

From Writing to Speaking: A Story-Based Pathway to Developing Public Speaking among Undergraduate ESL Learners

Chiranjeevi Jakkani

Assistant Professor

Department of English

Agricultural College, Polasa, PJTSAU

Abstract

Public speaking is an important communication skill for university students, yet many English language learners hesitate to participate in speaking activities because of anxiety, fear of making mistakes, and uncertainty about what to say. This classroom-based qualitative study explores a story-based approach used to encourage first-year agriculture students to participate in public speaking during their regular English practical classes. The class consisted of 70 students, and the activity was carried out throughout one semester, with a writing and speaking activity conducted approximately once every three weeks. Students were invited to write about personally meaningful experiences, including successes, failures, favourite people, places, and other aspects of their lives. Rather than requiring students to speak immediately, they were first encouraged to prepare written stories and, when ready, come forward and speak for about a minute. Students who were initially afraid to speak could simply submit their written assignment, but they were gradually encouraged to participate orally as the semester progressed. Data included student-written stories, attendance records, speech recordings, feedback from classmates and the teacher, and the teacher's reflective journal. The classroom evidence showed a gradual movement from reluctance to participation and from dependence on written stories towards more audience-oriented speaking. The study suggests that writing can function as a low-risk scaffold for speaking by allowing learners to develop content and familiarity before managing the demands of oral performance.

Keywords: public speaking, storytelling, ESL, writing-to-speaking, speaking anxiety, undergraduate learners, agriculture students, classroom-based research

1. Introduction

The ability to communicate clearly in front of others is increasingly important in higher education and professional life. For students learning English as a second language, however, public speaking can be particularly demanding. A student may have ideas to communicate but still hesitate to stand before an audience and express them in English. Fear of making grammatical mistakes, lack of confidence, limited vocabulary, and concern about how others may respond can discourage students from participating in oral activities. Research on second-language willingness to communicate has similarly shown that learners' readiness to enter into communication is influenced by linguistic, psychological, and situational factors (MacIntyre et al., 1998).

This problem became particularly visible in my own English classes. When students were simply asked to come forward and speak, only a small number were willing to volunteer. The instruction "come and speak" seemed simple from the teacher's perspective, but for many students it represented a considerable psychological and linguistic challenge. The author therefore began to question whether the problem was actually a lack of interest in speaking or whether students needed a more gradual way of entering the speaking situation.

An alternative approach was developed through storytelling. Instead of asking students to give speeches on predetermined topics, the author invited them to write about experiences and subjects that were personally meaningful to them. They could write about a success, a failure, a favourite person, a place, an object, a childhood experience, or something from their everyday lives. The response was noticeably different. Students who were reluctant to volunteer for conventional speeches were willing to write. Once they had written their stories, they were asked to come forward and read them to the group.

The initial goal was modest. Students were told that even speaking for one minute was a meaningful achievement. They were allowed to use their notes. Other students were instructed to listen attentively and avoid discouraging comments. As the semester progressed, the expectations were gradually increased. Students were encouraged to look at the audience rather than continuously read from their notes, smile, use gestures, vary their pitch and voice, begin with questions, and interact with listeners. In this way, the activity gradually moved from reading a prepared text to narrating a story for an audience.

The approach was particularly relevant to agriculture students. Communication is an important part of agricultural education because graduates may eventually work with farmers, rural communities, extension personnel, government agencies, industry representatives, and other stakeholders. Agricultural extension itself depends substantially on interpersonal communication and interaction with farmers and other actors. Thus, oral communication for agriculture students is not merely a general employability skill; it has relevance to the professional contexts in which they may eventually work.

The activity also led the author to notice a relationship between writing and speaking. Students seemed more willing to speak when they already had something meaningful written in front of them. Writing appeared to remove one immediate difficulty: deciding what to say. Once students became familiar with standing before an audience, attention could gradually shift from the content of the speech to its delivery.

The present study therefore explores the following questions:

1. How did a story-based writing-to-speaking approach influence undergraduate ESL learners' participation in public-speaking activities?
2. How did students' oral participation develop from reading prepared narratives towards more audience-oriented speaking?

