How Engineers Communicate: A Task-Based English Language Pedagogy for Multilingual Undergraduate Classrooms

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Abstract

This paper explores the role of Task-Based Language Learning in English language teaching to first-year B.Tech students of Chandigarh Engineering College, CGC, Landran (Mohali, Punjab, India). In the context of a linguistically and culturally plural classroom, the action-researcher employs systematic reflection and observation to analyse how interactive, engaging tasks can contribute to the communicative competence of the students in a technical education setting. The assignments are crafted to complement CASEL's (2023) five Social-Emotional Learning (Comer, 1998; Goleman, 1996) core competencies of self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making, which recognise the increasing imperative to tackle the emotional well-being and interpersonal development of students in high-stress academic environments such as engineering education. In drawing on the English for Specific Purposes (ESP) model (Dudley-Evans & St. John, 1998), activities are directed towards context-sensitive communication skills relevant to forthcoming engineers, including collaborative discussion, persuasive speech, reflective writing, and empathetic conversation, all set within authentic and professional contexts. The paper contends that task-based pedagogy, when combined with emotional literacy and intentional reflection, develops language skills and confidence, and critical thinking.

Keywords: Task-based language teaching, communicative language teaching, language across curriculum, multilingual classrooms, STEM education

Introduction

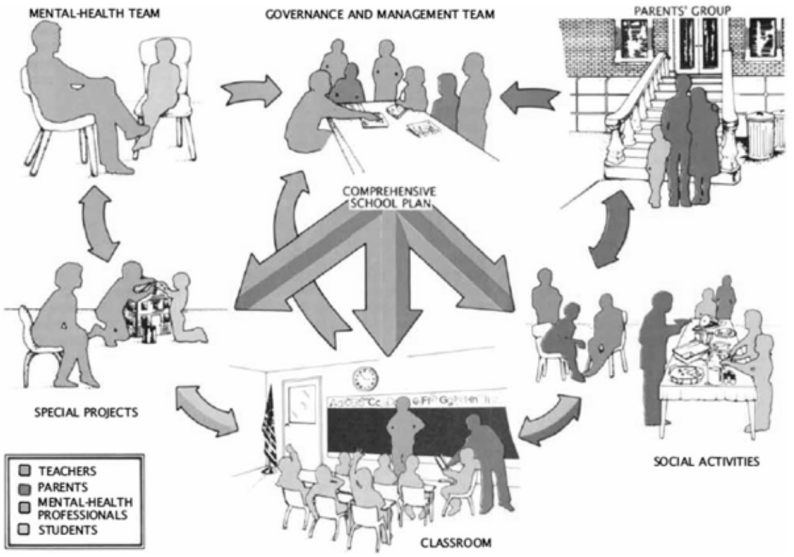
English Language Teaching (ELT) in the Indian technical education scenario is turning into a multilingual, multicultural, and difficult environment. For freshman engineering students, communicative English is not just a course requirement but a survival skill, one necessary for academic success, group work with peers, internships, and future workplace integration. However, pedagogy in engineering schools still tends to be textbook and grammar-oriented, not reflective of the real language demands of students who are actively building complicated, multilingual identities, and futures. Pedagogies are urgently needed that not only develop linguistic ability but also social consciousness, self-confidence, and ethical commitment in students. Engineering college students have a busy 6-hour daily schedule, with theories and practical courses taking center stage. Although the curriculum aims at all-round growth, students push themselves in a highly competitive environment. Several lamented that there were no chances to pursue skills-based learning. In this regard, ELT activities promoting communication, personality, and life skills—such as empathy, discipline, and teamwork—provide learners with a unique environment for emotional and expressive development

This paper addresses the demand in an action-oriented, classroom-based investigation of Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) as a substantial and compassionate alternative to the rote acquisition of language. TBLT is an approach to teaching and learning that focuses learning on "what learners are able to do with the language" (Norris, 2009). In any scenario, the teacher must be well-prepared for the activities, they must motivate the students to participate, guide them, moderate their proceedings, and, in culmination, give constructive feedback for the same. Michael Long (2014) further clarifies that TBLT begins with a close analysis of learners' target tasks, the real-world communicative functions they must perform in the second language.

