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Task-Based Approaches in ESL: Unveiling Factors for Enhanced Speaking Competence

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Abstract

Effective communication in both first- and second-language contexts requires mastery of the four fundamental linguistic competencies, with speaking being the most important. In English as a Second Language (ESL) instruction, instructors frequently face the challenging task of enhancing the speaking proficiency and confidence of undergraduate students. In response, an action study employing a qualitative research framework was conducted as part of a traditional course employing a task-driven methodology. The results of the study demonstrated that a combination of self-assurance, selection of creative and engaging topics, and refined presentation skills significantly improved students' speaking abilities. These elements have been designated as crucial for enhancing speaking skills in ESL classrooms.

Key Words: Task-Based approach, Oral Communication, Speaking Skills, Factors enhancing ESL students' speaking skills

1. Introduction

Proficiency in speaking is an integral part of effective communication in any language, especially when communicating in a non-native language like English, which is widely used in the globalized world. To achieve successful communication with native speakers of English and other members of the international community, it is essential to develop English speaking skills along with other language skills. According to experts like Brown (2020), effective teaching practices, appropriate tasks and materials, and assessment techniques can significantly enhance the development of speaking skills in English learners. By implementing these strategies, learners can improve their English-speaking proficiency and communicate more effectively.

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In the Indian context of learning English as a Second Language (ESL), the lack of speaking confidence among undergraduate students is a common concern among instructors. According to Sharma and Singh (2020) and other studies, students' fear of making errors and being judged by others is one of the reasons for their reluctance to speak English. Despite studying English for several years, many Indian undergraduate students struggle with speaking skills.

To address the issue of lack of speaking confidence among ESL university students, a preliminary study was conducted to identify the factors that could enhance their speaking skills. The study found that students' confidence and opportunities to practice speaking were the primary factors for improving their speaking abilities. Based on these findings, the course "Speaking and Listening for Effective Communication" was designed, which included regular speaking principles and activities. The course was intended to provide a supportive environment for students to develop their speaking skills and overcome their fear of speaking in English.

"A task-based language teaching approach (Willis & Willis, 2007) was employed to investigate two main research questions with the course participants: 1) What factors help ESL learners to improve/develop their speaking skills? and 2) What are ESL learners' strengths and weaknesses in speaking English for special communication? The study aimed to enhance the participants' speaking performance and also provide more insight for teachers into alternative activities to develop speaking skills for ESL or EFL learners in the Indian context."

2. Literature Review

The three primary aspects covered in the literature review were: the importance of speaking skills and related research, the strengths and weaknesses of EFL speakers' speaking abilities, and the use of a task-based approach for teaching speaking skills.

2.1. The importance of speaking skills and related research

Effective communication in English involves not only the receptive skills of reading and listening, but also the productive skills of writing and speaking (Goh & Burns, 2012). Among these four macro skills, speaking is often considered the most crucial for successful communication (Papathanasiou & Andreou, 2020). Strong speaking skills can lead to success

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in various areas, such as job interviews, training sessions, and ceremonial events (Hartley & Cheshire, 2019). In fact, communication skills are often valued more highly than work experience, motivation, or academic credentials during the recruitment process (Karniouchina, Biswas, & Weitz, 2014).

However, students learning English as a second or as a foreign language often have limited opportunities to practice speaking outside the classroom and interact with native speakers of the language (Shah, 2021). Therefore, it is important for language instructors to provide opportunities and activities that help students develop their speaking competence.

In addition, speaking for oral communication, such as delivering speeches or presentations, requires additional skills beyond those used in everyday conversation. These skills include selecting appropriate topics, organizing thoughts effectively, adapting to listener feedback, and tailoring the message to the audience (Lucas, 2015).

2.2. The strengths and weaknesses of ESL speakers' speaking abilities

Effective English speaking performance involves various factors, such as pronunciation, vocabulary, and collocations, which must be emphasized to improve fluency in ESL or EFL speakers (Ahmad, 2020; Chen & Li, 2021; Wang, 2021). To enhance students' speaking skills, teachers should expose them to a range of situations and offer frequent speaking tasks (Kamal & Maqsood, 2021; Rahimi & Bahrami, 2022). According to recent research, providing ample opportunities for students to practice speaking can significantly contribute to their fluency (Jiang & Wang, 2021; Khan, 2021). Therefore, incorporating speaking activities in the classroom is crucial for developing ESL learners' speaking abilities.

