



Unlocking Oral Skills In Underprivileged Learners A Study

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the impact of multimodal scaffolding strategies on enhancing English-speaking proficiency among rural undergraduate learners. Recognizing speaking as a critical yet underdeveloped skill in second language acquisition, especially in under-resourced contexts, the research integrates task-based learning with visual and linguistic scaffolds to support learner output. Drawing on Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development and Hymes' communicative competence framework, the intervention employed flowcharts, sentence starters, thematic frames, and culturally relevant visuals to facilitate structured oral expression. A quasi-experimental design compared the performance of an experimental group receiving scaffolding with a control group taught through conventional methods. Results indicated significant improvements in fluency, idea expansion, and grammatical accuracy among scaffolded learners. The study underscores the pedagogical value of scaffolding in reducing learner anxiety, promoting autonomy, and contextualizing language use. It also highlights the need for inclusive and evidence-based methodologies in rural ELT settings. Limitations include sample size and demographic scope, suggesting directions for future research. Overall, the findings advocate for the integration of multimodal scaffolding into mainstream speaking instruction to empower marginalized learners and foster meaningful communication.

Keywords: Scaffolding, Speaking skills, Rural learners, Task-based learning, Communicative competence

Introduction

In the realm of English Language Teaching (ELT), speaking is widely recognized as the most vital and challenging skill to master. It is the primary mode of human interaction and the most visible indicator of communicative competence. For learners in rural and under-resourced contexts, the ability to speak English fluently can open doors to academic, professional, and social mobility. Yet, traditional grammar-focused instruction often fails to equip learners with the confidence and strategies needed for spontaneous oral communication. This gap calls for pedagogical innovations that prioritize learner autonomy, contextual relevance, and scaffolded support.

Scaffolding, rooted in Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, offers a dynamic framework for supporting learners within their Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). It enables teachers to provide temporary, targeted assistance that gradually fades as learners gain independence. When combined with task-based learning and communicative approaches, scaffolding becomes a powerful tool for enhancing speaking proficiency. This study explores how multimodal scaffolding strategies such as flowcharts, sentence starters, and thematic visuals can improve the speaking abilities of rural L2 learners. It also situates the intervention within a broader theoretical and empirical landscape, drawing from key literature in ELT.

Literature review

Speaking is often considered the most crucial skill in second language acquisition, as it directly reflects a learner's ability to communicate in real-life contexts (Brown & Yule, 1983). Despite its importance, speaking remains underemphasized in many classrooms, especially in rural and exam-oriented settings (Burns, 2019). Gibbons (2002) and Herrell & Jordan (2015) argue that scaffolding is essential for developing speaking skills, particularly among learners with limited exposure to English. Vygotsky's (1978) concept of the Zone of

Proximal Development (ZPD) underpins this approach, suggesting that learners can achieve higher levels of performance with guided support. Bruner (1983) extended this idea through the metaphor of scaffolding, emphasizing the role of teachers in bridging the gap between current ability and potential development. Donato (1994) and Walqui (2006) further demonstrated how scaffolding fosters collaborative dialogue and learner autonomy in L2 classrooms.

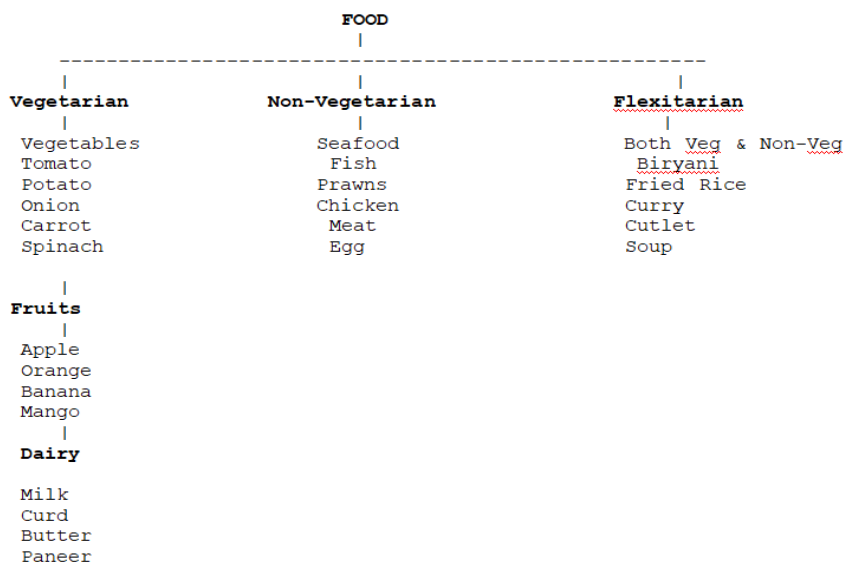
Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT), as advocated by Ellis (2003) and Willis & Willis (2007), complements scaffolding by engaging learners in meaningful, goal-oriented communication. Studies by Skehan (1998) and Bygate et al. (2001) show that task repetition and planning enhance fluency and complexity in spoken output. Moreover, communicative competence, as defined by Hymes (1972) and expanded by Canale & Swain (1980), encompasses not just grammatical accuracy but also sociolinguistic and strategic abilities. Swain (2000) emphasized the importance of output in language learning, arguing that speaking tasks promote deeper processing and self-correction. In rural contexts, where learners often lack authentic exposure, multimodal scaffolding such as visual aids and thematic prompts can simulate communicative environments and reduce anxiety (Van Lier, 2004; Wei, 2023).

