Enhancing English Communication Skills Through the English Language Association (ELA): An Action Research Study

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Abstract

This action research study examines the effectiveness of the English Language Association (ELA) as an activity-based student platform to support students from rural and semi-urban backgrounds in their English language learning. The study focuses on communicative confidence, frequency of English use, and student participation. The research was conducted at a law college in Sangamner, Maharashtra. Data were collected, using a mixed-method approach, from 56 students through a structured questionnaire, observation and feedback. The ELA organised theme-based sessions, including extempore speaking, role plays, group discussions, and vocabulary games twice a month. The activities encouraged interaction and reduced hesitation. The findings show improved willingness to speak in English, increased confidence and better participation. Speaking activities had a stronger impact. Hence, the study suggests that structured, activity-based platforms can support language learning in such a context,

Keywords

ELA, ESL, communication and soft skills, public speaking, personality development

Introduction

The importance of English as the language of education, technology, business, trade, commerce, industry, medicine, law, and the corporate

world has already been established by several studies (Agnihotri & Khanna, 1994; Kachru, 1986; Graddol, 2010). English is widely accepted as the *lingua franca* and known as the language of opportunities. For every aspirant, English language proficiency is crucial to achieve success in personal and professional life (Dasgupta, 1993).

However, despite the universal demand for English, in India, a significant disparity persists for students from rural and suburban backgrounds. A lack of appropriate linguistic exposure becomes, frequently, a substantial hurdle for these learners in higher education. This deprivation often manifests psychologically. Owing to hesitation, anxiety, and an inferiority complex resulting from a lack of English language skills, these learners are often unenthusiastic to participate in both curricular and extracurricular activities. Ultimately, this linguistic barrier serves as an obstacle to their prospective career paths (Ghodke, 2015).

Traditional classroom instruction usually emphasises rote learning and grammar-centric methodologies. It often lacks the practical and immersive environment necessary to develop communicative competence and essential soft skills (Salmanova, 2025). Lived experience and social interaction, not the mere passive reception of information, are crucial for dynamic education (Dewey, 1938). Traditional classroom instruction fails to bridge this gap. Several language teaching models, such as Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and Activity-Based Learning (ABL), have been widely discussed in English pedagogy (Richards, 2006; Salmanova, 2025). These approaches emphasise interaction, real-life communication and learner participation. However, in many rural and semi-urban contexts, their implementation remains limited. Classroom practices often continue to be exam-oriented and teacher-centred . Hence, there is a need to develop student-centric and experiential learning models.

Theoretical Framework: The Conceptual Foundations of the ELA

Language teaching resists reduction to a single, universally effective method. Approaches such as Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT), and Project-Based Learning (PBL) have each foregrounded vital dimensions of language acquisition, communication, task engagement, and collaboration. Yet, as Prabhu (1990) argues, the question is not which method is superior, but

how pedagogic principles are contextualised within specific learning environments.

This insight becomes particularly significant in rural and semi-urban contexts, for learners with limited exposure to English and limited opportunities for authentic language use (Ghodke, 2015). In these contexts, although CLT or TBLT appear theoretically sound, practically they remain unrealised within the constraints of formal classrooms.

It is in this context that the English Language Association (ELA) is not proposed as a new method; rather, it is conceived as a practice-oriented, activity-based platform that operationalises existing theoretical principles in a sustained and context-sensitive manner. By extending learning beyond the classroom into regular, student-led sessions, the ELA creates a space where communicative, collaborative, and experiential dimensions of language learning can be enacted rather than merely prescribed (Richards, 2006; Praratch & Tutwisoot, 2024). These dimensions are not treated as isolated principles but as mutually reinforcing processes shaping language development.

1. Collaborative Learning and Peer Interaction

A central premise of communicative approaches is that language develops through interaction and negotiation of meaning, rather than through isolated or decontextualised practice (Richards, 2006). However, conventional classrooms often remain teacher-centred, limiting opportunities for such interaction. Empirical studies have demonstrated that structured peer interaction enhances both fluency and learner confidence. For instance, Praratch and Tutwisoot (2024) found that collaborative speaking tasks significantly improved learners' willingness to communicate, while Beungmum et al. (2024) reported increased vocabulary retention and engagement through group-based language games. These studies suggest that interaction is not merely supportive but constitutive of language learning.

The ELA builds on this insight by foregrounding peer-led activities that redistribute authority from teacher to learner, creating a low-pressure environment, reducing hesitation and increasing participation naturally.

