attitudes towards communicative proficiency, which is the practical skill most strongly linked to employability and social mobility.

Literature Review And Conceptual Framework

The existing study (Sekar, 2025) found Tamil Nadu teachers inclined towards communicative, learner-centred approaches, oral testing while neglecting students who failed to grasp theoretical ideas. Students believed in classroom discussion for future, yet for ingrained mismatches, teachers emphasized cultural awareness, parents' employability and all shifted blame to authoritarian tests ignoring students' appeals. The prevailing study (Ramamoorthy & Mishra, 2025) depicted English as social liberation for Tamil Nadu teachers and parents, wherein upward mobility and hierarchy-breaking outweighed caste inequalities, which jeopardized Dalits' upliftment. While diverse pressures existed in the high-pressure classroom, (Akram, 2024) noted Algerian teachers favour early, slight exposure to foster trickling-down, gradual, deep learning, in contrast to surface learning driven by rote exams. Observing international teachers' proactive teamwork for attitudinal change and professional growth towards diverse learners, (Balogun, 2025) showed an inexorable search for solutions lingering in spite of system shortcomings. While observing at disadvantages (Khairnar & Padmavat, 2024) found 72% curriculum failure due to mother tongue influence, lack of lexical items, illiterate 68% parents, material scarcity and suggested a bilingual spoken approach.

Ajzen's Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) (1991) is a great companion for explaining stakeholders' attitudes as predictors of their behavioural intentions toward ELT practices (Mei, Brown, & Teo, 2018). According to TPB, attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control determine and explain actions like adopting communicative pedagogies and prioritizing English learning outcomes. Teachers' positive attitudes toward interactive evaluation predict implementation despite resource constraints. The learners' proficiency preferences mirror career norms and parents emphasize employability through instrumental attitudes. Attitudinal mismatch surfaces when the different components of TPB become out of sync among the triad, such as teachers' pedagogical optimism contrasting with parental exam-orientation, thereby directly affecting ELT effectiveness.

Method

In order to obtain detailed viewpoints of teachers, learners and parents, an interpretive qualitative research design was used.

Semi-structured interviews provide the researchers with the opportunity to be flexible (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021).

Instruments

Interviews

Secondary school ELT stakeholders across Chennai, formed the population for this study. The sample comprises 14 teachers have been selected purposively with a minimum of 10 years of teaching experience in order to have more knowledgeable perspectives on classroom practice and assessment. 17 learners from Grades 9 and 10 with different levels of English proficiency to cover a variety of learning experiences and 9 parents were recruited through the selected learners to represent different socioeconomic backgrounds such that parental beliefs and expectations can be contrasted across social contexts. In total, the study comprises 40 participants, where sampling is based on saturation. Purposive sampling method was decided since the research aimed at collecting the experienced perspectives of teachers, students and school-parents across different social contexts and purposive sampling allows for the obtaining of comprehensive, pertinent and diverse viewpoints which could be lacking in random sampling.

Data collection and ethics

Semi-structured interviews were used as the main method for collecting data, providing an in-depth insight into both the field of study and individual experiences, while remaining focused on the scope of the study. Interviews were conducted according to respondents' choice of language, in the online Zoom platform. The interviews were audio-recorded with written permission via email on secure flash drives where translation was required, the audio were transcribed by Wordly AI application. Ethical integrity was assured with criterion-based sampling, including signs of agreement from respondents, voluntary participation and withdrawal clauses, and confidentiality, anonymity and security of data. Individual anonymity was maintained throughout the processes.

Data analysis

A thematic analysis was used to analyse the qualitative interview data in accordance with (Braun & Clarke, 2006) six-phase approach to coding qualitative data. Transcripts were analysed inductively, with initial codes being developed through close examination of the data for patterns of attitudes and perceptions and empirically oriented gap analysis. The initial codes were identified as themes and were checked as to 'fit' with all stakeholder groups. Member checking was conducted with some of the participants to prevent researcher bias. Through coding of the qualitative data sources, this analysis highlighted the ways that the discrepancies in attitudes among these groups influenced ELT effectiveness.

Results

Teachers' Views

Theme	Respondent	Quote
Syllabus Pressure	T4	"I know speaking is important, but if I spend too much time on oral work, I will not finish the lessons."
Exam Priority	T7	"Students need practice, but in our system written marks matter more than conversation."
Textbook Coverage	T2	"We are expected to complete the textbook and prepare them for exams, so communication

		becomes secondary."
Time Constraints	T9	"Even when I try activities, many students hesitate, and I have only one period to cover too much content."

