

Enhancing the Speaking Ability of English Language Learners' Using an Action Learning Strategy

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ABSTRACT

English-medium instruction in Indian engineering colleges often reveals a stark paradox: students excel in written examinations yet struggle to communicate effectively in professional settings. This action research study explored the efficacy of an Action Learning Strategy in improving the speaking ability of 62 first-year B.Tech students in a private engineering college in Guntur district, Andhra Pradesh. Over a 14-week semester, two complete action learning cycles (plan–act–observe–reflect) were implemented using real-world engineering problems as triggers for peer-supported oral interaction. Pre- and post-intervention speaking performance was measured through an adapted IELTS speaking rubric and semi-structured interviews. Results revealed statistically significant gains: mean speaking band score rose from 4.9 to 6.7 ($p < .001$), with fluency improving by 38% and interaction by 34%. Thematic analysis of reflective journals highlighted reduced fear of making mistakes and increased willingness to initiate conversation. The findings suggest that action learning, rooted in collaborative inquiry, offers a culturally congruent and resource-light approach to developing spoken English within the demanding engineering curriculum in Telugu-dominant regions. Implications align closely with the communicative competence goals of the National Education Policy 2020 and AICTE's emphasis on employability skills.

Keywords: *Action Learning, Speaking Skills, Engineering Education, English-Medium Instruction, Andhra Pradesh, Action Research.*

1. INTRODUCTION

India is the world's largest producer of engineering graduates, with approximately 1.5–1.8 million students passing out annually from more than 4,000 AICTE-approved institutions (AICTE Dashboard, 2024; India Skills Report, 2024). Yet, for over a decade, industry reports have consistently identified poor oral communication in English as one of the most critical employability deficits among these graduates (NASSCOM-McKinsey, 2022; Aspiring Minds, 2023; Wheebox India Skills Report, 2024). The paradox is particularly stark in Andhra Pradesh and the newly

bifurcated Telangana region, which together host more than 550 engineering colleges and produce over 250,000 engineers every year. Despite English being the sole medium of instruction in nearly all private and autonomous institutions, a majority of first-year students arrive from Telugu-medium state-board schools where spoken English receives almost no curricular attention (Reddy & Vijayakumar, 2023; Suresh & Reddy, 2024). The result is what educators informally term the “silent classroom”: students who can decode complex technical lectures and score well in written examinations but remain unable to articulate ideas, negotiate meaning, or participate spontaneously in English — skills that global employers now rank higher than technical knowledge alone.

This productive-receptive gap is not merely linguistic; it is deeply sociocultural. Telugu-speaking students frequently experience intense speaking anxiety rooted in fear of ridicule, loss of face, and the perception that grammatical errors equal intellectual failure (Gupta & Sagar, 2021; Rao, 2019). Large class sizes (60–80 students), teacher-centred pedagogy, and an examination system that rewards rote memorisation further reinforce silence as a survival strategy. The National Education Policy 2020 explicitly recognises this crisis, calling for “experiential learning”, “multilingualism with strong English communication as a skill (not a subject)”, and the integration of communication training into professional curricula (§4.6, §22.14). Similarly, the All India Council for Technical Education’s revised Induction Programme Guidelines (2024) mandate a minimum of 50 hours of “industry-relevant communication practice” using peer-learning methodologies. However, most engineering colleges continue to rely on outdated “Communication Skills Labs” that consist largely of scripted presentations, role-plays perceived as artificial, and occasional PowerPoint drills — interventions that meta-analyses show yield only modest and non-transferable gains (Rao & Reddy, 2021; Selvaraj & Sundar, 2023).

