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### Let's Have Fun While Learning English: Activities to Develop Speaking Skills of Rural School Children

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#### Introduction

English no doubt is the language to know if one wants to succeed in today's workplace. Cut-throat competition, a steady rise in the international job-market, and a diverse client-base, has made it imperative for today's professional to be proficient in the English language to connect better at the workplace. To be proficient in a language certainly one needs to be thorough in all four language skills. To create a good first impression, adequate speaking skills are highly essential. Bygate (1987) observes that speaking is a skill that deserves as much attention as writing. It is the skill by which students are frequently judged. Speaking is one of the four important skills of English and a vital medium of expressing one's thoughts and communicating one's ideas and views directly to others.

In India, communicating in English is a big problem area for most students. And the problem is bigger particularly for the first-generation learners. Studies say that the ability of school children in the learning of English language is stagnating day by day. According to surveys made by Pratham Foundation, in the year 2009, 60.2% of class 8 children could read simple English sentences with comprehension but the figure decreased to 46.8% in 2014. Therefore, it is concluded by experts that the situation of Indian school education is in deep crisis and needs urgent attention "if Indians want to reap the so-called demographic dividend" (Nanda, p. 2). There are many reasons responsible for this, few among these are; absence of English communication in the classrooms, teachers' lack of proper training in the English language, students' lack of adequate exposure to the English language, and most importantly, inhibition of students toward speaking in English, resulting from all of the above. This inherent anxiety results in students completely avoiding speaking in English because of their fear of committing mistakes and facing perceived humiliation in front of others.

Various studies have been conducted to make English learning interesting and easy for the learners to acquire the language. Incorporating fun-methods of learning in the form of games and activities in the ESL syllabus is a well-established field of study that has been observed to motivate young learners to learn the language more readily. Through language games learners are observed to make actual use of the language. According to Bransford, Brown and Cocking (2000), learning through fun-methods adds variety to the dry, serious process of language instruction. Resnick (2004) supplements this by suggesting

that learning is a bitter medicine that needs a sugar-coating of entertainment to become palatable. Das (2014) proposes that in a learning situation “games and activities provide fun and motivate students to learn the target language in a relaxed manner” (p. 3). This underlines the idea put forth by McKay (2002) that every class is unique in the way teachers and learners interact with one another while learning English. Lengeling and Malarcher’s (1997) study highlights the benefits of language learning through the use of games in the classroom. In their opinion, teachers can supplement their lesson plans in the ESL classroom through games and activities. The benefits of these group activities range from cognitive aspects of language learning to more cooperative group dynamics.

### **Key Objective of the Study**

Taking into account the importance of games, stories, and different types of activities among young minds, this study aimed at finding out how different types of fun-methods can help develop speaking skills among rural ESL students.

### **Study Setting and Participants**

After seeking due permission from the school authorities, the study was conducted in two senior secondary state schools located in a village area. The objective was to help the learners develop their English-speaking skills through different fun-activities so that they would feel more comfortable and confident while communicating in English. Eighty six students participated in the study. School-1 had 42 students (experimental group) and school-2 (control group) had 44 students.

### **The Process (Pre-test, Intervention and Post-test)**

#### **Pre-test**

A pre-test on speaking was conducted in both of the schools. The test comprised 20 marks and was divided into two parts. The first part consisting of 10 marks was based on five general self-introductory questions for the students, for example, stating their names, birthplace, and occupation of their parents, their hobbies, and their aims in life. Each student was asked the same questions in random order so that memorization of the answers and reproducing through recall could be avoided. In the second part of the test, consisting of another 10 marks, some common topics like favorite picnic spots, village fairs, circus, scenes at a railway station/bus stop, village temples/churches/mosques and scenes at riverbanks were given and each student was asked to choose any two topics and speak for at least two minutes on them. They were given some prompt cards to use while speaking. The prompt cards were optional for the students. Apart from the given topics, the students were also given the freedom to choose any other topic of interest if they wished so. The test continued for four days after which the test scores were noted down.