Although there is a strong body of international research underpinning TBLT and English for Specific Purposes (ESP), their actual use in engineering classrooms in India, is limited, dispersed, or superficial. While national policy statements on education may advocate communicative or competency-based learning, classroom existence remains very much controlled by dogmatic grammar instruction and disjointed, exam-based content. In addition, the emotional and psychological dimensions of

language acquisition, particularly in very stressful technical institutions, are largely neglected. Models are mostly not combined with social-emotional learning, reflection by teachers, and contextualisation in everyday life. Social-Emotional Learning (SEL), pioneered by James Comer, believes that the inability to connect a child's home and school life is a basic cause of underachievement. Comer's model focuses on the fact that children from non-mainstream families tend to enter school having not learned the social strategies required for success, including negotiation and compromise. The research fills that important void by integrating TBLT, SEL, and ESP in a working, classroom-proven format designed to enable learners linguistically, emotionally, and socially (Comer, 1988).

Figure 1. *SEL Framework by James Comer (as cited in Comer, 1988)*



SCHEMATIC of the school-intervention program shows its key components and the relations among them. A governance and management team, consisting of the principal, parents, teachers and a mental-health worker, develops a comprehensive school plan covering academics, social activities and special programs, such as a Discovery Room for children who have lost interest in learning. Social activities, such as potluck suppers, teach children social skills and enable parents to meet teachers. Some parents become teachers' aides. The mental-health team assigns a member to work with a child who is having difficulty. It also tries to prevent behavior problems by recommending changes in school procedures. By reducing behavior problems and improving relations with parents, the program creates a school climate conducive to learning.

This image has been taken from the journal article published by James Comer in *Scientific American* in 1988. The engineering classroom, especially in a linguistically heterogeneous institution such as Chandigarh Engineering College, CGC Landran, is a locus of deep communicative promise and, often, severe apprehension. Students

typically hail from Tier-2 and Tier-3 areas, along with a mix of first languages and different levels of exposure to English. For most, English is a third language following their mother tongue and Hindi. The pressures of sounding *professional* or *fluent* are high, and conventional approaches rarely consider the affective aspects of language acquisition, so the research links classroom assignments with the CASEL model (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning), which recognises five core competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. SEL benefits from the "school-family-community partnerships to establish learning environments and experiences" focusing on collaboration in the classrooms and holistic learning (*What is the Casel Framework?*, 2023). This approach is quite similar to what Daniel Goleman proposes in his work *Emotional Intelligence*. He has proposed five domains of Emotional Intelligence (Goleman, 1996):

1. Knowing one's emotions
2. Managing emotions
3. Motivating oneself
4. Recognising emotions in others
5. Handling relationships

Figure 2. *SEL Framework by CASEL*

This image has been taken from the website of CASEL SEL, as published in 2023. This focus on emotional and ethical literacy is particularly needed in high-stress areas such as engineering, where students may not find time for personal expression, reflection, or cooperation. As Norris (2009) indicates, successful language tasks engage not just cognitive processes but emotional ones as well. Learning through doing, particularly when activities reflect actual difficulties, provides room for critical thought, compassion, and participation. The teacher's pedagogical role in such a system is also important. While Van den Branden (2016) contends that teacher preparation, scaffolding, and feedback are still the core even in learner-centred models such as TBLT, Ronald Fergusson's "7 Cs of expert teaching"—Care, Control, Clarify, Challenge, Captivate, Confer, and Consolidate—provide a useful rubric for grasping the holistic role of the educator (Fergusson, 2012). In this research, the teacher does not vanish in a student-centred classroom but instead acts as a facilitator, motivator, and emotional anchor, supporting students to tackle not just the language but their own self-doubt and socio-emotional development.

Methodologically, this paper uses the Action Research paradigm (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988), where the researcher is situated within the classroom, iteratively planning, enacting, observing, and reflecting on pedagogical interventions. This is not an observational study in isolation, but a participatory, classroom-based inquiry. The practices were taken from lived classroom life, modified over time, and examined using structured reflection and student feedback. The aim is to develop a classroom which is not only linguistically enriched but also emotionally nourishing and professionally pertinent. Last but not least, this research is based on the English for Specific Purposes (ESP) tradition (Dudley-Evans & St. John, 1998), which highlights context-specific language teaching. According to Dudley-Evans and St. John (1998), "all ESP teaching should reflect the methodology of the disciplines and professions it serves". The tasks are specifically designed for engineering students: presenting business ideas, deciding ethical dilemmas, critically reacting to social disputes, and developing interpersonal skills, all under the context of English communication. In what ensues, the paper introduces eight classroom-tried tasks, each addressed to a learning goal and preceded by an analysis of student outcomes as observed.

