

Learning By Doing: Enhancing Speaking Skills Of Engineering Students Through The Tbl Approach

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ABSTRACT : *There have been progressive demands from students of professional courses like engineering and business administration to help them enhance their oral proficiency in English for their academic, professional and social needs. The present study makes an attempt to find out the impact of a 20-hour oral proficiency course in the first year engineering programme at VFSTR (Vignan's Foundation for Science, Technology & Research), a deemed-to-be university situated in the state of Andhra Pradesh of India. The objective of the course was to enhance English proficiency skills of students through micro-presentations. A four-cycle lesson plans were designed as a part of curriculum based on TBLT (Task-based Language Teaching) method and administered through team teaching, to provide learners with opportunities to speak through various tasks like extempore, picture description, role play and group discussion. The paper will dwell on the teacher discussions (pre & post-delivery reflections) on the suitability and efficacy of the tasks adopted; the initial student inhibitions observed; subsequent tweaking of the materials to provide prompts (for the pictures) and key words for the tasks administered, which eventually led to improved outcomes in student performance. On the whole, the results of the tests highlight that there is a significant growth in the speaking skills among learners.*

Key words: *Speaking Skills, Curriculum, Task-based Learning, Oral Presentation*

1. INTRODUCTION

Speaking which constitutes several micro skills (Brown, 2010) is a highly sought after skill by budding engineering and management students as their professional contexts require them to be highly persuasive and effective as communicators. Increased emphasis is being laid on training graduates in developing the English language as English is universally used as a mean for academic and professional communication, especially in the 'internet world' (Boonkit, 2010). As there is a high demand to enhance speaking skills, Bailey (2005) and Goh (2007) have suggested ways to focus on speaking skills through syllabus modifications, task development and finding appropriate pedagogy.

In the present context, students studying undergraduate courses come with diverse backgrounds; cultural, educational and economic. Their language competencies also differ based on the learners' educational backgrounds; English medium or regional medium. Further, according to the recent report of Aspiring Minds (2018) many engineering students

are found to fail miserably on the communication front although they may be reasonably equipped on their domain related knowledge. Hence, there is a need to enhance students' oral proficiency in English which will enable them to perform well in their academic as well as professional contexts.

Literature Review

The literature review includes significance of speaking skills and task-based approach.

The Significance of Speaking Skills

In contrast to reading and listening, which are receptive skills, speaking and writing are productive skills. Among all these four basic skills, speaking skills are vital for effective communication (Zaremba, 2006) and leadership once students enter their professional spheres. Effective speaking skills thus have a utilitarian purpose more so in the contexts of job training, interviews, business interactions, presentations and other contexts (Osborn, Osborn, & Osborn, 2008). In the Indian context though English as a second language is taught from an early stage, most of the students, not only those from rural areas, but even those coming from two tier cities and towns receive very little exposure to speaking English in their primary and secondary classrooms. This could be attributed to most State Boards which oversee Secondary Education in India do not have any component of assessment or testing on speaking or listening in the language curriculum. Since only those skills which are trained or developed in the classroom get assessed or evaluated later in the exam, students tend to focus mostly on practising reading and writing skills. Likewise, teachers are found to give more priority to reading and writing skills as they are the ones which get tested at the end. Once students enter the tertiary level, they begin to realise the need of speaking skills for their future career, particularly their job interviews and professional demands.

While training on speaking skills, students' progress from fluency to accuracy. To start with, learners are provided tasks and advised to speak intelligibly and coherently without worrying too much on committing errors, i.e., accuracy. This enhances their fluency (Tam, 1997). Another way to enhance students' fluency in speaking is through developing students' confidence. Students are persuaded to believe, by the teacher that their language resources are adequate to start with and they should attempt to speak spontaneously without too much hesitation. Confidence is directly co-related with competence, and they are the two major factors which help learners to develop their speaking skills (Boonkit, 2010). According to Patil (2008) the language teacher should make sincere efforts to ensure an encouraging environment where learners feel confident enough to shed their inhibitions and speak without being inhibited by the fear of committing errors. Teachers should be observant while assuming a non-judgemental manner in the classroom. Pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary are other aspects which are to be subsequently focused while striving for fluency.