2. Experiential Education: Learning by Doing

The theoretical grounding of experiential learning, most notably articulated by Dewey (1938), emphasises that learning becomes meaningful when it is rooted in experience and purposeful action. In

language education, this translates into the use of language in context rather than its abstract study.

Research on ABL reinforces this perspective. Salmanova (2025) demonstrates that learners engaged in task-oriented activities show greater retention and practical language use compared to those exposed to traditional instruction. Similarly, Uwanawanit et al. (2025) highlight that structured and scaffolded activity sequences significantly improve learner engagement and performance.

The ELA adopts this experiential orientation by embedding language use through debates, role plays, and event coordination. These activities encourage learners to use English as a functional tool, thereby transforming errors into opportunities for learning. In this sense, the ELA shifts the focus from knowing language to performing it, aligning with broader communicative paradigms.

3. Social Learning and Observational Growth

Bandura's (1977) theory of social learning underscores the role of observation, imitation, and modelling in the acquisition of behaviour. In language learning, this implies that exposure to peer performance can shape both linguistic competence and communicative behaviour. Empirical research supports this claim. Studies indicate that learners who observe peer interaction develop greater awareness of discourse strategies, pronunciation patterns, and conversational norms. Importantly, such learning is often more accessible, as it emerges from shared social and linguistic contexts. The ELA operationalises this principle by creating a shared participatory space where learners observe, imitate, and gradually internalise communicative practices. More confident students function as informal models, while less confident learners engage in vicarious learning, reducing psychological barriers and facilitating gradual improvement (Ghodke, 2015).

A Journey from the "Inferiority Complex" to Enhanced Confidence

The ELA can serve as a highly motivational platform for linguistic growth and confidence-building among learners. Ghodke (2015; 2024) has identified the "inferiority complex" as a mental block for students from rural and suburban areas. The ELA creates a "low-anxiety" zone by using Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis and the Social Learning Theory (1982).

In a traditional classroom, learners tend to avoid speaking out of fear of receiving judgment . However, the ELA helps in changing the hierarchy by creating a conducive environment for participatory and interactive sessions. In this scenario, a student observes a peer from a similar socio-economic background participating in the activities. They feel like they are getting closer to being "fluent speakers". This peer modelling transforms the mindset from *"I cannot do this"* to *"If they can do it, so can I."* This shift is the first step in dismantling the hesitation and fear that otherwise hamper professional career paths.

From Theory to Practice: The ELA "Activity Packages"

A distinguishing feature of the ELA is its organisation of activities into structured and progressive packages, designed on principles of scaffolding and increasing communicative complexity. It enables learners to move from basic expression to active participation.

Empirical studies reinforce the importance of such structuring. Uwanawanit et al. (2025) demonstrate that sequenced activity sets lead to measurable gains in both fluency and confidence. Similarly, communicative frameworks emphasise that graded tasks allow learners to align performance with proficiency levels (Richards, 2006).

Within the ELA, three broad activity clusters can be identified:

- Spontaneous Expression Tasks reduce reliance on mental translation and promote immediate language use, thereby enhancing fluency and reducing hesitation.
- Professional Simulation Tasks situate learners in goal-oriented communicative contexts, improving both linguistic competence and contextual awareness.
- Collaborative and Creative Tasks require negotiation, shared decision-making, and collective production, thereby strengthening both language use and social skills.

This progression reflects a movement from individual expression to interactive communication and finally to collaborative construction, mirroring key stages in language development. While the primary focus of the ELA remains language development, its structure also facilitates the emergence of broader competencies. Research on twenty-first-century skills underscores the role of ABL in developing abilities such as teamwork, problem-solving, and adaptability (Trilling & Fadel, 2009).

In the ELA, these competencies are not taught explicitly but emerge through participatory practice. Learners assume roles, coordinate tasks, and engage in collective decision-making, thereby experiencing a form of situated skill development. At the same time, the ELA fosters a sense of learning community.

Despite the proven efficacy of communicative and activity-based pedagogy, a persistent "implementation gap" exists between theoretical ideals and classroom realities, especially within resource-constrained, semi-urban environments. Current literature predominantly focuses on isolated variables (e.g., fluency or confidence) through short-term interventions, failing to account for how these dimensions interact within sustained, holistic learning ecosystems.

The present study addresses this by examining the ELA as a longitudinal, student-led model. By integrating peer learning and experiential engagement, this research moves beyond binary "success" metrics to investigate the multifaceted impact of structured, participatory platforms on language proficiency and broader learner development.

Research Questions

The study is guided by the following questions:

1. Does participation in the ELA increase the frequency of English use?
2. Does the ELA improve communicative confidence among learners?
3. Does the ELA increase student participation in language activities?
4. Which types of activities show greater impact on language use and confidence?

