# DIAGNOSTIC FEEDBACK MODEL IN DEVELOPING SPEAKING SKILLS IN ESL LEARNERS – AN EXPERIMENTAL STUDY

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## ABSTRACT

Engineering classrooms often contain mixed-ability students with less interest in language study. These students come from different backgrounds and different mediums of instruction. Grammar translation method, communicative approach, or multimedia fail to entertain one or the other group of students in the same classroom. Diagnostic Feedback Model can be utilised for effective language teaching in such mixed-ability classrooms. With a descriptive research design, an evaluative study is conducted in VV College of Engineering, Tisaiyanvilai. 200 students and 10 teachers are involved in the study. Meetings are conducted periodically. Tasks for the pre-tests and criteria for evaluation are designed by the teachers. The pre-assessment contains items to check listening, body language, fluency, and accuracy of the students in speaking. The criteria provides 5 – 1 range of marks for each sub-skill in speaking. The students are made to speak and are evaluated by the teachers using the criteria. Based on the diagnostic feedback model, data consolidation is done by the teachers.

The diagnostic feedback model provide the teachers with the strengths and areas of improvement of the students. According to the overall scores, the students are classified into Beginner / Intermediate / Proficient instead of Below Average / Average / Above Average. Activities for each group are defined uniquely, and training is conducted separately for each group. At the end of the course, post-assessments are conducted using the same criteria. In the post-assessments, the average scores of 'Beginners' have increased from 20 to 35, the average scores of 'Intermediate' students have increased from 30 to 43, and the average scores of 'Proficient' students have increased from 40 to 48. This implies that diagnostic feedback model works well in mixed ability classrooms in engineering colleges.

## Introduction

Engineering colleges in Tamilnadu concentrate on the language development of students. This is because the job market demands language proficiency and soft skills along with the subject knowledge from the students. Providing language training in engineering colleges becomes difficult as the students are from various educational backgrounds with different mediums of instruction. Some might have English as their first language in school and have very good speaking and writing skills. Some might have English as the second language in school and do not know how to use English even in functional contexts. These students are seated together in engineering colleges based on their subject scores in the board exams. The teachers' efforts to develop the language skills of these mixed-ability students fail when the same type of activities or tasks are given to them. Diagnostic feedback model helps to identify the strengths and areas of improvement of all the students and provide appropriate skill-specific training to them.

## Background of the Study

Engineering colleges in Tamilnadu have Technical English I and II in their first year syllabus. Other than this, almost all the colleges provide extra-coaching for developing the language skills of the students. Urban colleges conduct BEC or BULATS coaching for their students. Rural colleges conduct Spoken English classes which fail most of the time because of the crowded, mixed-ability classrooms.

In language education, pre-assessment and post-assessment are essential as they act as signposts in the intricate process of language development. Pre-assessment provides a clear picture of the skills or knowledge of students before taking the course and post-assessment explains the skills or knowledge of students after taking the course, implying the actual development or improvement of language skills in the students during the course.

Shohamy (1993) describes a "collaborative or diagnostic feedback model" in which the teachers and test developers work together to purposefully create a feedback loop in which testing influences teaching and teaching influences testing. An ample, detailed, and innovative diagnostic feedback model with a variety of language dimensions within the language skills can be used in the

pre-assessment to evaluate the skills or knowledge of the students. This diagnostic feedback model goes beyond the rank ordering of students and provides information on the students' strengths and weaknesses with respect to the component knowledge, skills, and abilities of broader constructs. (Shohamy, 1992)

## Location of the Study

VV College of Engineering is an engineering college with five departments (Mechanical, Civil, Electronics and Communication, Electrical and Electronics, and Computer Science Engineering) in it. It is located in the outskirts of Tuticorin district in Tamilnadu. Nearly 800 students are studying in this college. The college has a language lab which contains 50 computers with in-built speakers and microphones. It has a digital library for the use of teachers and students. Every classroom has a system and LCD projector. The college with its advanced infrastructure is taken as the location of the study.

## Samples of the Study

Students from VV College of Engineering are the participants of this research. 200 students who learn English during their first year engineering course are chosen as samples. 10 teachers who have experience in ESL teaching are involved in the data collection and consolidation.