Method

Research Design

This research uses an Action Research approach (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988), tailored for teachers to research and enhance their practice in the immediacy of classroom settings. As a teacher and researcher, I designed, implemented, observed, and reflected on task-based learning interventions within a multilingual engineering classroom across a single semester. The study was qualitative and exploratory in approach, with foundations rooted in the principles of TBLT, ESP, and SEL. The activities were focused on contextual and meaningful language use, peer interaction, and problem-solving. Reflection was a core component of the research cycle. Data collection was interpretive and informal. Each class/activity lasted 45-50 minutes. The key focus was on communicative growth as well as participation.

Participants

The respondents in this study were first-year undergraduate students of engineering, who were in the age group of 17-19 years, pursuing Computer Science Engineering (CSE), Information Technology (IT), and Data Science (CSE-DS) courses at Chandigarh Engineering College, CGC Landran (Punjab, India). The in-class cohort was a linguistically heterogeneous group consisting of learners from different socio-economic, regional, and cultural backgrounds. The majority of students were multilingual, and English was usually their third language (L3) following their first language and Hindi. They had studied under various boards, CBSE, ICSE, and state boards, with the medium of instruction switching between English and Hindi. Each class consisted of 60-70 students, with a majority of male students.

Pedagogical Interventions: Task-Based Activity Designs

The essence of the intervention was eight task-based activities, thematically clustered and matched with the TBLT cycle (Pre-task → During-task → Post-task), SEL objectives (through CASEL framework), and ESP guidelines (technical, collaborative, and career-oriented communication). All tasks were performed during routine classroom lessons, modified in real time according to students' responses. Each activity includes a SWBAT (Students Will Be Able To) statement that elaborates on the specific observational objective of the activity. The activities undertaken have been described below.

Cluster A: Communication and Collaboration

1. **Shark Tank**

   Objective (Students Will Be Able To: SWBAT): Use persuasive language and teamwork to pitch technical ideas.

   ESP Focus: Business communication, pitch development

   SEL Competencies: Relationship-building, decision-making

   Pre-task: Students watched clips from *Shark Tank India* and discussed elements of successful pitches. Groups brainstormed startup ideas based on real-world problems.

   During-task: Teams pitched their ideas to a peer panel acting as "investors," who asked follow-up questions and negotiated offers. Ideas ranged from sustainable tech to an AI-powered communication platform.

   Post-task: Class discussion focused on persuasive strategies, team dynamics, and feedback. Many introverted students emerged as strong contributors.

This task resulted in the students not only figuring their passions but also bringing in innovative and highly novel ideas like an app that would produce music from data patterns. While their methodology and implementation faltered, given their basic understanding of the industry as of now, their ideas were unwaveringly unique and incredible. Students practised persuasive speech and technical vocabulary in their pitches (ESP), while negotiating with peers sharpened their audience-centred communication. The task also fostered SEL growth in collaboration and confidence, particularly as quieter students assumed visible leadership roles.

2. **Apocalypse**

   Objective: Engage in ethical debate and justify prioritisation in crisis.

   ESP Focus: Societal roles, group negotiation

   SEL Competencies: Social awareness, ethical reasoning

   Pre-task: Students were introduced to a survival scenario and assigned roles (doctors, educators, engineers, women and children, etc.).

   During-task: Each group argued why they should receive shelter priority, where resources may be listed or detailed, as per the choice of the teacher/trainer/facilitator. A separate committee judged responses.

   Post-task: Discussions centred on fairness, empathy, and rational decision-making. Many students proposed inclusive or unexpected solutions.

One of the foremost insights of this task was how students presented themselves as leaders and critical beings. The classroom execution of the

activity involved a twist, where the committee who was to decide the final judgement involved one member from each community. Personally, the members I chose for the final committee were the troublemakers of the class, who showcased intense power and responsibility while deciding on the verdict. It was an invigorating and surprising experience to see the change in their demeanour and for them to make the judgements in a just and successful manner. Learners used argumentation strategies to justify their roles in English (ESP), demonstrating improved fluency in ethical debate. The need to balance fairness and self-interest cultivated SEL competencies in empathy, social awareness, and responsible decision-making.