Methodology

This study employs a mixed-methods research design. It examines the effectiveness of the ELA in a real-world academic setting by combining action research and survey methods. The study also followed the stages of action research such as problem identification, intervention planning, implementation of action, observation of outcomes and reflection of findings outlined by McKay (2006).

Research Design and Sample

Using a mixed-methods action research design, this exploratory study evaluates the effectiveness of the ELA, a structured, student-led platform, at a law college in semi-urban Sangamner, Maharashtra.

The study tracks changes in communicative confidence, English usage frequency, and participation among 56 undergraduate learners (26 male, 30 female) primarily from Marathi-medium, rural backgrounds. Data collection integrated quantitative questionnaires with qualitative observations and feedback. Managed by a 12-member student executive body, the ELA serves as a specialised intervention to bridge the gap in English exposure for learners in resource-constrained, semi-urban contexts.

Tools and Data Collection

The data was collected through the following tools:

(i) Structured Questionnaires (Google Forms): The questionnaire was divided into three sections:

- **Section A:** Frequency of English Use (before and after participation)
- **Section B:** Self-reported confidence level in speaking
- **Section C:** Participation and engagement in activities

The questionnaire was designed to directly address the research question and capture measurable changes.

(i) Structured Questionnaires: Google Forms were used to gather quantitative data on student progress and perceptions.

(ii) Direct Observation: Student participation, engagement levels, and linguistic shifts were observed during bi-monthly sessions.

(iii) Qualitative Feedback: Subjective accounts from participants were collected at the conclusion of sessions to assess psychological shifts, such as changes in confidence and interest.

Structure and Governance of the ELA

The ELA was launched with a formal inauguration ceremony in January 2025. The ELA was run by and for students democratically. The executives took turns with roles like Coordinator, Activity Member, Anchor, and Judge to ensure equity and opportunity for skill development. Every student leader received opportunities to practise public speaking, plan events, and make decisions. Bi-monthly sessions on the first and third Fridays of every month (except during exams and vacation) were conducted. The overall intervention consisted of 12 sessions, the first session starting on 1 February 2025.

Structured Order of ELA Sessions

Each session is conducted using a systematic framework to maximise peer interaction and collaborative learning.

(i) **Grouping:** An attendant records attendance and assigns members to one of four groups, taking care of a balanced distribution.

(ii) **Introduction:** The coordinator welcomes attendees and introduces the theme, anchors, and judges.

(iii) **Context Setting:** An activity member presents information on special historical or current occasions to build general awareness.

(iv) **Interactive Rounds:** Anchors lead the session through five interactive rounds. These include:

- **Vocabulary and Grammar:** Games like *Word Antakshari*, synonyms/antonyms, and sentence formation , puzzles.
- **Communication:** speeches, role plays, group discussions (GDs), and debates.
- **Entertainment and General Knowledge:** JAM (Just a Minute) shows, "Who Am I?", and cultural quizzes.

(v) **Evaluation and Recognition:** Judges announce results, and awards such as "Best Performer" and "Best Beginner" are presented to encourage participation.

(vi) **Conclusion:** The session concludes with participant feedback and a vote of thanks.

ELA Activities: A Blend of Education, Entertainment, and Awareness

The ELA curriculum goes beyond traditional rote learning by combining academic material with social and cultural awareness.

(i) **Linguistic Education:** The focus here is on grammar, including tenses, prepositions, articles, etc., as well as specialised terminology related to law and justice.

(ii) **Communication and Argumentation:** The emphasis in it is on story-building and formal debating by taking the professional needs of law students into account.

(iii) **Entertainment:** To make it more entertaining, it uses high-engagement activities like "Dumb Charades" and singing. They help to lower the affective filter and make the language acquisition process natural and enjoyable.

(iv) Social and Cultural Awareness: It integrates seasonal themes such as the Ganesh festival, Diwali, and Independence Day, alongside other social issues.

This research corroborates the conclusions of Razak and Riskiawati (2025). They observe that such study clubs create an authentic environment where participants can naturally expand their vocabulary and enhance their LSRW skills through peer interaction. The ELA serves as a model of the CLT framework. It fosters an inclusive learning community.

