INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF RESEARCH IN EDUCATION AND PSYCHOLOGY (IJREP) An International Peer-Reviewed Journal
http://ijrep.com/ SJIF Impact Factor 6.466

Vol.12, Issue 4 (Oct.-Dec.) 2026

RESEARCH ARTICLE

ISSN:2455-426X

REMEDIAL ENGLISH STRATEGIES AND METHODS FOR ENHANCING ENGLISH LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY AMONG UNDERGRADUATE ENGINEERING STUDENTS

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Doi: https://doi.org/10.54513/IJREP.2026.12042

Abstract

For undergraduate students in professional courses such as engineering, one of the most important skills to acquire is English proficiency. However, a large number of students entering higher education have inadequate proficiency in grammar, contextual vocabulary use, writing, and speaking. Students from rural and non-English-medium educational backgrounds find it more difficult to cope with the sudden language shift, especially in speaking. English teaching-learning activities that often treat the entire class as a single level may not address the specific needs of these students. Learner-centered Remedial English language teaching becomes a solution to bridge this gap. This study focuses on remedial English strategies and methods for improving the language proficiency of undergraduate students in engineering colleges. The study adopts a qualitative review-based research methodology. Relevant literature on English for Specific Purposes, Remedial English, Task-based language teaching, Communicative language teaching, Collaborative learning, Mobile-assisted language learning, and AI-assisted language learning was reviewed and examined for this study. The study proposes that remedial English teaching should be considered a need-specific, student-centric, and activity-oriented program supported by a specially designed syllabus that focuses more on speaking, vocabulary building, and creative writing. The remedial framework should include strategies such as: need identification, guided reading-writing-speaking activities, and continuous feedback. A carefully designed and effectively implemented remedial programme can be a powerful means of improving students' language proficiency, confidence, and academic, professional, and social communication, and enhancing employability.

Keywords: *Remedial English, English language proficiency, task-based learning, diagnostic assessment, communicative English, ESP.*

Article Info:
Article Received: 01-10-2024
Accepted on: 27-10-2024
Published online: 21-11-2024

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1. Introduction

English language proficiency is an added advantage in higher education, especially in professional and technical education. It is also a boon to communicate well in English, as it can open doors to new opportunities. Graduate-level students are expected to read and understand textbooks, articles, and research papers; prepare reports and projects; participate in seminars, debates, and discussions; and attend interviews, mostly in English. English language proficiency is not just an academic skill for writing exams and scoring marks; it is much more about career settlement and opportunities.

Just because a student joins an institution where English is the medium of education does not guarantee that he will acquire English language proficiency unless he takes active steps to improve his language skills, such as listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Students who study in regional language environments where English is considered only a subject for examination purposes must take additional responsibility to overcome their language inadequacies, especially in oral communication.

Students who develop anxiety in using English due to the fear of making mistakes avoid speaking in English and refuse to participate in classroom discussions. The absence of taking the 'risk of making mistakes' results in a lack of practice, and further, it reduces confidence. Lack of confidence stops them from making any effort to improve their speaking skills. In such a scenario, the best solution is to create an atmosphere where learners can speak without fear of being criticized for making mistakes, provide opportunities for repeated practice, and offer continuous guidance and encouragement for improvement.

"Before designing a remedial programme there must be a careful diagnosis of the student's deficiencies." (Ramesh). Similarly, research involving engineering students in Telangana and Andhra Pradesh has found many linguistic inadequacies. It has proposed revisions to the curriculum, student-centered approaches, activity-based learning, project-based learning, and technology-assisted remedial measures. Instead of placing all students in a remedial programme, a diagnostic assessment can identify the areas where students are weak and which students should be included in the programme. (Ammanamanchi).

This paper explores the strategies and methods of a remedial programme for undergraduate engineering students with basic knowledge of English but lacking the confidence and proficiency needed for academic and professional communication.