Cluster B: Critical and Creative Thinking

3. **Reflection Task**

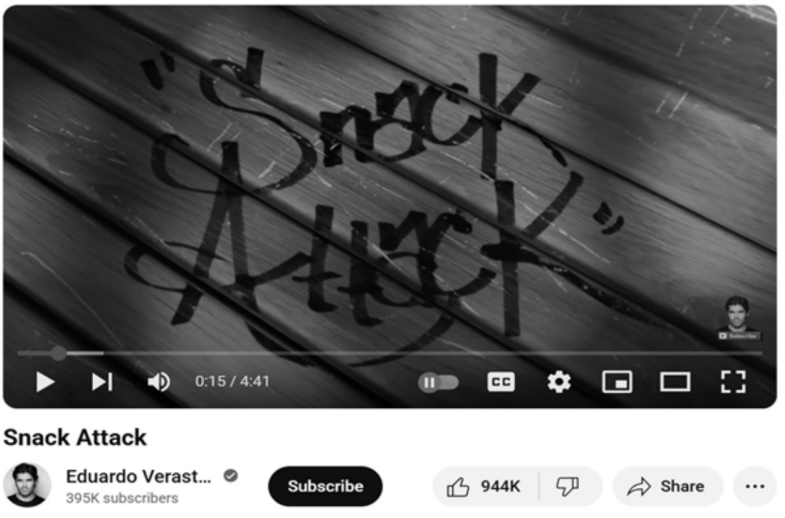
   Objective: Critically analyse texts and apply emotional insight.

   ESP Focus: Analytical reasoning, theme-based vocabulary

   SEL Competencies: Self-awareness, empathy

   Pre-task: Students viewed short, animated films (e.g., *Snack Attack*) and read a poem on regret and reflection attributed to Jorge Luis Borges (Words, 2014).

Figure 3. *Snack Attack Short Film*



   During-task: Collaborative mind maps helped uncover thematic elements like stress, empathy, and inner growth.

Post-task: Students shared personal connections to the material and discussed real-life applications of the themes.

It must be noted here that written tasks should only be undertaken as a post-task evaluation, if the class has an average English expertise. One of the classes where this activity was conducted the written reflections did not yield any particular results because the students were unable to put their thoughts to words efficiently and effectively. To solve this problem, a verbal discussion was undertaken to understand their ides and reflections. Both, verbal and written reflections worked well in this activity, depending on the students. Students engaged with thematic vocabulary and analytical reasoning through discussion of texts and films (ESP), developing the ability to link abstract ideas to personal narratives. The activity promoted SEL outcomes in self-awareness and empathy, as learners reflected on their own emotions and those of others.

4. **Absurd Questions**

   Objective: Use imagination to explore hypothetical scenarios.

   ESP Focus: Speculative discourse, modal verbs

   SEL Competencies: Perspective-taking

   Pre-task: Teacher posed absurd hypotheticals (e.g., "What if AI ruled humans?", "What if you woke up tomorrow and women ruled the world?", "What if you lived in a warzone and were deployed on the frontiers?").

   During-task: Students discussed ethical, political, and social consequences in groups, generating sub-questions.

   Post-task: Each group summarised their position; a reflective discussion followed.

The activity was extremely successful, it not only helped them break the monotony of the classroom, but also helped them expand their horizons. Their ideas and thoughts brought interesting experiences which were charged with the power and the capabilities of the youth. This activity expanded learners' use of modal verbs and speculative discourse (ESP), encouraging them to hypothesise and argue beyond rote language use. SEL competencies in perspective-taking and creativity emerged as students imagined alternative realities and considered ethical implications.

5. **CCC—Conflicts, Consequences, Communication**

   Objective: Resolve conflicts through group discussion and perspective-shifting.

ESP Focus: Ethical discourse, scenario resolution

SEL Competencies: Conflict resolution, leadership, empathy

Pre-task: Students received real or fictional dilemmas (e.g., war, quitting education, peer pressure).

During-task: Assigned community roles (e.g., soldiers, women, politicians), each group discussed consequences and proposed resolutions.

