

Task-Based Speaking Practice for Employability among Rural Undergraduate Learners

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Abstract

Speaking competence has become a major requirement for students who seek employment in a competitive job market. Rural undergraduate learners often complete many years of English study with limited confidence in oral communication. Their difficulty is usually connected with limited exposure, fear of making mistakes, lack of classroom practice, and the absence of meaningful speaking situations. This paper examines the use of task-based classroom activities for improving the speaking skills of final-year undergraduate students. The study gives special attention to fluency, accuracy, vocabulary use, sentence formation, and learner confidence. It also discusses the roles of teachers, learners, and speaking tasks in creating a supportive classroom atmosphere. The experimental activity used in the study was based on introducing oneself and others. Students were guided through pre-task, task, and post-task stages. The activity helped learners move from short and hesitant responses to fuller and more confident speech. The findings suggest that carefully prepared speaking tasks can give rural learners practical exposure to English and prepare them for employability contexts such as interviews, group discussions, self-introductions, and workplace interaction. The study also shows that teacher support, indirect correction, pair work, and repeated practice can create a positive environment for oral language development.

Keywords: Speaking skills, employability, rural learners, task-based language teaching, fluency, communication skills

Introduction

India has one of the largest youth populations in the world. A significant section of this population comes from rural and semi-urban backgrounds. Many young people complete higher education with academic knowledge, yet they struggle during interviews, presentations, group discussions, and professional conversations. The issue is closely related to employability. Employers expect graduates to communicate clearly, respond with confidence, and take part in workplace interaction. For many rural students, English speaking remains a difficult area because their exposure to English outside the classroom is limited.

English occupies an important place in schools and colleges across India. It is used in higher education, administration, technology, business, and international communication. In the employment sector, English often functions as a link language. A student with sound subject knowledge may still lose opportunities when oral communication is weak. This gap creates pressure on teachers and institutions to provide practical training in speaking.

Speaking is different from passive knowledge of grammar or vocabulary. A learner may understand rules, write answers, and read textbooks, yet feel anxious when asked to speak. Speaking requires instant selection of words, correct sentence patterns, clear pronunciation, and confidence. It also requires the courage to make attempts in front of others. Rural learners often feel shy because they fear criticism from classmates. Some of them also carry the belief that English belongs only to urban or privileged students. Such feelings reduce participation.

A classroom can change this situation when it offers regular and friendly speaking opportunities. Students need tasks that resemble real situations. They need activities such as self-introduction, introducing others, asking for information, narrating past experiences, describing people, sharing opinions, and responding politely. These

activities help them connect language with life. Task-based language teaching offers a useful method for this purpose because it places learners in meaningful communicative situations.

The present study focuses on speaking skills for employability among rural final-year undergraduate students. It examines how simple speaking tasks can help learners improve fluency, accuracy, vocabulary, and confidence. The study also stresses the shared responsibility of teachers and students in the language classroom.

Speaking Skills and Employability

Employability refers to the ability of a person to gain, maintain, and grow in employment. Academic qualification alone gives an entry point, while communication skill often determines performance in the selection process. In interviews, students introduce themselves, answer questions, explain their strengths, and speak about their goals. In group discussions, they listen, respond, agree, disagree politely, and present ideas in a clear manner. At the workplace, they interact with colleagues, supervisors, clients, and customers. All these situations require speaking ability.

For rural students, speaking in English is usually connected with nervousness. Their schooling may have given more importance to reading and writing than speaking. Grammar exercises and written examinations may have trained them to pass, while oral expression received limited attention. As a result, students may know English as a subject, yet they may hesitate to use English as a language.

Speaking skills support employability in several ways. First, they help students present themselves with confidence. Second, they help them share knowledge clearly. Third, they build social confidence in professional spaces. Fourth, they allow students to participate in training sessions, meetings, and workplace communication. Fifth, they increase the learner's sense of self-worth. When students speak even simple English with confidence, they begin to see themselves as capable participants in the wider job market.