Task-based Learning Approach

Following the communicative language teaching, the task-based pedagogy came into vogue from the "Bangalore Project" (Prabhu, 1987) where students were found to learn more efficiently when their minds were more on the task, rather than on the language they were using. The focus of this approach is on generating meaning and is less preoccupied with the form of the language. Emphasis is laid equally on the process of learning and not just on the content and information shared. This approach is based on the situational oral approach

(SOS) where situations or contexts are given to the learners to perform. Learners develop their speaking skills when the tasks are aligned with situations of the real world (Boonkit, 2010). In the present study, the task-based approach has been implemented as part of curriculum where learners were given situations to enact in the classroom. They include short presentations, picture descriptions, role plays and group discussions.

The Present Study

The objective of this project is to evaluate and develop the overall English Language Proficiency of first year technical graduates, 72-75% of who hail from rural and suburban backgrounds. A sample of 64 students was taken, of which 39 students are boys and the remaining 25 are girls. Overall proficiency of the students was assessed by awarding a Score i.e., based on a holistic impression and Criteria Wise Score was awarded based on aspects of Fluency, Vocabulary, Grammar, and Pronunciation. Four cycles of speaking tasks, each with duration of three minutes were assigned to each student. The tasks ranged from speaking on General Topics, Picture Description to Group Discussion and Role Play.

The initial task involved students selecting a topic of their choice from the given list and thinking on it for over a minute before being invited to speak on it for a minute. It was observed that about 55-60% of the students did not have the adequate lexical resources to develop the scope of the topic given. On the one-minute task, they spoke with great hesitation, taking long pauses and ran dry after 20-25 seconds. About 30% of the students could muster the appropriate vocabulary to achieve the task but lacked sufficient control of the grammar structures to speak with flexibility on the given topic. In the second cycle, students were given picture tasks and asked to describe the pictures using appropriate functional language. Initially students grappled for ideas and words to complete the task. On observing their difficulty, the teachers offered them three to four key words as prompts to complete the task. This proved to be really helpful. Students were quickly able to develop on the prompts and speak with improved fluency. Teachers offered feedback to each student and also invited peer feedback. The classroom became all charged up as students began to vie with each other to take the opportunity to speak as well as offer their observations on their peer performance. In the third cycle, students were organised into six different groups and given topics pertinent to their area of interest ranging from current education system to responsible use of cell phone. 15 minutes were allowed and a raconteur was appointed in each of the groups who also played the role of a moderator to guide the discussion. At the end of the end of the group discussion, each group was invited to make a team presentation of their key points before the rest of the class. In the final cycle, students were given flash cards with an information gap filling task. The cards had cues, following which students were asked to perform a role play. The task was found to be most effective because students were found to be highly interactive, as they spoke with great fluency using the functional language appropriate to the task.

The following criteria were used to evaluate individual students:

Area(s)	Aspect	Score	Total
Criteria wise Score	Fluency	2.5	10 marks
	Vocabulary	2.5	
	Grammar	2.5	
	Pronunciation	2.5	
Overall Score	Task Achievement	-	10 marks

	20 marks
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Table 1: Evaluation Criteria for assessing speaking skills

2. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The data thus collected and scored was analysed by using relevant statistical techniques like Mean.

The following table (Table-1) represents the average values of overall and criteria wise performance of students. There were four cycles of speaking tests conducted during the study.

