



Research Article

# Challenges Faced by Rural College Students in Developing English-Speaking Skills: A Study of Undergraduate Learners

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## Abstract

English speaking proficiency has become increasingly important for higher education, employability, professional communication, and participation in a rapidly changing global environment. However, many undergraduate students from rural backgrounds continue to experience difficulties in developing effective spoken English. These difficulties are not limited to grammar or vocabulary; they are also associated with psychological, social, educational, cultural, and environmental factors. The present paper examines the major challenges that rural college students may encounter while developing English speaking skills and discusses possible pedagogical responses. The paper adopts a descriptive and conceptual approach and does not claim to present primary survey data. It draws upon existing literature and educational perspectives concerning language anxiety, limited exposure, mother-tongue influence, inadequate opportunities for oral practice, lack of confidence, pronunciation difficulties, vocabulary limitations, examination-oriented teaching, and unequal access to learning resources. The paper argues that rural students' difficulties should not be interpreted simply as individual academic weaknesses. Rather, they should be understood within the broader linguistic and educational environment in which learners develop. The paper proposes a learner-centred framework based on supportive classroom interaction, peer learning, communicative activities, vocabulary development, pronunciation practice, extensive listening, technology-supported exposure, and continuous formative assessment. It concludes that creating a safe and encouraging speaking environment is as important as teaching linguistic knowledge. A systematic shift from examination-oriented language instruction towards communication-oriented learning can contribute significantly to improving the spoken English competence and confidence of rural undergraduate learners.

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**KEYWORDS:** Rural Students, English Speaking Skills, Oral Communication, Language Anxiety, Mother-Tongue Influence, English Language Learning, Undergraduate Education, Communicative Competence.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

English occupies a significant position in Indian higher education. It is widely used as a medium of academic communication, professional interaction, digital communication, employment, and access to international knowledge. For undergraduate students, therefore, English proficiency is no longer restricted to passing a compulsory language course. The ability to communicate ideas clearly and confidently in English can influence students' participation in academic activities, interviews, presentations, seminars, group discussions, and future professional opportunities.

Despite the importance of English, the development of speaking skills remains a major challenge for many learners. The difficulty becomes particularly visible among students who come from rural and semi-rural backgrounds. Students may possess adequate knowledge of basic grammar or may perform reasonably well in written examinations but still hesitate when asked to speak English in front of others. Research concerning rural Indian learners has associated these difficulties with limited exposure, psychological barriers, inadequate resources, and insufficient opportunities for meaningful oral communication.

Speaking is different from merely knowing a language. A student may know grammatical rules but may not be able to retrieve appropriate vocabulary quickly during a conversation. Similarly, a learner may understand an English passage but feel nervous while speaking. Oral communication requires the simultaneous coordination of vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, fluency, listening, confidence, and interactional skills.

Rural students often learn English in environments where their mother tongue dominates everyday communication. Consequently, English may remain largely a classroom subject rather than a language used naturally for communication. The limited availability of English-speaking environments can reduce opportunities for practice. Recent literature on rural education has identified limited exposure to English, weak foundational skills, mother-tongue interference, low confidence, speaking anxiety, socio-economic constraints, inadequate resources, and examination-oriented pedagogy among the interconnected barriers affecting rural English learners.

It is therefore important to examine the problem from a broader perspective. Instead of asking only why a student cannot speak English fluently, educators need to ask what linguistic, psychological, pedagogical, social, and environmental conditions influence the student's ability to speak. The present paper focuses on these challenges in the context of undergraduate rural learners and discusses practical approaches that teachers and colleges can adopt to create more supportive opportunities for spoken English development.

## 2. Background of the Study

The transition from school to college can be particularly demanding for students who have previously studied in regional-language or bilingual environments. Students may encounter greater academic expectations for English

communication at the undergraduate level. Presentations, seminars, viva-voce examinations, interviews, and project work may require students to communicate in English.

However, students' previous educational experiences may not have provided sufficient opportunities for spontaneous speaking. In traditional examination-oriented settings, students often devote greater attention to reading textbooks, memorising answers, learning grammatical rules, and preparing written examinations. Speaking may receive comparatively less classroom time.

Research on undergraduate education in rural Indian colleges has highlighted the challenges created by vernacular-medium schooling, inadequate teaching resources, and limited exposure to modern language-learning practices. This situation can create a gap between knowledge of English and ability to use English.

A student may know the correct tense but hesitate to formulate a sentence spontaneously. Another student may understand a teacher's English but avoid responding because of fear of making mistakes. Thus, speaking proficiency involves both linguistic competence and the learner's willingness to communicate.

