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ENGLISH FOR EMPLOYABILITY: A STUDY OF COMMUNICATION COMPETENCE AMONG RURAL ENGINEERING STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

English communication competence is an essential component of graduate employability, particularly in engineering education, where technical knowledge must be communicated effectively in academic and professional contexts. Rural engineering students may face challenges due to limited exposure to English-speaking environments, fewer opportunities for practice, and lack of confidence. This study examines the communication competence of rural engineering students and explores its relationship with employability. It focuses on speaking, listening, reading, writing, pronunciation, vocabulary, presentations, group discussions, interviews, and professional writing. The study adopts a mixed-methods approach using a structured questionnaire, classroom observations, and interviews with English faculty. It also investigates barriers such as communication anxiety, vocabulary limitations, mother-tongue influence, and inadequate opportunities for authentic interaction. The study proposes an employability-oriented framework integrating needs analysis, language practice, workplace tasks, feedback, and reflective assessment to strengthen students' communication competence and improve their readiness for professional employment.

KEYWORDS: English for employability; rural engineering students; communication competence; professional English; employability skills; English for Specific Purposes; engineering education.

1. INTRODUCTION

Employability has become a central concern in higher education. Engineering graduates are expected to possess technical knowledge as well as transferable abilities such as communication, teamwork, problem solving, adaptability, presentation, and professional interaction. English communication is particularly important because many academic and professional engineering contexts require graduates to understand and communicate information in English.

The relationship between English and employability has been examined in Indian engineering education for more than a decade. Clement and Murugavel's study of engineering students in India reported concerns about communication skills, confidence, and the need for more interactive English-language training. More recent research continues to identify communication challenges among engineering students and argues for needs-based pedagogies.

The issue becomes especially significant for students from rural educational backgrounds. Rural students are not a homogeneous group, and their English proficiency varies considerably. However, some may have had fewer opportunities to use English outside formal classroom settings. Differences in school medium, family language, access to English-speaking environments, exposure to English media, and opportunities for interaction can affect confidence and communicative performance.

A 2024 case study of rural engineering students identified student reticence, procrastination, anxiety, and weaknesses in other language skills as important barriers to speaking development. A 2023 study focusing on rural engineering students in Tamil Nadu examined technology as a means of reducing communication barriers and improving English communication skills.

These studies suggest that the challenge is not simply a lack of grammatical knowledge. Communication competence involves the ability to use language appropriately, confidently, and effectively in meaningful situations. The present study therefore investigates rural engineering students' communication competence from an employability perspective.

2. Statement of the Problem

Many rural engineering students study English throughout their schooling and higher education but may continue to experience difficulty using English confidently in professional situations. The gap may become visible during placement interviews, group discussions, technical presentations, internships, seminars, and workplace interactions.

The problem is particularly important because communication difficulties may influence students' ability to demonstrate technical knowledge during recruitment. A student may understand a technical concept but struggle to explain it clearly, respond spontaneously to questions, participate in a discussion, or present a project before an audience.

The present study therefore focuses on the communication competence of rural engineering students and asks whether existing Professional English instruction sufficiently addresses their academic and employment-related needs.

3. Objectives of the Study

1. To assess the perceived English communication competence of rural engineering students.
2. To identify the major linguistic and psychological barriers affecting their communication.
3. To examine students' perceptions of the relationship between English proficiency and employability.
4. To identify the professional communication skills most needed by rural engineering students.
5. To examine the effectiveness of classroom activities used to develop communication competence.
6. To explore English teachers' perceptions of the communication needs of rural engineering students.
7. To propose an employability-oriented framework for improving communication competence.

4. Research Questions

1. What are the major communication difficulties experienced by rural engineering students?
2. Which English language skills do students perceive as most difficult?
3. How do students perceive the relationship between English communication competence and employability?
4. Which classroom activities do students perceive as most useful for improving communication?
5. What pedagogical and contextual factors influence students' communication development?
6. How can Professional English education be redesigned to support the employability of rural engineering students?

5. Hypotheses

H1: Students' perceived English communication competence is significantly associated with their perceived employability readiness.

H2: Greater exposure to interactive English activities is positively associated with students' confidence in professional communication.

H3: Students with greater opportunities for English use outside the classroom report higher levels of perceived communication competence.

These hypotheses should be tested using the actual data collected for the study.

6. Review of Literature

6.1 English and Employability

English communication is increasingly treated as an employability-related competence rather than merely an academic subject. Engineering graduates work in contexts that require them to explain technical information, collaborate with teams, communicate with clients, write professional documents, and participate in meetings and presentations.

Clement and Murugavel found a gap between English teaching practices and engineering students' confidence in preparing for campus placements. Their findings support the need for interactive and employment-oriented English training.

