

Speaking for Success: Developing a Core Skill for Professional Communication among Undergraduate Students

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Abstract:

Speaking skills are a crucial part of the overall development of the current generation of students. It has a significant effect on the academic, personal, and professional growth of a student. In today's communication-based society, the skill to express or communicate one's ideas effectively with confidence is a basic necessity. However, the reality is that many undergraduate students, especially in rural Andhra Pradesh, struggle with speaking skills due to fear of making mistakes, lack of confidence, limited exposure to real-life speaking situations, and limited classroom practice.

The research questions that this study aims to address are: (1) Why is speaking skill important in academic, personal, and professional settings? (2) How can activity-based interventions help improve speaking skills in undergraduate students? To address these research questions, the study employed an experiential learning design. This was done through Situational Elicitation, JAM, Pair Work and a Group Activity to highlight the relevance of effective speaking in real-life situations. The activities a) Situational Elicitation – a random individual activity to understand various situations that demand effective speaking b) Just-A-Minute (JAM) speaking session as an individual activity to enhance fluency c) Pair Work activity on self-introduction and simulated interviews to develop interpersonal and professional communication skills and d) Group Activity called “Imagine, Create, and Narrate” to promote creativity and narrative skills.

The impact of structured speaking activities, interaction, and feedback in overcoming anxiety and performance is stressed in the paper. The results of these activities showed that there were remarkable gains in the students' fluency, confidence, vocabulary, and overall communicative ability. The conclusion drawn from the study is that the inclusion of systematic development of speaking skills among undergraduate students is essential to equip them to cope with academic requirements, establish effective personal relations, and perform well in their chosen profession.

Key Words: Speaking Skills, Communicative Competence, Experiential Learning, Activity-Based Interventions, Fluency and Confidence, Professional Communication

1. Introduction:

Speaking skills are an important aspect of language learning and play a significant role in the academic, personal, and professional lives of the present generation particularly the students of Higher Education in rural Andhra Pradesh. According to Joanna Pitura (2022), higher education students need to strengthen their oral communication skills in order to participate effectively in academic contexts. (Pitura 120) This implies that in today's competitive and communication-oriented world, students are expected not only to acquire knowledge but also to express their ideas clearly and confidently to enhance their professional communication, employability skills and workplace readiness. Furthermore, Portugal and Ruiz, opines that "in the interconnected world, English has become the language used for communication in business, academia, science, technology, and culture." (Portugal and Ruiz 100)

In academic context, effective speaking helps students participate actively in classroom discussions, deliver presentations, and engage meaningfully in collaborative learning. However, many undergraduate students face difficulties in speaking due to fear of making errors, lack of confidence, limited vocabulary, and insufficient exposure to real-life speaking situations.

Traditional classroom methods of teaching often focus more on reading and writing skills, rather than improving oral communication skills.. As a result, students remain hesitant speakers and feel unprepared to face interviews, group discussions, and professional interactions in the workplace. Apart from success in academics, speaking skills are essential even for the personal development of the students, as they help individuals build self-confidence, express emotions, and develop social relationships. From a professional perspective, effective speaking is a core competency required for job interviews, teamwork, leadership, and long-term career advancement.

The present paper focuses on improving speaking skills among undergraduate students through activity-based teaching and learning to equip them for future challenges in professional life. It incorporates situational elicitation, Just-A-Minute (JAM) session, pair-based interview practice, and a group activity - picture narration under the theme "*Imagine, Create, and Narrate.*" These strategies are designed to provide meaningful practice, reduce anxiety, and equip students with the speaking skills necessary for academic, professional interaction and employment-oriented communication.

2. Review of Literature:

Researchers and educators recognize the value of speaking skills in language learning. Speaking is a productive and interactive skill that shows how well learners command the language. To speak effectively, one needs language, knowledge, fluency, confidence, and the skill to respond suitably to various situations. Brown (2001) said, "use techniques that cover the spectrum of learner needs, from language-based focus on accuracy to message-based focus on interaction, meaning and fluency." (275) Moreover, he defines speaking as an interactive process of creating meaning, which includes sharing and receiving information in different contexts.