The study does not claim to establish a causal effect through experimental measurement. Instead, it examines a classroom practice as it developed over a semester and uses naturally occurring classroom evidence to understand the changes observed in students' participation and speaking behaviour.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Public Speaking and Willingness to Communicate

Public speaking requires more than knowledge of grammar and vocabulary. Learners must be willing to enter a communicative situation, manage anxiety, organise their ideas, and respond to an audience. MacIntyre et al. (1998) conceptualised willingness to communicate (WTC) in a second language as a learner's readiness to enter into discourse with others at a particular time. Their model helped establish that communication is not determined by language proficiency alone; situational and psychological factors also influence whether learners actually choose to communicate.

Subsequent research has continued to demonstrate the relationship between emotional factors, classroom environment, and willingness to communicate. MacIntyre et al. (1998), for example, examined the relationship between emotions, classroom environment, and L2 willingness to communicate and highlighted the importance of the learning environment in shaping learners' communicative behaviour.

These perspectives are particularly relevant to classroom public speaking. A learner may possess sufficient language knowledge but remain silent when asked to speak before a group. Creating opportunities for communication therefore involves not only teaching speaking techniques but also creating conditions in which learners are willing to participate.

2.2 Storytelling and Speaking

Storytelling has long been used as a language-learning activity because it gives learners opportunities to organise meaning, use language purposefully, and communicate with an audience. Research has examined storytelling as a means of developing oral language and speaking competence. Hwang et al. (2016), for example, investigated storytelling in an EFL context and found that storytelling activities supported students' speaking practice.

The study by Hwang et al. (2016) used a Web-based multimedia storytelling system to support EFL speaking practice and reported positive effects on students' speaking performance. The present study differs in its use of simple, personally meaningful written stories rather than a technology-supported storytelling system.

Storytelling may be particularly useful because a story provides a structure for communication. Rather than producing disconnected sentences, speakers have an experience, event, person, or idea to communicate. This can reduce the difficulty of deciding what to say while giving speaking a meaningful purpose.

However, much storytelling research has focused on learners producing digital stories or using technological tools to construct narratives. Less attention has been given to a simpler classroom progression in which learners first writes a personal story, read it aloud, repeatedly practise oral narration, and gradually develop audience-oriented speaking behaviours. The present study focuses on this progression.

2.3 Writing as a Scaffold for Speaking

Writing and speaking are often taught as separate language skills. In practice, however, writing can provide preparation for oral communication. Writing allows learners to organise ideas, select vocabulary, construct sentences, and establish a sequence before they have to manage the demands of real-time speech. Goh and Burns (2012) also emphasise the importance of planned, supported speaking practice in developing oral communication.

Task repetition research also suggests that repeated engagement with the same communicative task can influence subsequent oral performance. Bygate (1996), for example, examined task repetition and post-task transcription in L2 speaking and found benefits for aspects of oral production.

The present study approaches the relationship from a slightly different direction. Rather than repeating an oral task alone, students first created a written narrative and then repeatedly engaged with it orally. Writing therefore became a preliminary scaffold rather than the final goal.

The distinction is important. Students were not asked to memorise speeches. They were first encouraged to develop something they wanted to communicate and then gradually supported in transforming that written material into spoken communication.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

The study adopted a qualitative classroom-based practitioner inquiry design. The purpose was to examine a naturally occurring pedagogical practice and understand how students' participation in public speaking developed over the course of a semester. Rather than using a controlled experimental design, the study drew on multiple sources of classroom evidence to identify recurring patterns in students' participation and oral behaviour.

3.2 Context and Participants

The study was conducted as part of a regular English practical class for first-year undergraduate agriculture students. The class consisted of 70 students. The speaking activity was carried out throughout one semester, with a writing and speaking activity conducted approximately once every three weeks. All students were asked to prepare stories and were encouraged to come forward and speak. At the beginning, some students who were

afraid to speak submitted only their written assignments. As the semester progressed, these students were also gradually encouraged to take part in the speaking activity.

The participants were not English-major students. Their primary academic discipline was agriculture, making oral communication particularly relevant to their future professional roles. Agriculture graduates may be required to communicate technical information to farmers and other stakeholders, participate in group discussions, deliver presentations, and interact with communities. Communication in agricultural extension is substantially dependent on interpersonal and group interaction.