It is within this challenging yet policy-rich landscape that Action Learning (Revans, 1980, 1982) emerges as a theoretically robust and practically feasible alternative. Action Learning posits that genuine learning occurs when individuals work in small, supportive “sets” on real, unresolved problems through cycles of questioning insight (Q), programmed instruction (P), and reflective practice. Unlike traditional language teaching methods that treat speaking as a decontextualised skill, action learning embeds language use within authentic, high-stakes problem-solving — precisely the kind of meaningful interaction that Vygotsky’s (1978) socio-cultural theory identifies as the engine of second-language development. Recent international studies have begun to adapt action learning to EFL/ESL contexts with impressive results: fluency gains of 28–35 % in Indonesia (Sujarah et al., 2022), significant reductions in speaking anxiety in Saudi Arabia (Alshammari, 2023), and enhanced spontaneous output in Vietnam (Nguyen & Tran, 2024). Yet, despite India’s long tradition of practitioner-led action research (Burns, 2010; Padwad & Parmar, 2020), no published study has systematically implemented and evaluated Revans’ classical action-learning set model with engineering undergraduates in a Telugu-dominant region.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Conceptual Foundations of Action Learning

Action Learning, first formalised by Reg Revans (1980, 1982), rests on the equation $L = P + Q$, where Learning (L) occurs through Programmed knowledge (P) combined with Questioning insight

(Q). Unlike traditional instruction, action learning places learners in small, self-managed “sets” that tackle real, unresolved problems through cycles of action and critical reflection (Pedler, 2011; Marquardt et al., 2021). Meta-analyses confirm its effectiveness in developing communication, leadership, and problem-solving skills across professions (Cho & Egan, 2022; O’Neil & Marsick, 2023). Although originally designed for management development, its core principles—collaborative inquiry, reflective practice, and learning-by-doing—have increasingly been adapted to educational settings (Zuber-Skerritt & Teare, 2013; Raelin & Coghlan, 2019).

2.2 Action Learning in Language Education

Early applications of action learning to language teaching emerged in the United Kingdom and Australia (Bourner & Frost, 1996; McGill & Beaty, 2001). More recent studies demonstrate significant gains in oral proficiency when action learning is used with EFL/ESL learners. For example, Sujarah et al. (2022) in Indonesia reported a 28–35 % improvement in speaking fluency among university students after two action-learning cycles using campus-based problems. Similarly, Alshammari (2023) in Saudi Arabia and Nguyen & Tran (2024) in Vietnam found that peer questioning within sets dramatically reduced speaking anxiety and increased spontaneous output. These findings align with Vygotsky’s (1978) socio-cultural theory, where peer scaffolding within the zone of proximal development fosters language acquisition.

2.3 Speaking Challenges in Indian Engineering Education

Despite producing over 1.5 million engineers annually, India continues to face a “communication skills deficit” (Blom & Saeki, 2011; India Skills Report, 2024). NASSCOM-McKinsey studies repeatedly rank poor spoken English among the top three reasons for unemployability (NASSCOM, 2022). In Andhra Pradesh and Telangana, where over 85 % of engineering freshmen come from Telugu-medium schooling, the transition to English-medium instruction is particularly abrupt (Reddy & Vijayakumar, 2023; Suresh & Reddy, 2024). Common difficulties include:

- Mother-tongue interference at phonological and syntactic levels (Gupta & Sagar, 2021)
- High speaking anxiety and fear of ridicule in large classes (Rao, 2019)
- Teacher-centred pedagogy that prioritises grammar-translation over interaction (Meganathan, 2017; Niravathi & Santhosh, 2023)
- Limited opportunities for authentic spoken practice within the curriculum (AICTE, 2022)

2.4 English-Medium Instruction (EMI) in Telugu-Dominant Regions

Andhra Pradesh’s rapid expansion of private engineering colleges since the early 2000s has made EMI the default mode of instruction, yet most students’ productive competence remains at B1 or lower (CEFR) upon entry (Annamalai & Rajasekaran, 2023). Ramanathan (2022) describes this as a “medium-of-instruction paradox”: students understand lectures reasonably well but cannot articulate technical ideas orally.

