

Challenges and strategies in teaching speaking skills to the rural engineering students: A case study



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ABSTRACT

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Identifying and addressing speaking challenges is crucial for teachers to foster language acquisition. Additionally, the pedagogical approach employed by language teachers exerts a profound influence on students' linguistic development. Therefore, the present research focuses on oral difficulties faced by rural technical students and outlines tailored strategies for speaking improvement according to their specific needs. Data is collected through a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods in two engineering institutions affiliated with Jharkhand University of Technology, Ranchi India. The data instruments include questionnaires, interviews, observations and video recordings. Speaking challenges identified include student reticence, procrastination, anxiety and deficits in other language skills. Remedial strategies, implemented for one year, involved creating an encouraging environment, emphasizing sustained participation in speaking exercises, integrating continuous oral assessments, consistent practice and revision. The research result highlights the success of these approaches in demonstrating commendable proficiency in speaking skills among target students. Therefore, this study contributes valuable insights for teachers aiming to enhance oral communication in similar contexts with potential applications on a global scale. The research findings carry significant implications across various domains, offering numerous noteworthy outcomes and applications in education, language teaching and professional growth. The potential beneficiaries span a wide spectrum including students pursuing technical education, professionals in corporate environments and individuals involved in language acquisition endeavors.

Contribution/ Originality: This study significantly addresses the educational disparity prevalent in underprivileged regions by delving into the speaking challenges faced by rural technical students. This study discovered a successful strategy to improve the speaking of rural students comprised of encouragement, organized activities, frequent practice and continuous oral assessment.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary context of global interdependence in technological pursuit, the mastery of oral communication skills is unequivocally recognized as paramount, carrying substantial academic and professional implications. Therefore, technical graduates are increasingly encouraged to cultivate robust oral communication abilities to excel in both scholarly and occupational domains (Rahman, 2010). Unfortunately, the pedagogical emphasis is primarily confined to the development of reading and writing competencies while the acquisition of oral communication skills especially in the context of English language education in rural areas treated as an instrumental pursuit aimed at examination success within the predominant educational landscape of rural areas.

However, it is imperative to recognize that effective verbal expression constitutes an essential facet of language acquisition encompassing both an art and a skill replete with a diverse spectrum of expertise to be cultivated. Enhancing speaking skills entails a multifaceted approach encompassing theoretical, pragmatic and cognitive aspects. It necessitates not only students' intrinsic motivation and engagement in addressing speaking challenges but also underscores the essential role of teachers in fostering and sustaining their students' enthusiasm for the acquisition and mastery of spoken language. Hence, the organization and instructional methods employed by teachers in their classrooms exert a significant influence on students' assimilation of knowledge (Thijssen, Rege, & Solheim, 2022; Trigwell, Prosser, & Waterhouse, 1999). Numerous scholars have reached the consensus that learning constitutes an ongoing process attainable through consistent practice (Chanani & Wibowo, 2019). Teachers must consistently seek novel approaches for augmenting students' educational experiences by employing innovative pedagogical methods within the classroom to sustain the learning continuum. Nevertheless, a pivotal challenge confronting teachers pertains to the identification and implementation of effective strategies that facilitate students' comfort and proficiency in spoken language acquisition (Santos & Ramírez-Ávila, 2023). Frequently, what proves efficacious for one student may prove unsuitable for another, potentially yielding adverse effects on aspects such as students' emotional well-being (Méndez López & Bautista Tun, 2017). In the context of the present research endeavor, it has become evident that rural English learners face considerable difficulties in mastering spoken language when compared to other language competencies. Consequently, the primary objective of the present study is to elucidate the specific impediments to oral communication faced by rural learners within engineering institutions. Subsequently, the research seeks to devise and implement effective strategies aimed at alleviating these challenges in speaking, ultimately enhancing the oral proficiency of the designated student cohort thereby facilitating students' progression towards attaining oral excellence.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

In rural areas, students pursuing engineering in the contemporary educational landscape face diverse challenges, with a notable facet being the impediments to effectively articulating their thoughts and ideas through spoken communication. This literature review seeks to systematically analyze and synthesize existing research pertaining to the speaking challenges among rural engineering students. This review aims to elucidate the nature, causes and potential mitigating strategies for addressing the speaking challenges within this specific demographic by delving into the scholarly discourse.

2.1. Linguistic Aspects

Numerous researchers have identified speaking as a challenging facet in the realm of language instruction and acquisition. Shinde and Shinde (2022) conducted a recent investigation involving one hundred B.Tech first-year students revealing that proficiency in spoken language acquisition necessitates mastery of precise grammar, pronunciation, vocabulary and understanding of appropriate communication instances and methods. The identified challenges posed significant difficulties for the students resulting in their initial avoidance of participation in speaking activities. Furthermore, the learners themselves articulated their discontent that they are able to read and write in a second language but struggle with spoken proficiency. It can be said that imparting speaking skills among students is challenging for language teachers because it requires the development of linguistic competencies encompassing grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation and fluency among learners (Akhyak & Indramawan, 2013; Brown, 2004; Khan & Ali, 2010; Syakur, 1987). A study by Gregersen and Horwitz (2002) discerned a dichotomy among students wherein some learners exhibit a preference for articulate and fluent English speaking, approaching the proficiency level of native speakers while Dwyer (2000) found learners to adopt reticence and attribute their reluctance to a 'mental block' hindering active engagement in learning English as a foreign language. Several scholars have concurred that learning is an ongoing, iterative process (Chanani & Wibowo, 2019) and prioritizing

'learner-centered' teaching is pivotal to active learning (Weimer, 2002). Therefore, it is imperative to promote a learning environment that encourages students to actively participate regardless of the errors they may experience in the course of their educational journey. Akila and Ilankumaran (2020) asserted that speaking constitutes a multifaceted and productive skill, necessitating sustained attention and continuity in the learning process. Therefore, students who lack opportunities for regular practice often manifest errors in their speaking proficiency.

Bojović (2020) observed that engineering students often used metacognitive strategies in language classes due to explicit teaching and awareness training. The research posits that the efficacy of speaking strategies relies on students' aptitude for applying them to tasks, integrating them with their learning styles and aligning them with other relevant strategies rather than the sheer quantity of strategies employed. Research done by Othman, Mohamed, Powzi, and Jamari (2022) on 22 undergraduates from technical universities investigated that engineering undergraduates often used metacognitive and cognitive strategies in oral presentations. The study suggests active utilization of these strategies for effective goal achievement and problem-solving during oral tasks.