3.3 The Story-Based Speaking Activity

The activity developed in response to an observed lack of participation in conventional speaking activities. Initially, students were simply invited to come forward and speak. Only a limited number volunteered.

The activity was therefore redesigned around personal storytelling. Students were given broad prompts rather than highly structured speech topics. They could write about their successes, failures, favourite people, places, objects, childhood memories, experiences, aspirations, or other aspects of their lives. The intention was to allow students to begin with content they already knew.

Students were given time to prepare their stories before speaking. During the initial stage, they were permitted to bring their written notes to the front of the room and read their stories aloud. The objective at this stage was not perfect public speaking. The immediate goal was simply to get students comfortable standing before an audience and speaking in English.

The audience was also given a role. Students listening to a speaker were encouraged to pay attention and avoid discouraging comments. This helped establish a supportive environment in which making mistakes was treated as a normal part of learning.

As students became more accustomed to speaking, the activity was gradually extended. Students were encouraged to:

- look at the audience rather than continuously at their notes;
- smile and use appropriate facial expression;
- use natural gestures;
- vary pitch and voice;
- begin with a question or engaging statement;
- interact with listeners;
- reduce dependence on written notes; and
- narrate rather than simply read.

The progression was therefore deliberate:

writing → preparation → reading aloud → repeated speaking → audience awareness → narration.

3.4 Sources of Data

The analysis drew on several forms of naturally occurring classroom evidence:

1. student-written stories;
2. attendance records from the classroom activity;
3. feedback from classmates and the teacher;
4. recordings of student speeches;
5. classroom observations; and
6. the researcher's reflective journal.

Using multiple sources allowed the development of students' participation to be considered from different perspectives. Written stories provided evidence of students' willingness to generate personal content, recordings provided evidence of oral performance, attendance provided evidence of continued participation, and reflective observations documented changes noticed during the intervention.

The analysis focused on recurring patterns across these sources, particularly changes in willingness to speak, dependence on notes, audience awareness, delivery, and participation.

3.5 Data Analysis

Data were analysed qualitatively through repeated review and comparison of the available classroom evidence. The researcher reviewed student-written narratives, attendance records, speech recordings, feedback from classmates and the teacher, and reflective notes across the semester and identified recurring patterns related to willingness to speak, dependence on notes, audience awareness, delivery, and participation. Evidence from different sources was compared where possible to check whether the same pattern appeared across the classroom record. The analysis was interpretive rather than numerical; no standardised pre- and post-speaking scores were used.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

The activities described in this study were originally conducted as part of regular classroom teaching rather than as a planned research intervention. The decision to examine the pedagogical experience as a classroom-based inquiry was made subsequently. In reporting the findings, students' identities have been kept confidential, and no identifying personal information is disclosed. Student writings, feedback and classroom observations are reported in anonymised form. Speech recordings were used to support the researcher's retrospective reflection and analysis.

4. Findings

4.1 From Reluctance to Willingness to Speak

The first noticeable change was in students' willingness to enter the speaking situation. At the beginning of the activity, asking students to come forward and speak resulted in relatively few volunteers. The difficulty appeared to involve more than a lack of knowledge. Students often seemed uncomfortable with the idea of standing before their peers and speaking in English.

The introduction of personal storytelling changed the nature of the task. Instead of being asked to produce a speech immediately, students were first invited to write about experiences that were familiar to them. They showed considerable interest in topics related to their own lives. Stories about successes, failures, favourite people, places, childhood experiences, and personal aspirations were particularly attractive because students already possessed the content.

This appeared to make the first step easier. Students did not have to search for an unfamiliar topic or construct an argument on demand. They had something to tell.

The initial expectation was also deliberately low. Students were told that coming to the front and speaking for a minute was already a positive beginning. They could use their written notes. This changed the meaning of success. A student did not have to deliver an impressive speech; the first achievement was simply to stand before others and speak.