The Role of Teachers

Teachers play a major role in developing speaking skills among rural learners. A language teacher must create a classroom where students feel safe to speak. Fear of mistakes is one of the strongest barriers to oral communication. When teachers correct every error immediately, students may become silent. A supportive teacher allows learners to speak first and corrects errors later in a gentle manner.

Harmer (2007) explains that speaking activities serve important classroom functions. They give learners a chance to practise real-life communication in a low-pressure atmosphere. They also help teachers understand the learner's level, common errors, and areas that need improvement. Speaking practice activates the language already stored in the learner's mind and gradually makes its use more natural.

A teacher in a speaking classroom acts as a facilitator, organiser, motivator, observer, and counsellor. As a facilitator, the teacher prepares activities that encourage participation. As an organiser, the teacher gives clear instructions and arranges pair or group work. As a motivator, the teacher encourages hesitant students to try. As an observer, the teacher listens carefully and identifies common mistakes. As a counsellor, the teacher supports learners who feel anxious.

Harmer's comparison of a teacher to "a gardener" is useful in this context. A gardener plants seeds, gives care, and waits for growth. In the same way, a teacher creates conditions for language growth. Speaking ability cannot be forced instantly. It grows through repeated practice, encouragement, and meaningful exposure.

Teachers also need to select familiar topics. Rural learners speak better when the topic is close to their experience. Topics such as family, village life, festivals, games, food, college life, transport, mobile phones, and future goals can invite participation. After confidence develops, teachers can move toward interview practice, public speaking, debates, and professional communication.

The Role of Students

Students also carry responsibility in the learning process. A teacher can provide opportunities, but learners must use them actively. Speaking skill improves through practice. Students need willingness, effort, and patience. They must accept that mistakes are part of learning. A learner who waits for perfect grammar before speaking may

remain silent for a long time. A learner who makes regular attempts gradually gains control over words and structures.

Learner autonomy has an important place in language development. Benson and Voller (1997) describe autonomy in different ways: learning independently, developing self-directed learning skills, taking responsibility, and deciding the direction of one's learning. In the rural classroom, autonomy may begin with simple habits. Students can read aloud for a few minutes every day, listen to English news or short talks, practise self-introduction, maintain a vocabulary notebook, speak with classmates in pairs, and record their own speech for improvement.

Many students understand the value of English only when they face interviews or job applications. The classroom must help them recognise this need earlier. When students see a direct connection between speaking and employment, their motivation increases. They begin to treat English practice as an investment in their future.

Responsibility also includes participation. Some learners remain quiet because they think fluent speakers alone should speak. This belief reduces their progress. Speaking classrooms must encourage every learner, including slow learners and shy students. Even one or two correct sentences can become the beginning of confidence.

The Role of Tasks

Tasks are useful because they give purpose to speaking. A task asks students to use language to complete an activity. Nunan (1988) states that speaking skills can be developed through communicative tasks. Task-based language teaching gives learners a reason to speak, listen, ask, respond, and negotiate meaning.

Harmer (2001) gives three major reasons for using speaking tasks in the classroom. First, they give learners a chance to rehearse real-life language use. Second, they provide feedback for both teachers and learners. Third, they help students activate the language already stored in their minds.

A good speaking task should be simple, meaningful, and achievable. It should match the learner's level. For rural learners, tasks can begin with guided practice and gradually move toward freer communication. The teacher may first give words, sentence patterns, questions, and examples. Then students can practise in pairs. Later they can speak before a group.

Task-based speaking activities may include:

Self-introduction, peer introduction, picture description, role play, interview practice, short storytelling, information gap activities, opinion sharing, describing a process, narrating a past event, introducing a famous person, mock interview, and group discussion.

Such activities train students in both language and confidence. They also make the classroom lively. When students speak with peers before speaking to the whole class, anxiety is reduced. Pair work gives them a private space to try sentences before public performance.

Need for the Study

Among the four major language skills, speaking has a direct connection with employability. Rural undergraduate students often need special support in this area. Many of them come from Tamil-medium or regional-language backgrounds. Their exposure to English may be limited to textbooks, examinations, and formal classroom teaching. They may have vocabulary and grammar knowledge, yet they may find it difficult to speak naturally.