## Data Collection

Pre-assessment is given to the I Yr students who have finished board exams and joined in various departments in VV College of Engineering. The pre-assessment contains 5 – 10 speaking prompts in which the student has to select 2 or 3 topics. The student has to speak for 5 – 7 minutes. 2 teachers evaluate the speaking skill of the student using the rubric provided to them. After all the students complete, data consolidation is done to identify the strengths and areas of improvement of every student. The students are classified into Beginner /Intermediate / Proficient.

The students in 'Beginners' level are given activities like language drills, oral practice of simple sentences or questions, basic vocabulary learning, simple conversation practice, reading aloud, speaking on hints, etc. The students in 'Intermediate' level are given exercises like speaking

on pictures or posters, reading or seeing samples and imitating, speaking on any topic, paper presentation, etc. The students in 'Proficient' level undergo structural and accent training. They have to listen to audio and answer questions. They have to watch videos and explain the main ideas. They have to learn the error patterns in speaking. They need to practice neutral accent in speaking. At the end of the course, post-assessment is conducted for all the students using the same rubric. The post-assessment scores are compared with the pre-assessment scores of the students. The difference in scores indicates the effectiveness of diagnostic feedback model on ESL learners.

**Pre-assessment (Sample)**

a) Introduce yourself.

b) Speak on the image:



c) Read the following passage with proper stress, accent, and intonation.

d) "Look at that!" shouted John Durbin, Tyler's assistant. Tyler turned to where Durbin was pointing, and a smile slowly spread across her face. Poking through the ashy soil was a tiny plant called a fireweed. The purple blossoms of the plant were bright against the dull ground. Tyler knew that as more fireweed grew, their roots would provide a base for other plants to take hold. Soon after the plants were restored, animals would also begin to return.

e) Science – A toy in the hands of a school boy. Describe.

f) Expressing opinion: What is your opinion on violence in television?

**Criteria for Evaluation**

| Listening | | |
|---|---|---|
| | Understands the task perfectly | 5 |
| | Understands the task after repeating | 4 |
| **Understanding the Task** | Understands the task after rephrasing | 3 |
| | Understands the task with more difficulty | 2 |
| | Does not understand the task | 1 |
| | Responds instantly and more relevantly | 5 |
| | Responds relevantly with occasional hesitations | 4 |
| **Responding to the Task** | Responds relevantly with slight deviations | 3 |
| | Responds less relevantly with more deviations | 2 |
| | Searches for words and hesitates to speak | 1 |
| Self-Confidence | | |
| | Speaks with bold tone and high volume | 5 |
| | Speaks with appropriate tone and volume | 4 |
| **Tone and Audibility** | Speaks with average tone and volume | 3 |
| | Speaks with low tone and volume | 2 |
| | Speaks with very low tone and volume | 1 |
| | Maintains perfect eye contact and body language | 5 |
| | Maintains appropriate eye contact and body language | 4 |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| **Eye Contact & Body Language** | Maintains less eye contact and inadequate body language | 3 |
| | Maintains very less eye contact and improper body language | 2 |
| | Maintains no eye contact and body language | 1 |
| **Fluency** | | |
| **Continuity and Connectedness** | Speaks continuously with no hesitations | 5 |
| | Speaks continuously with occasional hesitations | 4 |
| | Speaks continuously with a few hesitations | 3 |
| | Speaks with more hesitations | 2 |
| | Does not speak continuously | 1 |
| **Content and Organisation** | Content and organisation are absolutely clear | 5 |
| | Content and organisation are clear | 4 |
| | Content and organisation are deviating | 3 |
| | Content and organisation are not clear | 2 |
| | Content and organisation are incorrect | 1 |
| **Point of View** | Speaks with distinct point of view | 5 |
| | Speaks with varied points of view | 4 |
| | Speaks with changing points of view | 3 |
| | Speaks with inadequate point of view | 2 |
| | Speaks with no point of view | 1 |
| **Accuracy** | | |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| **Sentence Structure** | Uses a variety of sentences | 5 |
| | Uses simple, complex, or compound sentences | 4 |
| | Searches for words and uses more simple sentences | 3 |
| | Searches for words and uses only simple sentences | 2 |
| | Uses no proper sentence structure | 1 |
| **Vocabulary & Pronunciation** | Uses varied vocabulary and perfect pronunciation | 5 |
| | Uses adequate vocabulary and good pronunciation | 4 |
| | Uses limited vocabulary and appropriate pronunciation | 3 |
| | Uses repeated vocabulary and incorrect pronunciation | 2 |
| | Uses improper vocabulary and poor pronunciation | 1 |
| **Grammar** | Speaks with no grammatical errors | 5 |
| | Speaks with a very few grammatical errors | 4 |
| | Speaks with a few grammatical errors | 3 |
| | Speaks with more grammatical errors | 2 |
| | Speaks randomly with no grammar | 1 |

