

Benefits of Experiential Learning in the Communication Classroom: A Case Study

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Abstract

The ability to speak confidently in English is an essential skill at the workplace today. While teaching various Communication Skills Courses as part of the undergraduate programme in a college, the researcher noticed a marked increase in oral communication confidence of students, from the first year at college to the final year. The researcher had been using experiential learning in the classroom, across three years of the Mass Communication Bachelor's Degree Programme, and was curious to ascertain if there was a direct relation between experiential learning and enhanced oral communication skills of students. Qualitative research was conducted via an open-ended survey on 145 of her own graduate students across 10 batches and the data was analyzed. Results showed that experiential learning—a combination of (i) interactive student-centric classroom teaching, (ii) application of theory to real-world practical assignments and projects and (iii) timely constructive feedback—had contributed, in various ways, to making students more confident speakers.

Keywords: Experiential learning, oral communication, pedagogy, student-centric

Introduction

Most Indian employers recognize English language proficiency, particularly oral communication confidence, to be an indispensable skill in the industry. However, colleges rarely give due importance to this skill during students' undergraduate programs (*India Skills Report, 2022*).

This results in students entering the workplace with insufficient oral communication skills often landing them in situations where they find speaking in front of peers and seniors a daunting task. Silence from fresh employees is also misunderstood as their incompetence in contributing to discussion and ideation. Organizations, therefore, often end up having to upskill their employees' communicative competence. This oral communication skills gap can be traced back to the one-way mode of instruction followed in most educational institutions. The teacher-centric instruction provides little or no opportunity to students, to speak up in the classroom, with a similar situation often continuing into college. (British Council, 2014, p. 30). Over time, this turns into public speaking anxiety (PSA), completely disabling students from speaking in a group. (Smith et al., 2022, p. 1).

The researcher has been teaching students of Mass Communication Bachelor's Degree Programme for over a decade using the 3-steps experiential learning model in the classroom: (i) Student-centric, two-way teaching (ii) Application of theory to practical projects/ assignments, and (iii) Detailed feedback on assignments. This learning model is based on learning outcomes and aims at equipping students with solid real-world skills in the workplace. Experiential learning has been the bedrock of lifelong skill acquirement. The ancient Chinese philosophy (AD 551-179) says, "I hear I forget; I see I remember; I do I understand" (Beard & Wilson, 2013, p. 123). Listening to a lecture on news reporting or even reading a well-written news story is not as effective in making the student understand the nuances of good reporting, as it is to actually encourage them to venture on-field and write a news report. While using experiential learning in her classroom, the researcher observed that year after year, within each batch of students, there was a gradual and a noticeable increase in the confidence of students as far as their spoken English skills were concerned—those who were tongue-tied in their first year in college contributed confidently to classroom discussions by the end of the final year. The researcher was, therefore, curious to explore if experiential learning plays a part in building confidence to speak L2. A survey was conducted on 145 of her own students from across 10 batches to assess how experiential learning had impacted their confidence in verbal English communication.

Review of Literature

Public Speaking Anxiety (PSA)

A vast number of students suffer from a common social phobia called Public Speaking Anxiety (PSA). This condition makes them nervous while speaking in front of others, impacting their performance in college during discussions or presentations. Reducing PSA can improve their confidence in oral communication. In fact, there are specific tools or “anxiety inventories” which educators use to help them in recognizing and measuring how PSA expresses itself in undergraduates. (Smith et al., 2022, p. 1).

Recruitment strategies in top Indian companies, currently revolve around specific skills—communication being one of them. Employing freshers with public speaking challenges puts organizations at a disadvantage with employers having to invest time, effort and finance into training new recruits. (*India Skills Report, 2022, p. 58*).

Freire’s Banking Concept of Learning

School-level teaching in India, over decades, has been mostly teacher-centric (British Council, 2014, p. 30). Students who are already uncomfortable with public speaking get pushed further into their shell with this one-way lecture-based teaching methodology. Freire discusses the pitfalls of this unidimensional teaching method in his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (2005), wherein he describes the teacher as the “depositor” who “deposits” her knowledge into students who passively receive, file and store the deposits. This “banking” concept of education turns students into automatons who become incapable of thinking for themselves (p. 72). The problem-posing education, on the other hand, according to Freire, involves the teacher and the student engaging in a constructive dialogue. The teacher builds on what they said earlier, taking the students’ expressions into consideration, resulting in students learning actively. Hence, communication and dialogue become an indispensable part of learning (p. 83).