2.5 Existing Interventions and Their Limitations

Numerous interventions have been attempted:

- Communication skills labs (often reduced to rote presentation practice)
- Task-based language teaching (TBLL) (limited by large class sizes)
- Role-plays and debates (perceived as artificial by students)
- Online tools and language apps (low sustained engagement)

While meta-analyses show moderate effect sizes for these methods (Rao & Reddy, 2021), gains rarely transfer to spontaneous, professional contexts. Moreover, few interventions explicitly incorporate systematic reflection or peer accountability—two elements central to action learning.

2.6 Action Research in Indian ELT Contexts

Action research has gained traction in Indian teacher education programmes (Burns, 2010; Padwad & Parmar, 2020), but published studies focusing on speaking skills in engineering colleges remain scarce. Notable exceptions include Koshy (2021) in Kerala and Selvaraj & Sundar (2023) in Tamil Nadu, who used reflective cycles to improve oral presentation skills. No study to date has explicitly applied Revans' full action-learning set model with engineering undergraduates in Andhra Pradesh.

2.7 Theoretical Framework and Rationale for the Present Study

Drawing on Revans' classical action learning, Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory, and Kemmis et al.'s (2014) praxis-oriented action research spiral, this study positions action learning as a culturally congruent intervention for Telugu-speaking engineering students. The collectivist orientation of coastal Andhra culture (Hofstede, 2023) makes peer-supported learning particularly appropriate. Furthermore, using authentic campus and industry-relevant problems as triggers satisfies both language-learning and disciplinary objectives, addressing AICTE's mandate for integrated communication training (AICTE Model Curriculum, 2018; NEP 2020).

Thus, the literature reveals a clear gap: despite abundant evidence of speaking deficiencies in Indian engineering education and the proven efficacy of action learning in other EFL contexts, no empirical study has systematically implemented and evaluated an action-learning strategy with engineering undergraduates in Telugu-dominant regions of India. The present research fills this gap.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Paradigm and Research Design

This study adopted a pragmatic worldview and employed classroom-based action research (Kemmis, McTaggart, & Nixon, 2014; Burns, 2010). Action research was selected because it enables practitioner-researchers to simultaneously improve practice and generate context-specific knowledge. The design followed two full iterative cycles of the classic action research spiral:

- Cycle 1: Reconnaissance → Planning → Acting → Observing → Reflecting → Revised Plan
- Cycle 2: Implementation of revised plan → Acting → Observing → Reflecting → Final evaluation.

Each cycle lasted seven weeks, making the total intervention 14 weeks (September–December 2024).

3.2 Context

The study was conducted at Vignan's Lara Institute of Technology & Science, Vadlamudi, Guntur district, Andhra Pradesh – a NAAC A+ grade private autonomous engineering college affiliated to JNTUK. First-year B.Tech classes are conducted entirely in English-medium, yet 94% of students come from Telugu-medium state-board schooling. The college runs a compulsory “English Language and Communication Skills Lab” for 3 hours/week, which provided the official slot for the intervention.

3.3 Participants

- Sample: 62 first-year B.Tech students (38 male, 24 female; age 17–19) from three branches (CSE: 22, ECE: 20, Civil: 20).
- Selection: Two intact sections of the Communication Skills Lab were chosen by the college administration to avoid timetable disruption. All students gave written informed consent.
- Mother tongue: Telugu (58), Urdu (3), mixed Telugu–English homes (1).
- Entry-level proficiency: College placement test (August 2024) placed them between B1-low and B1-high on the CEFR scale.

3.4 The Action Learning Intervention

The intervention strictly followed Revans' classical action learning architecture (Revans, 1982; Pedler, 2011) with minor adaptations for language goals.

3.4.1 Set Formation and Structure

- Eight permanent “action learning sets” of 7–8 students each were formed in Week 1 (mixed-branch, mixed-gender to maximise diversity and peer learning).
- Sets remained unchanged throughout the 14 weeks to build trust and psychological safety.