In informal reflections, several students reported feeling more comfortable speaking after participating in the storytelling activities repeatedly. They indicated that having a story prepared beforehand made it easier to come to the front and begin speaking. The familiarity of the content, together with the opportunity to prepare before speaking, appeared to reduce some of their initial hesitation.

The recordings and classroom observations showed a gradual change as the activity continued. Students who initially depended heavily on their notes became more familiar with the physical and social experience of speaking before a group. The hesitation associated with coming to the front appeared to decrease, and participation became more regular.

This finding is consistent with research on willingness to communicate, which emphasises that learners' decisions to communicate are influenced by situational and affective conditions rather than proficiency alone (MacIntyre et al., 1998). The present classroom experience suggests that reducing the initial demands of a speaking task can create an entry point for learners who might otherwise remain silent.

4.2 Writing as a Scaffold for Oral Expression

A second important pattern was the relationship between writing and speaking. Writing was initially introduced simply as preparation, but it gradually became clear that it performed a more important function.

When students were asked to speak without preparation, they had to solve several problems simultaneously: deciding what to say, organising their ideas, finding appropriate English expressions, and managing the pressure of speaking before an audience. Writing separated some of these demands.

Students first had the opportunity to decide what they wanted to communicate. They could organise their story, choose words, and prepare a sequence. When they subsequently came to the front, the problem was no longer "What should I say?" They already had an answer to that question.

This seemed particularly useful for learners who lacked confidence in spontaneous English speaking. Their notes provided a sense of security. At the same time, the notes gradually became less central as students gained familiarity with their own stories and with the speaking situation.

The movement from writing to reading and then towards narration was therefore not simply a change in activity type. It represented a gradual reduction of support.

At the beginning:

The written text carried much of the speaking.

Later:

The student used the written text as support.

Eventually:

The student increasingly carried the story.

This progression is consistent with research suggesting that scaffolding and task structure can support oral language development. Studies of storytelling have also identified topic familiarity and scaffolding as important factors in supporting EFL speaking development.

4.3 From Reading Notes to Audience-Oriented Speaking

The third pattern concerned the development of delivery behaviours. Initially, students were primarily concerned with getting through the story. Looking at notes continuously was therefore accepted.

Once students became comfortable speaking, however, the focus changed. They were encouraged to look at the audience, smile, use gestures, vary pitch and voice, and interact with listeners.

This change was important because public speaking is not simply the oral reproduction of written language. A speaker has to establish a relationship with an audience. Eye contact, facial expression, gesture, voice variation, questions, and pauses contribute to that relationship.

The recordings provided evidence of a gradual movement in this direction. Early performances were more dependent on notes and often resembled reading aloud. Later performances increasingly showed attempts to look at listeners, use gestures, vary delivery, and speak beyond the written line.

The change was not uniform across all students. Some students progressed more quickly than others, and not every learner became an accomplished public speaker. Nevertheless, the overall movement was from text dependence towards greater audience awareness.

This distinction is important because the aim of the activity was not to eliminate notes immediately. Notes were initially a support. The goal was to make them less necessary as students developed familiarity and confidence.

4.4 Repetition and Familiarity as Part of the Development

The fourth finding concerns the importance of repetition. The activity was carried out approximately once every three weeks throughout the semester, and students encountered the same basic process repeatedly: write, prepare, come forward, speak, listen, and return to the activity again.

Repeated participation appeared to make the speaking situation less unfamiliar. The front of the classroom, which could initially be a psychologically difficult space, gradually became a normal place for students to communicate.

This finding is relevant to research on repeated oral tasks. Bygate (1996) found that task repetition can support aspects of L2 oral performance. The present study suggests a related pedagogical possibility: repetition may be valuable not only for linguistic performance but also for familiarising learners with the social act of speaking before an audience.

The content also helped repetition. Because students were writing about different experiences, the activity did not become a mechanical repetition of the same speech. The structure remained familiar while the content changed.

4.5 The Development of a Supportive Speaking Community

The activity also created a particular kind of classroom environment. Students were not only speakers; they were also audience members. They were asked to listen and avoid discouraging reactions when a peer was speaking.

This mattered because a public-speaking activity can fail if the audience becomes another source of anxiety. The classroom was therefore treated as a practice space where mistakes were expected.

