

Challenges in Developing English Communicative Skills Among Rural Undergraduates in Coorg District: A Mixed-Methods Analysis

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Abstract

English has become the global language of communication, education, and employment. Yet, for rural undergraduates in India, especially in districts such as Coorg, Karnataka, acquiring English communicative competence remains a formidable challenge. This study investigates the difficulties faced by rural learners, drawing on survey responses from 194 students and 23 teachers. The analysis explores demographic, socio-economic, cultural, and instructional factors influencing language proficiency. Results reveal that most students have limited exposure to English beyond the classroom, suffer from low confidence in speaking, and lack adequate infrastructure and interactive learning opportunities. Teachers highlight fear of speaking, limited vocabulary, and poor fluency as major barriers. The study concludes that targeted interventions activity-based learning, bilingual instruction, integration of digital tools, and creation of immersive English environments are essential to bridge the rural–urban divide in communicative competence and to enhance employability.

Keywords: English Communication, Rural Students, Coorg District, Language Learning Challenges, Employability, Teacher Perspectives.

I. Introduction

English occupies a pivotal place in India's education and employment landscape. As a lingua franca, it functions not only as a medium of instruction in higher education but also as a prerequisite for employability in globalized sectors. The National Employability Report (Aspiring Minds, 2013) has repeatedly shown that poor communication skills, especially in English, are one of the largest barriers to graduate employability. NASSCOM (2011) similarly reports that only 25% of Indian technical graduates are readily employable, citing weak English communication as a major shortcoming.

Scholars also note that employers increasingly priorities communication and interpersonal abilities over technical expertise alone (Andrews & Higson, 2008; Rao, 2019). In the Indian context, weak proficiency in English is especially limiting for rural graduates, who often find themselves disadvantaged in competitive job markets (Azam, Chin, & Prakash, 2013).

Despite these findings, rural higher education institutions continue to face persistent challenges in teaching English effectively. Research (Bharathi, 2016; Jeyaraj, 2019; Rani, 2014) demonstrates that university syllabi often emphasize rote learning and reproduction of theoretical knowledge rather than practical communication. In regions like Coorg, Karnataka, this mismatch becomes especially stark due to socio-linguistic realities. The dominance of Kannada and other regional languages means students have minimal exposure to English outside formal classrooms.

Furthermore, systemic factors such as poor infrastructure, limited access to technology, lack of trained teachers, and traditional teaching methods constrain rural students' opportunities to develop communicative competence. Fear of speaking in English and lack of vocabulary further exacerbate their difficulties (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986). Teachers themselves recognize these issues, often resorting to bilingual teaching to bridge comprehension gaps (Richards & Rodgers, 2014).

This study examines these challenges through a mixed-methods lens, combining student and teacher perspectives. By focusing on Coorg district, the research highlights region-specific barriers while contributing to broader discussions on rural English education in India.

II. Objectives

1. To analyze the demographic, socio-economic, and cultural factors influencing English communication skills among rural undergraduates.
2. To assess the quality of English instruction, availability of resources, and student engagement.
3. To identify key challenges in developing English communicative competence from both students' and teachers' perspectives.
4. To suggest pedagogical and policy interventions for improving English communication skills in rural higher education contexts.

III. Methodology

This study adopted a mixed-methods approach combining quantitative and qualitative data.

1. Sample:

- **Students:** 194 undergraduates from Commerce (29.3%), Arts (24.7%), Business Administration (21.6%), and Computer Science (21.6%). The majority were female (54.6%), between 18–20 years of age (93.3%), and from rural areas (72.7%).
- **Teachers:** 23 English teachers from colleges in Coorg district, with varied teaching experience.

2. Data Collection:

- **Student survey:** demographics, socio-economic factors, cultural exposure, instructional quality, confidence levels.
- **Teacher survey:** perceptions of students' skills, challenges faced, teaching approaches, and effective practices.

3. Analysis:

Descriptive statistics were applied to quantitative data. Thematic analysis was used for qualitative responses.

IV. Results and Data Analysis

1. Student Perspectives

- **Technology & Resources:** 25% lacked internet-enabled devices; 58% relied only on smartphones. Only 23.7% reported access to language labs, and 79.3% said classrooms lacked technology.
- **Instructional Quality:** 40.9% reported communicative activities were never included in class; 56.2% said speaking activities were never assigned.
- **Confidence & Motivation:** 54.6% felt uncomfortable speaking English in public; 74.6% admitted poor English affected academic performance. Yet, 94.8% believed English would enhance their career prospects.

2. Teacher Perspectives

- **Student Communication Levels:** 91.3% of teachers reported that less than half of students communicate in English.
- **Key Challenges:** Fear of speaking (82.6%), lack of vocabulary (43.5%), poor grammar (56.5%), and weak fluency (69.6%).