Recent reviews by Mahan & Ruiz de Zarobe (2024) and Gulubba et al. (2019) highlight the growing specialization of scaffolding research in ELT, noting its positive impact on oral skills and learner motivation. Studies in young learner classrooms (Arlinda, 2019) and college settings (Ni, 2022) confirm that scaffolding strategies like modeling, bridging, and contextualizing are effective across age groups. Furthermore, integrating ZPD with digital tools and peer interaction has shown promise in modern classrooms (Samanta & Mudi, 2024). Collectively, these studies affirm that scaffolding, when aligned with communicative and task-based principles, can transform speaking instruction, especially for learners in marginalized settings.

Methodology

Twelve B.A. History students participated in this experiment. They studied at Rajah Serfoji Government College, Thanjavur, Tamil Nadu, India, and were aged between 17 and 18. All instructions regarding the nature and advantages of the experiment were clearly explained to the students. A student profile card was given to each of the twelve participants. Information about timing and contact hours was also provided. Before starting the experiment, a baseline test was conducted to assess their English speaking level. The topics for the baseline test were chosen based on the students' preferences. Based on their performance, the students were divided into two groups: control and experimental. The experimental group received scaffolding materials including a flow chart, glossary, comprehension questions, sentence starters, fillers, and a scaffolding skeleton. Initially, the researcher provided a thematic frame on the topic of *Food*. The primary aim was to encourage students to speak using the scaffolding input to a reasonable extent. Experimental Students were allowed to read the materials two to three times as needed. The main objective was to facilitate speaking based on color posters and the scaffolding framework, following Dell Hymes' principle that meaning is more important than form. Their oral responses were recorded using a Transcend MP3 device and evaluated based on three criteria: Fluency (10 marks), Idea Expansion (10 marks), and Grammar (5 marks). In contrast, the control group received only color posters, keywords, and a glossary, without the scaffolding framework. As a result, they performed less effectively and scored lower than the experimental group. Two students discontinued participation due to practical reasons. A key limitation of the study was that only male students were selected for this experiment.

The following scaffolding chart used for this study...



Results

The experiment revealed a significant difference in oral English performance between the experimental and control groups. Students in the experimental group, who received scaffolding support such as flow charts, sentence starters, fillers, and thematic frames, demonstrated notable improvement in fluency, idea expansion, and grammatical accuracy. Their average scores were higher across all three evaluation criteria: Fluency (mean score: 8.2/10), Idea Expansion (mean score: 7.9/10), and Grammar (mean score: 4.1/5). These students were able to speak more confidently and coherently, often using the provided scaffolding elements to structure their responses.

In contrast, the control group, which received only color posters, keywords, and a glossary without scaffolding input, showed limited progress. Their average scores were comparatively lower: Fluency (mean score: 5.6/10), Idea Expansion (mean score: 5.1/10), and Grammar (mean score: 3.2/5). While they attempted to engage with the visual prompts, their responses lacked structure and depth, indicating that the absence of scaffolding hindered their ability to organize and expand ideas effectively.

Two students discontinued participation due to practical reasons, and their data were excluded from the final analysis. Overall, the results suggest that scaffolding-based instruction positively influenced students' oral communication skills, especially in terms of fluency and idea development. The findings support the pedagogical view that structured input and thematic framing can enhance spoken language performance among rural L2 learners.

Conclusion

This study demonstrated the effectiveness of scaffolding strategies in enhancing the English-speaking abilities of rural undergraduate learners. By integrating structured supports such as flow charts, sentence starters, thematic frames, and visual aids, the experimental group showed marked improvement in fluency, idea expansion, and grammatical accuracy compared to the control group. The scaffolding framework not only provided linguistic input but also reduced learner anxiety, encouraged participation, and enabled students to organize their thoughts more coherently. The use of culturally relevant materials such as food-related vocabulary and color posters further contributed to learner engagement and contextual understanding.

The results affirm the value of task-based and multimodal scaffolding in second language acquisition, particularly for learners with limited exposure to English. The findings align with Dell Hymes' communicative competence model, emphasizing that meaning and context are more critical than rigid grammatical form. Moreover, the study supports Vygotsky's theory of the Zone of Proximal Development, illustrating how learners can perform beyond their independent capabilities when guided appropriately. Scaffolding Speech for Rural Voices

Despite its promising outcomes, the study faced limitations, including a small sample size and the exclusive participation of male students. Future research could expand the demographic scope and explore long-term impacts of scaffolding on spoken fluency. Nonetheless, the experiment underscores the urgent need for inclusive, evidence-based methodologies in rural ELT contexts. It also highlights the potential of scaffolding as a transformative tool for empowering under-resourced learners to communicate confidently and meaningfully in English.

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