Socratic Teaching

The importance of two-way interaction in the classroom was recognized by Greek philosopher, Socrates, over 2,500 years ago with the Socratic Teaching Method based on questioning (Beard & Wilson, 2013, p. 191). This method involving open-ended questions, often sparks analysis,

debate, and discussion. In this scenario, the teacher is not the all-knowing *guru* and the students are not empty vessels. The teacher's role in the classroom is to simplify, clarify, and challenge the students to 'think' and answer, taking into account their own beliefs, thoughts and experiences. This changes the classroom from a teacher-centric to a student-centric one (Saiki, 1995, p. 8). Initially students may be shy, but as they keep answering and asking questions, their confidence as well as motivation to speak increases (p. 43).

National Education Policy 2020 and Communication

NEP, 2020, has acknowledged the importance of oral communication in the classroom. Although it encourages students' flexibility with respect to curriculum choice, it insists on some skills that all students *must* learn in order to become "productive human beings"—oral communication being one of them (MHRD, 2020, p. 16).

Research Questions

There are multiple studies related to oral communication. The lack of oral communication skills in Engineering students (Clement & Murugavel, 2015); the use of multimedia activities to enhance oral communication in students (Kotak, 2020); taking a task-based approach towards teaching oral communication (Rehman, 2010); experimental studies on the impact of TED talks on students enhanced oral communication skills (Salem, 2019). However, there is hardly any research done in order to explore the effects of experiential learning on the students' confidence to use English in oral interactions in the classroom. This study was planned in order to investigate the same.

The study aimed at investigating the following questions:

1. What, according to students, was their level of confidence in spoken English in the first year of college?
2. What was the self-perceived confidence of students in their oral English communication in the final year of college?
3. If there was an increase in the level of confidence, what reasons did the students attribute it to?

Data Collection

Qualitative research was used for this study. A survey was conducted on

a purposive sample of 145 students across batches who had been exposed to experiential learning in the communication courses taught by the researcher over three years of the Mass Communication undergraduate Degree Programme at Mount Carmel College, Bengaluru. At the time of conducting research, many of these graduates had graduated and were working across various Media: Radio, Television, Journalism, Digital Marketing, Advertising, Animation, Theatre, Films, Features and Documentaries, Education, NGO, Copy-editing and Publishing, Writing, Graphic Design, Event Coordination, Corporate Communication, Technical Writing, to name a few. Some were pursuing higher studies.

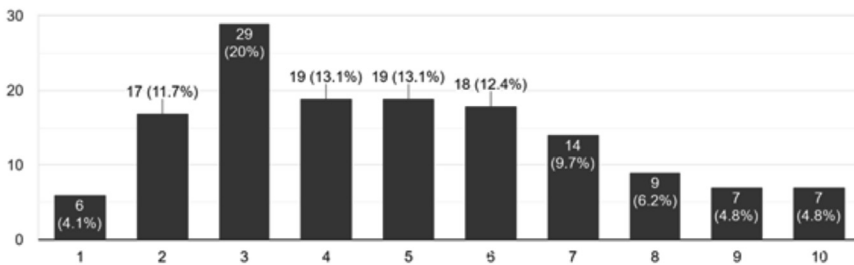
Summary of Findings

Two Likert Scales were presented to the respondents. The first one asked students to assess their confidence while speaking English in a group (in and outside class), in their first year at college on a scale of 1 to 10 (1 being the least and 10 being the most confident). Only 15.8 per cent of the respondents described their confidence as being between 8 and 10 on the scale as depicted in Figure 1.

Figure 1: *Students' self-rated response to their confidence in oral English in the First Year at college*

On a scale of 1 to 10, how confident were you, speaking in a group (in and outside class) in your 1st year at college (1 being the least and 10 being the most confident)?

145 responses

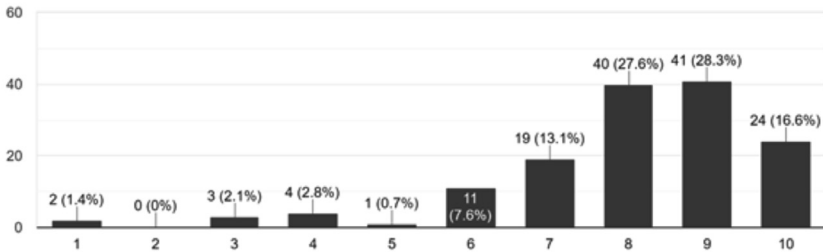


The second Likert Scale asked students to assess their speaking confidence level in their final year at college. 72.5 per cent of the students reported having confidence level between 8 and 10 on the scale as represented in Figure 2.