The present employment situation expects graduates to speak in English during interviews, training programmes, customer interaction, office communication, and digital meetings. This demand creates a need for practical classroom methods. Language teachers need activities that help students practise speaking in a structured yet friendly way.

The study reports a classroom activity designed to improve speaking skills among final-year undergraduate students of an Arts and Science college in Thanjavur District, Tamil Nadu. It focuses on how a task-based activity can help learners introduce themselves and others with better sentence formation, tense usage, vocabulary, and confidence.

The study has the following objectives:

To identify the speaking difficulties of rural final-year undergraduate students.

To provide task-based speaking practice for improving fluency and accuracy.

To help students use simple present and past tense forms in oral communication.

To improve vocabulary related to self-introduction and introducing others.

To reduce hesitation through pair work and guided practice.

To examine the usefulness of pre-task, task, and post-task stages in speaking development.

To prepare learners for employability-related speaking situations.

Methodology

The study follows an experimental design. The participants were 60 final-year undergraduate students from an Arts and Science college. A diagnostic test was conducted to assess their speaking level. Based on their performance, the students were divided into two groups of 30 students each. One group served as the control group, and the other group served as the experimental group.

The control group followed the usual classroom method. The experimental group received task-based speaking practice prepared for the study. The activity was conducted in two phases, with each phase lasting two hours and thirty minutes. The focus of the activity was introducing oneself and introducing others.

The task was selected because self-introduction is one of the most common requirements in interviews and formal situations. It allows students to practise basic sentence structures, present tense, past tense, descriptive words, personal details, and polite speech. The activity also helps learners speak about another person before speaking about themselves, which reduces anxiety.

Classroom Procedure

The activity was carried out in three stages: pre-task, task, and post-task.

Pre-Task Stage

In the pre-task stage, students were paired. They were asked to introduce Mr. M. S. Dhoni, the cricketer, to their partner. One student played the role of Dhoni, while the other introduced him. The teacher observed the learners' performance.

At this stage, most students gave short responses. Some students used only words or phrases. Some were unsure about tense forms. They found it difficult to move from facts to full sentences. For example, instead of saying, "He was born in Ranchi," some students said, "Born Ranchi." Instead of saying, "He loves bikes," some said, "Bike liking." Their responses showed that they had ideas but needed help in sentence formation.

The teacher wrote selected responses on the board and guided the students indirectly. The teacher gave correct sentence patterns, useful verbs, and tense forms. Correction was handled in a supportive manner so that students felt encouraged to continue speaking.

Task Stage

During the task stage, students received a page containing details about M. S. Dhoni. The details included his birth, education, hobbies, personality, interests, favourite food, school habits, and personal qualities. Students discussed the information in pairs for twenty minutes.

They were encouraged to frame complete sentences using the given information. The teacher guided them with useful structures such as:

He was born on July 7, 1981.

He was brought up in Ranchi.

He studied at DAV School.

He pursued graduation at St. Xavier's College.

He loves riding bikes.

He is calm in difficult situations.

His friends call him Mahi.

He is respectful towards his peers.

After discussion, students performed the role play again. This time, their responses were fuller. They used more present and past tense forms. They also used more descriptive words. Their confidence improved because the task gave them content, structure, and time for preparation.

Post-Task Stage

In the post-task stage, students were asked to introduce themselves to the group. They used the patterns learned from the Dhoni activity. The earlier task helped them organise personal details such as name, place, education, family, hobbies, strengths, goals, and interests.

The post-task activity connected classroom practice with employability. Self-introduction is a basic requirement in interviews. Students who had hesitated earlier were able to speak a few complete sentences. Some students used simple but meaningful expressions about their background and ambition. The activity helped them understand how to present themselves in a clear and confident manner.

Observation and Discussion

The activity created visible improvement in learner participation. At the beginning, students showed hesitation and gave limited responses. After pair discussion and guided practice, they spoke with more confidence. The use of a familiar public figure helped them participate with interest. Dhoni was a suitable choice because many students already knew him. Familiar content reduced the pressure of thinking about ideas and allowed them to focus on language.