2.2. Emotional and Cognitive Factors

Hanifa (2018) found that students' anxiety is an obstacle to teaching that prevents them from learning. The researcher highlighted that speaking skills involve precise technical terms, structures and context-specific content knowledge, contributing to frequent impediments in teaching and learning due to learners' feelings of fear, anxiety and nervousness. According to Tuan and Mai (2015) and Kasbi and Elahi Shirvan (2017) anxiety is a predominant reason contributing to oral difficulties. They identified a lack of topical knowledge as the cause of high speaking anxiety that made students speak very little or not at all. Moreover, Raja (2017) found that the magnitude of the audience also exerted a substantial influence on the students' performance, potentially rendering it arduous for the student to manage audience engagement particularly in the presence of a sizable audience. Additionally, emotional variables, including apprehension and shyness present hindrances to the acquisition of speaking skills among learners (Santos & Barcelos, 2018; Santos, Veiga, & Vélez-Ruiz, 2020). In addition, Raja and Selvi (2011) noted that the pedagogical approach warrants scrutiny due to individualized challenges in acquiring speaking skills wherein students contend with cognitive overload leading to the rapid erosion of acquired knowledge following examinations. Hence, it is discerned that students tend to adopt an examination-centric approach rather than pursuing language acquisition for communicative proficiency. Santos and Ramírez-Ávila (2023) examined 12 ninth grade participants in a study and posit that teachers should cultivate students' self-assessment capabilities to enable awareness of their learning errors. The researchers noted that participants displayed increased motivation to learn when they recognized improvements in their performance. Moreover, their research elaborated on the significance of visual narratives in facilitating students' self-expression and comprehension of their communicative abilities.

Godwin-Jones (2020) noted the efficacy of a blended learning environment linking the classroom to the real world through language and community for enhanced speaking skills. This encompasses employing blended teaching methods tailored to meet students' requirements (Zamri & Narasuman, 2023). Students play an active role in their education with this blended learning strategy, organizing their own learning through interactive self-study exercises and instructional classes. This methodology provides students with the opportunity to acquire knowledge through inquiry. Nevertheless, a thorough evaluation of blended learning must consider linguistic support, learning resources, activity design and facilitator roles (Shinde & Shinde, 2022). Deep learning engagement is supported by tasks that are both challenging and feasible and strongly associated with the desires of the learners (Van Den Branden, 2016). Rahimi and Zhang (2019) investigated the relationship between motivational beliefs, anxiety and simple and complex tasks. They observed that engaging in more challenging tasks triggers an increased flow in learners, thereby enhancing their focus on mental states and information processing. According to Saville-Troike and Barto (2016) motivation significantly influences the effort learners invest in tasks. Swain, Brooks, and Tocalli-Beller (2002) identified a significant positive impact of pair interaction on second language speaking task

performance. The interdependence of cognitive and affective domains influences learners' willingness to participate in two-way communication providing more learning opportunities through listening, adopting expertise, exchanging ideas and receiving feedback (Moranski & Toth, 2016). Furthermore, task enjoyment and high interest prompt focused thinking in learners. According to Ur (1991) the majority of research has underscored the supreme importance of listening skills in the development of speaking proficiencies. She further elucidates that speaking and listening are intricately interwoven advocating for the design of tasks that afford students ample listening opportunities to enhance their speaking abilities.

2.3. Socio-Cultural Influences

Richards and Renandya (2002) suggested that socio-cultural factors are a determining dimension that influences speech. The findings of Raja and Selvi (2011) suggest the primary factors influencing the difficulties students experience when learning spoken language are the environment, the attitudes of the students and the competence level of the teachers. Hence, teachers should attempt to instill in their students a constructive attitude towards the English language to enhance their learning process. Studies strongly support the positive impact of social interactions on cognitive development in the mother tongue (Lefebvre, Sorenson, Henchion, & Gellynck, 2016; Verga & Kotz, 2013). Second language proficiency has been extensively examined in terms of school influence and family contributions. Furthermore, Shinde and Shinde (2022) observed that the majority of students enrolling in professional speaking courses come from rural, semi-urban or low-exposed urban backgrounds, lacking proficiency in English particularly in speaking skills. They struggle to develop the necessary skills required in a corporate or professional environment due to limited exposure to English. Meskill, Anthony, and Sadykova (2020) and Barrett and Liu (2019) indicated that learners benefit from media interaction with peers, fostering language and social skills development through cultural engagement, feedback and reflective practices. This approach underscores the effectiveness of diverse instructional strategies in enhancing the learning experience.

Technology plays an essential role in language acquisition, offering a variety of possibilities to enhance speaking skills. Parveen (2016) observed that contemporary technological tools not only render the learning process engaging but also attainable, thereby motivating students towards achieving proficiency in speaking. Miangah and Amin (2012) review of Mobile-Assisted Language Learning (MALL) identifies this technology as an important advancement in language learning. A recent study from Bagheri and Mohamadi Zenouzagh (2021) showed that effective technology integrated language learning innovation can connect learners through collaborative activities and allow them to learn through discussing and exchanging their ideas. The use of technology blended with short activities makes learning interactive and interesting. The comprehensive review of the literature underscores the formidable nature of acquiring proficient speaking skills in a second language. The identified challenges span emotional, linguistic and socio-cultural dimensions. Researchers indicate strategies such as self-evaluation, encouragement and technology integration for addressing these challenges but rural areas may not have the necessary infrastructure, educational resources or parental illiteracy and unawareness to make these strategies efficient. This highlights a critical need for targeted interventions to bridge this educational gap in underprivileged regions. Consequently, the present study is motivated by two primary objectives which are tailored to address the specific needs of rural technical students. The first objective entails the identification and examination of the challenges encountered in teaching speaking skills to rural engineering students. The second objective seeks to elucidate effective teaching strategies aimed at enhancing their proficiency in spoken English.

3. METHODOLOGY

Instrument: The present study adopts a mixed-methods research approach encompassing both qualitative and quantitative methodologies. Quantitative data have been acquired through students' questionnaires while

qualitative data have been collected through observational analysis, interviews and the recording of students' video interactions.

Sampling: A convenience sampling technique characterized as a non-probabilistic sampling approach has been employed for the current study. This method was chosen due to its expediency, cost-effectiveness and ease of access to the sample population. Convenience sampling was particularly suitable in this case owing to the geographic proximity of the participants and their willingness to engage in the research.

Setting: The current research is conducted within a 'classroom setting,' comprising a total of six classes per week, spanning two consecutive semesters with each class having a duration of 55 minutes.

Participants: A total of 140 students, consisting of both first-year (session 2018-22) and second-year (session 2017-21) B. Tech students studying at Guru Gobind Singh Educational Society's Technical Campus in Bokaro and K. K. College of Engineering and Management in Dhanbad actively participated in this study. These institutions are affiliated with the Jharkhand University of Technology, Ranchi, India. The data is representative data for the rural students in technical institutions. The study population was divided into two distinct groups based on their residential backgrounds. 100 students hail from rural areas while 40 originate from urban locales. A comparative analysis was subsequently conducted to discern potential similarities and disparities in their speaking abilities attributable to their respective geographic origins. Participants were apprised of the research's nature through exhaustive discussions on research methodologies in adherence to ethical imperatives. Their voluntary participation was contingent upon informed consent affirming the principled conduct of the study. Questionnaires were served to students and research was conducted upon securing their consent.

Data collection: At the outset of this study, students' questionnaires were administered to the participating students of Guru Gobind Singh Educational Society's Technical Campus and K. K. College of Engineering and Management. Additionally, video recordings of the designated student cohort were captured on two occasions: initially, at the commencement of the research, and subsequently following the implementation of the instructional interventions. [Thornbury \(2005\)](#) asserted that assessments are typically conducted both at the initiation and conclusion of language courses or intermittently throughout the course duration.