**Data Sheet (Sample)**

**Note:** Hard copy of this data sheet is used by the teachers during the evaluation.

| S. No. | Name | Task | Listening | | Self-Confidence | | Fluency | | | Accuracy | | | Total Marks (Out of 50) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | Understanding the Task (5) | Responding to the Task (5) | Tone and Audibility (5) | Eye Contact & Body Language (5) | Continuity & Connectedness (5) | Content & Organisation (5) | Point of View (5) | Sentence Structure (5) | Vocabulary & Pronunciation (5) | Grammar (5) | |
| 1 | Ananthi .M | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 2 | Anushiya .A | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 3 | Asophika .C | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 4 | Bency Evelin .B | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 5 | Benistan .Y | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 6 | Claret Sweatha .A | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 7 | Denitta Chelin .R | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 8 | Devi .T | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 9 | Esther Brithvin .N | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 10 | Francis Vedamani .K | | | | | | | | | | | | |

## Data Consolidation (Sample)
**Note:** Data consolidation is done in MS Excel by the teachers

| S. No. | Name of the Student | Task | Listening | | Self-Confidence | | Fluency | | | Accuracy | | | Overall Performance |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | Understanding the Task | Responding to the Task | Tone and Audibility | Eye Contact & Body Language | Continuity & Connectedness | Content & Organisation | Point of View | Sentence Structure | Vocabulary & Pronunciation | Grammar | |
| 1 | **Ananthi .M** | Narrating a Story | 5 | 5 | 4 | 4 | 3 | 4 | 4 | 3 | 3 | 3 | |
| | | Opinion about Violence in TV | **10** | | **8** | | **11** | | | **9** | | | **38 / 50** |
| | | | **Strength** | | **Needs a little motivation** | | **Needs more oral practice** | | | **Needs concentration on structured exercises** | | | **Proficient** |
| 2 | **Anushiya .A** | Describing a Picture | 1 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 2 | 2 | |
| | | Explaining a Recipe | **3** | | **3** | | **5** | | | **6** | | | **17/50** |
| | | | **Needs more listening practice** | | **Needs more motivation** | | **Needs more oral practice** | | | **Needs more concentration on structured exercises** | | | **Beginner** |
| 3 | **Asophika .C** | Reading a Poem | 4 | 4 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 2 | 2 | 2 | |
| | | Explaining a Science Process | **8** | | **6** | | **9** | | | **6** | | | **29/50** |
| | | | **Needs a little listening practice** | | **Needs more motivation** | | **Needs more oral practice** | | | **Needs more concentration on structured exercises** | | | **Intermediate** |
| 4 | **Bency Evelin .B** | Reading with Stress & Intonation | 5 | 5 | 3 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 5 | 5 | 5 | |
| | | Commenting on an Advertisement | **10** | | **6** | | **12** | | | **15** | | | **44/50** |
| | | | **Strength** | | **Needs a little motivation** | | **Needs oral practice** | | | **Strength** | | | **Proficient** |
| 5 | **Benistan .Y** | Narrating an Event | 4 | 4 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 2 | 3 | 2 | |
| | | Speaking about Politics | **8** | | **6** | | **9** | | | **7** | | | **30/50** |
| | | | **Needs a little listening practice** | | **Needs more motivation** | | **Needs more oral practice** | | | **Needs more concentration on structured exercises** | | | **Intermediate** |