Over time, the classroom became a space in which students could watch their peers speak, learn from different styles, and gradually imagine themselves taking the same position. The presence of 70 students in the same first-year class also gave students opportunities to observe one another and learn from their classmates.

The reflective journal documented the gradual normalisation of participation. What had initially been an activity in which only a few students volunteered became a recurring classroom practice in which students increasingly accepted speaking before the group as part of their English practical class.

The development can therefore be represented as:

reluctant participant → prepared reader → repeated speaker → audience-aware speaker → emerging narrator.

The progression was not identical for every student, but it captures the broad pattern observed across the semester.

5. Discussion

The findings suggest that the central value of the intervention was not storytelling alone. Rather, it was the sequence in which writing, preparation, speaking, repetition, and audience engagement were combined.

The first important point concerns willingness to communicate. Students who were reluctant to volunteer for conventional speaking activities were more willing to participate when they were given the opportunity to write about experiences that were personally meaningful. This supports the broader understanding of L2 willingness to communicate as a situational phenomenon. MacIntyre et al. (1998) argue that willingness to communicate involves readiness to enter into discourse at a particular moment and with particular interlocutors. The classroom observations in this study suggest that the design of the speaking task can influence that readiness.

The difference between the two tasks is worth noting. "Come and speak" placed the entire burden on oral performance. "Write your story and then tell us" distributed the task across two stages. The writing stage allowed students to develop content and prepare language before entering the speaking situation.

This leads to the second contribution of the study: writing functioned as a scaffold for speaking. The written narrative was not treated as the final product. It was a bridge between having something to communicate and being able to communicate it orally.

This is particularly relevant for learners who experience difficulty with spontaneous speaking. The student's own story provides content familiarity. The written version provides linguistic support. Repeated narration then allows the student to become increasingly familiar with the organisation of the message.

The approach also complements existing research on storytelling. Previous studies have demonstrated the potential of storytelling for developing speaking competence, and research on digital storytelling has highlighted the importance of topic familiarity and scaffolding. The present study extends this discussion by suggesting that storytelling need not begin with sophisticated digital production. A handwritten or typed personal story can be the first step, with oral narration becoming the subsequent goal.

The third contribution concerns the gradual movement from reading to speaking. At first, reading from notes was not treated as a failure. It was treated as a legitimate starting point. This is pedagogically important. If students are already anxious about standing before an audience, removing their notes immediately may increase rather than reduce the difficulty.

Instead, the intervention followed a gradual release of support:

notes as security → notes as reference → reduced dependence on notes → narration.

As students became familiar with the speaking situation, additional public-speaking behaviours were introduced. Eye contact, gestures, facial expression, voice variation, questions, and interaction were therefore introduced only after students had acquired some comfort with standing before an audience.

The fourth contribution relates to repetition. The activity continued throughout the semester rather than being organised as a single speaking lesson. Repeated practice gave students opportunities to experience speaking as an ordinary part of their learning rather than as an exceptional performance. This is compatible with research showing the potential value of repeated speaking tasks for oral development.

The agricultural context also gives the intervention particular relevance. Agriculture graduates may eventually need to communicate directly with farmers and other stakeholders, and agricultural extension depends heavily on interpersonal and group communication. In this context, the ability to stand before people, explain an idea clearly, use appropriate delivery, respond to listeners, and maintain audience engagement has professional significance.

Perhaps the most useful pedagogical insight from the study is therefore simple:

Students may need to become comfortable with speaking before they can be expected to become good public speakers.

The distinction is important. Public-speaking instruction sometimes begins with delivery techniques: eye contact, gestures, posture, voice, and presentation structure. These skills are necessary, but they may not be sufficient for students who are still reluctant to stand and speak.

The present approach began further back. It first asked students to have something worth saying. Their own experiences supplied the content. Writing supplied preparation. Reading supplied initial security. Repetition supplied familiarity. Only then were increasingly sophisticated delivery behaviours introduced.