The student questionnaire is structured into three distinct sections i.e. lack, need and improving speaking to gain insights into students' perspectives regarding their speaking abilities. The questionnaire incorporates Likert scale questions to gauge students' responses. Students were assigned a specific topic along with an explanatory note, two days in advance of their speaking presentation for the video recordings conducted both before and after the instructional sessions. They were provided with instructions to speak on the assigned topic for a duration ranging from 3 to 5 minutes.

4. DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

The students' questionnaire data is analyzed employing a conventional statistical method, namely, the percentage which represents information as a proportion of the total. According to [Chambliss and Russell \(2010\)](#) the *percentage*, regarded as the relative frequency is calculated by dividing the frequency of cases falling within a specific category by the overall number of cases, then multiplying the result by 100. Profiles of the sample of rural students are presented in [Table 1](#) and those of urban students in [Table 2](#). [Tables 1](#) and [2](#) delineate the demographic characteristics of students hailing from rural and urban locales within the region of Jharkhand, respectively. Urban students' exhibit proficiency in six distinct mother tongues constituting approximately half the linguistic diversity observed among their rural counterparts who boast a total of thirteen different mother tongues within their demographic composition as shown below in [Figures P 1](#) and [P 2](#). Notably, a significant proportion of students, numbering 31 (representing 31% of the rural student population) and 35 (comprising 87.5% of the urban students) whose native language is Hindi, manifest a pronounced inclination towards pursuing technical education in contrast to individuals conversant in other regional languages as their vernacular dialect.

Table 1. Rural students' profile.

Sl. no.	Mother tongue	Frequency (%)	Male (F/ %)	Female (F/ %)	JAC (F/ %)		CBSE (F/ %)		Others (F/ %)	
					10 th	12 th	10 th	12 th	10 th	12 th
1	Hindi	31 (31%)	17 (17%)	14 (14%)	12 (12%)	19 (19%)	17 (17%)	9 (9%)	2 (2%)	3 (3%)
2	Bangla	6 (6%)	4 (4%)	2 (2%)	2 (2%)	3 (3%)	2 (2%)	3 (3%)	2 (2%)	-
3	Hindi and Bangla	9 (9%)	5 (5%)	4 (4%)	7 (7%)	8 (8%)	2 (2%)	1 (1%)	-	-
4	Hindi and Khortha	13 (13%)	3 (3%)	10 (10%)	8 (8%)	8 (8%)	5 (5%)	1 (1%)	-	Dip*-4 (4%)
5	Hindi and Bhojpuri	12 (12%)	7 (7%)	5 (5%)	10 (10%)	9 (9%)	2 (2%)	3 (3%)	-	-
6	Khortha	5 (5%)	3 (3%)	2 (2%)	2 (2%)	4 (4%)	3 (3%)	1 (1%)	-	-
7	Hindi and Magahi	3 (3%)	3 (3%)	-	2 (2%)	2 (2%)	1 (1%)	1 (1%)	-	-
8	Bhojpuri	3 (3%)	2 (2%)	1 (1%)	1 (1%)	1 (1%)	2 (2%)	1 (1%)	-	1 (1%)
9	Hindi and Urdu	5 (5%)	3 (3%)	2 (2%)	2 (2%)	1 (1%)	3 (3%)	1 (1%)	-	1 + 2 Dip* = 3(3%)
10	Hindi, Maithili and Bhojpuri	2 (2%)	2 (2%)	-	-	-	-	-	2 (2%)	Dip*-2 (2%)
11	Hindi, Khortha and Bangla	2 (2%)	2 (2%)	-	2 (2%)	2 (2%)	-	-	-	-
12	Hindi and Kurmali	3 (3%)	2 (2%)	1 (1%)	1 (1%)	3 (3%)	2 (2%)	-	-	-
13	Others (Santhali, Oraon, Chhattisgarhi, Marathi, Nagpuri and Magahi)	6 (6%)	4 (4%)	2 (2%)	5 (5%)	4 (4%)	1 (1%)	1 (1%)	-	Dip*- 1 (1%)
Total rural students		100 (100%)	57 (57%)	43 (43%)	54 (54%)	64 (64%)	40 (40%)	22 (22%)	06 (6%)	14 (13%)

Note: (Total no. of students: 100).

*F' indicates frequency; '%' indicates percentage.

*Each case percentage below is calculated using the conventional formula, i.e. frequency in each case divided by total participants (100), multiplied by 100.

JAC: Jharkhand Academic Council (A state board).

CBSE: Central board of secondary education (A national board).

ICSE: Indian certificate of secondary education (A national board).

ISC: Indian school certificate (A national board).

Dip* Diploma.

Table 2. Urban students' profile.

Sl. no.	Mother tongue	Frequency (%)	Male (F/ %)	Female (F/ %)	JAC (F/ %)		CBSE (F/ %)		Others (F/ %)	
					10 th	12 th	10 th	12 th	10 th	12 th
1	Hindi	35 (87.5%)	13 (32.5%)	22 (55%)	4 (10%)	4 (10%)	28 (70%)	26 (65%)	3 (7.5%)	4+ 1 Dip*=5 (12.5%)
2	Bangla	1 (2.5%)	-	1 (2.5%)	1 (2.5%)	-	-	-	-	Dip*-1 (2.5%)
3	Santhali	1 (2.5%)	1 (2.5%)	-	1 (2.5%)	-	-	-	-	Dip*-1 (2.5%)
4	Hindi and Oraon	1 (2.5%)	1 (2.5%)	-	-	-	1 (2.5%)	1 (2.5%)	-	-
5	Khortha and Hindi	1 (2.5%)	1 (2.5%)	-	-	-	1 (2.5%)	-	-	Dip*-1 (2.5%)
6	Hindi, Khortha and Bhojpuri	1 (2.5%)	1 (2.5%)	-	-	-	-	-	ICSE-1 (2.5%)	ISC-1 (2.5%)
Total urban students		40 (100%)	17 (42.5%)	23 (57.5%)	06 (15%)	04 (10%)	30 (75%)	27 (67.5%)	04 (10%)	09 (22.5%)

Note: (Total no. of students: 40).

*F' indicates frequency; '%' indicates percentage.

*Each case percentage below is calculated using the conventional formula, i.e. frequency in each case divided by total participants (40), multiplied by 100.

JAC: Jharkhand academic council (A state board).

CBSE: Central board of secondary education (A national board).

ICSE: Indian certificate of secondary education (A national board).

ISC: Indian school certificate (a national board).

Dip*- Diploma.