## 3. Statement of the Problem

The problem addressed in this paper may be stated as follows:

**“Challenges Faced by Rural College Students in Developing English Speaking Skills: A Study of Undergraduate Learners.”**

The focus is on identifying and conceptually examining the major barriers that may prevent rural undergraduate students from developing confidence, fluency, accuracy, pronunciation, and willingness to communicate in English.

## 4. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. To identify the major challenges faced by rural college students in developing English speaking skills.
2. To examine the linguistic factors affecting students' spoken English.
3. To explore psychological barriers such as fear, hesitation, lack of confidence, and speaking anxiety.
4. To examine the role of mother-tongue influence in English speaking.
5. To understand the effect of limited exposure and inadequate opportunities for English conversation.
6. To examine the influence of classroom practices on the development of speaking skills.
7. To suggest practical and learner-centred strategies for improving spoken English among rural undergraduate students.
8. To propose a supportive framework for developing confidence and communicative competence.

## 5. Research Questions

1. What are the major difficulties experienced by rural undergraduate learners while speaking English?
2. How does limited exposure to English affect speaking development?

3. What psychological factors discourage students from speaking English?
4. How does mother-tongue influence affect English pronunciation, vocabulary, and sentence formation?
5. How can classroom practices provide greater opportunities for meaningful English communication?
6. What pedagogical strategies can help rural students develop confidence and fluency?

## 6. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Research on rural English education indicates that speaking difficulties are multidimensional. They cannot be explained solely by lack of grammatical knowledge.

Research on Indian rural students has reported that psychological obstacles, limited facilities, anxiety, self-image, and inadequate exposure can influence English-speaking ability and has emphasised the need for appropriate instructional support for rural learners.

Research on rural engineering students has similarly identified student reticence, anxiety, procrastination, and deficits in other language skills as important speaking challenges. Such research has also highlighted supportive environments, sustained oral practice, continuous assessment, and regular revision.

Recent reviews of rural English education have categorised major barriers into limited exposure, weak foundational skills, mother-tongue interference, low confidence and speaking anxiety, socio-economic constraints, inadequate learning resources, and examination-oriented pedagogy.

Research involving rural learners has also reported challenges including fear of expressing ideas, limited exposure to spoken English, low motivation, mother-tongue dependence, and large classroom sizes.

Research on language anxiety suggests that learners' emotional responses are closely connected with language learning. Studies involving predominantly rural Indian college students have found that language anxiety can be an important issue when English is used as the language of academic study.

These studies indicate that the rural English-learning problem involves several interconnected dimensions rather than one isolated cause.

## 7. Research Gap

Although considerable research has examined English learning among rural students, several areas deserve continued attention. First, many studies concentrate on school learners or technical/engineering students, while the experiences of students studying in general undergraduate colleges deserve greater attention.

Second, speaking difficulties are sometimes treated primarily as linguistic deficiencies. However, confidence, classroom atmosphere, peer reactions, fear of negative evaluation, and opportunities for authentic communication can significantly influence students' willingness to speak.

Third, rural learners should not be viewed as a homogeneous group. Their educational backgrounds, exposure to digital

resources, family environments, previous medium of instruction, and individual motivation can vary considerably.

Therefore, a more holistic framework is needed—one that views speaking development as an interaction between language knowledge, psychological readiness, social environment, classroom pedagogy, and opportunities for practice.

## 8. Major Challenges Faced by Rural College Students

### 8.1 Limited Exposure to Spoken English

Exposure plays a major role in language development. Students who rarely hear or use English outside the classroom have fewer opportunities to develop natural listening and speaking habits. In rural settings, everyday communication generally takes place in the regional language. As a result, English may remain restricted to textbooks, examinations, or formal classroom instruction. Limited exposure can affect listening comprehension, pronunciation, vocabulary, sentence patterns, fluency, and confidence. The problem is therefore not necessarily a lack of intelligence or ability. Rather, students may simply have fewer opportunities to interact with the language.

### 8.2 Fear of Making Mistakes

Fear of grammatical or pronunciation errors is one of the strongest barriers to classroom participation. Students may worry that classmates will laugh at them, that they will pronounce a word incorrectly, or that their sentence will be grammatically wrong. Such thoughts may cause students to remain silent. Avoiding speaking prevents students from receiving the practice necessary to improve. Thus, fear can create a cycle: Fear → Avoidance → Less Practice → Low Fluency → More Fear. Breaking this cycle requires an environment where mistakes are treated as a normal part of learning.