Figure 2: *Students' self-perceived confidence in oral English in the final year at college*

On a scale of 1 to 10, how confident were you of speaking in a group in your final year at college (1 being the least and 10 being the most confident)?

145 responses



As is evident from the above two figures, students' confidence in using English for verbal interactions had increased considerably as they had moved from the first to the final year at college. They were subsequently asked to explain reasons for this self-perceived transformation through an open-ended question and their responses were tabulated using Thematic Content Analysis. Some significant findings are discussed below:

- *Pedagogy Involving Two-Way Discussion*

Explaining the reason for increased confidence in using English for oral communication, a student said, "It was the teacher's ability to create a safe learning space that made me confident." Another student described it as "a collaborative classroom culture that invited people to share opinions". Respondents mentioned that initially the shy ones had to be nudged by the teacher to share their thoughts but speaking their mind "eventually became a natural response". As the classes were interactive by nature, students gradually found their creative flair in speaking. They also noted that all ideas and interpretations were welcome, without judgement, and that took the pressure off while expressing themselves. "There was never a right or wrong way to think in class. Speaking up for ourselves and voicing our opinion was encouraged. With every passing semester, we spoke our minds out, and eventually got to a point where nervousness faded out," analyzed a student. The measurement of confidence, according to a student, was her ability to speak out when she had a doubt and being okay with saying something embarrassing or wrong. "Even when I was proved wrong or something was explained

to me with a different perspective, I wouldn't feel shameful or like an attack but rather as an opportunity to learn more," observed another student. The constant positive push from the teacher made students comfortable with saying "I don't know" in a public speaking scenario and they were made to feel it was perfectly fine to give wrong answers. "We were also encouraged to casually put forth our opinions and share our experiences with everybody in class, whenever we felt like it, even in the middle of lectures," shared a student. The "structured one-by-one speaking" where everyone (and not just the talkative ones) were listened to, helped students get comfortable with getting individual attention. "The environment of openness, trust and guidance by my teachers is what enabled me to express myself best," underscored a student.

- *Solid Understanding of Theoretical Fundamentals*

A solid theoretical foundation seems to have led to higher speaking confidence. Being guided by the teacher, through concepts, in a clear and comprehensive manner had given students a sense of security, which in turn, pushed up communication confidence. "I felt conscious to speak up with a lack of know-how but once my knowledge increased, I felt more confident," noted a student. Another observed that the teaching of fundamentals of speaking, grammar, comprehension, writing, research skills and increase in subject knowledge of courses, resulted in increased confidence. "A stronger knowledge base – knowing the subject – really helps when it came to having conversations and participating in discussions," highlighted a student. Many respondents remarked that knowing what they were saying was factually right, in terms of subject matter, empowered them and helped them articulate their thoughts better while speaking.

- *Plenty of Classroom Practice*

Most respondents were in agreement that the ample presentations, projects, speaking exercises, open discussions and debates which were a mandatory part of the courses helped ease the fear of public speaking. A student elaborated, "Multiple presentations—both in groups and individually, gave me confidence in my abilities and made me feel that what I had to say, was worth listening to." Another student shared, "I am from a small town, so I had less exposure before undergrad. Interacting with more people and having topics to speak about, helped."

It was unanimously agreed that the course structure gave students a lot

of practice with speaking all through the year. As one student observed, "Almost every subject had it. Every single semester." Another agreed, "All the classes had some element of public speaking. For example, many involved researching a topic and making a presentation on it." Another said, "Several papers in the course required us to speak in front of people, mostly classmates, and some specifically designed to improve speaking skills. This really helped improve my own attitude towards public speaking." While a student said she spoke because "somewhere, someone is going to benefit from what you say/question," others said speaking in groups repeatedly over the years, made it easier.

Initially, some shy students were uncomfortable speaking when "put on a spot to speak in front of the entire class". A student explained, "Initially I was forced to speak in front of an audience for assignments. Then I slowly developed a liking and, more importantly, got comfortable in doing so." Another said, that although, at first, she felt pressurized when asked to speak, she realised "it was necessary to come out of my comfort zone".

A common observation amongst respondents was that encouragement and comfort established with peers and professors helped them in accepting that "being wrong isn't necessarily the worst thing in an open classroom discussion or among people". This helped overcome their hesitation in speaking despite not being completely sure about something. A student pointed out that even if there were corrections or suggestions, they learnt to pass them along in a respectful way so that there was no stress, anger or confrontation. "Real discussions are calm and respectful," observed another student. This also helped with understanding various points of view, and as one student opined, "the confidence in knowing what to say impromptu increased, internally, because of exposure to different ideas and debates with the students". Many said that constant speaking practice made them aware of the importance of impactful communication. "Emphasizing the need to be prepared and work with the goal of communicating effectively were the key takeaways that really helped me after college as well," remarked a student.