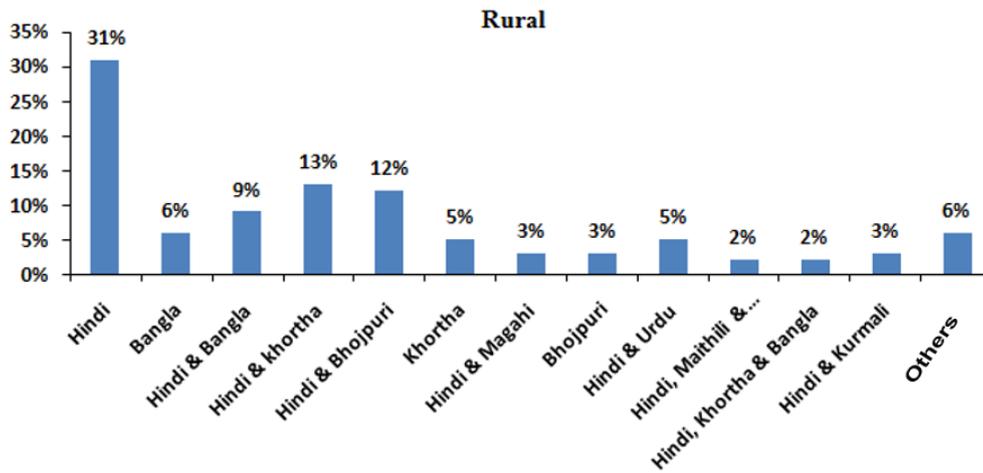


Figure P1. Variety of mother tongue among rural students.

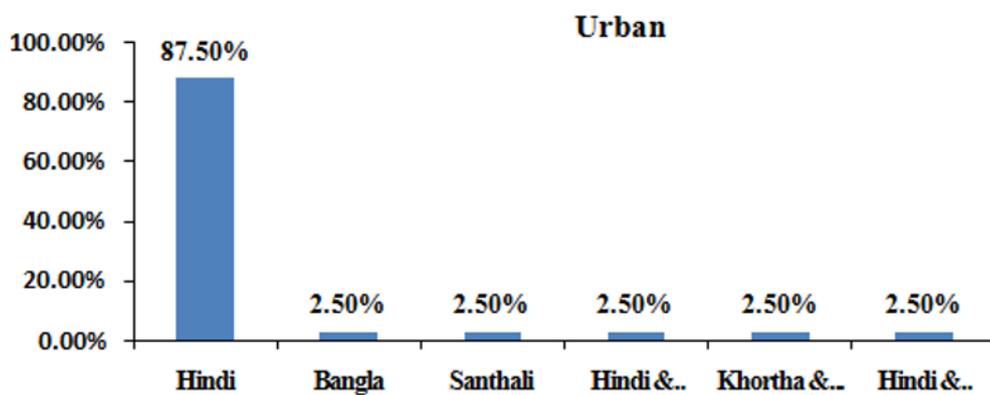


Figure P2. Variety of mother tongue among urban students.

On the other hand, Figures P 3 and P 4 below show that the frequency of rural male participants is 57 (57%) and that of rural female participants is 43 (43%) whereas male participants from the urban area are 17 (42.5%) and female participants are 23 (57.5%).

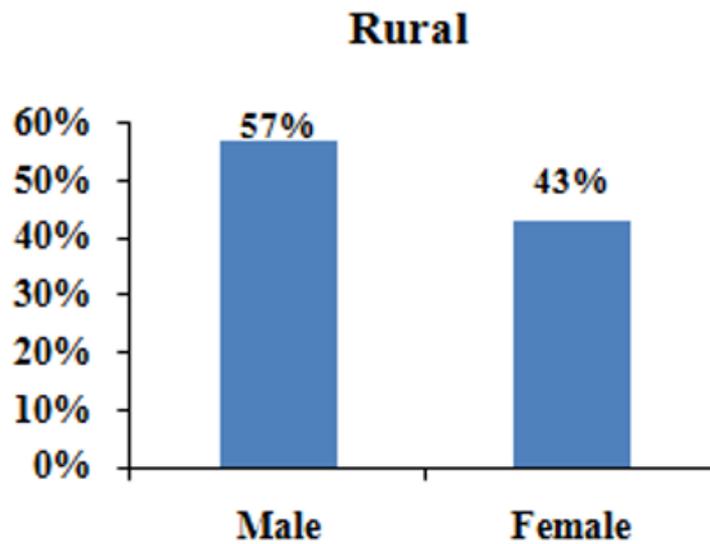


Figure P3. Frequency of male and female learners among rural participants.

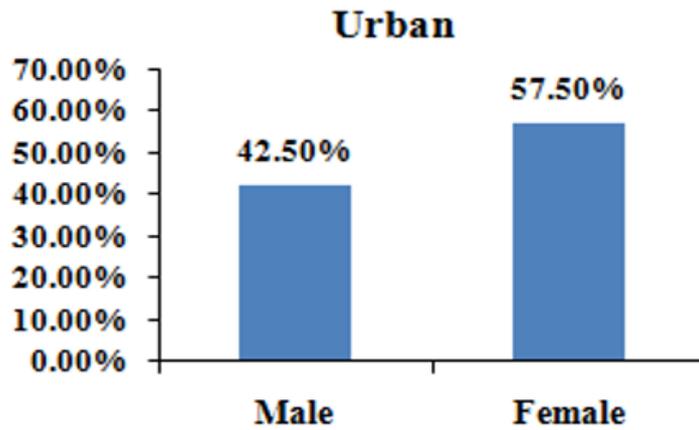


Figure P4. Frequency of male and female learners among urban participants.

Empirical evidence reveals a discernible gender disparity with a lower proportion of female students in comparison to their male counterparts in the context of students hailing from rural areas. Conversely, the gender distribution exhibits a converse trend wherein the ratio of female students surpasses that of male students within the demographic of urban students. A salient observation gleaned from recurrent interviews conducted with students elucidates distinct educational trajectories among these cohorts. Specifically, male students from urban areas are frequently observed to pursue higher education opportunities in neighboring states. In contrast, their rural male counterparts tend to exhibit a proclivity for enrolling in proximate educational institutions situated within urban areas. Meanwhile, a noteworthy pattern emerges among rural female students with a substantial proportion either discontinuing their academic pursuits or opting for non-technical degree programs. However, an examination of survey responses provided by students and an analysis of video recordings yielded evidence indicating that gender does not exert any discernible influence on speech-related concerns. Table 1 indicates that there are 54 (54%), 40 (40%) and 6 (6%) rural students who have completed their 10th grade from JAC, CBSE, and other sources respectively. On the other hand, the frequency of rural students who have completed their 12th grade from JAC, CBSE and other boards or universities are respectively 64 (64%), 22 (22%) and 14 (14%). According to Table 2, urban students who have completed their 10th grade from JAC, CBSE, and other sources are at a frequency of 06 (15%), 30 (75%) and 04 (10%) respectively. The number of urban students who have completed their 12th grade from JAC, CBSE and other sources are 04 (10%), 27 (67.50%) and 09 (22.50%) respectively. According to Figures P 5 and P 6, the majority of the rural participants completed their 10th (54%) and 12th (64%) from JAC whereas the majority of urban participants are educated, 10th (75%) and 12th (76%), from CBSE affiliated schools.