1.2 Research Questions

This study addresses the following research questions:

1) What are the linguistic difficulties faced by undergraduate engineering students?
2) Why are some of these undergraduate students not able to become proficient in English language skills?
3) What remedial strategies can help students overcome these deficiencies?
4) How can a creative and activity-oriented remedial English programme improve the English language proficiency of the learners?

1.3 Objectives of the Study

The following are the objectives of the study.

1) To identify the linguistic deficiencies and difficulties faced by undergraduate engineering students.
2) To analyse the existing research on remedial English for engineering students.
3) To identify effective methods to improve English communication skills.
4) To examine the effectiveness of activity-based and task-based approaches in remedial English programmes.
5) To propose an effective framework for remedial English programme for engineering students.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Remedial English for Engineering students

Remedial English language teaching aims to improve the basic grammar, vocabulary, sentence construction, creative writing, and speaking skills of students who have not developed their linguistic skills to the required level.

Nawale expresses that remedial English is highly beneficial for students from rural backgrounds. He emphasises that inadequate language proficiency can affect not only academic performance but also employability opportunities. Additionally, he suggests that "remediation should suit the educational backgrounds of the learners instead of just assuming

that all those who enter higher education possess or are expected to possess similar and standard levels of English language proficiency" (Nawale).

A study of 410 first-year engineering students from Andhra Pradesh and Telangana identifies challenges in grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation and comprehension among students from vernacular-medium backgrounds. It recommends curriculum updates, learner-centred activities, practical exposure and project-based learning to address these challenges (Ammanamanchi).

Aspiring Minds' National Employability Report—Engineers 2019 identifies differences in English-module scores between students from metropolitan and non-metropolitan backgrounds. The report discusses English comprehension and writing as relevant to several professional roles; however, it does not substantiate the percentages or the causal claims stated in the earlier version (Aspiring Minds).

Nawale points out that the most common reason employers reject graduates is their poor English communication skills. According to him, even those who are good at the subject are unable to get through the interview process (Nawale).

Neeli Ramesh, after specifically examining the engineering students from rural backgrounds, says that only through a specially designed English programme can these students overcome their deficiencies and improve their LSRW skills in English, and in the absence of such a programme these students will continue treating English just like a subject to score marks in the exam, not as a language for communication (Ramesh).

Abraham Beena, after analysing 'Effective Strategies in Remedial Instruction', concludes that remediation can help students catch up to their peers who are better at communication skills. She further suggests that remedial teaching might be done individually or in groups to help them overcome linguistic weaknesses. It must also be a structured, specifically designed intervention rather than a repetition of a normal ELT syllabus meant for a normal group. The objective must be to provide the linguistic foundation necessary to build the learner's confidence and support their participation in graduate-level academic and professional requirements (Abraham).

Designing an English syllabus for specific purposes should align the linguistic tasks with professional demands and requirements. The communication skills activities should cater to

the needs of their professional careers and enhance their employability (Bhayani and Chauhan). (Bhayani and Chauhan).

A need-based curriculum and teaching-learning activities that support real-world communication needs improve students' motivation and engagement. Helping students understand the practical relevance of language proficiency for their future studies and careers would encourage them to participate more actively in classroom activities (Deci and Ryan). (Deci and Ryan).

A study by Khan, Zainab, and Inzamul Sarkar shows increased student motivation and engagement after the implementation of outcome-based teaching with student involvement. The study also mentions that students who were struggling with specific language skills found it challenging to participate in activities, as these activities required their involvement and demanded self-responsibility. However, they also expressed their interest in more opportunities, support, and feedback (Khan and Sarkar).

Studies on Outcome-Based Education support the objectives of Remedial Education. It shows that many students who were taught through a specifically designed outcome-based education program reported increased confidence and fluency. The opportunities for practice and feedback, and the focus on communication skills relevant to their academic and career goals, were mentioned as reasons for improvement (Littlewood).