Table 2: Average values of Overall and Criteria wise scores in each cycle

No. of cycles	Average Values		
	Overall Score (10 marks)	Criteria Wise Score (10 marks)	Overall +Criteria Wise (20 marks)
I	5.19	5.73	10.92
II	5.82	5.73	11.38
III	6.52	5.66	12.19
IV	7.39	7.27	14.65

The average scores in overall speaking related to all the four cycles were 5.19, 5.82, 6.52 and 7.36. It is evident from the data collected that there is a significant improvement on overall speaking skills from one cycle to another cycle among the students. Further, 5.73, 5.73, 5.66 and 7.27 are the average criteria wise scores in I, II, III and IV cycles which is evaluated on Fluency, Vocabulary, Grammar and Accuracy, and Pronunciation. The results highlight that in the first two cycles students achieved the same score, but in the third cycle the performance was slightly low. However, the performance was the highest in the fourth cycle. It was found that there is a fluctuation in the criteria wise score. On the whole students showed significant improvement on aspects like Fluency and Grammar, but a little more intensive practice is required to enhance the students on aspects like Vocabulary and Pronunciation.

The average score values i.e., Overall + Criteria wise are shown in Figure 2 and the values are tabulated in Table 1 with respect to all four cycles. The overall average values of I, II, III and IV cycles are 10.92, 11.38, 12.19 and 14.65 respectively. This indicates that there is a significant improvement among the students from one cycle to another cycle.

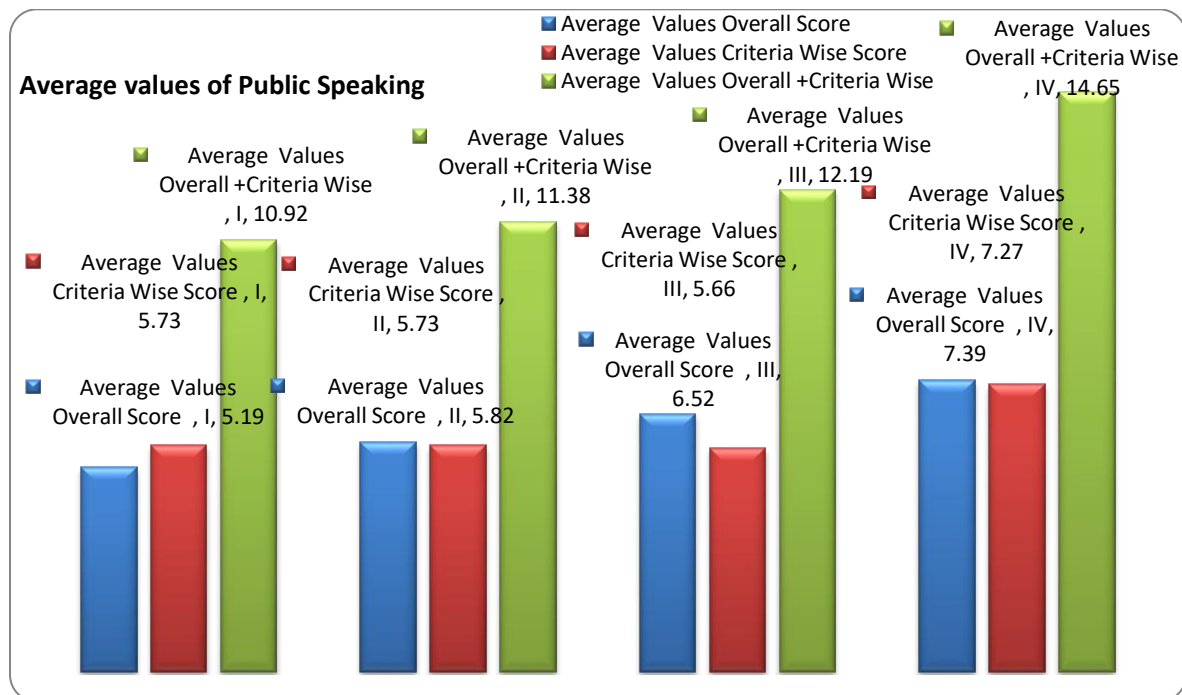


Figure1. Average score values of overall, criteria wise as well as the total scores of students in the four cycles

