



Challenges of Teaching Spoken English to Assamese Medium learners in Rural Colleges: A Teacher's Perspective of a Ground-Level View from the Classroom

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Abstract:

The Assamese medium learners of English especially of rural areas primarily strive for English skills whether be listening, speaking, reading and writing (LSRW). It has been noticed that even after completing graduation, many Assamese medium learners are neither able to write a well-structured sentence in English nor speak simple sentences confidently. In this regard, the pedagogical implication of English especially to Assamese medium learners in rural pockets of Assam cannot be disregarded. This paper explores the multifaceted challenges faced by English language teachers in promoting spoken English in rural areas of Assam. It poses a mixture of linguistic, infrastructural, and socio-cultural challenges. This study presents insights drawn from classroom observations and interviews with English teachers of three rural colleges in the Kamrup district of Assam: S.B.M.S College, Sualkuchi; Pub Bongsor College, Pacharia; and Bamundi Mahavidyalaya, Bamundi, Assam. Teachers of English encounter numerous barriers-ranging from infrastructural inadequacies, lack of exposure to English in day-to-day life to students' low self-confidence, hesitation, fear and deep-rooted influence or interference of mother-tongue, i.e, Assamese despite of the emphasis on communicative competence. The study is based on qualitative data collected through survey, interviews and classroom observations of English teachers working in the three rural colleges. The findings suggest that along with addressing the pedagogical and practical challenges, the need for contextualized and localized teaching strategies can provide a leap to making spoken English instruction more effective and relatable.

Keywords: Spoken English, pedagogical implication, contextualised, communicative competence



Introduction

The role and importance of the English language in the current century is considered indispensable. It serves as lingua franca in areas such as education, science and technology, trade, diplomatic areas, etc. in the new millennium age. Similarly, English has paved the way to academic and professional opportunities, enhancing employability and vertical mobility to the students as well as young and enthusiastic professionals. As a lingua-franca, English connects the world and is essential to mediate amongst governments for important commercial, education, and tourism agreements worldwide (Kitao,1996).

Given the importance of English in all educational systems, the functional aspect of the language is hardly dealt with in the ground-level of the English classroom restricting English as a subject in the curriculum rather than training the life-skill associated with the English language. There exist various factors associated with poor performance, particularly spoken English, such as, poor educational back ground, personal attitude, motivation and exposure, fear and anxiety, teaching-learning methods, large class size, lack of English teaching in customised way, socio-cultural influence, etc. The benefits of English competencies are often unevenly distributed with rural and vernacular medium learners, in this case, Assamese, facing systematic challenges in mastering the language, especially its spoken form.

Unlike reading and writing which are essential in academic landscape, the ability to speak fluently and confidently often determines the employability and professional growth in the later phase of a student's life. But the state of things is that for many Assamese medium learners from rural background, the lack of spoken English skills becomes a significant hurdle, despite acquiring adequate subject knowledge.

In the context of Assam, English is taught as a second language from the primary level in Assamese medium schools. Students spend more than twelve years studying the English language. However, the practical challenges are deep and profound especially in rural areas where the language of instruction, student exposure to English beyond text books and teacher training are often scarce. The spoken English continues to be neglected and teachers are engaged in large classes along with limited technological support in rural colleges. This has created a substantial gap between curriculum expectations and ground level existence, particularly in terms of oral communication skills. There is a need to address this disparity in order to ensure equitable access to acquire the skills of the English language. In this context, teaching spoken English among the college students in rural and vernacular medium background students is not merely a language focused initiative but a move towards social upliftment.



Literature Review

The emphasis of the pedagogical challenges and implications of teaching English- particularly spoken English for college level students of rural set up has been profoundly perceived. The obstacles are not uniform in urban rural settings in case of socio-economic, linguistic and infrastructural contexts. There are several scholars who argue that the traditional pedagogical approaches are not sufficient for vernacular medium learners of rural background as they have limited exposure to English beyond the classroom. They advocated the role of multilingualism in shaping English language learning, directing that vernacular medium backgrounds often face structural and psychological barriers in mastering spoken English. (Agnihotri,2009; Mohanty,2010). Kumaravadivelu (2006) emphasises for a context-sensitive, locally relevant and learner-centred approach for rural setting. He advocates the teacher's innovation within their specific teaching environments along with drawing upon the socio-linguistic resources of their students. Nag-Arulmani et al. (2003) put emphasis on the importance of addressing affective filters such as fear, anxiety and lack of motivation. These filters in an uneven manner affect rural students in second language learning. Their findings suggest that the emotionally attached classroom environments, peer collaboration and confidence building activities facilitate effective learning outcomes.