3. Teaching Approaches: 43.5% relied on lectures, 34.8% used group discussions, 13% used audio-visual aids; none used role-play.

4. Effective Practices: Teachers highlighted bilingual approaches, technology integration, and English audio practice as most useful method.

V. Tables

Table 1. Demographic Profile of Students (N = 194)

Variable	Category	Percentage
Gender	Male	45.4
	Female	54.6
Age	18-20 (years)	93.3
	21-23 (years)	6.7
Residence	Remote, Rural	73.2
	Semi-urban, Urban	26.8

Table 2. Teachers' Perceptions of Challenges (N = 23)

Challenges	Percentage
Fear of Speaking	82.6
Weak Fluency	69.6
Poor Grammar	56.5
Lack of Vocabulary	43.5
Listening Difficulties	39.1

VI. Figures

Figure 1: Students' Residential Profile

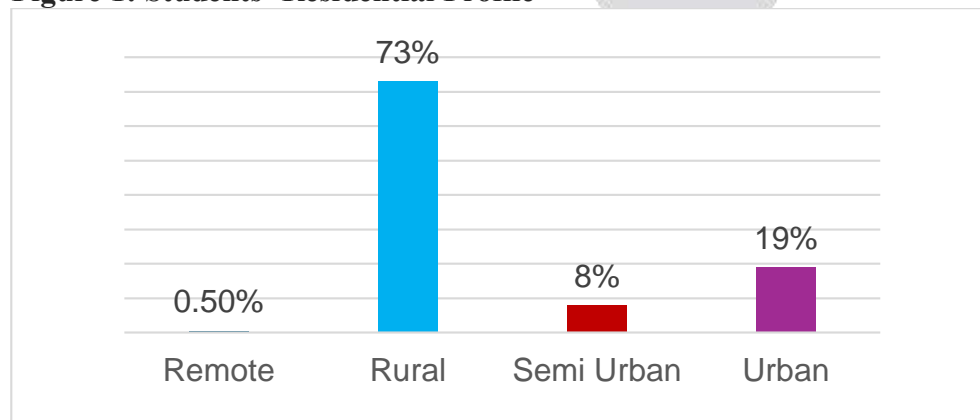
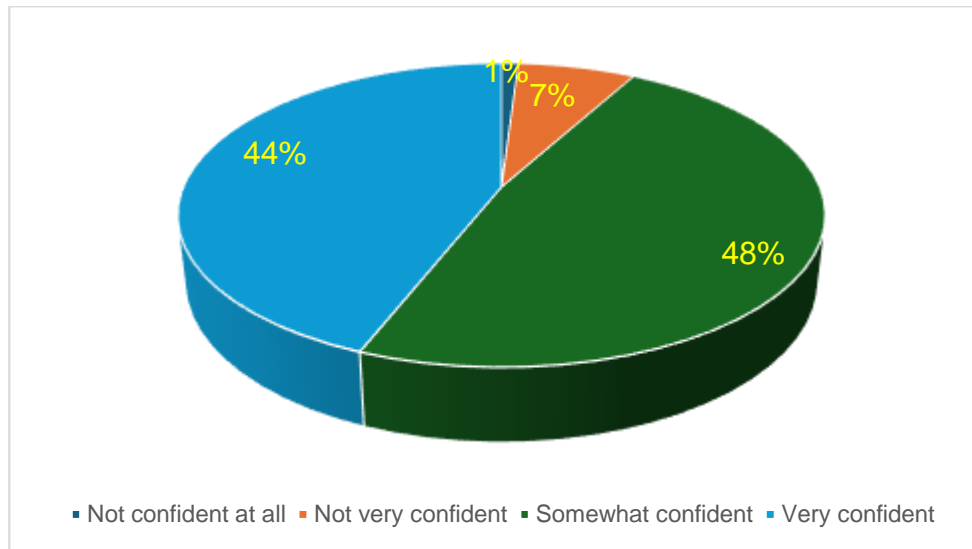
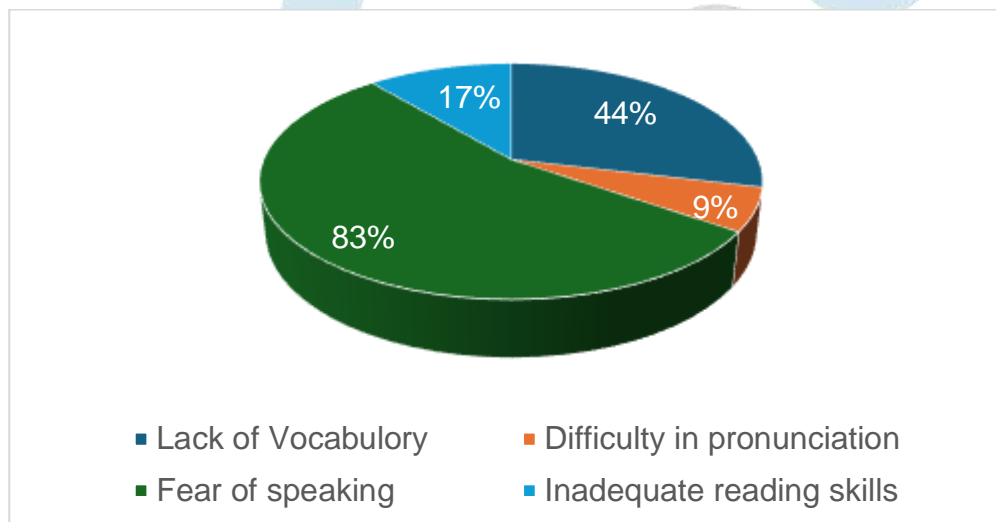
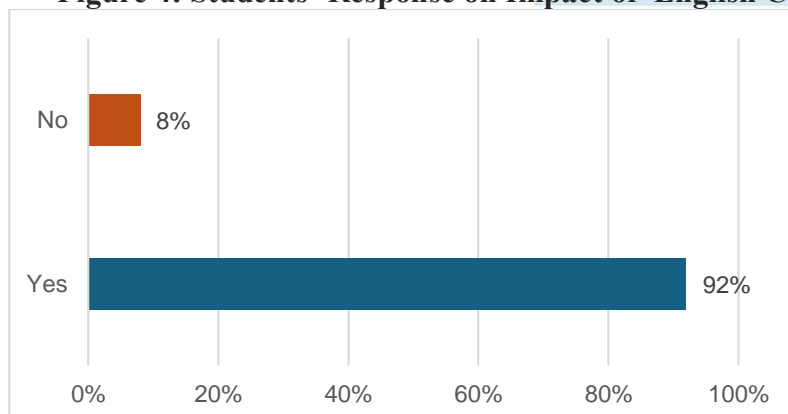