**Data Analysis and Interpretation**

Graph 10.1 Students Classified as Beginner / Intermediate / Proficient Based on the Pre-assessment Scores:
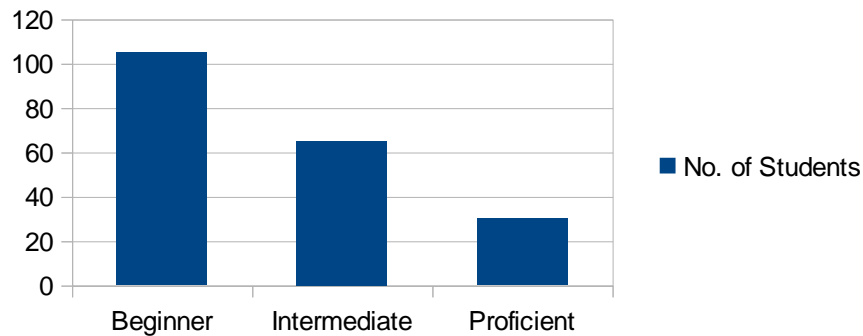


- 105 students who get below 20 (out of 50) fall under the category 'Beginner'.
- 65 students who get below 35 (out of 50) fall under the category 'Intermediate'.
- 30 students who get above 35 (out of 50) fall under the category 'Proficient'.

Graph 10.2 Differences between the Pre-assessment & Post-assessment Scores of the Students:
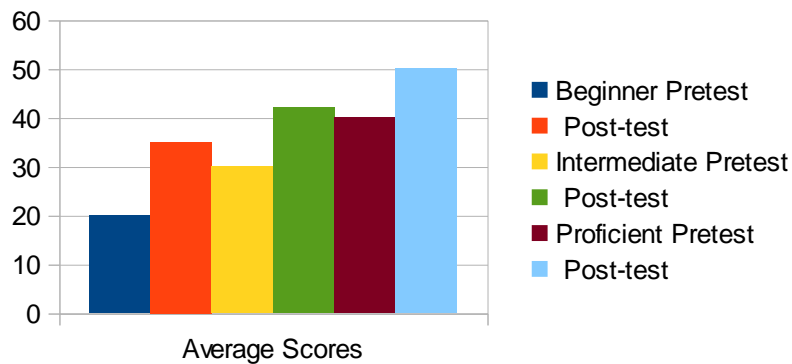


- The average scores of 'Beginners' have increased from 20 to 35.
- The average scores of 'Intermediate' students have increased from 30 to 43.
- The average scores of 'Proficient' students have increased from 40 to 48.

**Findings**

- Based on the diagnostic feedback model, 200 students involved in the study are classified into Beginner / Intermediate / Proficient. 105 students fall under the category 'Beginner'. 65 students fall under the category 'Intermediate'. 30 students fall under the category 'Proficient'. Different kinds of activities are given to each group.

- After finishing the speaking course, post-assessment is conducted for all the students using the same criteria. The average scores of 'Beginners' have increased from 20 to 35. The average scores of 'Intermediate' students have increased from 30 to 43. The average scores of 'Proficient' students have increased from 40 to 48.

- The qualitative feedback collected from the students after the course reveals that most of the students find the speaking practice up to their level and relevant to their abilities. Diagnostic feedback model proves to be more effective in mixed-ability classrooms.

**Recommendations**

- Diagnostic feedback model can be used in mixed-ability classrooms for classifying the students into groups.

- Instead of Below Average / Average / Above Average, students can be classified into Beginner / Intermediate / Proficient. This motivates the students in learning the skills better.

- Speaking activities should be planned according to the level of the students. Drills, conversation practice, reading aloud, hearing news, watching movies, etc. can be used with pedagogical value.

- Pre-assessment can be used to evaluate the level of the students. At the end of the course, post-assessments can be conducted to measure the exact improvement in the language learning process of the students.

- The scores of students for whom the diagnostic feedback model is used can be compared with the scores of students for whom the diagnostic feedback model in not used. This may show the actual effectiveness of diagnostic feedback model in teaching speaking in mixed-ability classrooms.

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