Developing confidence and competence are essential for strengthening English speaking skills. According to Wang and Wang (2020), teachers should prioritize building students' confidence and reducing their fear of making errors to create a comfortable learning environment. This can be achieved through effective syllabus design, teaching methods, and sufficient learning materials and tasks (Sun et al., 2021).

To achieve effective speaking, ESL learners need to have various competencies, including grammatical, discourse, sociolinguistic, and strategic competencies, as well as

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listening skills and an understanding of sociocultural and affective factors (Liao & Li, 2020; Kılıçkaya, 2021). Grammatical competence is particularly crucial, as it allows learners to accurately use and understand English language structures with confidence, which ultimately contributes to their fluency (Zhang & Liu, 2021).

Therefore, incorporating ample opportunities for learners to practice speaking and building their confidence through effective teaching methods and materials is crucial in developing their competence and fluency in English speaking.

2.3. A Task-based approach for teaching speaking skills

To design speaking activities, a task-based language teaching (TBLT) approach was employed based on Willis and Willis's (2007) principles of task design. The speaking activities were designed with a needs-based approach to content selection, providing opportunities for learners to use English, enhancing learners' experiences as important contributors to classroom learning, and linking speaking situations to real-world English.

Recent studies have also highlighted the effectiveness of TBLT in improving learners' speaking skills (Khosravi & Haghighi, 2021; Xiao & Ji, 2021). TBLT involves learners engaging in meaningful tasks that are relevant to their needs and interests, which can lead to improved motivation and engagement in the learning process.

Furthermore, recent research has emphasized the importance of creating a learner-centered classroom environment that promotes communication and interaction among learners (Huang & Yang, 2021; Tahririan et al., 2020). This approach can enhance learners' speaking skills by providing opportunities for them to practice speaking and receive feedback from their peers and the teacher.

In summary, employing a TBLT approach based on Willis and Willis's (2007) principles of task design and designing speaking activities with a needs-based approach, providing opportunities for learners to use English, enhancing learners' experiences, and linking speaking situations to real-world English, in addition to creating a learner-centered classroom environment, can lead to significant improvements in learners' speaking skills.

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3. Research Methodology

The research methodology consisted of three main components: the research framework, subject selection and research instruments, and data collection and analysis.

1.The research framework outlined the theoretical foundations and research questions for the study. It provided a framework for the study's design and guided the selection of research instruments.

2.The subjects of the study were carefully chosen based on specific criteria, such as age, proficiency level, and learning context. The research instruments used to collect data included speaking tests, interviews, and questionnaires.

3.Data collection and analysis involved the collection and organization of data, followed by data analysis using statistical methods and qualitative analysis. The data collected were analyzed to identify patterns and trends in the data and to answer the research questions.

Recent studies have highlighted the importance of using mixed methods approaches in language research, combining quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis techniques (O'Brien, 2020; Plonsky, 2020). This approach allows for a more comprehensive understanding of the research topic and provides richer data to support the study's findings.

In summary, a well-designed research methodology is essential for the success of language research. It should include a clear research framework, appropriate subject selection and research instruments, and careful data collection and analysis procedures.

3.1. The Research framework

To provide a clear understanding of the study's theoretical foundations and research questions, Figure 1 displays the research framework.