Results and Discussion

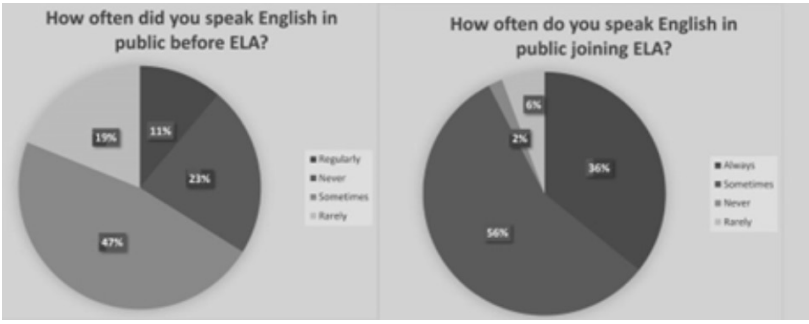
This section analyses the findings in direct relation to the research questions (RQs), integrating questionnaire data, classroom observations, and participant feedback.

Usage, Familiarity, and the Novelty of the Model

The findings indicate a substantial shift in students' language-use patterns following participation in the ELA. While pre-intervention data show limited and irregular use of English, post-intervention responses demonstrate a marked transition toward consistent usage.

The data are presented in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1: *Impact on English Communication Frequency*



Before joining the ELA, only 11% of students reported speaking English regularly, 23% never did, and 47% spoke it "only sometimes".

Following participation in ELA activities, the data reflect a substantial improvement:

(i) **56% of students** now assert that they "always" speak English.

(ii) Only **2% reported "never"** speaking the language.

(iii) The transition from "sometimes" to "always" is the outcome of the supportive environment created through tasks like self-introductions, routines, and role plays.

This shift is not merely quantitative but reflects a change in language behaviour. The structured exposure to communicative tasks, such as self-introductions, role plays, and GDs, appears to have normalised English as a medium of interaction rather than a formal classroom subject. In this sense, the ELA functions as a practice-oriented speech community, where language use is embedded in meaningful social contexts.

This finding aligns with communicative language teaching principles, where frequency of use emerges through interaction rather than instruction (Richards, 2006). Repeated participation reduces hesitation and transforms passive knowledge into active linguistic performance.

Confidence and Psychological Barriers

It was found that the ELA is very impactful in helping rural learners to overcome "stage fear" and the inferiority complex.

(i) Pre-ELA: Only 17% of students identified as "very confident", while 17% were "very hesitant".

Post-ELA: 60% of students now report feeling "very confident". N**o student** reported feeling "very hesitant" after the sessions.The comparative data are presented in Figure 2 below.

Figure 2: *Comparative Data Showing Pre-ELA and Post-ELA Results*



The data suggest a significant improvement in learners' communicative confidence, supported by both self-reported responses and observational evidence. The disappearance of "very hesitant" responses in the post-intervention phase indicates not just increased confidence but a reduction of affective barriers, such as anxiety and fear of judgment.

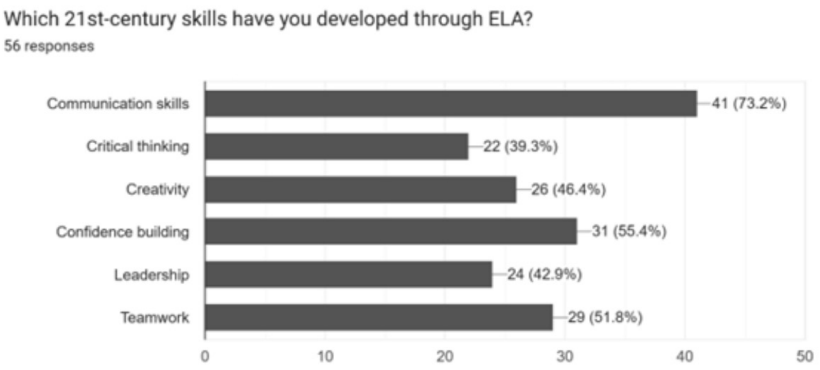
This transformation can be interpreted through the lens of low-anxiety, peer-supported learning environments, where learners feel safe to experiment with language. The ELA's non-evaluative and collaborative structure appears to foster what may be termed a participatory comfort zone, enabling learners to take risks in communication.

Observation data further reinforce this interpretation, showing increased voluntary participation and spontaneous speech during activities.

Improved Student Participation and Engagement

Participation levels increased across sessions. As shown in the figure. 3 below, students actively took part in group tasks, discussions and performance-based activities. Role rotation (anchor, coordinator, judge) also encouraged wider involvement.

Figure 3: *Post-ELA Perception of Twenty-first Century Skills*



Collaborative activities required learners to engage with peers and contribute to group outcomes. This led to more consistent participation. These findings align with communicative and activity-based approaches that emphasise learner involvement (Salmanova, 2025)

Participation in the ELA extends beyond physical presence to active engagement in collaborative learning processes. Students consistently contributed to discussions, performances, and group tasks, indicating a shift from passive reception to active involvement.