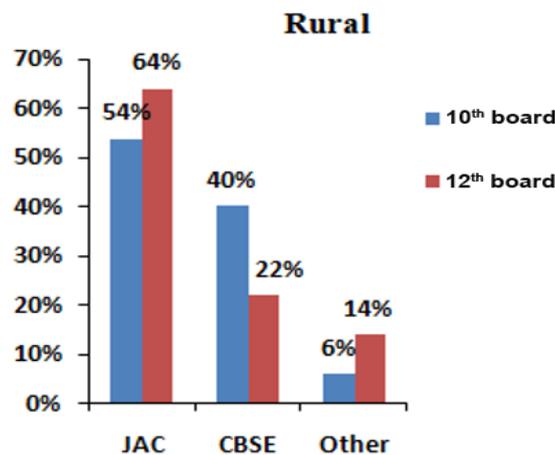


Figure P5. 10th and 12th board history of rural participants.

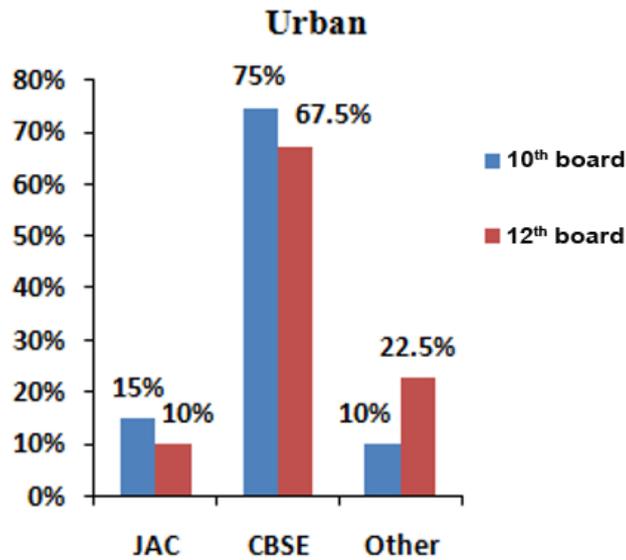


Figure P6. 10th and 12th board history of urban participants.

Jharkhand Academic Council (JAC) schools predominantly employ Hindi as the medium of instruction while a majority of Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) schools use English as the primary mode of instructional delivery. Urban students have been immersed in an educational milieu where English assumes the central role. Learning materials and resources are predominantly available in English and teachers predominantly or exclusively employ English for communication with students and among themselves. Conversely, learners residing in rural areas are situated at the opposite end of this linguistic spectrum experiencing limited or negligible exposure to learning materials in English and encountering few, if any, opportunities for interpersonal communication in the language. Consequently, it becomes imperative to consider the diverse linguistic backgrounds that students bring to their educational endeavors.

4.1. Introducing the Students' Questionnaire

The following questions are asked by the participants using a questionnaire:

1. English and speaking skills will help students build their career and get a respectable job.

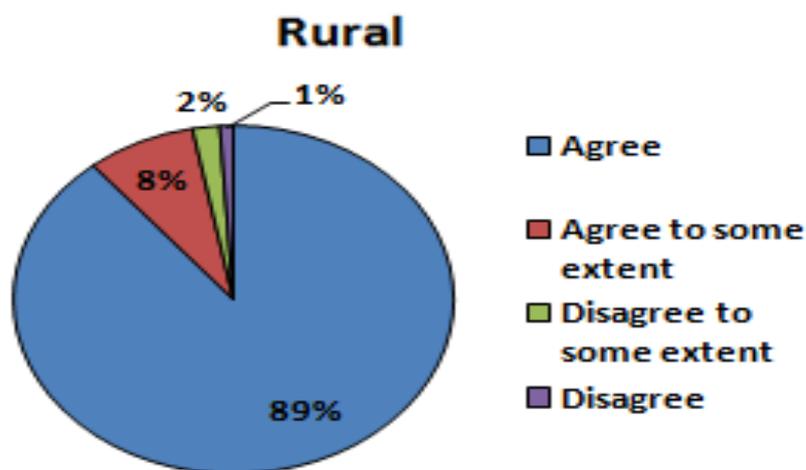


Figure 1 (a). Perceptions of rural participants regarding the importance of English and speaking skills in career development.

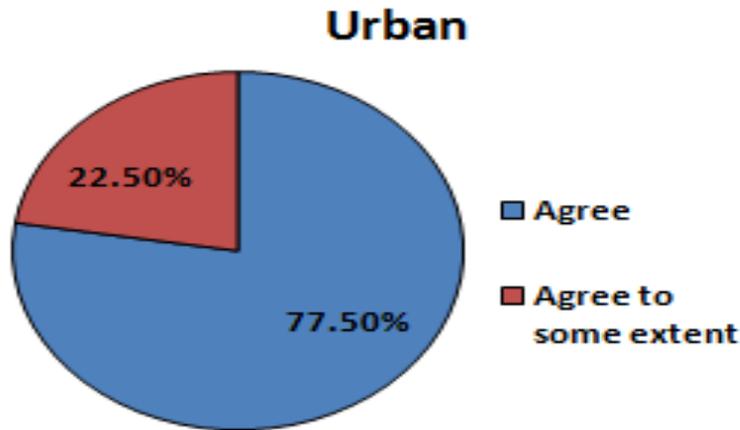


Figure 1 (b). Perceptions of urban participants regarding the importance of English and speaking skills in career development.

Figures 1(a) and 1(b) illustrate that a substantial majority of students specifically 89% of rural students and 77.5% of their urban counterparts have recognized the instrumental role played by English proficiency and effective speaking abilities in enhancing their career prospects and facilitating access to desirable employment opportunities. This discernible awareness among the student population underscores their knowledge of the significance of oral communication and English language proficiency.

2. Classes in English are necessary to enhance speaking skills.

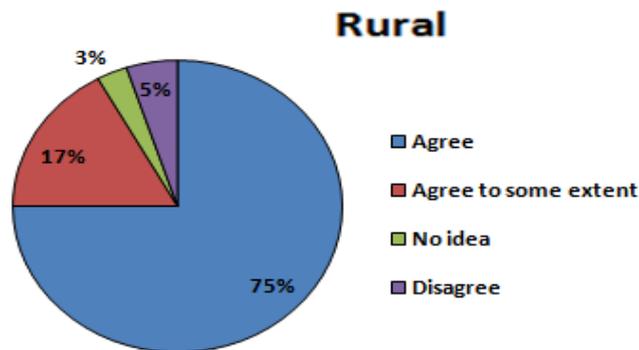


Figure 2 (a). Perceptions of rural participants regarding the importance of English classes for improving speaking skills.

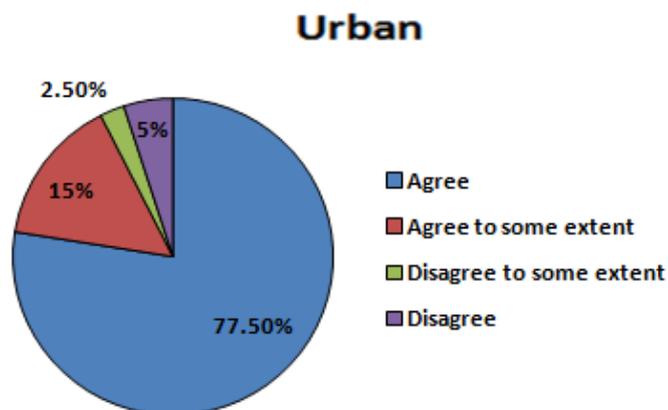


Figure 2 (b). Perceptions of urban participants regarding the importance of English classes for improving speaking skills.