#### **Intervention process**

After the pre-test, only the experimental group (school 1) was subjected to the intervention process. Forty-two class IX students (25 girls and 17 boys) between the ages of 13-15 years participated in the study. Classes were conducted over a period of 12 weeks. A total of 30 classes were conducted, each class was 45 minutes in duration. Special English classes using fun methods of learning were conducted for students in the school by one of the authors. The following activities were conducted in the class, along with discussing with students some selected portions from their own prescribed textbooks. Out of the 30

experimental classes that were conducted for the students towards improving their speaking skills, no class was specifically ear-marked for any particular activity. Each activity was conducted simultaneously depending upon the interest of the students and as and when the need arose.

**Storytelling.** On the first class when the students were asked to suggest what they wished to study, most of the students responded with, “Teacher, tell us a story.” This set the stage for the way the classes were to progress and it was perceived that storytelling could be used as one of the methods to teach the students how to speak in English. Twelve well-known and popular fables were chosen and narrated to the students in English, which the students thoroughly enjoyed and appreciated. Some of these fables are: *The Lion and the Rat*, *The Rabbit and the Tortoise*, *The Monkey and the Crocodile*, *The Cap-seller and the Monkeys*, *The Greedy Dog*, *The Proud Lion*, *The Thirsty Crow*, and *The Clever Fox*. The students found the language very easy and comprehensible. On being enquired about whether they could now tell stories in English, they responded that if they hear these types of stories a few more times, then they can narrate. As per their wish, the story-telling process continued for two more classes. Then the students were asked to narrate the same stories to their friends in English in the classroom. Most of the students tried it without realizing that they were speaking in English not only in front of their classmates, but also in front of the teachers. In this process, 12 stories having some moral themes were narrated, and simple discussions based on the stories were carried out in the classroom with active participation from the students. Lightbown and Spada (2013) suggest that teachers can positively contribute to students’ motivation to learn “if classrooms are places that students enjoy coming to because the content is interesting and relevant to their age and level of ability, the learning goals are challenging yet manageable and clear, and the atmosphere is supportive” (p. 88). Storytelling is one such English speaking learning-method where students were observed to be participating out of their own will and also enjoying the learning process. It is a good technique to develop listening and speaking skills of students since they are perceived to be more attentive during the process.

**Chain-drills.** Chain-drills are words, phrases, or sentences, lines from a text (prose/poem), which the learners of a class repeat one after the other in a serial order, usually at the beginning or at the end of the class. It is a very simple but effective method for improving speaking skills (Kundu & Patra, 1998). In the words of Freeman and Anderson (2016) “A chain drill gives students an opportunity to say the lines individually... it also lets the students use the expression in communication with someone else even though the communication is very limited” (p. 37). Chain-drills were done for few minutes at the beginning of every class. The words or phrases or sentences were noted on the blackboard and the students copied it on to their notebooks. The words written on the blackboard were then read aloud a few times as a practice model for the students who also repeated it loudly. Then the teacher passed along a word/phrase/sentence to one of the students who then passed it on to the next student, and the next to his/her next, until it reached the last student of the class. It was observed that all the students really enjoyed this task. Some of the examples of chain-drills are given below.

Example 1:

For introducing each other.

- 1 My name is .....? What’s your name?
- 2 My father’s/mother’s name is ..... What is your father’s/mother’s name?

Example-2:

Simple Basic Structures:

- 1 I like Mango. What fruit do you like?
- 2 I love to sing. What about you?
- 3 I play football. What do you play?
- 4 They love to play cricket. What about you?
- 5 He likes to watch TV. What about you?

6 I go to temple every day. What about you?

7 I go to school every day. What about you?

Practicing chain drills in classrooms proved to be very effective not only in developing the spoken English of the learners, but also at the same time it helped the learners in framing grammatically correct sentences. It also added fun and humour in the classroom.