### 8.3 Lack of Confidence

Confidence is closely associated with willingness to communicate. A student who believes that others speak better English may compare themselves negatively with peers. Such comparison can reduce participation. Confidence does not develop merely through motivational speeches. It develops through repeated successful experiences. Small speaking activities can therefore be valuable. A student may first speak for thirty seconds, then one minute, and gradually participate in longer discussions.

### 8.4 Limited Vocabulary

Vocabulary shortage is another major obstacle. Students often understand words when reading but cannot recall them quickly while speaking. This difference between passive vocabulary and active vocabulary can create hesitation. Instead of encouraging students to memorise long lists of words, teachers can focus on useful expressions, everyday vocabulary, topic-based words, sentence patterns, and contextual practice.

Vocabulary becomes useful for speaking only when learners repeatedly use it in meaningful situations.

### 8.5 Mother-Tongue Influence

The mother tongue naturally influences the learning of another language. Students may transfer pronunciation patterns, sentence structures, word order, or expressions from their first language into English. Such transfer is a normal linguistic phenomenon. In a multilingual environment such as India, teachers should therefore avoid presenting the mother tongue as an enemy of English learning. Appropriate contrastive activities can help learners understand differences between English and their familiar language.

### 8.6 Pronunciation Difficulties

Pronunciation problems can make students reluctant to speak. Students may have difficulty with unfamiliar English sounds, stress, intonation, word endings, consonant clusters, and connected speech. Pronunciation teaching should not necessarily aim at producing a particular foreign accent. The primary goal should be clear and intelligible communication. Regular listening and repetition activities can help learners notice and practise unfamiliar sounds.

### 8.7 Lack of Speaking Opportunities

One of the most important classroom challenges is insufficient speaking time. If a class consists primarily of teacher explanation and student note-taking, students may receive very little opportunity to produce spoken English. Speaking is a skill that requires practice. Classroom time should therefore include pair conversations, role plays, group discussions, short presentations, interviews, storytelling, problem-solving tasks, debates, and question-answer activities.

### 8.8 Examination-Oriented Learning

When academic success is measured mainly through written examinations, students naturally prioritise writing. Grammar rules, textbook questions, essays, and memorised answers may receive greater attention than spontaneous communication. This can produce students who can write an examination answer but struggle to express the same idea orally. A balanced approach should therefore integrate speaking with reading and writing rather than treating it as a separate or optional skill.

### 8.9 Peer Pressure and Fear of Negative Evaluation

Peers can either support or discourage language learning. A student may hesitate because of fear that classmates will laugh at mistakes. This problem can become particularly serious when students have different levels of English proficiency within the same classroom. Teachers should create a culture in which mistakes are corrected respectfully and students are encouraged to support one another.

### 8.10 Limited Access to Learning Resources

Although digital resources have expanded considerably, access and effective use are not uniform. Some students may have

limited access to reliable internet connectivity, suitable devices, language laboratories, or structured digital learning materials. Even when students have smartphones, they may not know how to use digital resources systematically for language development. Teachers can therefore guide students towards purposeful activities such as listening practice, vocabulary building, pronunciation exercises, and short speaking recordings.

## 9. Psychological Dimension of Speaking

English speaking is not merely a linguistic activity; it is also a psychological experience. A learner may possess adequate vocabulary but remain silent because of anxiety. Research among rural learners has repeatedly highlighted speaking anxiety, fear of negative evaluation, and classroom apprehension as relevant factors.

A supportive classroom should therefore reduce unnecessary psychological pressure. The teacher's role is particularly important. Instead of immediately interrupting every grammatical mistake, teachers can allow students to complete their ideas and provide feedback afterwards. The objective should be: Communication first → confidence development → gradual accuracy improvement.

## 10. Proposed Pedagogical Framework

### Step 1: Create a Safe Speaking Environment

Teachers should establish a classroom rule that mistakes are acceptable and ridicule is not.

### Step 2: Begin with Familiar Topics

Students should initially speak about topics connected with their everyday experiences such as family, village/town, college, hobbies, festivals, local environment, education, and future aspirations. Familiar content reduces the cognitive burden of simultaneously thinking about ideas and language.

### Step 3: Move from Pair Work to Group Work

Some students may not feel comfortable speaking before the entire class. Pair activities provide a less threatening starting point. The progression can be: Individual → Pair → Small Group → Whole Class.

### Step 4: Introduce Short Speaking Tasks

Students can begin with 30–60 second speaking activities and gradually move towards longer presentations.

### Step 5: Use Role Play

Role plays provide realistic communication situations such as student and teacher, customer and shopkeeper, interviewer and candidate, doctor and patient, tourist and guide, and librarian and student.