Methodology

The present study takes on a qualitative research design ingrained in exploratory and descriptive paradigms. The research focuses on actual situations that exist within a specific context prevalent in rural Assamese medium colleges with the emphasis on teachers' perspectives and the ground level realities of English classroom of rural colleges of Assam so as to derive pedagogical insights in this regard. The investigation culminated at three rural colleges of Kamrup district: S.B.M.S College, Sualkuchi; Pub Bongsor College, Pachria and Bamundi Mahavidyalaya, Bamundi, Assam.

The study involved the English language teachers from rural provincialized Assamese medium colleges of Kamrup district. The participation of ten selected English teachers from 3 rural colleges located in predominantly rural settings was chosen conveniently since the investigator works in one of the colleges where the study was conducted. A structured questionnaire meant for teachers with 20 nos. of questions was developed, focusing on the areas such as: Perspectives of English Teaching, Teacher Preparedness and Confidence, Curriculum, Pedagogical Practices, Challenges and Learning Barrier, Infrastructure and Resources, Suggestions and Need for Improvement.

Respondents could rate each item on a 5-point Likert scale as: Strongly Disagree (1), Disagree (2), Neutral (3), Agree (4) and Strongly Agree (5). The survey put an emphasis on key pedagogical insights encompassing teacher preparedness, classroom practices, and motivation of students, infrastructure and availability of teaching aids.



Analysis and Findings

Perspectives of English Teaching

The teachers were asked to respond to the following five items coded from T1 to T5 on a five-point Likert Scale questionnaire to understand general perception of English teaching.

T1: I feel confident in teaching English to students from rural backgrounds.

T2: The curriculum of English is suitably designed to meet the needs of rural learners.

T3: Students are motivated and show interest for learning English.

T4: The administration provides full support to me for English teaching.

T5: The infrastructure prevalent in classroom supports effective English language teaching.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics for Perspectives of English Teaching

Question Code	Mean Score	Interpretation
T1	3.4	Moderate Agreement
T2	2.4	Disagreement (low readiness)
T3	1.9	Strong Disagreement
T4	2.6	Disagreement
T5	1.9	Strong Disagreement

Pedagogical Practices

The teachers were asked to respond to the following five items coded from P1 to P5 on a five-point Likert Scale questionnaire to understand of pedagogical practices.

P1: I frequently use activity-based methods (Role Play, Group Discussion and Debates, Storytelling, Language Games, Jigsaw, Dramatization, Peer Teaching, etc) to teach English.

P2: I use locally relevant examples to facilitate better understanding of spoken English.

P3: ICT tools (like projectors, language apps, or audio-visual aids) enhance learning level.

P4: Students actively participate in spoken English activities in classroom.

P5: I get opportunities to attend professional development programs related to ELT.



Table 2: Descriptive Statistics for Pedagogical Practices

Question Code	Mean Score	Interpretation
P1	1.0	Strong Disagreement
P2	2.6	Disagreement (low readiness)
P3	4.4	High Agreement
P4	1.2	Strong Disagreement
P5	1.0	Strong Disagreement

Challenges and Learning Barrier

The teachers were asked to respond to the following five items coded from C1 to C5 on a five-point Likert Scale questionnaire to understand challenges and learning barrier.

C1: Lack of student exposure to English beyond the classroom affects their progress.

C2: The foundation level in English hinders students' competency and performance.

C3: I face challenges in arousing interests among the students during English lessons.

C4: There are limited English learning resources (e.g., books, labs, internet access).

C5: The support from parents and local community for the English language learning is minimal in rural areas.

Table 3: Descriptive Statistics for Challenges and Learning Barrier

Question Code	Mean Score	Interpretation
C1	4.6	High Agreement
C2	5.0	Strong Agreement
C3	4.8	High Agreement
C4	4.1	Agreement
C5	5.0	Strong Agreement

Suggestions and Need for Improvement

The teachers were asked to respond to the following five items coded from S1 to S5 on a five-point Likert Scale questionnaire to understand suggestions and need for improvement.

S1: There is a need to revise the curriculum to suit rural learners' realities.

S2: Extra training in spoken English would help me teach better.



S3: More interactive tools (videos, smart boards) would improve my teaching.

S4: Collaboration among teachers enhances ELT practices.

S5: I would recommend specific strategies to improve English learning in rural settings.

Table 4: Descriptive Statistics for Suggestions and Need for Improvement

Question Code	Mean Score	Interpretation
S1	3.8	Agreement
S2	4.4	Moderate Agreement
S3	3.4	Moderate Agreement
S4	3.2	Moderate Agreement
S5	4.8	High Agreement

Findings

• *Strong Agreement/High Agreement:*

Teachers strongly agree that the foundation level in English hinders students' competency and performance, pointing it a major barrier (Mean: 5.0) in rural areas. They also strongly believe that parental and community support for English education is low in rural areas (Mean: 5.0). Teachers overwhelmingly agreed that lack of student exposure to English beyond the classroom environment affects their progress (Mean: 4.6) and teachers face challenges in arousing as well as maintaining interests among the students during English lessons (Mean: 4.8). These are the major barriers to spoken English learning for Assamese medium learners especially of rural areas. The teachers recommend specific strategies to improve English learning in rural settings

(Mean: 4.8). They also agreed upon that ICT tools (like projectors, language apps, or audio aids) enhance students' learning (Mean: 4.4).