**Blackboard texts.** Another fun-activity that was practiced in the class for speaking skill improvement was the blackboard text activity which is otherwise known as BB text activity. BB texts are small poems, stories, and pieces of writing which the teacher writes on the blackboard and the students note them down on their notebooks. The BB text is a necessary activity for rural students because most of the students in rural areas hardly get any English books to read other than the prescribed textbooks. The speaking skills of the learners develop through dialog practice based on the BB texts. Some of the methods that are applied for students' dialog practice are - teacher vs. students, students vs. students, practicing in pairs, and demonstration practice by two students in front of the class. They also learn new words and how to use those in conversations. One example is given below:

V-I-B-G-Y-O-R

I am rainbow, the superstar,  
With seven colours filled in me,  
And here I tell their tale to thee.  
Promising a great future,  
Come violet and indigo to nurture,  
And nourish the young minds.  
The colour of faith and trust is blue,  
Spreading peace and harmony in its hue.  
Green and yellow come hopping from behind,  
Scattering hope and sunshine into our mid.  
Seeing this orange smiles,  
It knows, its creativity will take them miles.  
At last comes Red  
To bind the world with love's thread!

This activity was observed to develop all the four language skills. First, the students wrote it in their notebooks, and then read it aloud, thereby developing both reading and speaking skills and the listening skill also develop simultaneously when the other students speak.

**Role plays.** The students were also encouraged and motivated to play the roles of different personalities. Starting from their school head-master, class teacher, English teacher, and the attendant, they went up to playing the roles of the Chief Minister of the state and the Prime Minister of the country. Initially they spoke in the local language, but gradually after several performances they started to speak in English. Frequent grammatical errors were observed among the students. They were mostly permitted to proceed unhindered, yet at the same time, corrective feedback and guidance was also provided to them, sometimes in-between the performances and sometimes at the end of the performance so that they got to know where they were committing the errors.

This activity really motivated the students to speak, and additionally, it also increased their confidence level. It aided towards improving their vocabulary and they got to know how to communicate in real-life situations. Added to this, it was also observed that it improved the students' knowledge of grammar, specifically the use of simple present and present progressive tense forms.

**Skits.** As confided by the students themselves, textbooks never interest them. But interestingly, they were ready to act-out the stories given in the textbooks. The students were thus divided into small groups and each student was assigned some portion of the story to read and memorise, for performing it in the next class. All the students who were given the assignment did the task sincerely and performed it in the class. Even though the quality of the performances might not have been of very high standard yet at the same time the students got a chance to practice their speaking skills in front of their friends and the teacher which certainly was a happy moment for them. This activity was perceived to be improving the students' speaking skill by making them utter long sentences, as well as difficult words, rather smoothly and spontaneously.

**Telephone conversation practice.** Students found telephone conversation practice the most interesting. This is a technique brought from real life situations. Everybody knows the usage of mobile phones these days. So the students were quite enthusiastic to learn English through this type of communication. The students were asked to talk in such a way as if they were talking over mobile phones or the telephone, both in formal and informal contexts. The informal situation included talking to friends, family, and relatives. Formal situations included booking rooms in hotels, ordering food from restaurants, and talking to teachers over the phone regarding how to prepare for examinations and other similar situations.

**Dumb charades.** The other fun-learning activity that was practiced in some classes was *Dumb Charades* which was observed to be thoroughly enjoyed by the students. The students were first made to know the rules of the game, and a demonstration of the game was given using the students' L1. The students were divided into five groups and the groups were numbered 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5 respectively. One member of a group posed as the dumb person and she was given some topics like the name of a movie, the name of a famous person/place, and she had to act it out without uttering a single word. In this process the other group members could ask her several questions quickly to find out the answer and the "dumb" person has to convey it through signs and gestures only. The process continues until the cycle gets completed. In this activity, initially the topics that were given were primarily the names of movies and the students used the local language while asking questions. Subsequently, other topics were given and the students asked the questions to their 'dumb' friend to get the right answers. They were directed to use only English words and sentences.