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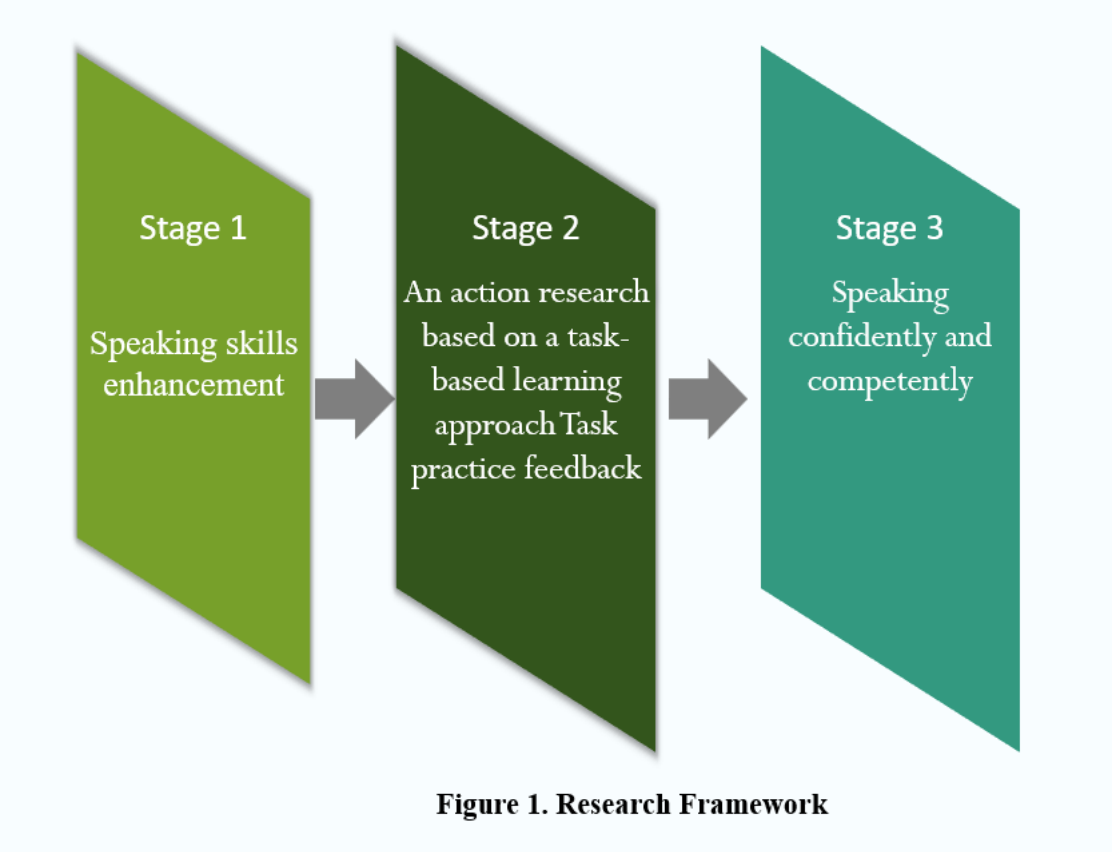


Figure 1. Research Framework

Figure 1 provides a visual representation of how these components are interconnected and guides the selection of research instruments and data analysis procedures.

3.2. Subjects Selection and Research Instruments

The study's participants were 18 students who enrolled in the elective course "Speaking Skills for Effective Communication" as part of the Bachelor of Arts program in English language and literature at a university in India. The course was designed for English majors and minors and focused on enhancing listening and speaking skills for effective communication. The study utilized two research instruments to collect data for the research findings.

3.2.1. Questions for a structured interview

To address the first research question - What factors contribute to the development of speaking skills in ESL learners? - two structured interview questions were utilized: 1) What factors have aided in the development of your speaking skills for oral communication? and 2)

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What recommendations do you have to enhance the speaking competence of Indian ESL students?

3.2.2. Participants' speaking recordings

The speaking performance of the participants was recorded to facilitate analysis of one of the speaking tasks. This task was selected as it was deemed to provide valuable insights into the second research question - What are the strengths and weaknesses of ESL learners in speaking English for oral communication?

3.3. Data Collection and Analysis

The data was collected over a period of 15 weeks during the course. The researchers used 'Strength and weakness' sheets to record the participants' speaking performance in every task, which included feedback from classmates and the instructor. This information was then used to analyze the participants' strengths and weaknesses in speaking English for oral communication, which was the focus of the second research question.

To obtain answers to the first research question, which was about the factors that helped the participants improve their speaking skills, the participants were invited to answer interview questions. The researchers recorded their responses, which were then analyzed to identify common themes and factors that contributed to the development of the participants' speaking skills. For the second research question, the researchers selected one speaking task to analyze, focusing on the participants' speaking content, pronunciation, and language use. The goal of this analysis was to identify the participants' strengths and weaknesses in speaking English for oral communication. Overall, the researchers used multiple methods to collect data for the study, including feedback sheets, interviews, and recordings of speaking tasks, in order to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the participants' speaking skills and the factors that contributed to their development.

4. Findings and Discussions

The study presented its major findings based on the two research questions mentioned earlier. The first research question was about the factors that help EFL learners to improve or develop their speaking skills, and the second research question was about EFL learners'

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strengths and weaknesses in speaking English for oral communication. Apart from these major findings, additional qualitative findings were also documented. The study then provided discussions on each aspect, including the major findings and the additional qualitative findings. Finally, the study summarized the findings and discussions.