Pair work played an important role. Students who felt shy before the whole class spoke more freely with a partner. Peer interaction gave them rehearsal time. It also allowed them to learn from each other. The role play format made the activity lively and purposeful.

The activity also helped learners understand tense usage. Since Dhoni's life details included both past and present facts, students practised simple past and simple present naturally. For example, educational details required past tense, while hobbies and personality traits required present tense. This helped students connect grammar with actual communication.

The teacher's method of indirect correction was effective. Immediate correction during speech can increase fear. In this activity, the teacher allowed students to speak first, then wrote selected responses on the board and guided the class. This method helped students notice errors and correct them through practice.

The task also improved vocabulary. Students learned words and phrases related to personality, hobbies, education, interests, and habits. Words such as respectful, calm, conscious, favourite, passion, pursued, enrolled, and brought up became useful in their speech.

The activity strengthened fluency as well. Fluency developed because learners repeated the speaking act in stages. First, they attempted the task with limited support. Then they discussed the given details. Finally, they performed with greater confidence. Repetition with improvement gave them a sense of progress.

Pedagogical Implications

The study suggests that rural learners benefit from structured speaking practice. Teachers can prepare similar tasks using familiar personalities, local leaders, sportspersons, writers, freedom fighters, teachers, or community figures. Once students become comfortable, the same format can be used for self-introduction, peer introduction, interview practice, and group discussion.

Teachers can also create activity sheets with vocabulary, sentence patterns, and guiding questions. Such materials reduce hesitation because students receive language support before speaking. The movement from guided practice to independent speaking is useful for beginners.

Speaking classrooms should give equal importance to confidence and correctness. Accuracy is necessary, but confidence must grow along with it. When students are encouraged to speak, errors can be corrected gradually. A positive classroom atmosphere is especially important for rural students who may already feel insecure about English.

The findings also suggest that employability training should begin before the final semester. Regular speaking tasks from the first year can help students build confidence over time. Colleges can include short oral activities in English classes, soft-skill programmes, placement training, and bridge courses.

Conclusion

The activity used in the study shows that task-based speaking practice can improve the oral communication of rural undergraduate learners. The movement from pre-task to task and post-task stages gave students a clear path for learning. They first attempted to speak, then received support, practised in pairs, and finally used the learned patterns for self-introduction.

The activity helped students use simple present and past tense forms, learn useful vocabulary, and speak with greater confidence. It also made the teacher more aware of learner difficulties and classroom possibilities. The study confirms that speaking skills grow through meaningful practice, patient guidance, and learner participation.

For rural students, English speaking is closely connected with employability and self-confidence. Classroom tasks can bridge the gap between textbook knowledge and real communication. When teachers design simple, purposeful, and repeated speaking activities, students gain the courage to use English in academic, social, and professional contexts.

References

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Annexure

Activity 1: Introducing M. S. Dhoni

Discuss with your partner and introduce M. S. Dhoni using suitable tense forms, sentence structures, and vocabulary. One student may play the role of Dhoni, while the other student introduces him.

M. S. Dhoni was born on July 7, 1981.

He was born and brought up in Ranchi.

He completed his higher secondary education at DAV School, Shyamali.

He pursued graduation at St. Xavier's College.

He enrolled for a bachelor's course in commerce in 1999.

His friends call him Mahi.

Captain Cool is his most popular nickname.

He stays calm in difficult situations.

He is respectful towards his peers.

He is conscious of his looks and personality.

He loves riding bikes and collecting supercars.

His favourite bike is his Harley-Davidson.

He is fond of cars, and his favourite car is a Hummer H2.

Apart from cricket, he enjoys playing football.

He grew up admiring cricketing legends such as Adam Gilchrist and Sachin Tendulkar.

He used to be a backbencher in school.

He would study the entire syllabus on the night before the examination.

He is sensitive about his family matters.

He spends time chatting with friends.

He likes Kishore Kumar's songs.

His favourite dish is butter chicken masala.

He had a childhood passion for painting.