For example, the topic given to a "dumb" student was "Morning shows the day". The students asked her questions like, "how many words", "how many letters in the first word", "how many in the second", "what is the first letter of the first word, is it A/B/C/D/..." Through this process the students started asking questions in English without even realizing it.

**Vocabulary games.** In this game the students were divided into small groups and were given some jumbled words. Some words had missing letters and students were asked to quickly solve the puzzle. The group that gave the correct answer first was given a small prize. They were also asked to frame other words having two vowels, three vowels, or four vowels, which the students completed quite enthusiastically. The students were also asked to stand in a queue and play *Word-Chains*. Word-Chain is a type of game which is played by forming new words from the last letter of the previous word. For example, ant – tiger – rose - elephant...and so on. Then they were asked to play verb word-chains, adjective word-chains where they had to answer only in verbs or adjectives, as the game demanded. They were also given a list of vocabulary related to their daily-life as a home-task to practice and to use in sentences.

## Post-test

After the intervention process was over the post-test was conducted. The procedure for the post-test was the same as for the pre-test, and was conducted without any prior notice to the students. The results

were collected and analysed.

### Analysis and Interpretation

The control group comprised 44 students. The results from the tests are graphically represented in Figure 1:

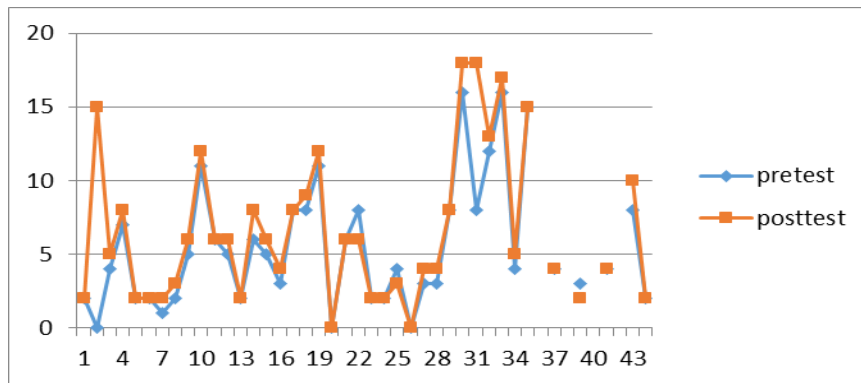


Figure 1. Control group results.

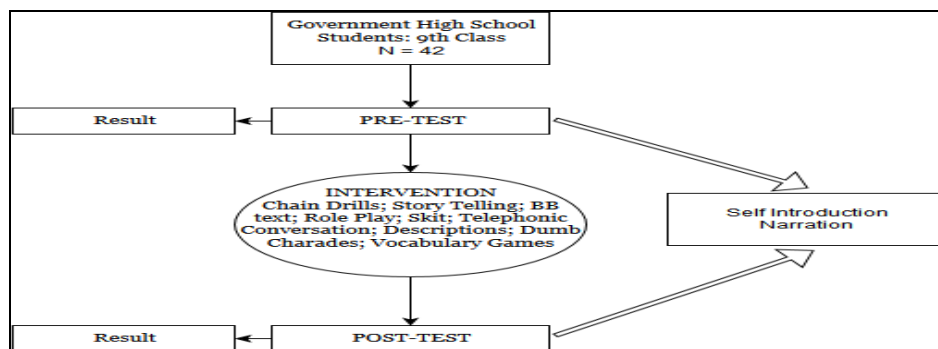


Figure 2. Framework for experimental group.