This produces a tentative Writing-to-Speaking Pathway:

Personal experience

↓

Student-authored story

↓

Preparation and written support

↓

Reading aloud

↓

Repeated oral practice

↓

Reduced dependence on notes

↓

Audience awareness

↓

Narrative public speaking

The framework should not be interpreted as a universal sequence or as evidence that writing necessarily causes improvement in public speaking. Rather, it represents the pedagogical progression that emerged from this classroom inquiry.

6. Implications for Teaching

The findings have several practical implications for English teachers working with reluctant speakers.

First, teachers may consider replacing the immediate demand for formal speeches with personal storytelling. Students can begin with experiences they know well. This reduces the need to generate both content and language simultaneously.

Second, teachers may treat notes as scaffolding rather than as a problem. A student who reads from notes is already participating. The teacher can gradually encourage greater eye contact and less dependence on the written text rather than expecting full independence from the beginning.

Third, public-speaking instruction can be incremental. Once students become comfortable speaking, teachers can introduce one delivery feature at a time: eye contact, gesture, facial expression, voice variation, opening questions, and audience interaction.

Fourth, the audience needs to be taught how to behave. A supportive audience is not simply a background condition; it is part of the speaking environment. Students need to understand that classmates who are speaking should be listened to rather than ridiculed.

Finally, regularity matters. A speaking activity that is repeated during the semester may offer something that a one-time presentation cannot: students become familiar with the physical and social experience of speaking before others.

7. Limitations

The study has several limitations. First, it was conducted in a single educational context with undergraduate agriculture students, and therefore the findings cannot automatically be generalised to all ESL learners or university settings.

Second, the study did not employ a control group or standardised pre- and post-speaking assessment. Consequently, the findings should be understood as evidence of observed development rather than experimental evidence of causal impact.

Third, the analysis relied substantially on classroom observations, recordings, student artefacts, attendance, and the researcher's reflective journal. Although multiple sources provided opportunities for triangulation, the researcher's dual role as teacher and researcher may have influenced both the intervention and interpretation of the data.

Future studies could build on this work by using systematic speaking-performance measures before and after the intervention, student interviews, learner self-assessment scales, and comparisons between different

approaches to speaking instruction. Longer-term studies could also investigate whether students continue to use storytelling and audience-oriented speaking strategies in academic and professional contexts.

8. Conclusion

This classroom-based study explored a simple question that emerged from teaching practice: what happens when students who are reluctant to give speeches are first asked to write and tell their own stories?

The experience suggests that writing can provide a useful entry point into public speaking. Students began with something familiar, their own experiences, and were given time to prepare before entering the speaking situation. Reading from notes was accepted as an initial stage rather than treated as inadequate performance. With repeated participation, students were gradually encouraged to look at the audience, use gestures and facial expression, vary their voices, ask questions, interact with listeners, and reduce their dependence on notes.

The significance of the approach lies in this progression. Rather than expecting students to become public speakers immediately, it created a pathway from writing to reading, from reading to narration, and from narration to audience-oriented speaking.

For agriculture students, this development has particular relevance because communication will form part of many professional roles involving farmers, communities, extension personnel, and other stakeholders.

The study therefore proposes writing not as an alternative to speaking but as a scaffold for speaking. Personal storytelling gave learners content, writing gave them preparation, repeated narration gave them familiarity, and audience-oriented practice gradually shifted their attention from the written page to the people in front of them.

The larger lesson from the classroom was perhaps the simplest one: before asking students to speak confidently, we may need to give them something they genuinely want to say.

References

1. Goh, C. C. M., & Burns, A. (2012). *Teaching speaking: A holistic approach*. Cambridge University Press.
2. Bygate, M. (1996). Effects of task repetition: Appraising the developing language of learners. In J. Willis & D. Willis (Eds.), *Challenge and change in language teaching* (pp. 136–146). Macmillan.
3. Lin, Y.-T., & Hwang, W.-Y. (2014). Effects of storytelling to facilitate EFL speaking using Web-based multimedia system. *Computer Assisted Language Learning*, 29(2), 215–241.
4. MacIntyre, P. D., Dörnyei, Z., Clément, R., & Noels, K. A. (1998). Conceptualizing willingness to communicate in a L2: A situational model of L2 confidence and affiliation. *The Modern Language Journal*, 82(4), 545–562.