• *Moderate Agreement / Agreement:*

As far as General Perception of Teaching English is concerned, the teachers are confident enough in teaching English to students from rural backgrounds (Mean: 3.4). Teachers opined that there are limited English learning resources (e.g., books, labs, internet access) (Mean: 4.1). They expressed that extra training in spoken English would help them teach better (Mean: 4.4), indicating a clear need for teacher training programme. They agreed upon that there is a need to revise the curriculum to suit rural learners' realities (Mean: 3.8).

Similarly, they opined that more interactive tools (videos, smart boards) would improve their teaching (Mean: 3.4). They emphasised on collaboration among teachers which will enhance ELT practices (Mean: 3.2).



- **Low Agreement:**

The teachers have put a low agreement in the curriculum of English, which is, suitably designed to meet the needs of rural learners (Mean: 2.4). Similarly, they expressed their views that they hardly get adequate support from the administration for English teaching (Mean: 2.6). They expressed their low readiness while integrating local examples or context in teaching English (Mean: 2.6).

- **Strong Disagreement:**

The teachers strongly expressed that Assamese medium learners of English exhibit low levels of motivation and interests to learn as well as to speak English, indicating their disagreement in their motivation to learn English (Mean:1.9). They put forward their strong disagreement on the classroom infrastructure that supports effective English language teaching (Mean: 1.9). They are also reluctant to frequently implement activity-based methods, such as (Role Play, Group Discussion and Debates, Storytelling, Language Games, Jigsaw, dramatization, Peer Teaching, etc) (Mean: 1.0). The teachers opined that active engagement in English speaking activities in class remains low among Assamese medium students (Mean: 1.2), indicating their strong disagreement in this respect. They also strongly disagree on the aspect of getting opportunities to attend professional development programmes related to ELT (Mean: 1.0).

Discussion

The data indicates that there are various factors associated with poor spoken English performance among the Assamese medium learners especially of rural colleges of Kamrup district. The negative language transfer from Assamese to English in terms of phonology, stress, intonation patterns has been detrimental in spoken English performance. In this regard, while articulating fricatives and affricates, the Assamese medium learners of English find difficult to articulate as these sounds don't exist in Assamese. Apart from that Assamese medium learners hardly get any exposure to listen to English syllable, stress and rhythm and speak accordingly in English classroom environment of rural set-up. In practice, it is a subject like any other written subject. The high affective filter, i.e., fear of ridicule or correction occurring in students' psyche leaves little room for the practice of speaking. Both Assamese medium and rural background learners have the unique psychological and socio-cultural influences that affect their engagement in learning English. They strive to boost their confidence and suffer anxiety while speaking English. Instead of focusing on grammatical accuracy, functional use of English should be encouraged in ground level of English classroom. Moreover, it is inferred that in order to develop student's spoken skill; there is a need for a structured pedagogical approach.



Conclusion

The primary goal of this research was to investigate the challenges of teaching spoken English to Assamese medium learners in rural colleges of Kamrup district. The learners' dismal performance in spoken English has caused concerns among most of the teachers. This study has tried to focus the ground-level view from the classroom—the real scenario why most of the Assamese medium students find difficult to communicate even simple English, neither most of them can construct a basic sentence even on the verge of college completion. The ability to acquire spoken English is not merely a linguistic challenge; it is also related with pedagogical perspective. The paradigm shift from conventional to inclusive, communicative and non-conventional one from teachers' end is the need of the hour. In order to develop the spoken proficiency among college students of rural settings, spoken English must be integrated into core curriculum right from their primary level of their learning. The structured speaking activities such as role play, real life contextual situations, group discussion, story-telling activities, drilling pronunciation practice should take place in classroom environment. Teachers' training programme on spoken English, Faculty Development Programmes, and Refresher Course etc. on spoken English should be made compulsory for English language teachers so that they can work on innovative ideas to model spoken English in the classroom.

According to the researcher, these findings can provide practical significance for language teachers of vernacular medium colleges in the Kamrup district of Assam as addressing these areas, a conducive teaching-learning environment can be facilitated. The present study has its limitations as it is confined to a limited number of rural colleges of Kamrup district and may not generalise to all colleges of rural settings of Assam. The findings are inferred on self-reported data provided by teachers as well as classroom realities to English language teaching.

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