Figures 2 (a) and 2 (b) show that 75% of rural students and 77.50% of urban students agree that the classes are essential for improving speaking skills. In contrast, researchers have observed that the students want to skip it during English classes. The possible reason is that the students are exam-focused. Exams of English at technical institutions in Jharkhand, India are of average or moderate level. Additionally, there are no tests or exams available to evaluate oral skills. Therefore, students become less interested in oral classes.

3. In which of the following English macro skills do you (the student) need improvement? (You can select or tick more than one).

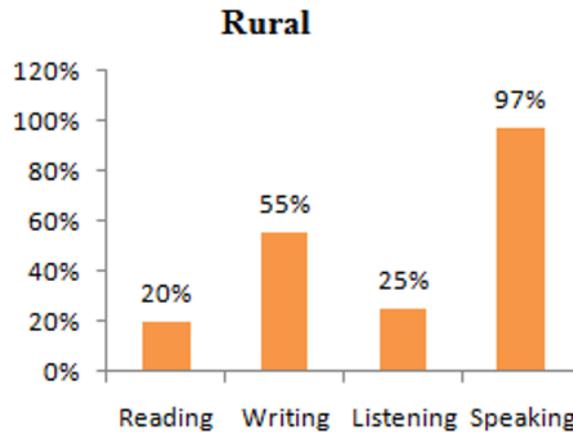


Figure 3 (a). Perceptions of rural students regarding the need for improvement in English macro skills.

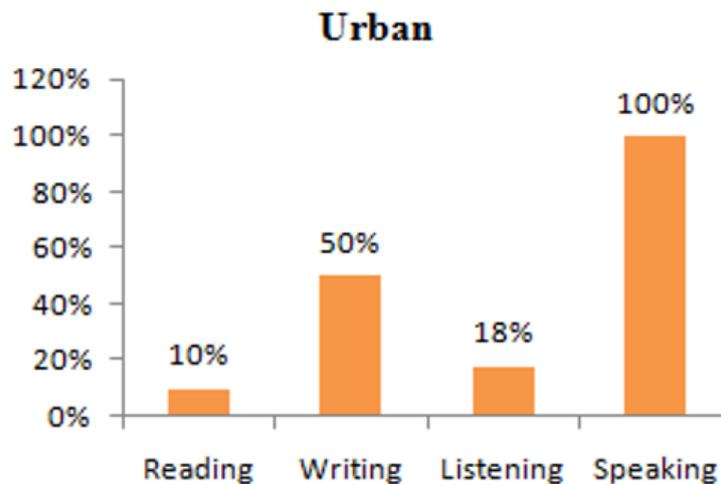


Figure 3 (b). Perceptions of urban students regarding the need for improvement in English macro skills.

The data in Figures 3 (a) and 3 (b) demonstrates that both groups of participants need to develop their productive talents. Almost every student wants to enhance their speaking skills and around half of them require improvement in their writing skills. It has been observed that the students' writing and speaking suffer as a result of their neglect of attention to the receptive skills of listening and reading. This is also indicated by the data where only 20% and 25% of rural students and 10% and 18% of urban students, respectively report that their reading and listening skills need to be improved. Receptive language abilities are pivotal for effective communication. They have a limited vocabulary, poor sentence construction and a lack of confidence due to the ignorance of students' receptive skills.

4. What makes you (student) uncomfortable in speaking class (you can select or tick more than one).

- i) Your teacher becomes angry when you do not perform well.
- ii) Your classmates make fun of you and your mistakes.

- iii) You do not perform well in class activities.
- iv) You do not understand properly the different activities conducted in your class.
- v) You do not care about your performance.

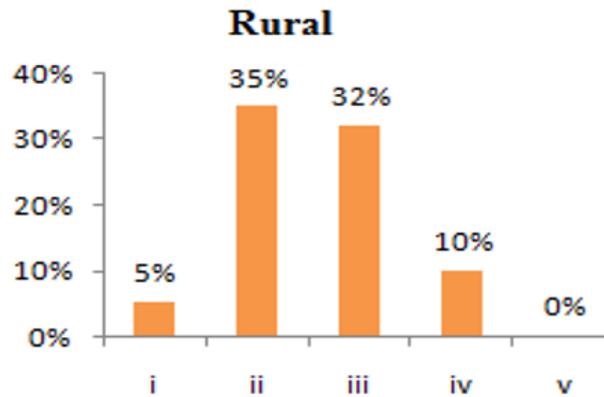


Figure 4 (a). Perceptions of rural students regarding their discomfort in speaking class.

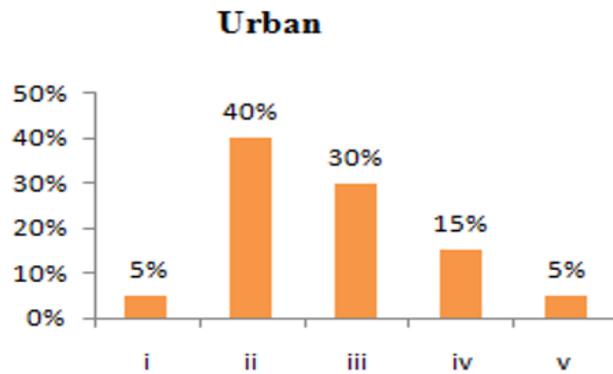


Figure 4 (b). Perceptions of urban students regarding their discomfort in speaking class.

The main obstacle for both sets of students as shown in Figure 4(a) and 4(b) is that their classmates make fun of them and their errors. Secondly, the students struggle with their own weak performance. A few of the learners in both groups acknowledge that their inability to comprehend the tasks and activities in class presents another difficulty. Peer pressure and poor performance make students feel awkward and prevent them from participating in speaking activities. According to the current study, peer pressure has a negative impact on students' speaking achievement and self-confidence.

- 5. Revise grammatical rules, vocabulary and notes that student has.

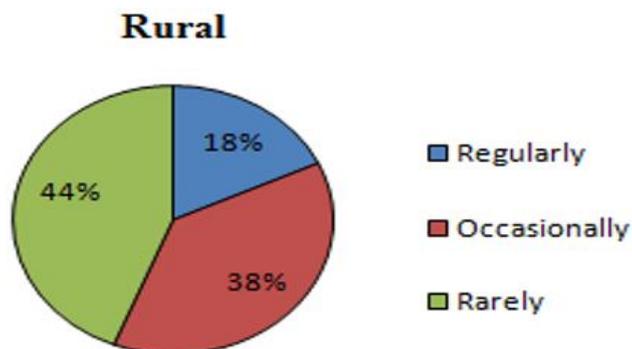


Figure 5 (a). Perceptions of rural students regarding their revision record of the available study materials.