4.1. Factors enhancing ESL students' speaking skills.

The findings in this section were derived from interviews conducted with the course participants. Building up confidence in speaking to an audience was reported as a factor that strengthened speaking performance. The tasks based on speaking for special communication in a variety of situations designed into the course also helped participants to prepare for speaking, and once each speaking task was well-prepared, this preparation became an effective strategy to minimize anxiety, and thus maximize speaking confidence. Recent studies have also emphasized the importance of promoting speaking confidence and designing appropriate tasks for the English skills development of EFL/ESL learners (Kim & Tracy-Ventura, 2020; Yang, 2021). In addition, the findings suggest that frequent exposure to English materials, such as listening to music, watching movies, and accessing multimedia websites, can enhance participants' speaking skills (Lee, 2020). It is worth noting that speaking and listening skills are intertwined in terms of language learning and development, and thus, it is important to promote both skills (Bae & Kim, 2019). Suggestions for EFL learners' speaking improvement include a variety of course activities and seeking opportunities to speak in real situations, which have been supported by recent studies (Dornyei & Kormos, 2020; Kaur, 2021). Overall, the findings of this study suggest that building speaking confidence, designing appropriate speaking tasks, and promoting exposure to English materials and real-world speaking situations are effective strategies for enhancing ESL learners' speaking skills.

Table 1. Factors enhancing ESL students' speaking skills

Participant	Factors
1	Confidence is crucial for speaking English. Building up confidence should be a priority to improve performance.
2	Watching foreign movies and listening to songs can improve pronunciation. Confidence is essential for speaking.

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Participant	Factors
3	The course has helped to build confidence. Listening to news, songs, and TV programs also enhances speaking skills.

4.2. Strengths and Weaknesses of Speaking Performance in Indian ESL Learners

The study examined the speaking abilities of Indian students. The study involved analyzing data that was collected from recordings of a speaking task and categorizing the data based on content, pronunciation, and language use.

The findings revealed that the participants demonstrated strong speaking skills when it came to discussing a variety of real-world topics. They were able to use a broad vocabulary and express their ideas clearly. However, the study also uncovered certain weaknesses in the participants' pronunciation and grammatical structure. Specifically, the participants had trouble with word stress, final sounds of certain English words, and using tenses correctly.

The study also found that allowing the participants to choose their own topics for discussion had a positive impact on their confidence levels and motivation to speak. Additionally, the use of a wide range of vocabulary related to the selected topics led to an automatic activation of the English lexicon of the ESL learners.

The study concluded that the strengths and weaknesses of speaking performance in Indian ESL learners are as follows:

- **Strengths:**
    - Ability to discuss a variety of real-world topics.
    - Use of a broad vocabulary.
    - Ability to express ideas clearly.
- ***Weaknesses:***
    - Pronunciation issues such as word stress and final sounds.
    - Grammatical structure.

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The study also recommended that teachers of ESL learners in India focus on the following areas to help improve the speaking skills of their students:

- Providing opportunities for students to choose their own topics for discussion.
- Giving feedback and comments on students' speaking.
- Teaching students about the importance of word stress and final sounds.
- Providing instruction on grammatical structure.

The study's findings suggest that the speaking skills of Indian ESL learners can be improved by providing them with opportunities to practice speaking in a variety of contexts, receiving feedback on their speaking, and learning about the specific aspects of pronunciation and grammar that they need to improve.

Table 2. The strengths and weaknesses of speaking

Strengths	Examples	Weaknesses	Examples
Diverse range of topics	Topics such as Indian cuisine, traditional dance forms, Indian mythology, tourism in India, Indian festivals, etc.	Pronunciation	Errors in word stress, such as in the words opportunity and inauguration. Final sound errors, such as the absence of final /z/ sound in buzz, and /s/ sound in runs and books.
Rich vocabulary	Vocabulary related to the selected topics such as masala, Kathakali, Ramayana, backwaters, Diwali, etc.	Grammar	Errors in subject-verb agreement, such as "He don't like spicy food." or incorrect use of articles, such as "I want to buy a pen from the shop." instead of "I want to buy the pen from the shop."

5. Conclusion and Implications

This qualitative action research aimed to investigate the factors that facilitate the development of speaking skills in Indian ESL undergraduate students. The study revealed that a confidence factor was gradually developed over a 15-week period of a regular listening and speaking course. A task-based pedagogical design was implemented, which provided opportunities for the course participants to speak in various situations. This helped to activate 'passive' vocabulary and expand the English lexicon through diverse speaking topics. The creativity of topics was considered a strength, while errors in pronunciation and grammatical structure were identified as weaknesses.

The findings of the study suggest that ESL learners in India can improve their speaking skills by enhancing their listening skills. This can be achieved by activities such as listening to music, watching movies, and practicing listening and speaking skills from multimedia websites. The task-based learning design employed in this research could be applied to promote a particular skill or integrated-skill pedagogy in EFL/ESL and other language learning contexts in India.

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