6.2 Rural Engineering Students and Speaking Challenges

Rural engineering students may experience particular difficulties in oral communication when their previous educational environment offered limited opportunities for spontaneous English use. Kumari and Rahman (2024), in a case study of rural engineering students, identified reticence, anxiety, procrastination, and deficits in other language skills as important speaking challenges. Their study suggests that oral activities and sustained practice can help address these difficulties.

6.3 Tamil Nadu Context

The Tamil Nadu context is particularly relevant because engineering institutions include students with diverse linguistic and educational backgrounds. Geetha and Karthiga (2023) examined rural engineering students in Tamil Nadu and reported the importance of technology and appropriate methodology in improving English communication. Their empirical study involved 180 engineering students and considered communication barriers from an employability perspective.

6.4 Task-Based and Interactive Learning

Recent work on rural engineering students has also explored task-based language teaching. Shinge and Kotabagi (2025) reported improvement in interaction among rural freshman engineering students following a task-based intervention. Such findings support the use of meaningful tasks that require students to use English for purposeful communication rather than merely completing grammar exercises.

6.5 Receptive Skills

Communication competence includes listening and reading as well as speaking and writing. A 2026 study of English for engineering purposes in Tamil Nadu highlights the continuing need to address receptive language skills among engineering students from diverse educational backgrounds.

7. Research Gap

Existing studies have examined English communication, employability, rural engineering students, speaking challenges, technology, and task-based learning. However, there remains scope for an integrated study that examines communication competence across the four language skills while simultaneously relating those skills to employability readiness.

The present study seeks to address this gap by combining learner self-assessment, classroom evidence, and teacher perspectives. It also connects linguistic competence with specific employment-related tasks such as interviews, group discussions, technical presentations, professional writing, and workplace interaction.

8. METHODOLOGY

8.1 Research Design

The study adopts a mixed-methods research design. Quantitative data will be obtained through a structured questionnaire administered to rural engineering students. Qualitative data will be collected through classroom observations and semi-structured interviews with English/Professional English faculty.

8.2 Participants

Participants will be undergraduate engineering students studying in selected engineering colleges located in or serving predominantly rural areas. Students from different branches and years of study may be included. English faculty members involved in communication or Professional English courses may participate in the qualitative component.

8.3 Research Instruments

The student questionnaire may contain five sections: demographic and educational background; self-assessment of speaking, listening, reading, writing, pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary; communication barriers; classroom practices and preferred learning activities; and employability and professional communication needs.

The teacher interview schedule will address learner diversity, classroom participation, common language difficulties, teaching strategies, assessment practices, technological resources, and placement-oriented communication.

8.4 Data Analysis

Quantitative data may be analysed using frequencies, percentages, means, standard deviations, and appropriate inferential tests. Depending on the sample and research questions, correlation, t-test, ANOVA, or regression analysis may be considered.

Qualitative data will be analysed thematically. Expected thematic categories include linguistic barriers, psychological barriers, exposure, classroom interaction, pedagogical practices, technology, and employability needs.

9. Proposed Communication Competence Framework

The study proposes a five-stage framework for developing employability-oriented communication competence among rural engineering students.

Stage 1 – Diagnose: assess students' existing communication abilities and identify individual needs.

Stage 2 – Develop: strengthen vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, listening, speaking, reading, and writing through contextualised practice.

Stage 3 – Interact: provide regular pair and group activities, discussions, role plays, interviews, and collaborative tasks.

Stage 4 – Perform: simulate workplace situations such as technical presentations, project pitches, meetings, interviews, and professional email communication.

Stage 5 – Reflect: use teacher feedback, peer feedback, self-assessment, and performance rubrics to encourage continuous improvement.

The framework follows the principle that communication competence develops through repeated meaningful use rather than through exposure to language rules alone.

10. Major Communication Challenges to Be Investigated

10.1 Limited Exposure to Spoken English

Students who have limited opportunities to use English outside the classroom may hesitate during spontaneous communication.

10.2 Vocabulary Constraints

Students may understand technical terminology but struggle with general academic and professional vocabulary needed to express ideas fluently.

10.3 Pronunciation and Fluency

Pronunciation difficulties and slow speech may reduce students' confidence and willingness to participate.

10.4 Communication Anxiety

Fear of making grammatical or pronunciation errors can lead to silence or avoidance of speaking tasks.

10.5 Mother-Tongue Influence

Students may transfer vocabulary, sentence patterns, pronunciation, or discourse conventions from their first language into English.

10.6 Limited Classroom Interaction

Teacher-dominated classrooms can restrict students' opportunities to speak. Communication competence requires sufficient student talk time.

10.7 Placement Pressure

Students may become particularly anxious when English performance is evaluated during interviews and group discussions.

11. Classroom Strategies

11.1 Pair and Small-Group Interaction

Small-group activities can increase speaking opportunities and create a less threatening environment.

11.2 Role Play

Students can practise workplace conversations, supervisor-student interactions, customer communication, and team meetings.

