



Breaking Barriers: Scaffolding Tasks Enhance English Speaking Skills in Rural Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the effectiveness of collaborative scaffolding in enhancing English speaking skills among rural undergraduate learners. Thirty first-year B.Sc. Chemistry students from a Tamil-medium background at Rajah Serfoji Government College, Thanjavur, participated in the study. A baseline test was conducted to assess their existing speaking ability, following which students were divided into an experimental group and a control group. The experimental group engaged in a structured storytelling task using roles such as leader, president, and secretary, supported by sentence starters and lexical templates. The control group received visual prompts and keywords with minimal collaboration. Performance was evaluated based on initiation, development, and extension of speech, using a 30-point rubric. Descriptive statistics revealed that the experimental group achieved a higher mean score (24.6) and median score (25) compared to the control group (mean 17.8; median 18). The findings suggest that collaborative scaffolding fosters fluency, confidence, and learner autonomy, especially in low-resource contexts. The study highlights the value of culturally responsive, task-based speaking activities in promoting inclusive and effective English language learning.

Keywords: Collaborative scaffolding, English speaking skills, Rural learners, Tamil-medium students and Storytelling tasks

I. Introduction

This study explores the impact of collaborative scaffolding on developing English speaking skills among rural undergraduate learners. The participants were first-year B.Sc. Chemistry students from a Tamil-medium background at Rajah Serfoji Government College, Thanjavur. Most students had limited exposure to spoken English and lacked confidence in using the language. The research aimed to create a safe and supportive environment for oral communication. A group storytelling task was designed to encourage imagination, vocabulary use, and peer interaction. Students were assigned roles such as leader, president, and secretary to promote active participation. Templates and sentence starters were provided to scaffold their speech. The control group received minimal collaboration and performed less effectively. The study focused on fluency, engagement, and learner autonomy rather than grammatical accuracy. Overall, the experiment highlighted the value of culturally responsive scaffolding in empowering underprivileged learners.

II. Literature Review

Recent scholarship underscores the transformative potential of collaborative scaffolding in enhancing second language speaking skills, particularly among under-resourced learners. Vygotsky's sociocultural theory (1978) provides the foundational lens, emphasizing the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) and the role of guided interaction in language acquisition. Building on this, Swain (2000) and Lantolf & Thorne (2006) argue that peer collaboration fosters meaningful output and negotiation of meaning, essential for oral proficiency. Studies by Storch (1999) and Chiu (2022) demonstrate that structured group storytelling and peer-led tasks significantly improve fluency and confidence in EFL contexts. In rural Indian settings, Khan (2021) and Shrikhande (2024) highlight sociolinguistic barriers such as limited exposure and linguistic insecurity that

hinder English speaking development, advocating for culturally responsive scaffolds. Cheng & Dornyei (2007) found that self-confidence is a strong predictor of speaking competence, reinforcing the need for low-stakes, supportive environments. Research by Arora et al. (2024) and Flores (2023) confirms that scaffolding techniques like sentence starters, modeling, and chunking enhance learners' ability to organize thoughts and express ideas orally. Additionally, Rao & Mishra (2024) emphasize the importance of sociocultural awareness in designing speaking tasks for rural learners, noting that language acquisition is deeply embedded in community norms and learner identity. Finally, collaborative learning frameworks, as reviewed by Kato et al. (2023), show that assigning roles such as leader, president, and secretary within storytelling tasks not only promotes equitable participation but also builds learner autonomy and metalinguistic awareness. Together, these studies affirm that collaborative scaffolding, when culturally and contextually adapted, is a powerful strategy for developing speaking skills among rural Tamil-medium undergraduates.

III. Methodology

The participants were lower-intermediate level students aged between 17 and 18. The time required for the activity ranged from 1 hour to 1 hour and 30 minutes. The goals of the study were to develop speaking skills through collaborative activities, to raise awareness of appropriate vocabulary, grammar, and sociolinguistic aspects of communication, and to build confidence in using English through scaffolding techniques. The tools used for data collection included descriptive statistics, a Transcent voice recorder, and pen and paper. The participants were underprivileged rural learners from Tamil-medium (i.e. regional language) backgrounds. All were first-year B.Sc. Chemistry students at Rajah Serfoji Government College, Thanjavur, where the medium of instruction was Tamil.

After the researcher explained the nature of the experiment, 34 students expressed willingness to participate. Due to irregular attendance, only 30 students participated consistently throughout the task. To assess their existing second-language speaking ability, a baseline test was conducted. Based on the results, the students were divided into two groups: an experimental group and a control group, each consisting of 15 students.

For the experimental group, a collaborative scaffolding method was implemented. Students were asked to select a leader and a president from among their group. They were informed that they would collaboratively create a story, with each member contributing sequentially. The researcher encouraged them to use their imagination and provided story-building templates such as "Once upon a time," "Then," "That," "After," "One day," and "Finally."

The leader initiated the story, ensuring that each member contributed. The president noted key phrases and lexical chunks from each participant's input, which were later used for further language work. Students assigned the role of secretary also contributed to the storytelling process. During the first round, students were instructed to keep their stories brief and avoid excessive detail. Other group members were allowed to take notes and assist the president with documentation.