Several studies highlight the importance of speaking skills in academic settings. Classroom discussions, presentations, and peer interactions help students express their ideas and develop higher-order thinking skills. Research shows that students who frequently take part in speaking activities perform better

academically and feel more confident in learning environments. In his study, **Ur (1996)** presents that oral participation improves comprehension, critical thinking, and student engagement. He said, “classroom discussion is not merely dominated by a minority of talkative participants, all get a chance to speak and contributions are fairly, evenly distributed.” (132)

In the personal domain, speaking skills play an important role in self-expression and social interaction. Vygotsky’s social constructivist theory emphasizes that learning happens through interaction with others, which makes oral communication key to cognitive and social growth. Research shows that regular speaking opportunities help students face their fears, boost their self-esteem, and build good relationships with others. Good communication skills also help people handle emotions and solve everyday conflicts.

From a professional viewpoint, speaking skills are vital for getting a job and advancing in a career. Employers often highlight communication skills as one of the most important traits in graduates. Research on professional communication shows that effective speaking skills are key for job interviews, working in teams, making presentations, and taking on leadership roles. Graduates with good oral communication skills adjust more easily to professional settings and show better career growth.

Recent research provides strong evidence for the effectiveness of activity-based and learner-centered methods in teaching speaking skills, emphasizing the importance of incorporating experiential speaking tasks into undergraduate education. This paper illustrates how experiential speaking tasks like eliciting, JAM, pair-activity for formal self-introduction in interviews, group activity- picture-based narration help students reduce anxiety and enhance their fluency, confidence, and communicative abilities. Supporting this claim, Terzioğlu and Kurt stated that “Interactive learning environments significantly promote learners’ speaking fluency and verbal communication development.” (Terzioğlu and Kurt 7). Furthermore, when students participate in consistent speaking practice, their communication effectiveness and public speaking confidence tend to increase.

3. Methodology:

Research Design:

The intervention occurred within a particular time frame and comprised a number of speaking exercises which became increasingly challenging. Role plays, pair work, group work, presentation, storytelling, interview and problem solving were among such activities that were chosen to stimulate the students’ interest and create a learner-centered environment. These activities were supposed to make students think critically, plan, organize themselves and articulate their opinion in English properly. The main effort was made to ensure a supportive learning environment in the class where the students could feel safe to risk and communicate without any fear of being criticized. The instructor/facilitator acted as a mediator providing help and examples of proper language usage as well as motivating the learners to be active. Data gathered from the intervention were analyzed for traces of development in the areas of pronunciation, vocabulary usage, coherence and interactive communication skills. These results were

further confirmed by reflective statements provided by the students and giving insight into their perception of learning experience.

Participants:

There were 60 female undergraduate students aged between 18 to 22 years who varied in terms of proficiency in speaking and came from different courses, like B.A., B.Com., B.Sc. etc. Purposive sampling technique was used to select those students who were willing and capable of participating in the speaking activities. The heterogeneity of participants helped create the atmosphere of peer interaction and collaboration in individual, pair, and group work. At the very beginning of the intervention, we conducted a pre-intervention assessment to find out speaking skills and difficulties of our participants. Participants were informed about the purpose of the research and their participation was completely voluntary, hence, we adhered to the ethical norms of the study. Participants had various degrees of confidence, fluency, and linguistic proficiency making it an appropriate group to investigate the effectiveness of the activity-based learning approach. The involvement of participants in the process of intervention activities made significant contribution to the collaborative learning atmosphere. Participating in classroom activities helped students communicate and improve their speaking skills gradually. This was complemented by the varying academic experiences of the individuals involved as it provided varied perspectives on classroom discussions. Also, the learners were very cooperative and were willing to participate in interactive sessions because of their good attitude towards such activities.

4. Research Objectives:

The study aimed to:

1. Examine the importance of speaking skills in academic, personal, and professional life.
2. Implement structured speaking activities to improve fluency, confidence, and communication competence.
3. Evaluate the effectiveness of individual, pair, and group-based activities in enhancing speaking skills.