Mobile-Assisted Language Learning is another strategy that can be used effectively in the remedial programme. Listening and speaking supportive applications can help the students practice them repeatedly. Even voice interactions with AI can be used by students for grammar improvement, sentence correction, and pronunciation improvement (Metruk). (Metruk).

Pasupathi et al. observe in their study that remediation supports strategic skill-building, especially for those from vernacular backgrounds. Furthermore, the study states that frequent assessments are required to evaluate the student's ability to apply the strategies in real-life situations. Making effective use of technology can enrich the application of language skills. Explicit training in language can enhance proficiency and build their confidence (Pasupathi and Ghosh). (Pasupathi and Ghosh).

2.2 Grammar Remediation

Grammar is one of the areas that needs remedial teaching. Grammatical errors in students' writing and speaking are an important component to be rectified. At the same time, this is the area that instills fear in students. However, grammar teaching should not be rule-based or definition-based. Written and oral exercises guided by the instructors, classroom activities, and continuous feedback can be an effective means of improving learners' grammatical accuracy (Khan and Sarkar).

For example, students can practice tenses by describing their daily activities. They can be asked to narrate past events to use the past tense. Discussions about their plans and goals can be used to practice the future tense.

Similarly, passive voice, reported speech, etc., can be practiced with situational activities and discussions. This kind of approach might not only improve grammatical understanding and accuracy but also reduce fear of communicating in English.

V Kumar et al., in their article titled 'Investigating the Efficacy of Task-Based Language Teaching in English Grammar Acquisition ', suggest different ways of situational grammar practice in the classroom such as: conditionals through discussion of engineering problems, modal verbs through safety instructions, articles through technical descriptions, prepositions through explaining diagrams, and subject – verb agreement through report writing. These kinds of task-based activities can help students better understand grammar and its use (Kumar and Maheswari).

2.3 Reading Strategies

Graduate-level students are required to read and understand textbooks, technical reports, research articles, manuals, instructions, project reports, etc. Students with weak reading abilities may find it time-consuming and difficult to understand. This, in turn, might affect their confidence and cause them to lose interest in reading. Remedial teaching strategies can help them rebuild their confidence and improve their reading skills.

Devi, G.S et al., propose a few strategies for improving reading skills such as: Skimming – reading quickly to identify the main idea, Scanning – searching for specific information, Predicting – anticipating content from titles and headings, Identifying key words – locating important technical terms, Summarising – expressing the main idea briefly, and Question generation – creating questions based on a text (Devi and John).

Introducing easy-to-read, easy-to-understand texts and having students express what they understood from the given texts can be ideal at the starting stage. Once their confidence, understanding, and reading speed increase, more advanced reading texts can be introduced.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study adopts a review-based qualitative and analytical research design. This study systematically examines published research on remedial English and English language acquisition among engineering students who lack the required English proficiency at the graduate level. This study is analytical and exploratory in nature. It examines strategies proposed across related fields of study and various pedagogical strategies.

3.2 Sources of Data

The literature reviewed for this research analysis includes:
Peer-reviewed articles published in various journals, research studies on Engineering English language teaching strategies, studies conducted on remedial English, task-based language teaching, studies on AI–assisted language learning, research on reading and listening strategies, and studies on corrective feedback.

4. Remedial English Strategies

4.1 Communicative Language Practice

Informal classroom activities that are not part of the syllabus and are not meant for marks and records, with the sole purpose of engaging students in speaking or writing, usually receive more positive responses and active participation from students. Learning the language by using it in a given situation thus becomes more effective, especially at the beginning stage. Some of the useful classroom activities (individual, pair and group) include:

Pair interviews, mock interviews where a few students form an interview panel and conduct interviews for other students, group discussions based on guided topics, situational narrative tasks, problem-solving tasks, picture descriptions, and small group debates. However, there should be no interruptions or corrections by the instructors during the activities. Instead, a better approach is to note the common errors and suggestions for improvement, then discuss them at the end of the activity. Similarly, a word of

encouragement and appreciation can also motivate the students and improve their confidence to participate more actively in the future.