The prompt used for the activity was "Sunita's Job Interview." A sample story developed by the students included the following sequence:

1. Sunita's job interview went terribly wrong.
2. Sunita went to an office to search for a job.
3. She was hungry.
4. Sunita was worried about her job.
5. She had to wait a long time for her boss.
6. Sunita went to the canteen.
7. She met her old friend there.
8. She returned to the office.
9. The boss said Sunita did not have the right qualifications.
10. Sunita left the office feeling sad.
11. But she won the lottery on her way home.
12. Finally, she did not need any job.

Some students were initially reluctant to contribute, fearing mistakes or feeling unsure about their ideas. However, they were later encouraged to develop the story freely. Eventually, each group extended their story using appropriate vocabulary, grammar, and phrases. After group discussions, students presented their stories autonomously.

Performance was evaluated based on criteria designed by the researcher: Initiation (10 marks), Development (10 marks), and Extension (10 marks). The primary objective of the tasks was to create a safe and comfortable learning environment. Students' speaking errors were tolerated, as engagement and confidence-building were prioritized over linguistic accuracy.

In contrast, the control group used visual aids related to job interviews and received keywords and templates from the researcher. Due to limited collaboration, their presentations were less effective.

IV. Results and Discussion

The study involved 30 rural undergraduate students divided equally into an experimental group and a control group. Each group was assessed on three criteria such as Initiation, Development, and Extension using a 10-point scale per category, totaling 30 marks per student. The experimental group engaged in collaborative scaffolding through storytelling roles and structured templates, while the control group participated in a less interactive, picture-based task.

Descriptive Statistics revealed a clear performance difference between the two groups. The experimental group had a mean score of 24.6 and a median score of 25, indicating consistently higher performance across participants. In contrast, the control group recorded a mean score of 17.8 and a median score of 18, reflecting lower engagement and output quality. The experimental group showed stronger results in all three criteria, particularly in Extension, where students demonstrated creative use of vocabulary and cohesive storytelling. Qualitative observations supported these findings. Students in the experimental group displayed increased confidence, willingness to speak, and peer support. The roles of leader, president, and secretary fostered accountability and active participation. The use of sentence starters such as “Once upon a time” and “Finally” helped students organize their thoughts and reduce hesitation. Notably, even students with limited prior speaking experience contributed meaningfully, suggesting that scaffolding lowered affective barriers. In contrast, the control group struggled with fluency and coherence. While the visual prompts and keywords provided some support, the lack of structured collaboration limited their ability to extend ideas or build narrative flow. Several students hesitated or relied heavily on memorized phrases, indicating lower autonomy. Overall, the results affirm that collaborative scaffolding is an effective strategy for enhancing speaking skills among rural Tamil-medium learners. The combination of role-based storytelling, lexical support, and peer interaction created a safe and motivating environment. Importantly, the study prioritized fluency and engagement over grammatical accuracy, aligning with the pedagogical goal of building learner confidence. These findings support the integration of culturally responsive, task-based speaking activities in similar educational contexts.

IV. Limitations and Recommendations

While the study offers valuable insights into the impact of collaborative scaffolding on rural learners' speaking skills, certain limitations must be acknowledged. The sample size was relatively small and restricted to a single institution and discipline, which may limit the generalizability of findings across broader educational contexts. Additionally, the short duration of the intervention did not allow for long-term tracking of language development or retention. Future research could expand the participant pool across multiple colleges and include learners from diverse academic streams to validate and enrich the results. It is also recommended that longitudinal studies be conducted to assess sustained improvements in fluency and confidence. Incorporating digital tools and multilingual scaffolds may further enhance accessibility and engagement, especially in resource-constrained environments.

V. Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that collaborative scaffolding is a powerful and context-sensitive strategy for enhancing English speaking skills among rural Tamil-medium undergraduate learners. By integrating culturally relevant storytelling tasks and assigning peer roles such as leader, president, and secretary, the experimental group showed marked improvement in fluency, confidence, and autonomy. The use of lexical templates and sentence starters provided essential linguistic support, enabling students to organize their thoughts and participate actively, even with limited prior exposure to spoken English.

Quantitative data revealed a significant performance gap between the experimental and control groups, with higher mean and median scores in the former. Qualitative observations further confirmed that students in the experimental group were more engaged, imaginative, and willing to take risks in communication. These outcomes affirm the importance of creating a low-anxiety, collaborative learning environment where errors are tolerated and creativity is encouraged.

Importantly, the study highlights the need for pedagogical approaches that are not only linguistically supportive but also socially inclusive. In under-resourced contexts like rural Tamil Nadu, such scaffolding methods can bridge the gap between learners' lived experiences and academic expectations. Future research may explore long-term impacts of collaborative scaffolding and its adaptability across disciplines. Overall, this study contributes to the growing body of evidence advocating for task-based, culturally responsive ELT practices that empower marginalized learners and promote meaningful language use.

VI. References

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