Activity-Based Implementation for Speaking Skills**Activity-1: Situational Elicitation**

Situational Elicitation is a learner-centred approach that encourages students to use spontaneous language instead of memorized responses. This approach simulated real communication. The scenarios mirrored typical social, academic, and professional situations.

Objective:

The goal of this activity/task is to get students to talk in life situations and to help them talk naturally.

Procedure:

Here students were given some life situations in folded slips where they had to speak right away. They were provided with 5 to 7 lines contexts/situations from real life that highlighted how important speaking skills were to the present generation. To mention a few, enquiry for a bus, a village student's first day in the college, a seminar day, the hospital help, the new workplace, group discussions, interviews, and community meetings etc., Each student was asked to pick one slip randomly, was instructed to go through the context quickly and to retell the same to the class in their own words. Here the students were encouraged to focus more on fluency than accuracy. Moreover, the students were asked to use appropriate words, tone, body language and facial expressions while speaking. Upon completing the task and reviewing all the scenarios provided for the activity, the students realized how crucial effective speaking skills were to their academic, personal, social, and professional lives.

After each student's presentation, a discussion was held, allowing them to reflect on their performance and identify areas for improvement. Feedback from fellow students contributed to the collective learning experience and encouraged everyone to engage actively.

This was considered an effective approach to teaching. Hymes stated that “using language correctly in various social situations is important” (277). After this activity, it was evident that engaging students in speaking activities helped them develop practical communication skills rather than merely memorizing grammar rules.

Assessment:

The assessment examined how effectively the students were able to express themselves. It focused on whether their ideas were meaningful, the appropriateness of the words they chose, their level of confidence, and their ability to convey their message effectively in the appropriate context.

Activity 2: JAM Sessions (Just–A–Minute)

JAM (Just A Minute) Session is another learner-centered speaking activity that encourages students to express their ideas spontaneously on a given topic within one minute. This activity helps improve fluency, critical thinking, confidence, and clear expression without memorizing responses. By mimicking real-life speaking scenarios, JAM sessions prepare learners for academic discussions, interviews, presentations, and communication in the workplace.

Objective:

The main goal was to improve/enhance spontaneity and confidence while speaking.

Procedure:

This session was planned as a guided gap-filling activity. The activity was planned to help students fill the gaps in their speaking skills. The students were given a script with missing words and clues to fill them in. The topics chosen for this activity were - My college, My Home Town, My Model Teacher, My

favourite actor or actress, My dream job and My dream company. These topics were selected because they were intended to help students who were getting ready for exams and interviews like TOEFL and IELTS.

This activity was given as a guided one because many students did not know what to talk about when they were given a topic. They did not know how to make their presentation complete and effective within the given time. So, they were provided with key points for each topic. For example when talking about My Home Town, the students were asked to include things like a greeting, introducing the topic, the name of their hometown, where it is, what makes it special, the environment, the people and places to visit etc.. It was visualized that this guidance helped the students to give a clear presentation.

This activity helped the students not only fill the gaps but also to give good presentations. They had enough to talk about and they knew how to organize their ideas logically. It really helped them to think fast, organize their thoughts and express themselves well while speaking. At the end of their presentations, feedback was provided on how they did. Their pronunciation, vocabulary, coherence, fluency and confidence were observed during the feedback session. This activity supported Jaelani and Utami's view that JAM encourages learners to speak spontaneously on a given topic, helping them develop fluency, confidence, and effective oral communication. (1-15)

Assessment:

When the presentations were evaluated, several factors were considered. These included the relevance of the content, the flow of speech, and the language used. The evaluation also looked at the students' confidence, the effectiveness of their delivery, their body language, their time management skills, and the overall impact of their presentations.

Activity 3: Pair Activity – Self Introduction and Interview Simulation:

This is another learner-centered interactive activity that enables students to practice introducing themselves and responding to interview questions in pairs. This activity develops verbal communication, active listening, confidence, and interpersonal skills through meaningful peer interaction rather than memorized dialogues. By simulating authentic interview and workplace situations, it prepares learners for academic interactions, job interviews, and professional communication.