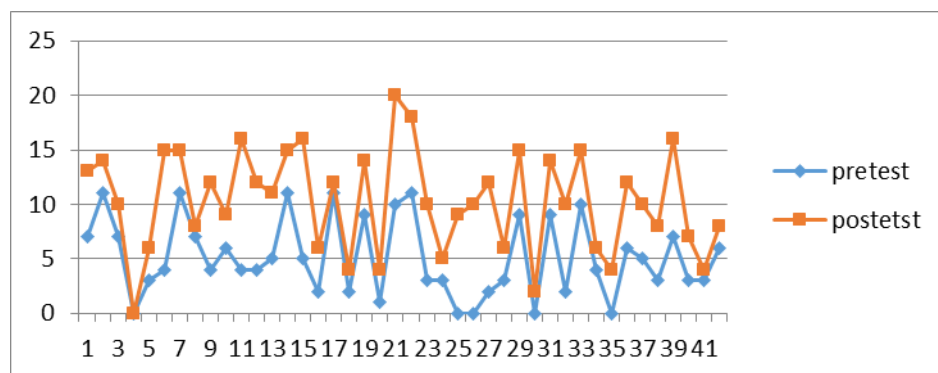


Figure 3. Experimental group result.

The experimental group comprised 42 students. Figure 1 represents the results of the control group school and Figure 3 represents the results of the experimental school. Both the figures provide a clear cut picture of the comparison of pre-test and post-test. It was found that there was significant improvement in the performance of the students of experimental group after they were subjected to the interventions.

It is said “better late than never.” Though giving these kinds of lessons to high-school students sounds a

bit too juvenile but there is actually a real need for them. We have to remember that these are all first-generation English learners with zero or minimal exposure to any kind of new or innovative English learning methods at the primary level. With numerous infrastructural and administrative issues abounding in most state-supported rural schools, effective teaching is a non-starter. It is generally observed that secure in their positions teachers are simply not interested to teach, and parents lack the confidence and acumen to demand accountability from them. The Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) published by Pratham Education Foundation, a reputed education non-profit organization in India, states that, "In 2014, only about 25% of children enrolled in Class 5 (rural schools) could read simple English sentences. This number is virtually unchanged since 2009."

Before the adoption of these techniques in the classroom it was seen that students were reluctant to open their mouth and speak a few lines even to introduce themselves. The reasons for such diffidence were perceived to be numerous and varied. Some of the apparent reasons for their inhibition towards speaking in English were their lack of interest in the subject, lack of proper English knowledge, lack of confidence, anxiety towards the subject, strong and quick learners' dominance, underprivileged background, and excessive use of the mother tongue inside classrooms. After the adoption of these techniques it was seen that students were enjoying their performance and were quite enthusiastic to speak in English. They started translating their own thoughts into English quite spontaneously. In every class they demanded these kinds of activities, especially the games and the story-telling activities, rather than reading from their own prescribed textbooks. Their speaking skills along with vocabulary and grammar were observed to have been improved. It is clearly visible from the two figures that represent the results of the pre-test and post-test that those students who were subjected to the fun-learning activities performed much better than those students who were not part of the experiment.

## Conclusion

To conclude, we can quote Confucius - "I hear and I forget, I see and I remember, I do and I understand." These students need to practice such types of learning activities on a regular basis to understand the language better and subsequently generate adequate confidence to use it in their day-to-day interactions. And the more they use it in their daily interactions the better they will be. From this experience of ours we find these kinds of activities to be very helpful in developing English speaking skills of students who come from underprivileged backgrounds, with limited exposure to the language. Teaching English using fun-learning techniques was observed to contain different types of benefits for the students like, developing their speaking skills, improving their vocabulary and grammar knowledge, promoting confidence and a positive frame-of-mind towards English learning, increasing children's willingness to communicate their thoughts and feelings, enhancing their listening skill, and encouraging active participation among them. Additionally, the activities also have the potential to build creativity and imagination among the students.

This study was carried out over a relatively short period of time. If more time is devoted to these kinds of activities on a daily basis, then there is a fair chance that students from such backgrounds would certainly do better in their classes. Furthermore, more innovative and fun-activities like extemporaneous speeches, debates, dramas, and mimes can also be practiced in classrooms for active participation by the students, which could subsequently lead to improvement in their speaking skills.

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