- *Practical Assignments and Real-World Projects*

Remarking on the utility of the assignments and projects that were given to them, a student pointed out that "the group projects gave me

a passion and purpose which helped me work on my public speaking confidence". Another student explained that working in groups "showed me the value of having and discussing multiple opinions on the same topic". With some, it was "the ability and desire to make myself heard, because if I were to work on myself and my creative abilities, it was important for me to get the feedback of my peers". While working on "real-world projects" like newsletters, films, etc., gave some students an opportunity to "interact confidently with peers", it helped others take up leadership roles as group project managers which helped increase their confidence. The on-field work pushed students out of their comfort level. "Being pushed to do field work for journalism, filming purposes made me interact with different kinds of people. Even when I was scared or uncertain, I just had to do it...during the TV news project, searching for, contacting and finally interviewing people at the State Election Commission and INC's youth wing was daunting but...it worked out." It was observed that the hands-on nature of the course helped in developing speaking skills and industry-specific assignments like newsletters, television news reports, scripts for radio and television, advertising copy and branding etc., increased confidence. Students opined that individual assignments, on-field work, group discussions – all helped them push themselves and become more open and comfortable with speaking in front of others.

- *Timely and Constructive Feedback from the Teacher*

Many respondents stated that the constructive feedback given by their teacher regularly during their vivas and presentations helped them enormously and made them feel more certain about their spoken English skills. As one student pointed out, "We would get constructive feedback from our professors, not just in relation to the topic we were discussing, but also how we could be better presenters/public speakers." Another student added how detailed stage-wise feedback aided her development as a speaker as she explained how "comments and reviews of the sessions and assignments helped me understand my strengths and use them efficiently". The post-feedback revised presentations enabled students to reflect on their mistakes and boosted their confidence. As one student pointed out, "A part of the process was incorporating feedback and making the assignment a better version of the original...this helped in improving our performance."

- *Peer Influence*

Many assignments involved getting feedback from the whole class which, in turn, helped students in offering their views as well as taking criticism and responding to it positively. It was observed by most students that peer interaction had a positive impact on their oral competence. As one student pointed out that over time “everyone in my class spoke, so I felt comfortable speaking as well”. While some noted that having a smaller class-size meant a smaller audience, which helped them get rid of stage-fright, others were encouraged by peers who boosted their morale and confidence. One student attributed common customs, language and like-mindedness of classmates which helped build familiarity, as a reason for the increase in confidence while speaking in the company of peers. Another respondent observed, “Negotiating ideas on the same subject with classmates having different creative approaches helped in understanding and overcoming communication difficulties.”

Students seemed to have learnt by observing each other in class. “Besides making my own presentations, looking at how my peers went about it also taught me how to incorporate confident public speaking techniques,” explained a respondent. Students were made to review their own work as well as their peers’ in group projects. They felt this process made them accountable for their own work and respect that of their group mates. “Peer reviews and feedback sessions also helped as they taught me how to give and accept constructive criticism,” elaborated a student. The analysis of how peers influenced confidence building over the course of three years was succinctly explained by a respondent: “In your first year, you try your best to impress... As you study more and understand the world, you’re more comfortable in your skin and don’t chase the pretence. You’re confident in learning from people around you.”

- *Direct Exposure to Industry and Industry Experts*

During the undergraduate program, several opportunities were provided to students to touch base with industry. Reaching out to newsmakers and other multiple sources for interviews for Print, Broadcast Journalism, and Documentary making, was inevitable. They were also required to attend guest lectures of industry experts and actively participate in the Question-Answer sessions post the lectures. Many respondents mentioned that the exposure to multiple situations involving interactions

with industry experts had contributed towards building their verbal communicative competence.

Conclusion

As the findings of this study reveal, experiential learning boosted students' confidence and positively impacted their spoken English skills. Students' responses indicate that the experiential learning model that they were exposed to in the classroom had, in various ways, directly or indirectly, benefitted them. The two-way classroom interaction by way of discussions, debates, positive feedback and repeated practice of speaking in front of classmates contributed in eliminating students' fear of public speech and gave them a sense of empowerment. Therefore, experiential learning must be encouraged in educational institutions since it contributes significantly to building the confidence of students and in turn aids in the development of spoken skills of students.

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