This pattern reflects the principles of participatory learning and community-based practice, where learning occurs through shared activity and mutual contribution. Role rotation further decentralised authority and redistributed responsibility.

From a theoretical perspective, this aligns with experiential learning models (Dewey, 1938), where knowledge is constructed through doing, reflecting, and interacting. The ELA thus operates as a micro-learning community, where participation is both a means and an outcome of learning.

The findings suggest that activities requiring active language production have a more pronounced impact on fluency, confidence, and engagement compared to receptive or form-focused tasks.

This indicates that communicative intensity plays a critical role in language development. Tasks that demand real-time processing, negotiation of meaning, and interpersonal interaction create conditions for deeper learning. In contrast, vocabulary and grammar games, while supportive, operate at a more controlled and less interactive level.

This distinction reinforces the theoretical emphasis on output-driven learning, where language acquisition is strengthened through use rather than passive exposure. The ELA's activity design thus reflects a shift from knowledge-based to performance-based learning.

The Outcomes of the ELA

The findings of the study reveal the following outcomes of the ELA:

1. Leadership Development and Role-Based Learning

The ELA provides structured opportunities for leadership and responsibility through roles like anchor, coordinator, and judge. Observational data indicate that students become more organised and proactive over time. However, it is important to note that these findings are based on observational trends and self-perception, and therefore indicate emerging patterns rather than measurable outcomes.

2. Peer Learning and Collaborative Knowledge Construction

The ELA environment promotes peer learning as a central mechanism of engagement. Students learn through interaction, feedback, and shared performance rather than teacher-led instruction alone. This aligns with communicative and socio-constructivist approaches, where learning occurs through negotiation of meaning and collaborative interaction (Richards, 2006).

3. Participatory Practice and Community Building

The consistent involvement of students in group-based activities

suggests the emergence of a participatory learning culture. Students not only engage in tasks but also contribute to the functioning of the ELA as a collective platform.

4. Perceived Development of Transferable Skills

Students reported increased opportunities to develop transferable skills such as teamwork, adaptability, and decision-making. The shift in perception from pre- to post-intervention suggests that structured, activity-based environments make such skills visible and practicable.

The analysis demonstrates that participation in the ELA contributes to:

- A behavioural shift from limited to regular use of English
- A reduction in communicative anxiety and an increase in confidence
- Enhanced participation through collaborative and role-based engagement
- Greater effectiveness of production-oriented activities in language development

The findings collectively suggest that the ELA operates not merely as a language practice platform but as a participatory learning ecosystem, integrating communicative practice, peer learning, leadership, and experiential engagement.

Recommendations

The ELA has been successfully implemented at a law college situated in a semi-urban area. It consisted of students from rural and tribal backgrounds. The outcomes of this model are very positive, and it emerged as a unique, skill-oriented initiative. It helps in bridging the language gap between rural and urban areas. Based on the positive learning outcomes of this study, the following recommendations are proposed:

(i) HEIs in rural, tribal, and semi-urban settings should use the ELA model beyond the traditional syllabus to provide students with a practical atmosphere for language acquisition.

(ii) To maximise the development of soft skills, associations should maintain a democratic *"Of the students, By the students, For the students"* policy.

(iii) Programmes should blend educational content with entertainment

and cultural awareness to lower learners' affective filters to make second-language acquisition a natural and engaging process.

(iv) Educational stakeholders and policymakers should recognise and support activity-based platforms for student development.

Conclusion

English proficiency and mastery of soft skills have become essential prerequisites for professional success in the present competitive global environment. In light of the limitations of traditional, instructor-centred teaching approaches to address the linguistic difficulties experienced by ESL learners with underprivileged backgrounds, there is a significant need to transition from passive classroom education to active, student-centred learning.

The ELA provides a distinctive and pragmatic method to enhance 21st-century skills. The ELA, by incorporating the principles of CLT and ABL, ensures the inclusive development of each learner. Students' linguistic competencies, self-assurance, and professional qualities like leadership and critical thinking improve as a result of the ELA's effectiveness. The ELA serves as an immediately applicable resource for ESL educators with its organised activities, role-rotation procedures, and focus on peer learning.

Thus, the ELA stands as a replicable and scalable model. It is an important tool to strengthen linguistic competence and transform the personalities of students. Its implementation prepares learners for academic excellence. Eventually, it will equip them with the social and professional tools necessary for a successful career in a globalised world.

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