

## ENHANCING ENGLISH SPEAKING SKILLS THROUGH EXPRESSION-BASED ACTIVITIES IN UNDERPERFORMING SCHOOLS: A CASE STUDY OF NARPAY DISTRICT

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**Abstract.** *This study examines the effectiveness of expression-based activities in improving English speaking skills among learners in underperforming rural schools. Many students in such contexts face limited opportunities for authentic communication, resulting in low fluency, restricted vocabulary use, and high speaking anxiety. The research employed a quasi-experimental design involving secondary school students from the Narpay district. Expression-based activities focusing on formulaic language, conversational routines, and contextual speaking tasks were implemented over eight weeks. Pre- and post-intervention speaking assessments, classroom observations, and student feedback were used to evaluate outcomes. The results demonstrate measurable improvement in fluency, coherence, confidence, and interactive communication. The findings suggest that structured expression-based instruction provides a practical and pedagogically effective approach for enhancing speaking performance in resource-limited rural EFL environments.*

**Keywords:** *EFL speaking, formulaic expressions, communicative competence, rural education, speaking fluency, expression-based learning.*

### Introduction.

Speaking proficiency is one of the most challenging skills for learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), especially in rural school environments where exposure to authentic language input is limited. In many underperforming schools, students encounter difficulties such as limited fluency, inadequate vocabulary use, poor organization of ideas, and strong hesitation during oral tasks. These challenges often reduce learner participation and weaken overall communicative competence.

A major reason behind this issue lies in traditional grammar-focused teaching practices. Although such approaches support rule-based knowledge, they rarely provide sufficient opportunities for spontaneous interaction or meaningful conversation. As a result, students may perform well in written exercises but struggle to speak effectively in real communicative situations.

Recent research in applied linguistics highlights the importance of formulaic expressions—ready-made language chunks such as discourse markers, conversational routines, and frequently used phrases. These expressions reduce cognitive load during speech production and allow learners to focus more on communication rather than grammatical construction. Expression-based activities, which systematically teach and practice such language chunks, are considered effective tools for improving fluency, coherence, and confidence.

This study aims to investigate whether structured expression-based activities can significantly improve English speaking skills among learners in underperforming schools of the Narpay district. The study focuses on practical classroom strategies that can be realistically implemented in rural educational contexts.

## 2.1 Research Design

A quasi-experimental design with pre-test and post-test evaluation was used. The study compared students' speaking performance before and after the implementation of expression-based activities.

## 2.2 Participants

The study involved 60 secondary school students (grades 8–9) from two underperforming schools. Students were divided into:

- Experimental group (30 learners): received expression-based speaking instruction
- Control group (30 learners): continued traditional instruction

## 2.3 Intervention

The intervention lasted eight weeks with two speaking sessions per week. Expression-based activities included:

- Formulaic phrase practice (greetings, opinions, agreement/disagreement)
- Guided dialogue construction
- Role-plays based on real-life situations
- Speaking frames and sentence starters
- Pair and group interaction tasks
- Phrase recycling and repetition exercises

The activities were designed to gradually move from controlled to free speaking tasks.

## 2.4 Data Collection Tools

The following instruments were used:

- Pre- and post-speaking tests (fluency, coherence, vocabulary, pronunciation)
- Classroom observations
- Student self-assessment questionnaires
- Teacher reflection notes

## 2.5 Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using comparative scoring averages, while qualitative data were analyzed through thematic observation of classroom behavior and participation patterns.

### 3.1 Improvement in Speaking Fluency

Students in the experimental group demonstrated noticeable improvement in speaking fluency. Hesitation frequency decreased, and learners produced longer, more continuous speech segments compared to the pre-test stage.

### 3.2 Vocabulary and Expression Use

After the intervention, learners showed increased use of conversational expressions such as transition phrases, opinion markers, and interactive responses. Their speech became more natural and less dependent on translation from their first language.

### 3.3 Confidence and Participation

Observation data indicated greater classroom participation. Students who previously avoided speaking tasks began engaging in pair discussions and role-plays more actively.

### 3.4 Comparative Performance

While both groups showed minor progress, the experimental group achieved significantly higher gains in fluency, coherence, and interactional competence than the control group.

The findings support the theoretical assumption that expression-based learning facilitates oral language production by reducing the cognitive burden associated with sentence construction. Instead of generating language word-by-word, students relied on memorized functional expressions, allowing them to focus on meaning and interaction.

In rural EFL contexts, where exposure to English outside the classroom is limited, formulaic language functions as a practical scaffold for communication. The structured nature of the activities also helped reduce speaking anxiety, as learners felt more secure using familiar expression patterns.

The results align with communicative language teaching principles, emphasizing interaction and real-life communication. Expression-based activities appear especially effective for learners with limited vocabulary because they provide immediate communicative tools that can be reused across contexts.

However, the study acknowledges limitations such as a relatively small sample size and short intervention duration. Longer-term studies involving multiple schools may provide deeper insights into sustainable speaking development.

### **Conclusion.**

This study demonstrates that expression-based activities can significantly improve English speaking skills among learners in underperforming rural schools. The approach contributes to increased fluency, better organization of speech, richer use of functional vocabulary, and higher learner confidence. For teachers working in resource-limited

contexts, integrating formulaic expressions into speaking instruction offers a practical and effective strategy for enhancing communicative competence.

Future research should explore long-term application of expression-based instruction, teacher training models, and integration with digital or blended learning environments.

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