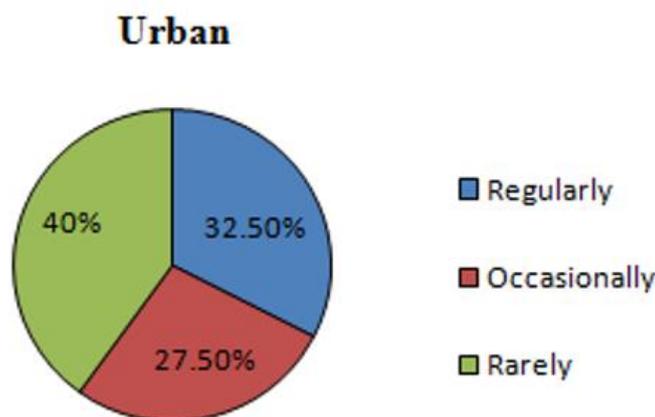


Figure 5 (b). Perceptions of urban students regarding their revision record of the available study materials.

The data in Figures 5(a) and 5(b) shows that the majority of rural students (44%) and urban students (40%) rarely revise the grammatical rules, vocabulary and notes that they have. Revision is an integral and essential part of study, thus, ignorance of revision results in poor students' performance. Timely revision helps students reduce their anxiety and stress levels. It makes students well-prepared and complements their efforts at studying. Unfortunately, it is also observed that some of the students in both categories ignore to maintain a proper class notebook.

5. DISCUSSION

5.1 Difficulties of Speaking among Rural Engineering Students

The following speech problems were identified through reviewing the pre-class video recordings and questionnaires submitted by the students:

Grammar: Inconsistent grammar or poor sentence structure were quite visible when students spoke. Students were unable to construct even simple sentences correctly. This resulted in the message being ambiguous and meaningless. The learners were also examined for excessive use of the 'ing' form. For example, the participants said, "I am living in India" (I live in India). Additionally, it was noted that participants were not using the verb tenses "do," "does " and "did" for framing interrogative and negative phrases. They were using two auxiliaries together for an interrogative form, like "Is social media making us less social?" (Is social media making us less social?).

Vocabulary: First, the target students were unable to use a variety of vocabulary. It was observed that various expressions were portrayed by adding "very" to them. For instance, they said "tired" and "very tired". Second, the use of comparative and superlative degrees was not evident. Third, the target groups were observed making mistakes in using plural forms, for example, they used childrens, peoples (in the context of people belonging to the same nation) and mans. Similarly, occasionally students underestimated the usage of singular and plural.

Pronunciation: A disparity between how the target group pronounces the words and how they actually sound was evident due to a lack of phonological awareness. The rural students pronounced "live" and "leave" in the same manner. Stress patterns were not at all applied by the target population. The lack of linguistic learning also contributed to the pronunciation errors of the target students because many times the words in the English language are not pronounced the same way they are spelled. For example, "ch" is pronounced differently in "Chicago", "stomach" and "champion". Another case is the "silent" case. "H" is silent in "honor" while "S" is silent in "island". Additionally, the students were speaking quickly consequently missing syllables which resulted in mispronunciation.

The influence of the mother tongue was also evident in the students' speaking. Due to the impact of mother tongues like Khortha and Bangla students pronounced the letters 'o' and 'u' with rounded lips, irrespective of their appearance with other letters in a word, like "come" as 'kom' (*kuhm*) and "build" as "buold" (*bild*).

Fluency: Fluency is another crucial aspect of speaking. It is the ability to express oneself easily, articulately and accurately. From the sample data, the target students are observed to struggle with fluency. They were pausing frequently to organize their thoughts and construct sentences. Additionally, they seemed to translate their thoughts from their native language or from Hindi into English. This resulted in consuming extra time and the need for fillers and thus, for the majority of the time, students remained silent and frequently bypassed speaking. Most of the time students kept silent and did not speak.

Body language: Speaking calls for complete involvement of the speaker including voice delivery, body expression, and content. Target groups were observed not making proper eye contact. Most of the time, they made no gestures and occasionally they made too many. Some negative reflections that were noticed during students' speaking performances were standing putting one's body weight solely on one leg, shaking legs and continuously moving their body while speaking while sometimes they appeared to be sitting in their drawing room, fully relaxed. The facial expressions of the students were unnatural. They never appeared at ease or composed during their performance.

Practice: The learners did not believe in "learning through repetition". At the present age of technology, people seek some shortcut to acquire speaking skills. Practicing similar exercises and activities seems tedious and boring for them. Insufficient practice was evident and affected students adversely. The students were unable to use even the allotted time for speaking. None of the students could speak continuously for 2 minutes and looked eager to escape the spotlight.

5.1.1. Challenges of Teaching Speaking to the Rural Engineering Students

Unwillingness: It has been witnessed that the target students were often reluctant to attend English classes for a variety of reasons. First, during their four years, there is only one paper 'English' (in the first year) and the students manage to pass their final examinations, at least with passing grades. Their speaking ability is not measured by any test or examination in their course. As a result, students pay less attention to learning to speak. Second, the learners already believed that their speaking was substandard and could not be improved. Before even beginning to acquire speaking, they want to quit it. Third, the students did not complete their homework and were unprepared. Fourth, they lacked topical information and general awareness.

Anxiety: Language anxiety is a sensation of stress and apprehension associated with acquiring a second language including speaking, listening and learning in a particular situation (Gopang, Bughio, Umrani, & Lohar, 2015). It is observed that the rural students were scared to participate in speaking and they had negative feelings like nervousness and uneasiness in English classrooms. Consequently, the speaking skills of the students suffered. One of the participants claimed, "I want to say something but due to nervousness I forget what I have to say". Stage fear and peer pressure were discovered as the main reasons for anxiety among the target students. Most of the students hadn't the opportunity to make an appearance on the stage. This created anxiety among students; consequently, they hesitated to participate in speaking activities.

Guidance outside of the classroom: The students from rural regions have great potential but lack the right mentoring. The parents of the rural technical students were not that literate to guide their wards. Furthermore, rural areas had dominance over the mother tongue. Consequently, the students did not get a proper environment that could support language learning. As a result, the class room remained the only place where the target learners could learn the language and assess their improvement.

Ignorance of listening, reading and writing: The rural students had studied English just as a subject and not as a language. As a result, they didn't stress over learning all four skills of language resulting in poor language skills.

Listening, speaking, reading and writing are all interrelated. One can't acquire one skill without the other; people rarely write without reading and it is hard to speak in a conversation without listening (Harmer, 1991). Unfortunately, it was found that the students didn't pay attention to listening, writing and reading activities while learning to speak, thinking it was a needless approach.

Students' incompetency: The students of the rural areas were incompetent in using accurately the components of speaking, like grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation and fluency. One learner reported, "I understand others but I am unable to reply instantly because I don't find the exact vocabulary to express my opinion". Another participant said: "I face difficulty structuring sentences". Moreover, it was unfortunate that the students were not seen using the dictionary. Additionally, many of the participants were observed committing pronunciation errors, using fillers and non-words. The students were not confident and many times they started speaking in local languages.

Large class: English paper is compulsory for all the branches in the technical institutions of Jharkhand, India. Generally, the regional technical colleges suffered from an insufficient number of English teachers. Consequently, there were combined classes. Thus, the language teacher faced a great deal of difficulty managing the large class of sixty to seventy students. Larger classrooms often lead to disruption for students resulting in less students' participation. It also resulted in less attention from the teacher leaving the students with unanswered questions.

