This report explores the (mis)naming of “thinking skills” as “communication skills” in the CBSE English Language reforms, initiated in 1988 with limited success and re-initiated in 2009/2012 with more favorable outcomes. I suggest that official interpretations of the reform, first as communicative and later as international, elided a pedagogic transition from the literary to the academic/scientific. Academic literacy involves the explicit teaching, sustained modeling and scaffolded practice of metacognitive skills—the ability to identify and monitor comprehension problems, strategies to clarify unfamiliar technical words and concepts, and tactics to identify main points as well as the logical progression of the text.

On the contrary, communicative approaches focus on producing socially appropriate linguistic performances, typically in face-to-face interactions. Meanwhile, the rhetoric of internationalization is a justificatory rather than a pedagogic framework. Considering the misrepresentation of academic content as communicative method, I argue that reform narratives not only obscure the pedagogic investments required to actually teach reformed materials but also make academic proficiency a black box that is available only to the already initiated. What is more, the reforms
naturalize communicative skills as a key marker for metacognitive skills, increasingly coalesced with “higher order thinking skills”. I conclude by suggesting that the earlier “failure” and contemporary “success” of the reform is situated in new competitions that have emerged and consolidated in contexts of globalization.

To elaborate briefly, the CBSE English language reforms were initiated in 1988 by the CBSE with financial support from the Overseas Development Association (later DfID) routed through the British Council, and academic support from the College of St Marks and St Johns, UK. The initiative sought to reform teaching learning materials and methods in secondary grades in English-medium CBSE schools (Course A) from exam-oriented, memorization-based methods to skill-focused, communicative approaches. To do so, the materials development team worked to replace the existing literature and grammar focused textbooks with a Main Course Book titled “Interact in English”. However, on the insistence of the CBSE committee of courses, the Main Course Book became one of three textbooks, and both the Literature Reader and the Grammar Workbook were retained.

Secondly, a key aspiration of the reform was to replace the exam format, which largely tested for memory of textbook content, with an exam that would test reading, writing, speaking and listening skills. Like with the textbooks, the exam reform was also partial, with 45% weightage retained for content-based tasks. Therefore, reform proponents were deeply dissatisfied with the new textbooks introduced in 1994 and the first 10th standard board exams conducted in 1995.

However, I argue that this narrative remains silent on key content and design changes introduced by the Main Course Book (MCB). Firstly, the MCB introduced scientific and academic texts into what was earlier a literature based or “literary” curriculum. These texts about medicine, science, environment and so on, have a detailed logical argument typical of “academic/scientific texts” and require the explicit teaching of analytical and metacognitive strategies. Yet, strategies for the teaching of academic literacy are conspicuously absent even though the content and questions require the exercise of academic literacy. Thus, the communicative method became, as scholars have cautioned repeatedly, a platform for those who
already had these skills to exhibit them. While the reform did not do the pedagogic work expected of it, it did perform characterological work, that is, it discursively marked bodies that could do academic/analytical work as communicative bodies. Academic literacy becomes an unacknowledged and implicit base for the performance of the communicative. Students who found the textbooks overambitious in terms of textual impenetrability became “weak learners” not because of their presumed “lack” of vocabulary and reading comprehension skills but because they would not/could not perform pair or group work. The analytical mode of reading that typifies academic literacy is discursively described as “higher order thinking skills” as per Bloom’s and Anderson’s taxonomy, and named as communicative skills.

Furthermore, though the CIEFL (1997) report acknowledges that the reform did not address the issues of “weak learners”, the report holds students, teachers and parents responsible, asserting that if they follow the communicative method faithfully, non-elite students will perform as well as advantaged students. Neither resource deprivations instituted through the
reforms nor the non-teaching of academic literacy requires scrutiny within this stance.

The story remains the same even though it changes dramatically in the 2009/2012 period, when some of the key recommendations of the reforms are formally take up by the CBSE. Comprehensive and continuous evaluation (CCE) and the assessment of speaking and listening (ASL) are formalized in 2009 and 2012 respectively. Furthermore, the newly introduced CBSE International takes up the reform proposals in toto, designing a non-textbook based, supposedly skill-focused curriculum. Two key features of all three initiatives (CCE, ASL and CBSE i) are 1) the use of internationalization to justify the “paradigm changes” and 2) the extension of reform logic to all curricular subjects and even non-curricular domains.

Meanwhile, the teaching and learning of academic literacy is gestured to discursively through the rhetoric of “higher order thinking skills” but never taken up for actual instructional design. That the more extensive curricular reform is justified through the logics of internationalization and competition suggest that the more recent “success” of the reforms is a response to parental and national desires for internationalization as well as to the competitive educational markets emerging to meet these demands. Pedagogy thus becomes “sensible” to key stakeholders only in specific socio-political contexts and educational research can make sense of pedagogy only by taking these into account.