Post-task: Class wide debriefing brought out critical reflections on morality, civic responsibility, and emotional maturity.

The focus here was on the aspect of Responsible Decision-Making, as explored by the SEL framework, to delve into their "capacities to consider ethical standards and safety concerns, and to evaluate the benefits and consequences of various actions for personal, social, and collective well-being" (*What is the Casel Framework?*, 2023). Role-based dialogue helped students articulate consequences and propose resolutions, strengthening spontaneous spoken English and conflict-resolution discourse (ESP). The SEL focus on responsible decision-making, leadership, and empathy was evident in the way students mediated opposing views to reach consensus.

Cluster C: Emotional and Social Engagement

6. **The Great Wave Falls For…**

Objective: Share personal feelings through movement and humour.

ESP Focus: Listening comprehension, responsive language

SEL Competencies: Empathy, classroom bonding

Pre-task: The teacher modelled scaffolded sentence completions like, "The great wave falls for students who slept after midnight."

During-task: Students stood or sat based on personal resonance, then added their prompts.

Post-task: Reflection writing helped students process classroom empathy and common stressors.

This works well for ice-breakers and for situations where the students feel the need to connect and express without any particular challenging activity. Quick, responsive exchanges improved listening comprehension and spontaneous sentence-building (ESP). At the same time, the activity nurtured SEL skills of empathy and social bonding, as students recognised shared experiences and validated each other's feelings.

7. **Self-Awareness Tasks**

   Objective: Increase emotional literacy and build peer bonds.

   ESP Focus: Expressive writing, vocabulary of emotion

   SEL Competencies: Self-regulation, positive self-image

   Pre-task: Students brought an emotionally resonant photo and captioned it meaningfully.

   During-task: Peers annotated each other's strengths; students wrote about their own weaknesses and co-designed strategies to improve.

   Post-task: A gratitude paragraph helped close the loop with self-appreciation.

Particularly charged with psychological undertones, this activity helps students identify and deal with their issues. While this works only if the students are in the mental state to reflect and analyses, mostly it helps students get a vague idea of their identities and their emotions. Expressive writing and peer feedback expanded learners' emotional vocabulary and descriptive language (ESP). The activity promoted SEL competencies in self-regulation, positive self-image, and empathy by helping students acknowledge their strengths and areas for growth.

8. **Kaun Banega Crorepati (KBC)**

   Objective: Review English course content through gamification.

   ESP Focus: Content recall, fast-paced communication

   SEL Competencies: Motivation, confidence, positive reinforcement

   Pre-task: Students reviewed course material and worked in teams.

   During-task: A KBC-style quiz was hosted on a smartboard, with real-time scores and light-hearted competition.

   Post-task: Rewards were given for participation and teamwork; students reflected on what they retained and enjoyed.

This gamified activity helped the students in learning and revising hard concepts with ease and attention. Fast-paced questioning enhanced recall and reinforced course content in an interactive format (ESP), while also boosting fluency under time pressure. SEL competencies in motivation, confidence, and teamwork emerged as students encouraged peers and celebrated collective success.

Table 1. *Activities and Their Pedagogic Goals and Learning Outcomes*

Activity Title	Learning Outcome (SWBAT)	TBLT Stage (Pre → During → Post)	SEL Focus	ESP/Real-World Focus
Shark Tank	Roleplay, persuasive speaking, business pitching	Brainstorm startup ideas → Group pitch → Peer/investor feedback	Decision-making, collaboration	Business communication, entrepreneurship
Apocalypse	Ethical reasoning, conflict negotiation, social role discussion	Scenario setup → Role-based argument → Committee-led resolution	Social awareness, fairness	Group decision-making, leadership
Reflection	Critical analysis of visual/literary texts, emotional insight	Watch short film/poem → Mind map + group talk → Class sharing	Self-awareness, empathy	Critical thinking, theme analysis
Absurd Questions	Imaginative reasoning, speculative problem-solving	Pose absurd question → Group brainstorm → Summary of viewpoints	Perspective-taking, creativity	Hypothetical reasoning, future scenarios
CCC (Conflicts...)	Collaborative problem-solving, ethical argumentation	Assign conflict scenario → Role-based discussion → Group solution + class debate	Responsible decision-making	Social conflict resolution, real-life application
The Great Wave Falls For…	Listening comprehension, classroom bonding	Teacher-led prompts → Student-led prompts → Short reflection or debrief	Emotional validation, belonging	Spontaneous English, social-emotional listening
Self-Awareness Tasks	Expressive writing, peer bonding, gratitude practice	Bring photo → Write & annotate → Share and reflect	Emotional regulation, self-expression	Reflective writing, personal growth
KBC Quiz Game	Recall and reinforce course content through gamified activity	Review previous unit → Play team quiz → Reflect and reward winners	Motivation, low-stakes confidence-building	Academic revision, communication under pressure