Figure 2: Students' Confidence in Improving Communication Skills**Figure 3: Teachers' Perceptions of Major Challenges****Figure 4: Students' Response on Impact of English Communication on Personality Development**

VII. Discussion

Findings reveal that rural undergraduates face both structural and psychological barriers to acquiring English communicative competence. Fear of speaking, identified by over 80% of teachers, is consistent with the concept

of foreign language classroom anxiety (Horwitz et al., 1986). Such anxiety reduces willingness to communicate, regardless of ability (Krashen, 1982).

Students' limited exposure outside classrooms highlights the importance of technology-mediated learning. Although formal infrastructure is scarce, smartphone penetration presents opportunities for mobile-assisted language learning (MALL) (Kukulska-Hulme & Shield, 2008; Godwin-Jones, 2011). Research shows digital tools improve vocabulary and learner autonomy in resource-poor contexts (Stockwell, 2007).

Motivation emerged as a strength: Nearly all students recognized English's role in employability. Motivation is central to second-language learning (Dörnyei, 2001) and can be harnessed through task-based approaches (Littlewood, 2004; Nunan, 2015), which encourage practical, real-life use of English.

VIII. Recommendations

1. **Curriculum Reform:** This can be achieved through the integration of debates, role-plays, and presentations in the classroom to promote active learning (Richards & Rodgers, 2014; Nunan, 2015).
2. **Teacher Training:** Teachers should be provided with training in communicative language teaching and digital pedagogy to enhance their effectiveness (Kumar & Rani, 2016).
3. **Technology Integration:** Technology, particularly smartphones and language learning apps, can be leveraged to improve listening, pronunciation, and vocabulary skills (Kukulska-Hulme & Shield, 2008).
4. **Bilingual Scaffolding:** The use of bilingual scaffolding, such as Kannada-English code-switching, helps reduce fear and build confidence among learners (Rao, 2019).
5. **Community Involvement:** Community involvement, including parental support for informal English learning, can further strengthen the process (Jeyaraj, 2019).
6. **Extracurricular Exposure:** Extracurricular initiatives such as English clubs and cultural events provide valuable opportunities for informal practice and motivation (Dörnyei, 2001).

IX. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that rural undergraduates in Coorg district face multifaceted challenges in learning English communication skills, including poor infrastructure, low exposure, weak teaching practices, and lack of confidence. Teachers reinforce these findings, emphasizing fear of speaking and weak fluency as critical issues. However, both students and teachers express openness to reform through interactive pedagogy,

technology integration, and bilingual support. By implementing these strategies, institutions can enhance employability and empower rural learners to participate in global opportunities.

X. References

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