11.3 Mock Interviews

Mock interviews can help students practise self-introduction, project explanation, responses to common interview questions, and professional etiquette.

11.4 Technical Presentations

Students should be trained to explain technical concepts in language accessible to both specialists and non-specialists.

11.5 Group Discussions

Regular group discussions can develop turn-taking, listening, argumentation, agreement, disagreement, and summarising.

11.6 Task-Based Learning

Tasks should require students to use English to achieve a meaningful outcome. Examples include solving an engineering-related problem, explaining a process, preparing a project pitch, or negotiating a solution.

11.7 Technology-Supported Practice

Mobile devices, language laboratories, speech-recognition tools, video recording, and carefully selected AI-supported tools can provide additional opportunities for practice and self-assessment. Technology should supplement rather than replace teacher guidance.

12. Employability-Oriented Activities

S.No	Activity	Primary Communication Skill	Employability outcome
1.	Mock interview	Speaking and listening	Interview readiness
2.	Group discussion	Interaction and argumentation	Teamwork
3.	Technical presentation	Public speaking	Presentation competence
4.	Workplace role play	Functional communication	Professional interaction
5.	Project pitch	Persuasion	Innovation and entrepreneurship
6.	Meeting simulation	Listening and discussion	Collaboration
7.	Professional email	Written communication	Workplace writing
8.	Technical explanation	Clarity and vocabulary	Knowledge transfer
9.	Problem-solving task	Collaborative communication	Problem solving
10.	Peer feedback	Evaluation and reflection	Interpersonal competence

13. DISCUSSION

The central argument of the study is that rural engineering students should not be viewed through a deficit model. Their communication difficulties are better understood in relation to

their previous educational experiences, opportunities for English use, classroom environments, and access to supportive practice.

The classroom can compensate for limited exposure by providing structured opportunities for meaningful interaction. Teachers can begin with low-risk activities and gradually increase complexity. For example, a sequence can move from self-introduction to pair interview, small-group discussion, short presentation, and formal technical presentation.

Employability-oriented English instruction should also connect language practice with engineering identity. Students should learn to explain what they know, not merely repeat language patterns. A mechanical engineering student, for example, can practise explaining a machine component; a civil engineering student can describe a construction process; and an electronics student can explain a circuit or instrumentation system.

This approach makes English meaningful because students use the language to communicate disciplinary knowledge.

Assessment is equally important. If students are evaluated only through written examinations, they may have little incentive to develop oral communication. Continuous assessment should therefore include speaking and listening tasks, presentations, group discussions, professional writing, and reflective portfolios.

14. Implications

The study has implications for English teachers, engineering institutions, placement cells, curriculum designers, and students. Teachers can use more learner-centred and task-based classroom practices. Institutions can strengthen language-laboratory use and placement training. Placement cells can collaborate with English faculty to prepare students for interviews, group discussions, presentations, and professional communication. Curriculum designers can use needs-based Professional English courses that recognise differences in learner background. Students can be encouraged to regard English communication as a professional skill that develops through regular practice.

15. RECOMMENDATIONS

- Conduct communication needs analysis at the beginning of the academic year.
- Assess students' speaking, listening, reading, and writing abilities rather than relying only on written examinations.
- Provide regular opportunities for student-to-student interaction.
- Use engineering-related content for language tasks.

- Introduce mock interviews and group discussions from the first year.
- Use peer feedback and self-assessment.
- Provide additional support for students with limited English exposure.
- Use language laboratories and digital tools purposefully.
- Integrate professional writing with technical subjects.
- Establish collaboration between English departments, engineering departments, and placement cells.

16. Limitations

If the study is conducted in a limited number of institutions, the findings may not be generalisable to all rural engineering students in India. Self-reported questionnaire data may also differ from objectively assessed performance. Differences in institutional resources, curriculum, student background, and teaching practices may influence the results.

Future research can employ longitudinal designs, larger multi-institutional samples, employer perspectives, placement outcomes, and standardised communication assessments.

17. CONCLUSION

English communication competence can play an important role in the employability of rural engineering students. The challenge is not simply to teach English but to create conditions in which students can use English confidently and purposefully.

Rural engineering students bring diverse linguistic and educational experiences to higher education. Instead of treating these differences as weaknesses, Professional English programmes can respond through needs analysis, scaffolded practice, task-based learning, authentic workplace situations, technology-supported practice, and continuous feedback.

The proposed framework connects diagnosis, language development, interaction, professional performance, and reflection. Its purpose is to transform the English classroom into a space where students practise the communication demands they are likely to encounter after graduation.

Ultimately, English for Employability should enable rural engineering students to articulate their technical knowledge, participate confidently in professional interactions, collaborate with others, and compete more effectively for employment opportunities. A needs-based and inclusive approach to Professional English can therefore contribute not only to language development but also to greater equity in engineering education and graduate employability.

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