Table 1. Teacher Participants responses

According to Table 1 the teacher group indicated how they prefer the exam-oriented teaching rather than the communicative approach. They highlight the importance of writing considering it the dominant activity based on the formal system. The written exams are the main factor for planning classes and communicating is downgraded by not being emphasized in the syllabus and inside the books, their plan of the language classroom. The teachers are concrete to the curricula in order to have well-prepared exams and do not care up the communication by considering it an interruption or just a waste of time. The communicative approach is disconnected in the classroom, time and the exam schedule do not allow speaking activities. The long-term exam focus encourages student anxiety over spontaneous spoken performance based upon passive, writing-directions and conditioned learning. Teachers succumb to systemic standards by not addressing this anxiety through sequential practice but performing the expected routines. Teacher attitude permeating the themes serve to maintain a rung in the ladder of the dominant Triadic-Gap induced search for exam tasks as the bit that overpowers spoken language in Chennai ELT.

Learners' Views

Theme	Respondent	Quote
Exam Focus	L5	"I learn English to get marks. Speaking is not needed in the exam."
Safe Memorization	L9	"We memorize answers because that is the safest way to pass."
Speaking Anxiety	L12	"I want to speak, but I feel nervous. If I make mistakes, others laugh."
Writing vs Speaking Gap	L7	"We can write the answer, but we cannot talk in English."

Table 2. Student Participants Responses

Table 2 shows the students realize the instrument of studying English as test hinder than instant communication media, redirecting their learning towards having a high score, that is, passive memorization. They prefer the formal examination not spoken part, so they leave the learning and treat it as a written subject to gain survival grades rather than usage practicality. Though they regard the speaking as later to be their future job skill, their priority is still on writing and mastering translation by rote and teacher's instruction. This establishes psychological barriers such as passive structures were better than active oral production, producing disconnected utterances and lack of confidence. The fear of errors, laughter and failure bogs down unprepared talk and prevents the enthusiasm. The identity to say nothing and to imitate learned phrases in an oral awarded context shows the unanimity of similar themes revealing twice-narrowed triadic distance.

Parents' Views

Theme	Respondent	Quote
Marks equals Proficiency	P3	"If my child gets good marks in English, then I know the child is good in English."
Social Mobility	P6	"English is the language of success. We want our children to do well in it, especially in school results."
Future Opportunities	P1	"We cannot follow the classroom method, but we believe English will help our children get better opportunities."
Marks Priority	P7	"Speaking is good, but marks are what matter in the end."

Table 3. Parent Participants Responses

The Table 3 presented that parents view their child's progress in English according to report card grades, but not relating to actual communicative competence, since they only have limited mastery of the language. Report cards are the sole indication of progress, since parents question what language competence truly entails, they often equate high grades with actual mastery rather than genuine speaking ability. Since the desire for upward social mobility through social mobility in the community, English language proficiency is seen as a key tool in attaining one's professional goals. The parents do not understand the importance of pedagogy, and support the child's efforts for higher mark since they do not know how to promote the actual conversation. Such reliable system naturally perpetuates a vicious circle as parents rely only on marks of the exam, ignoring oral aspects, which are beyond their reach. Although parents recognized the importance of speaking tasks, they could not ignore numerical marks that could determine their child's future in school and job. Standardization of the voice in all themes supports the idea of this grade driven perspective, providing considerable evidence parents' detachment perpetuating triadic lacunae and diluting oral activity in the Chennai ELT.

Triadic Gaps

Theme	Teachers	Learners	Parents
English Importance	T1: "English opens corporate jobs in IT parks"	L2: "English needed for engineering college admission"	P5: "English gives social status in marriage market"
Speaking Priority	T4: "Speaking practice secondary to syllabus completion"	L5: "Speaking marks don't come in quarterly exams"	P7: "Speaking nice, but 95% marks secure future"
Responsibility	T11: "State board exam pattern controls my teaching"	L12: "Classmates laugh when I make pronunciation errors"	P1: "Trust teachers, judge by percentage marks only"
Accountability	T6: "Principal checks syllabus completion monthly"	L14: "Safe to copy answers, risky to speak wrongly"	P9: "Can't speak English myself, trust the system"

Table 4. Triadic Responses

Table 4 exposed clear misalignments among teachers, students, and parents despite shared recognition of English's value for education, jobs and mobility. Teachers emphasize syllabus completion and exams, students prioritize low-risk passing via memorization and parents gauge success through grades as progress proof. Communicative purpose is sidelined across groups. This perpetuates a rote-learning cycle as teachers limit speaking due to time, class size and board pressures. Students avoid orals from mistake fears and peer judgment, favouring writing and translation. Parents assume high marks equal fluency. Priorities converge on exams but diverge from functional use, binding English to scores over communication. Addressing this requires shifting understandings beyond classroom fixes. Consistency across these themes empirically confirms hypothesized gaps obstructing communicative proficiency in Chennai ELT.