### Step 6: Develop Active Vocabulary

New vocabulary should immediately be used in sentences and conversations.

**Step 7: Integrate Listening and Speaking**

Students should regularly listen to understandable English before being asked to produce it. Listening provides models of pronunciation, vocabulary, rhythm, and sentence patterns.

**Step 8: Provide Constructive Feedback**

Feedback should focus on a manageable number of errors rather than correcting every sentence.

**Step 9: Encourage Self-Assessment**

Students can maintain a simple speaking diary recording what they spoke about, new words used, difficulties experienced, and improvements noticed.

**Step 10: Use Technology Purposefully**

Technology can provide additional exposure beyond classroom hours. However, digital tools should supplement—not replace—teacher guidance and human interaction.

**11. Role of the English Teacher**

The English teacher is not merely a provider of grammatical knowledge. In a speaking-focused classroom, the teacher becomes a facilitator, motivator, language model, activity designer, feedback provider, and confidence builder.

Teachers should recognise that students enter the classroom with different levels of exposure and confidence. A rural student's hesitation should not automatically be interpreted as lack of interest. It may reflect limited prior opportunities, fear of mistakes, or unfamiliarity with English-speaking situations.

**12. Role of Peer Learning**

Peer learning can be particularly effective because students may feel less anxious while communicating with classmates. A structured peer-learning programme can include the following progression:

- Week 1–2: Self-introduction and simple conversations
- Week 3–4: Picture description and storytelling
- Week 5–6: Pair interviews
- Week 7–8: Group discussions
- Week 9–10: Role plays
- Week 11–12: Short presentations and debates

Such gradual progression can provide repeated opportunities for oral practice.

**13. Educational Implications****For Teachers**

Teachers should increase the proportion of classroom time devoted to meaningful communication.

**For Colleges**

Colleges can organise English speaking clubs, language labs, conversation hours, presentation activities, inter-class discussions, and peer-learning programmes.

**For Curriculum Designers**

Speaking activities should receive greater importance in language courses and assessment.

**For Students**

Students should understand that fluency develops gradually through regular practice. Perfection should not be treated as a prerequisite for speaking.

**For Institutions in Rural Areas**

Institutional support should focus on equitable access to language-learning opportunities, teacher development, digital resources, and communicative teaching practices.

**14. Limitations of the Present Paper**

The present paper is conceptual and descriptive in nature. It does not claim to report primary data collected from a particular college or group of students. Consequently, no statistical findings, percentages, correlations, or experimental outcomes have been presented. The challenges discussed are based on synthesis of existing literature and pedagogical reasoning. Future researchers may conduct empirical studies involving rural undergraduate students from different colleges and regions.

**15. Suggestions for Future Research**

- Rural and urban students through comparative studies.
- The relationship between speaking anxiety and English proficiency.
- The effect of peer learning on speaking confidence.
- The effectiveness of role plays in improving oral communication.
- The impact of English-speaking clubs.
- The use of digital resources for rural English learners.
- The relationship between mother-tongue influence and pronunciation.
- Gender and socio-economic differences in speaking confidence.
- The effect of task-based language teaching on oral proficiency.
- Longitudinal studies examining improvement over one academic year.

A particularly useful future study would combine a questionnaire with a speaking assessment so that students' perceptions and actual speaking performance can be examined together.

**16. CONCLUSION**

Developing English speaking skills among rural undergraduate students is a complex educational challenge. The difficulties faced by learners are not limited to grammar, vocabulary, or pronunciation. They are connected with limited exposure, lack of opportunities for communication, fear of mistakes, low confidence, speaking anxiety, mother-tongue influence, examination-oriented teaching, peer pressure, and unequal access to learning resources.

Existing research supports the view that these barriers are interconnected rather than isolated. Therefore, simply asking students to “speak more English” may not be sufficient. Students need structured opportunities, supportive teachers, meaningful activities, constructive feedback, and a classroom environment in which mistakes are considered a natural part of learning.

The most important shift required is from knowledge-centred English teaching to communication-centred English learning.

Rural students should not be viewed through a deficit perspective. Their difficulties often reflect differences in exposure and opportunity rather than differences in potential. When learners receive sustained opportunities to listen, speak, interact, make mistakes, receive feedback, and try again, their confidence can gradually develop.

Ultimately, improving English speaking skills among rural college students requires a partnership between students, teachers, institutions, and educational policymakers. A supportive and inclusive language-learning environment can help transform English from an examination subject into a practical communication skill.

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