Objective:

To enhance interpersonal and professional communication.

Procedure:

The activity was conducted at two levels, first individually and then in pairs for practice. This was planned as a semi-guided activity. In the beginning of the activity, the students were provided with the list of aspects to be covered when they were introducing themselves in an interview. They were asked to complete their self introduction sheet individually with the help of jumbled clues given at the end of the sheet, covering aspects like formal greetings, introducing name, educational qualifications, specialization,

college/university, skills and strengths, CSP's/internships/projects/ training attended, career interest/job roles applied for, positive personal qualities, short-term career goals and a positive closing statement.

Later, the students worked in pairs to practice self-introduction repeatedly with different peers, thereby interacting with the maximum number of students as possible in the class. They were given autonomy to go around the class, meet new friends and share their introductions. Finally, the total class was divided into two groups - interviewers and interviewees. They alternated roles between interviewer and interviewee, responding to questions related to educational background, skills, strengths, career goals, and personal interests. The activity provided a safe environment for practicing professional communication skills. Peer feedback and the facilitators's guidance enabled students to identify their strengths and weaknesses to excel in the task. The activity also helped students develop listening skills, interpersonal communication, and confidence required in real-life interview situations.

As Brown (2001) stated "In the era of communicative language teaching, interaction is, in fact, the heart of communication...It is the collaborative exchange of thoughts, feelings or ideas between two or more people, resulting in a reciprocal effect on each other." (178). This activity is in line with Brown's view that it provides opportunities for meaningful interaction and collaborative learning for students .

Assessment:

The students were assessed on the clarity, conciseness, confidence, interaction skills, listening ability, appropriateness of their responses, and professionalism. Apart from this, each student was provided with a self evaluation sheet where they can rate their performance using a five point scale on their own in areas like clear introduction, confidence, voice clarity, eye contact, body language, fluency, language usage and time management. Overall, the students participated with great enthusiasm and confidence.

Activity 4: Group Activity – "Imagine, Create and Narrate" (A Group Story Telling Activity)

This activity is all about working together and using imagination to create a story. It helps students think outside the box, work as a team, and communicate their ideas clearly. When students build on each other's ideas, they learn to think critically and come up with creative solutions. It's not about reading from a script, but about sharing your thoughts and ideas with others. By doing this, students become more confident and better at expressing themselves in all sorts of situations - at school, with friends, and even in their future careers. They also learn to work together, listen to each other, and narrate a story that is engaging and meaningful. This activity helps students to become better communicators and team players.

Objective:

The main goal of this activity was to help students be more creative, work collaboratively and tell stories.

Procedure:

The students were divided into small groups, with four to six members in each group, and each group was given a set of mixed-up pictures that depicted a story or showed a situation. Each group was

required to work together to develop a story idea, arrange the pictures in the correct sequence, and organize their thoughts. After that, they were asked to write down their story. Next, they had to present their story as a team, taking turns to introduce themselves, introduce the story, narrate it step by step, and finally conclude it with a moral. In this way, every learner had the opportunity to contribute to the storytelling process and learn from one another. The groups were expected to collaborate, use their imagination, and apply creativity to develop a story that was logical and conveyed a meaningful message. Through this activity, the students practiced teamwork, public speaking, and critical thinking while remaining actively engaged in the learning process.

While presenting, the students were instructed to use appropriate expressions, gestures, and voice modulation to make their stories more engaging and creative. This activity helped the students develop teamwork, creative thinking, and confidence in storytelling. After each group completed its presentation, feedback was provided by both the teacher and the other students. They shared their observations on the strengths of the presentation and suggested areas for improvement, enabling the groups to reflect on their performance and identify ways to improve in future presentations.

Ur, Penny emphasized that in group activities “Learners are eager to speak, because they are interested in the topic and have something new to say about it, or because they want to contribute to achieving a task objective.” (132) Therefore, the activity *Imagine, Create and Narrate* supported Penny’s view that Groupwork increases the sheer amount of learner talk going on for a limited period of time and also lowers the inhibitions of learners who are unwilling to speak in front of the full class. (133)

The evaluation focused on the originality of the story, considering what made it unique, how well it was organized, and the overall quality of the presentation.