4.2 Task-Based Language Teaching

Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) is a pedagogical approach that assigns meaningful and guided tasks to facilitate language learning (Willis).

An experiment conducted to analyse the effectiveness of TBLT shows that students engaged in meaningful, guided tasks have made remarkable improvements in their linguistic skills and confidence levels. It also showed increased participation in classroom activities (Kumar and Maheswari).

Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT), in which students are guided to engage in practical tasks, can be highly effective in providing opportunities to practice LSRW activities and improve their communication skills.

Tasks may include: explaining how certain machines work, describing experiments or events, explaining a chart or diagram, presenting a project, explaining a product's details and benefits, or giving safety instructions (Kumar and Maheswari).

4.3 Speaking skill activities

Speaking is the most difficult skill for most students from rural backgrounds and for those who studied the language merely for exam purposes. In a normal ELT classroom where all students are given equal attention, it becomes almost impossible for students to improve their speaking skills. Remedial English is the only solution for such students, helping them build confidence and improve their speaking skills.

Remedial speaking activities should start with easy tasks. Speaking tasks may include activities such as self-introduction, describing a picture, person, event, or object, expressing an opinion, participating in mock interviews, debates, group discussions, presenting a seminar, or describing a book or movie.

4.4 Writing Remediation

Improving creative writing skills, where a student should be able to construct a sentence on his own with proper vocabulary and without grammatical inaccuracies, needs a lot of practice and guidance. Starting with sentence formation, paragraph development, and the use of

appropriate vocabulary, the exercises may gradually progress to higher levels of grammar correction and idea development.

The teachers need not correct grammatical errors; instead, they should encourage the students to discuss and rectify their own errors.

4.5 Peer Learning

Remedial English classes might become more effective when students help each other in activities and error correction. Students working in small groups can not only provide more opportunities for speaking and sharing their ideas but also help them correct and improve their ideas. The fear of addressing a large group can be avoided by dividing it into small groups. Activities such as group discussions, debates, expressing ideas, and narrating events give opportunities for everyone to communicate. However, teachers' guidance is required for appropriate error correction and improvement. Teachers should also monitor and restrict students from unnecessary criticism. One of the biggest advantages of peer learning is that students who hesitate to speak in front of others feel more comfortable speaking in a small group of friends. This helps them improve their confidence and communication skills.

4.6 AI and Mobile Assisted Language Learning

Making the best use of AI might make remedial English activities more interesting and effective. Moreover, students might find it easy to use AI tools because they give them individual freedom and confidence.

Mobile apps designed to help learners improve their speaking skills can be used repeatedly by students to practice sentence construction and pronunciation. Language-learning videos on YouTube channels also allow them to listen repeatedly, imitate, and improve their speaking.

AI can be used for sentence formation, error identification, sentence improvement, vocabulary building, conversation practice, creative writing, spelling, interview preparation, summarisation of topics, etc. Since AI can respond to voice input and reply in spoken form, it is highly beneficial for students to practice speaking and interact with AI to develop conversation skills.

A 2024 meta-analysis of 40 empirical studies examining the effectiveness of AI on English learning, with 3290 participants from ten countries, conducted via Comprehensive Meta-

Analysis (CMA) software, gives the result that AI had a high effect size (g = 0.812) on English language learning achievement, indicating that students who utilised AI significantly outperformed their counterparts who followed traditional pedagogy in achieving English language proficiency (Xu and Wang).

However, it must be understood that AI is not a substitute for students' involvement or teachers' guidance and feedback. AI should only be used as a tool for support and integration, not as a shortcut for activities that students are expected to do. AI integration must be carried out under the teacher's guidance.