5.2. Strategies for Teaching Speaking to Rural Engineering Students

The following strategies were implemented in the class:

Encouragement: A safer space in the classroom was created for their participation to encourage students. The teacher protected the speakers from bullying and dominance by other students. The sooner the students began to believe their teacher, the sooner they became involved in learning. The students were not ridiculed and mocked, their incorrect answers were handled with solutions and they were consistently paid attention to and praised for their contributions and improvements. In addition, rules like raising their hands when they had something to say, using full sentences while participating in speaking activities, supporting the team and using a dictionary were implemented.

Teaching components of speaking: Grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation and fluency play pivotal roles in building speaking skills. Basic sentence structure, tense and voice were taught to the technical students. Similarly, the transformation of sentence structure while forming affirmative, negative and interrogative sentences was taught. A list of verbs was provided to the class and the learners were asked to frame sentences using different verbs. The rural learners were also provided five vocabularies, (initially, in fifteen days and enhanced this number with time and their improvement in speaking) and asked the learners to use these vocabularies for performing the speaking activities like JAM or storytelling.

Activities: A variety of speaking activities were used to enhance the speaking of the rural undergraduates, like storytelling, role plays, picture describing, short talks, group discussions, presentations and interviews. Two outside classroom assignments were also provided to the students: talk to themselves in small groups in public places and talk to strangers (like teachers, industrialists and learned persons). The class was split up into smaller groups of five to seven students. Students in small groups were observed to be eager for rehearsals and practice. It produced insightful remarks on the speech and knowledge of the students and intriguing connections between the teacher and the students and among students.

Regular practice and revision: Practice and revision are the significant steps in the learning process. It was discovered that the students undervalued revisions and practice, causing speaking difficulty for them. In the current framework, adequate time was allotted for revision and practice and it was discovered that repetition benefited rural students. Furthermore, timely revision reduced students' anxiety and stress levels. Moreover, it made students well-prepared for academic and professional needs and helped them gauge their strengths and knowledge.

Oral assessment, quizzes and rewards: The students were regularly assessed through speaking activities. Separate days were assigned to work on grammar, content, pronunciation, fluency, confidence and body language. On the other hand, class tests were regularly organized. Quizzes took place every fortnight among individuals and groups. This motivated the learners and rewards and gifts kept their interest and attention.

Analysis of video recording after implementation of the class: The students were interviewed before and after the class. The reports are given in Table 3.

Table 3. Interview statements of the rural students.

Student list	Before class	After class
Student 1	I am afraid to speak in English and thus, ignore participation.	My speaking has improved with regular practice.
Student 2	I think in Hindi, translate the content into English, and then speak. I take long pauses.	I can speak fluently and my pronunciation has improved.
Student 3	I don't want to speak because I commit grammatical errors.	I can speak on any topic with confidence which I lacked earlier.
Student 4	I want to speak but I don't know what to say.	My speaking has improved and I eagerly participate in all activities.
Student 5	I feel shy about speaking in front of people. I forget everything during speaking activities due to nervousness.	I can easily talk to my friends and audience. This becomes possible because of continuous practice.

Based on the video recordings and interviews conducted after the class, it is evident that the strategies outlined in this research have the potential to enhance the speaking skills of rural engineering students. The following findings prove promising avenues for improving speaking abilities in this demographic:

1. After the class, students significantly improved their vocabulary, incorporated phrases and idioms into their speech and demonstrated increased proficiency in using comparative degrees in oral presentations.
2. Students showed marked improvement in grammatical proficiency as indicated by their skillful use of grammar during spoken interactions in the class. They consistently constructed accurate sentences, effectively communicated their messages and displayed receptiveness and adeptness in addressing cross-questions.
3. Rural engineering students notably improved their pronunciation through consistent practice and deliberate enunciation, mastering both pronunciation and rhythm while effectively integrating stress patterns into their speech during the class.
4. The students' fluency significantly improved after the class as they exhibited confidence and accurate performance in speaking tasks expressing their ideas swiftly and naturally.
5. Students displayed enhanced body language skills, effectively utilizing non-verbal communication to convey their messages during the class. Their expressions were balanced and persuasive.

6. CONCLUSION

The present study examined the different speaking difficulties that rural technical students faced. They exhibited closed body language, avoided practice, committed grammatical and pronunciation errors and were afraid during communication. The researcher identified some significant challenges while teaching speaking that included students' unwillingness, anxiety, a large class and students' limited language proficiency in the process of overcoming these difficulties. Focusing on these underpinnings the class was framed and implemented for the target learners. The study discovered a successful strategy to improve the speaking of rural students comprised of encouragement, organized activities, frequent practice and continuous oral assessment.

6.1. Implications and Limitations

The implications of the research are multifaceted suggesting several noteworthy outcomes and applications in the realm of education, language instruction and professional development. The identified strategies offer a valuable foundation for refining existing instructional approaches and designing targeted interventions to improve speaking skills. The potential beneficiaries encompass diverse demographics ranging from students in technical fields to professionals in corporate settings and individuals engaged in language learning initiatives.

The present study also contains certain limitations. First, as a representative sample for rural engineering students, it only included two private engineering institutions that were affiliated with the same university, Jharkhand University of Technology (JUT), Ranchi. Second, the study was limited to first- and second-year B.Tech students as a representative sample of technical students. Third, whenever necessary, Hindi (or regional) was allotted for oral use in the class. Lastly, the study also made significant use of the Internet which could be expensive for colleges with inadequate infrastructure.

6.2. Suggestions and Recommendations

This study maintains its credibility and significance, and speaking strategies and approaches can be implemented by technical students worldwide with similar speaking challenges despite the acknowledged limitations. The study also offers certain suggestions. The researchers offer suggestions for future research endeavors aimed at addressing certain limitations. Firstly, future research in this domain may encompass a broader selection of universities and engineering institutions nationally and internationally to facilitate a more comprehensive analysis. Secondly, the inclusion of participants from various academic years within the B. Tech programs, including engineering professionals, are suggested in order to enhance both the validity and the scope of the investigation. It is also advisable for future studies to explore the potential impact of improvements in reading, writing and listening skills on the speaking abilities of rural engineering students given the interconnected nature of language skills. The study offers several recommendations pertaining to faculty development programs that language teachers should routinely engage in to enhance their pedagogical methodologies. It is advisable to consider a reduction in the student-teacher ratio which would enable teachers to devote ample attention to addressing the individualized learning complexities of students. Establishing regular parent-teacher meetings is also recommended as it can facilitate a deeper understanding of students' backgrounds, thereby aiding in the creation of tailored assignments for each learner. Furthermore, it is encouraged that students actively participate in events such as national and worldwide tech- festivals and inter-college activities as this engagement provides an opportunity to assess their progress relative to peers from other educational institutions and regions.

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Transparency: The authors state that the manuscript is honest, truthful, and transparent, that no key aspects of the investigation have been omitted, and that any differences from the study as planned have been clarified. This study followed all writing ethics.

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