Ethical Considerations

All activities were carried out within normal classroom teaching under the Communicative English course of study and hence did not need approval from the authorities in writing. Participation was voluntary and non-assessment. There was no coercion, grading, or individual risk in any activity. Verbal permission was sought from students to incorporate their reflections and anonymous feedback in this research. The research followed ethical guidelines suitable for classroom research led by teachers, prioritising student dignity, consent, and emotional safety. Informal and verbal assent was obtained from the Department Head and students before every activity.

Results and Discussion

These activities uncovered a more profound problem: student stress is not merely academic but existential, driven by performance-oriented systems that disregard personhood. "Communication in these classrooms is no longer about language skills; it is an emotional processing, identity negotiation, and self-expression outlet." The language classroom, then, becomes what Freire calls a "humanising space… to create possibilities for the production or construction of knowledge" (Freire, 1998). This vision aligns with CASEL's call for spaces "where all students and adults feel respected, supported, and engaged" (*What is the CASEL Framework?*, 2023). The core competencies of SEL—self-awareness, self-management, relationship skills, social awareness, and responsible decision-making—are the key to resilience in high-stress environments such as engineering colleges (Schunk et al., 2014). Conflict resolution and ethical discussions provided students with a platform to develop these competencies through language use. These results also extend Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT), demonstrating that it can promote not only linguistic but also ethical and emotional development. As Long (2014) observes, "for millions of learners,… acquiring a new language is inextricably bound up with creating a new identity and acculturating into the receiving community." Institutions must now support teachers to design such spaces with time, autonomy, and care. In addition to overall stress and identity negotiation observations, task-specific analyses uncovered pronounced communicative competence development patterns consonant with ESP and SEL goals.

Table 2. *Competencies Achieved*

Cluster	Key Tasks	ESP Outcomes (Language/Professional Skills)	SEL Outcomes (Socio-Emotional Competencies)	Communicative Gains
A. Communication & Collaboration	Shark Tank, Apocalypse	Persuasive pitching, audience-centred speech, negotiation, argumentative English	Collaboration, relationship skills, fairness, responsible decision-making	Stronger verbal presentations; improved group discussion structure and confidence
B. Critical & Creative Thinking	Reflection, Absurd Questions, CCC	Analytical discourse, speculative vocabulary (modal verbs), conflict-resolution talk	Self-awareness, perspective-taking, empathy, leadership	Growth in small-group presentations; hesitant speakers contributed more in role-based discussions
C. Emotional & Social Engagement	Great Wave, Self-Awareness, KBC	Listening comprehension, expressive writing, fast-paced recall, spontaneous fluency	Empathy, self-regulation, motivation, bonding, resilience	Increased verbal fluency under pressure; enhanced peer validation and classroom belonging

Conclusion

This study investigated how task-based language learning with emotional literacy and contextual awareness can reinvigorate English classrooms in engineering colleges based in India. Carried out through action research, collaborative and reflective activities involved students beyond mere rote pedagogy. Students reacted most when activities related to life, values, and sentiments. These outcomes reinforce the imperative for language teaching that is communicative as well as humanising. In synthesising TBLT (Long, 2014), SEL (*What is the Casel Framework?*, 2023), and ESP (Dudley-Evans & St. John, 1998), the research reimagines classrooms as communities of linguistic and affective development. It pushes back against ESP's sole emphasis on work readiness by insisting that

engineers need to be emotionally intelligent communicators. Teachers, as designers of life-altering moments, require time and support to be inventive. Future research might test long-term effects on employability and resilience. This paper presents an invitation: to teach English as a means of selfhood, solidarity, and resilience in a generation that is always asked to do but never permitted to look beyond. Let us help cater to the voices of our students and not their silences!

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