5. Findings and Discussion

The following are the findings of the thematic analysis of reviewed literature.

1. Remedial English should start with a diagnosis to identify students' linguistic weaknesses. Identifying the specific needs of the learners, whether they need progress in vocabulary, grammar, speaking, reading, listening, or writing, has to be done with a diagnostic assessment (British Council).
2. Remedial English should integrate all language skills. Students at graduation level need to be proficient not only in grammar but also in reading, writing, listening, speaking, vocabulary and pronunciation. Students who are weak in a particular skill should receive more focused practice and guidance in that skill (Celce-Murcia et al.).
3. Contextual and academic-oriented lessons, instructions, and examples are more effective and appropriate for engineering students. They feel more useful, relevant, and connected when English is taught with their academically related content.

For example, while explaining passive voice, instead of saying 'Rama killed Ravana', you can say, 'He shut down the laptop before packing it.' or 'He verified the data before submission.' These kinds of examples and contextualised texts help students use the same sentences in both speaking and writing (Priya and Jeyanthi).

4. Task-based learning can improve participation and effectiveness.

   Studies show that task-based activities can not only be interesting and effective but also can increase students' participation. Moreover, at the engineering level, students might not be interested in traditional lectures because they are not aligned with their professional requirements. Tasks such as describing objects or products, explaining experiments, solving technical problems, discussing new technology, participating in

mock interviews, and any such activities make students active learners (Kumar and Maheswari).

5. Small-group activities can be more encouraging for hesitant speakers.

   Research and pedagogical evidence show that students who hesitate to speak English in large groups feel more comfortable speaking in a smaller group of three to five students. Inviting students to address a large group at the beginning stage may encounter resistance (Richards and Rodgers).

   Small-group activities reduce the anxiety of shy students and create a dynamic, friendly environment for speaking. Another advantage of small-group activities is that more students can participate simultaneously. It gives each student more opportunities to speak and discuss (Harmer).

6. Digital tools & AI can foster language acquisition. Many studies show that digital tools and AI can provide additional support and guidance to students to improve LSRW skills. AI and digital tools can assist students by providing unlimited practice time and resources, which is practically not possible in the classroom. Students who are weak in speaking can use mobile apps and AI for personalised speaking practice (Godwin-Jones).

Another advantage of AI tools is that students can gradually overcome their fear, hesitation, and shyness while practising speaking with the support of mobile applications, as they need not have the fear of judgment or criticism (Jeon).

6. Conclusion

6.1 Summary of the Main Findings

Remedial teaching must not be limited to correcting grammar. Instead, it should include contextualised vocabulary use, task-based creative writing, activities on reading and listening comprehension, sentence improvisation, common error identification and correction, and guided speaking activities.

The most important finding from the review is that remedial English must not be an extension of, or part of, the regular English syllabus. Remediation should be carefully planned and designed to support the specific needs of the students. The purpose of remedial English should be to enable the students to participate effectively in academic and professional communication.

6.2 Limitations of the Study

This study has a few limitations.

First, this study is review-based, not based on experimental data from any engineering institution. Therefore, the proposed suggestions and findings are to be tested through classroom experiments.

Second, engineering students in different institutions are from diverse backgrounds. Based on their exposure to English, use of technology, and socioeconomic conditions, their linguistic skills may vary. Therefore, a remedial teaching approach that is effective in one organisation may require changes and modifications in another institution.

Third, AI-assisted language learning is in its initial stage. Therefore, findings on the effectiveness of AI-assisted remedial teaching, Mobile applications, and other digital tools may require further experimentation and reassessment.

6.3 Future Research Directions

While this study offers promising results, further research is required to explore suitable curriculum design for Task-Based Remedial Teaching (TBRT) and its impact on students' academic, social, and professional performance. Additionally, investigating the possibilities for subject-specific remedial teaching to help students overcome academic deficits across all subjects would contribute to a more effective pedagogical outcome.

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