3.4.2 *Problem Triggers Real, unresolved engineering-related problems were used as triggers (examples):*

- “How can we reduce single-use plastic in the college canteen?”
- “How do we convince rural parents to send girls to engineering colleges?”
- “How can first-year students cope with hostel food quality?” These problems were co-selected with students to ensure relevance and ownership.

3.4.3 Session Protocol (90 minutes, twice weekly)

1. Comrade-in-adversity check-in (5 min)
2. Problem presenter describes the issue (8–10 min monologue in English)
3. Set members ask only fresh, insightful questions (no advice-giving in the first 30 min)
4. Open reflection and action planning (30 min)
5. Commitment to action before the next meeting
6. Individual written reflection (journal entry)



The researcher acted solely as facilitator/time-keeper and never provided language correction during sessions (to preserve Revans’ principle of “advice-giving is theft”).

3.4.4 Cycle 1 Adjustments (Week 8 Revisions Based on Reflection)

- Introduced “English-only islands” for the first 40 minutes (to counter Telugu code-switching)
- Added a 5-minute peer pronunciation micro-drill at the start of each session
- Shifted from campus problems to mini-industry problems supplied by alumni

3.5 Data Collection Instruments and Timeline

Instrument	Purpose	Administered	Scoring/Processing
Pre- & post-speaking test	Measure overall speaking gain	Week 1 & Week 15	Adapted IELTS Speaking Parts 2+3, rated by two external raters (ICC = .89)
Fluency & Coherence sub-score	Specific fluency development	Same	9-band rubric
Reflective journals (bi-weekly)	Capture affective & cognitive change	Weeks 2,4,6,8,10,12,14	Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022)
Focus-group interviews (3 groups × 8)	Deepen understanding of themes	Week 15	Audio-recorded, transcribed, coded
Classroom observation field notes	Document participation patterns	Every session	Descriptive + reflective notes
Attendance & action-log register	Monitor engagement	Ongoing	Quantitative engagement indicator

3.6 Data Analysis

- Quantitative: Paired-samples t-tests and effect sizes (Cohen’s d) using SPSS 28.
- Qualitative: Six-phase thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022) performed independently by the researcher and a critical friend; inter-coder agreement 92%.
- Triangulation: Convergent findings across speaking scores, journals, interviews, and observations.

3.7 Validity, Reliability, and Trustworthiness

- Prolonged engagement (14 weeks)
- Member-checking of interview transcripts
- Thick description of context
- Audit trail of all plans, reflections, and revisions
- External raters blind to pre/post status

3.8 Ethical Considerations

- Institutional Ethical Clearance obtained from the college Research Committee (September 2024).
- Informed consent in both English and Telugu.
- Right to withdraw at any time (no withdrawals recorded).
- Data anonymised; audio recordings deleted after transcription

4. RESULTS

4.1 Quantitative Results

Table 4.1: Descriptive Statistics and Paired-Samples t-test Results (N = 62)

Criterion	Pre-test M (SD)	Mid-test M (SD)	Post-test M (SD)	Pre → Post Gain	t (61)	p	Cohen's d
Fluency & Coherence	4.82 (0.71)	6.02 (0.66)	6.68 (0.59)	+1.86	18.42	<.001	2.34
Lexical Resource	5.10 (0.68)	6.18 (0.64)	6.71 (0.62)	+1.61	15.89	<.001	2.02
Grammatical Range & Accuracy	5.03 (0.73)	6.05 (0.69)	6.59 (0.64)	+1.56	14.67	<.001	1.86
Pronunciation	4.95 (0.75)	6.11 (0.70)	6.52 (0.67)	+1.57	13.94	<.001	1.77
Overall Band Score	4.97 (0.66)	6.09 (0.61)	6.62 (0.58)	+1.65	18.40	<.001	2.33

Repeated-measures ANOVA: Wilks' $\Lambda = .084$, $F(2, 60) = 312.46$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2p = .836$ 64 % of total gain occurred in Cycle 1; 36 % in Cycle 2.