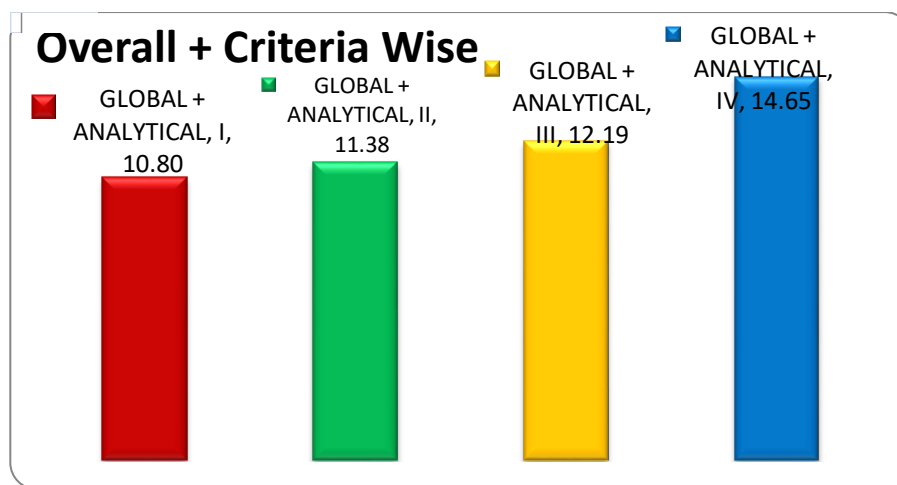


Figure2. Overall Average score values of students in four cycles

Figure 3 represents three pie graphs of each cycle i.e., in I cycle 22%., II cycle 23%., III cycle 25% and IV cycle 28 %, which reveals the overall growth of the students in public speaking in each and every cycle conducted.

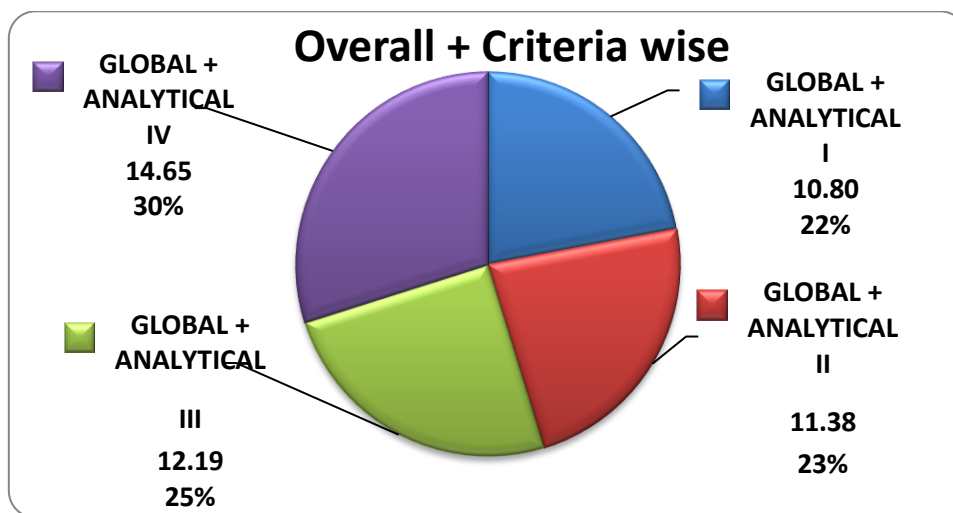


Figure3. Overall growth of the student's s in public speaking

Achievement levels among boys and girls in cycle I and II

The following table (Table 3) represents the average score values of boys and girls in the overall and criteria wise with total cores in Cycle-1.

GENDER	CYCLE I			CYCLE 2		
	O1	C1	O1+C1	O2	C2	O2+C2
BOYS (39)	5.13	5.23	10.36	5.71	5.60	11.14
GIRLS (25)	5.18	6.29	11.46	5.96	5.90	11.66

The average overall score values of boys and girls as shown in Table 2 highlights that cycle I is 5.13, 5.18 and in cycle II were 5.71 and 5.96. It is clear from the findings that the significant difference between boys and girls in the overall score in cycle I and II. And also in both the cycles' girls' performance is better than boys. The criteria wise score of boys and girls in cycle I are 5.23, 6.29 and cycle II the values are 5.60, 5.90. There is significant difference between boys and girls in criteria wise assessment scores in the both the cycles. Thus, in the Criteria wise assessment also the performance of girls is found to be slightly better than the boys.