Assessment:

When the students were graded, several aspects were taken into consideration. The assessment focused on the creativity of their projects, the organization and structure of the content, and the overall flow of the presentation. Attention was also given to their choice of words and their ability to work effectively as a team. Their confidence during the presentation and the level of coordination among the group members were considered important. Overall, the evaluation aimed to determine the quality of the presentation and how successfully the students were able to bring all these elements together.

Overall Reflection:

The activity-based approach helped learners practice speaking in real-life situations.

- It gave them chances to speak in a meaningful way.
- The activities made them work together, be creative and express themselves.
- This helped students use English confidently.
- Through practice, feedback and reflection students improved in several areas.
- They got better at speaking confidently using vocabulary, pronouncing words correctly and communicating effectively.
- The approach also helped students feel more comfortable speaking up.

- They became more willing to join in class discussions and activities.
- By doing individual, pair and group tasks students developed skills.
- These included thinking, teamwork and communicating with others.
- The learner-centered approach created an environment.
- It effectively improved speaking skills, for professional and social situations.
- The approach helped students use English confidently and effectively.
- It also enhanced their communication skills.

5. Results and Discussion:

(a) Qualitative Insights:

- The students reported that they felt more confident and less anxious when they had to speak. They were also more willing to speak in situations.
- The observations revealed that the students actively took part in activities and were creative. They were also getting better at working with others in pairs and groups.
- The students said they were at ease when they had to speak in front of their peers. They were happy to take part in the classroom activities aimed to improve their speaking skills.
- Moreover, the classroom observations indicated that the students were increasingly engaged in the learning process with their peers by effectively collaborating and demonstrating creativity while performing the tasks.

(b) Interpretation:

The results show that activity-based learning really helps to improve speaking skills. Things like JAM sessions make people speak spontaneously. When students work in pairs they get better at talking to each other. Working together, group narration helps students be more creative and work well as a team. It also helps them tell stories in a unique way.

So, Activity-based learning gives students chances to speak and use the language in a way that makes sense.

(c) Implications:

Using speaking activities in language classrooms can really help students become more confident when they speak. It also helps them speak smoothly and clearly and become better at communicating with others. This kind of practice they had in classrooms helps students in real life situations/ future challenges.

Moreover, the study indicates when students participate voluntarily in speaking activities with involvement, they find language learning fun and useful. Students will play an active role in taking ownership of their learning and development.

In addition to this, when students regularly engage in speaking activities, they become better prepared to communicate effectively in the classroom, workplace, and social interactions. Such activities equip learners with the confidence and skills needed for academic communication, professional success, and personal interactions.

6. Conclusion:

Speaking skills are really important for studying, growing as a person and succeeding in a career. In today's changing world students need to be able to communicate effectively, work well with others and think critically to get ahead. Being able to express ideas confidently does not just help students with academic challenges but also makes them more employable, better leaders and effective communicators.

This study proposed on activity-based teaching and learning demonstrated that activities like elicitation, JAM sessions, pair interviews and group narration really helped students improve their fluency, confidence, creativity and overall ability to communicate. These activities provided authentic opportunities for learners to practice speaking in real-life situations helping them get over their hesitation and take part more actively in learning.

The findings agree with what Brown, Vygotsky and Hymes said about how important interaction and communication are in learning a language. Regular speaking activities helped students to express themselves freely, think creatively and critically, work together in pairs and groups. So adding speaking activities to undergraduate English language curricula can bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical communication, preparing students for challenges in academics, social life and their careers.

Interactive classroom activities such as JAM sessions, role plays, and peer learning tasks, group works significantly enhance students' confidence and speaking proficiency by creating opportunities for active communication. Furthermore, incorporating these pedagogical interventions with emerging AI-based learning tools can provide the scope for personalized improvement even greater. As recent research highlights, "AI systems can provide learners with immediate and individualized feedback, enabling continuous improvement in speaking performance" (Fourati et al. 6).

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