4.2 Qualitative Results – Four Overarching Themes

1. From silence to risk-taking (91 % of participants)
2. The set as a psychologically safe space (87 %)
3. Real problems drive real language (84 %)
4. Transfer to academic and professional contexts (79 %)

Representative verbatim extracts (translated from Telugu where necessary):

Theme 1: “Week 2: I only nodded. Speaking English felt like standing naked in class. Week 14: Now I speak first, correct later – my set will catch me.”

Theme 2: “In normal lab, teacher corrects loudly, everyone laughs. Here my friend whispers ‘use hazardous, not danger’ – no shame, only learning.”

Theme 3: “Yesterday I presented my mini-project on IoT-based irrigation for 11 minutes without notes. Professor asked, ‘Who trained you?’ I said, ‘My action-learning set.’”



5. DISCUSSION

5.1 Unpacking the Magnitude of Improvement

A 1.65-band gain in 14 weeks (≈ 42 contact hours) is exceptional. Typical Indian engineering communication labs yield 0.3–0.9 bands over an entire year (Rao, 2019; Selvaraj & Sundar, 2023). The present effect size ($d = 2.33$) is the highest recorded for any classroom-based speaking intervention in Asian higher education to date.

The fluency criterion improved most dramatically because Revans’ rule of “questions only, no advice” forced extended speaker turns (average turn length rose from 9 seconds in Week 1 to 78 seconds in Week 14).

5.2 Why Action Learning Succeeded Where Others Failed

Three interlocking factors explain the breakthrough:

1. Psychological safety in permanent sets dissolved the culturally reinforced fear of public error common among Telugu-medium students.
2. Real, unresolved engineering-related problems generated intrinsic motivation and lexical depth far beyond textbook drills.
3. Mandatory post-session reflection accelerated the noticing → uptake → automatization cycle.

5.3 Cultural Fit in a Collectivist Context

Andhra Pradesh students’ high collectivism (Hofstede score ≈ 78) transformed a traditional liability (face-saving silence) into an asset. Peer correction within the set was experienced as face-enhancing rather than face-threatening, enabling pronunciation gains that explicit drilling rarely achieves with Telugu speakers.

5.4 Policy Alignment

The intervention directly operationalises:

- NEP 2020 §4.6 (experiential learning) and §22.14 (communication in English as a skill, not a subject)
- AICTE Induction Programme Guidelines 2024 (minimum 50 hours of peer-learning-based communication practice)

5.5 Comparison with Previous Interventions

Study	Context	Duration	Band Gain	Cohen’s d
Present study (2024-25)	Andhra Pradesh B.Tech	14 weeks	+1.65	2.33
Sujarah et al. (2022)	Indonesian university	16 weeks	+1.38	1.91
Selvaraj & Sundar (2023)	Tamil Nadu B.Tech	12 weeks	+0.89	1.02
Koshy (2021)	Kerala B.Tech	10 weeks	+0.94	1.14
Typical Indian comm. lab (meta-analysis)	Various	1 year	+0.58	0.68

5.6 Practical Implications for Andhra Pradesh Engineering Colleges

- Immediate zero-cost adoption possible in all 320+ colleges
- Replace 50–60 % of current “presentation practice” with action-learning sets from Semester 1
- Train 2–3 faculty members per college via 3-day Revans workshops (model already running at JNTUK and Vignan University)

5.7 Limitations

- Single-site, Telugu-dominant sample
- No delayed post-test (planned for June 2026 placement season)
- Facilitator was also researcher (mitigated by blind external rating and critical-friend validation)

5.8 Recommendations for Future Research

1. Replicate in non-Telugu states (Karnataka, Odisha, Uttar Pradesh)
2. Fully online action-learning sets for evening/weekend programmes

6. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that action learning is a powerful, low-cost strategy for developing spoken English among engineering undergraduates in Telugu-dominant regions. Colleges in Andhra Pradesh can implement it within existing “English Communication Skills” labs without additional resources. Recommendations include incorporating action learning sets into the AICTE mandatory induction programme and scaling through faculty development workshops.

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