Discussion

The present results indicate that teaching English language in the chosen Indian scenarios has been greatly influenced by examination culture, meanwhile communicative proficiency is hardly given any priority in actual teaching. The prevailing study (Sekar, 2025) is in line with the present study since the results also revealed that teachers in principle favoured student-centred and communicative approach ideas, but external factors practically forced them to revert to syllabus completion and conventional testing. Our study also showed teachers' inclination towards speaking skill however the influence of board examination and lack of time relegated communication to a secondary level.

Building upon the narrative presented by (Ramamoorthy & Mishra, 2025) also aligns with the present study results to some extent because both study's view English as a means for social mobility and the opening up of freedoms, especially in situations of inequality. In existing study teachers' learners and parents were all identifying English with chances and status. However, the way they believed that it can be done was different. The present study therefore drives a step further than the existing study by illustrating that English as a means of liberation alone is not sufficient for communicative learning to take place unless the attitudes of the stakeholders are harmonized.

Challenging the optimistic outlook of (Akram, 2024) that revealed teachers' overall favourableness towards introducing English early. On the contrary, the present findings revealed that even when teachers were positive about communication, their work was very much limited by syllabus load, class size and examination pressure. The present study do not negate the importance of early English teaching. However, it points out that a positive teacher attitude alone is insufficient when the structural constraints are really strong. Therefore, the current results make the depiction of the existing study more complex by revealing the gap between belief and practice.

Resonating deeply with the concerns raised by (Khairnar & Padmavat, 2024) as both studies indicate the student disadvantage associated with language barriers, weak resources, and limited oral exposure. The present study participants especially those from marginalized and lower socioeconomic backgrounds, also identified English speaking as their major issue and lack of supportive practice environments. Therefore, by allowing learners to become bilingual, providing them oral fluency, and making resources available, can only result in learners moving away from a surface-level achievement.

Implication

This study urges ELT reforms in India such as equip teachers with time-efficient micro-communicative techniques fitting syllabus constraints. By launch parent programs emphasizing home-school links beyond grades and accelerate NEP 2020's balanced, skill-based assessments. True communicative transformation demands aligning teachers, learners, and parents psychological and systemic goals.

Limitations And Directions For Future Research

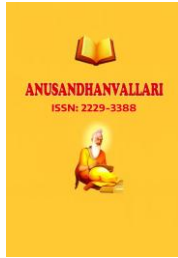
This study has its limitations while recognizing its merits. At first, the study depends on a very limited, purposive sample of only 40 participants taken from Chennai secondary school stakeholders. Since India is very diverse in terms of language, culture, and socio-economic aspects, the qualitative findings provide a profound contextual insight rather than statistical generalizability to the whole country. Also besides just interpreting the qualitative data, the outcomes are limited to the participants' reported attitudes at the time of the study and do not include a longitudinal perspective that would allow to understand how these triadic gaps change over time.

Conclusion

This interpretive qualitative study revealed each group understood that English is a very important tool for changing one's social position. The main problem is the very large difference between the common demand to be fluent in English and the realities of local exam-driven expectation. Since this difference is a structural one, it responds well to appropriate action. Teachers can be provided with time-saving communicative techniques that incorporate the use of oral tasks in very busy schedules and coupled together with oral interaction assessment will help with the students. Students' anxiety of getting judged will be overcome by engaging in very low stress, peer group discussions which will expose them to the spoken mode of the language. On the other hand, parents can be reached via orientation discussion sessions where a clear distinction between school scoring and real-life communication is explained. Targeted suggestions include teacher training in efficient oral methods, peer activities to ease anxiety, and parent workshops distinguishing scores from fluency, aligning with NEP 2020 and Tamil Nadu's Naan Mudhalvan reforms. Future quantitative study's across urban-rural Chennai divides could test interventions for scalable impact.

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