Achievement levels among boys and girls in cycle III and IV

The following table (Table4) represents the average score values of boys and girls in the overall as well as criteriawise assessment in cycle III and IV.

GENDER	CYCLE3			CYCLE 4		
	O3	C3	O3+C4	O4	C4	O4+C4
BOYS (39)	6.39	5.53	11.91	7.33	7.12	14.44
GIRLS (25)	6.69	5.83	12.52	7.45	7.45	14.90

The overall average score values as tabulated in table 4 of boys and girls in cycle III is 6.39, 6.69 and cycle IV is 7.33, 7.45. In cycle III and IV girls performance is better than Boys and there is slight significant difference between boys and girls in both the cycles III and IV.

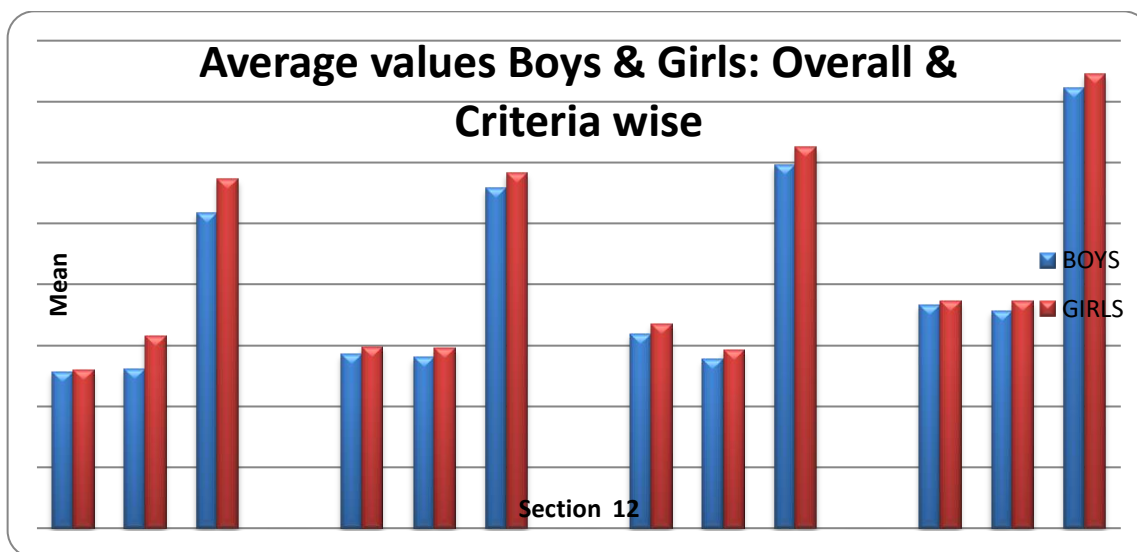


Figure 4. Average values of boys and girls in all cycles

Figure 4 represents the overall performance of the boys and girls in overall, criteria wise and overall. It is clear from the graph that there is a significant difference between boys and girls.

3. CONCLUSION

The present study highlights how speaking skills can be enhanced through short presentations. This study recommends the use of practice with TBL approach to enhance speaking skills where learners get opportunities to speak and interact in the second language. Language teachers should design and develop materials keeping this aspect in mind to ensure that each learner is provided enough opportunities in the classroom to speak. To conclude this paper, a Chinese proverb says, “Give a Man a Fish, and You Feed Him for a Day. Teach a Man To Fish, and You Feed Him for a Lifetime.” In other words, teaching spoken skills is akin to teaching a student how to fish.

4. REFERENCES

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