Impact of ePortfolio Assessment as an Instructional Strategy on Students' Academic Speaking Skills: An Experimental Study

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Abstract

This paper reports an experimental study on the impact of ePortfolio assessment (EPA) as an instructional strategy on undergraduate students' academic speaking skills and the difference in impact, if any, on their performance in four different communicative contexts. Set in India and conducted with first-year EAP students from various academic disciplines of science, commerce, and arts, the study was built on the gap concerning the scarcity of empirical studies on ePortfolio use in academic speaking contexts. While only a few studies have investigated the employment of EPA for teaching speaking skills, the study makes a significant contribution by carrying out and reporting an experiment with adequate details which, in turn, make the study replicable. The study adopted an experimental design with the experimental group (EG, n = 39) undergoing an ePortfolio-driven intervention of 30 hours. The results, obtained through the employment of *t*-tests, indicated a statistically significant impact on the performance scores of EG students and a considerable gap between the scores of students in EG and the comparison group (CG, n = 36). A repeated measure of variance (RM ANOVA) run on gain scores for four task types revealed that students' performance in the short response type and reading prompt-based response task was better than those in extended response type and pair discussion tasks. The findings may further the academic use of EPA in English a second or foreign language (ESL/EFL) speaking classrooms. Future researchers can qualitatively investigate the effects of EPA and how learners' attitude toward EPA shape their performance.

Keywords: ePortfolio assessment, academic speaking skills, ESL, EFL, experimental design

Introduction

Alternative assessment methods are often used to promote learning in ESL/EFL contexts (Law & Eckes, 2007). Portfolio assessment, a popular assessment-as-learning approach (Lam, 2017), is a reasonably well-researched area in ESL literature (Alam, 2019; Barootchi & Keshavarz, 2002; Lam, 2020). Paulson et al. (1991) describe the portfolio as "a purposeful collection of student work that exhibits the student's efforts,

progress, and achievements in one or more areas of the curriculum" (p. 60). EPortfolios, the electronic version of portfolios that allow learners to keep evidence of their individual growth over time (Dougherty & Coelho, 2017), are also adequately explored in ESL/EFL classroom contexts. Primarily used in writing contexts, EPA has been found to aid improvement in writing through self-regulation (Lam, 2017), self-assessment (Barrot, 2021), and peer assessment (Barrot, 2016). It also has a positive effect on learner autonomy (Sultana et al., 2020), learner motivation (Lee, 2017), and learners' reflective thinking (Sultana et al., 2020). Since it is cloud-based, it helps overcome the barriers of space and time, which has turned out to be of great value to language educators who are teaching online after the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic. In ESL contexts like India, where students and teachers at the tertiary level have access to the internet, the potential of EPA as a pedagogic tool is immense. However, apart from two studies (Mahapatra, 2015, 2016) in which ePortfolio is used for teacher development purposes, no study on the employment of ePortfolio for promoting language learning has been found in Indian contexts. Even at a global level, most EPA-related studies are concerned with writing, and the use of EPA for enhancing speaking skills is an unexplored area. The current experimental study addresses these gaps and explores the impact of EPA on tertiary-level ESL learners' academic speaking ability.

Theoretical framework

The investigation reported in the study was built on theoretical foundations comprising assessment for learning (AFL), reflection in teaching, and social constructivism. AFL places learning at the center of the process of assessment. Driven by the work of William and Black (1996) on formative assessment, AFL focuses on how evidence about learning is "elicited, interpreted and acted upon" (p. 540) which is what EPA facilitates. When applied to teaching academic speaking, evidence of students' academic performance is periodically collected and stored. Self, peer, and teacher assessments contribute to the interpretation of the evidence. Feedback is provided to the student and the student makes an effort ('action') to improve his/her academic speaking skills.

Dewey's (1933) theory of reflection in learning highlights reflection as an "active, persistent and careful" (p. 118) process that leads to learning. According to Dewey, this process involves revisiting the event, questioning one's own experience, and seeking to transform the outcomes into future events with the help of one's experience. Dewey highlights the consequentiality involving reflective thinking and explains that it is a continual evidence-based practice leading to meaningful changes in belief and behavior. When engaged in EPA, students reflect on their speaking performance and make efforts to improve it with the help of self, peers, and the teacher. It helps the student monitor his/her performance and progress as he/she identifies areas that require more attention and improvement.

Another theory that forms a basis for EPA is social constructivism which emphasizes the collaborative and social nature of learning. According to Vygotsky (1978), potential development (*zone of proximal development*) is the level of development that the learner can reach when working under the supervision of the teacher or together with peers. When participating in EPA, learners can be placed in this *zone of proximal*

development, a developmental stage. In this stage, when they perform pedagogic tasks independently and with their peers and the teacher and receive feedback from them, they undergo a process of *maturation* which leads to the development of their language skill/s.

Literature review

Adequate empirical evidence is available in ESL/EFL literature to support the positive impact of EPA on students' language skills, especially writing. Several studies have been conducted to evaluate the impact of portfolio assessment on writing (Burner, 2014; Farahian & Avarzamani, 2018; Hirvela & Sweetland, 2005; Lam & Lee, 2010; Romova & Andrew, 2011; Song & August, 2002). Al-Hidabi et al. (2020) identified improvement in four areas owing to the use of ePortfolios in EFL classes of UCAS students: language skills, feedback practices, ICT skills, and autonomous learning. González-Mujico (2020), who implemented a short-term EPA, indicated a substantial impact on motivation and linguistic proficiency. In their meta-analysis, Segaran and Hasim (2021) concluded that ePortfolios could promote self-regulated learning (SRL) and facilitate positive academic outcomes. A study conducted by Aghazadeh and Soleimani (2020) traced the significant positive impact of EPA on intermediate Iranian EFL learners' complexity, accuracy, and fluency in writing. Ngui et al. (2020), who investigated the impact of the EPA on the academic writing skills of Malaysian undergraduate students at a public university, found that the use of the ePortfolio with an emphasis on feedback and communication, artifacts, reflections, and peer review contributed to the development of students' academic writing skill.

In contrast with research on EPA in writing, much less has been explored in speaking, and very few studies can be found in good, quality peer-reviewed journals. Most empirical studies on speaking focus on ePortfolios as an alternative assessment or assessment for learning instruments (Özdemir-Çağatay, 2012). Huang and Hung (2010) investigated the impact of ePortfolios on EFL students' speaking performance in terms of language quantity, lexical richness, and syntactic complexity. The participants were 39 English-major juniors aged 20-25 years from 2 English conversation classes at a Taiwanese university. Students developed their ePortfolio on Wretch, a popular free blogging platform. They regularly uploaded audio recordings of their reflections on their classroom sessions and also included occasional songs, speeches, and video clips. They offered feedback on their peers' work and uploaded reflective accounts of their progress in speaking. The findings revealed a significant improvement in language quantity and lexical richness in students' oral performance using ePortfolios. However, no substantial effect was observed on syntactic complexity. Cabrera-Solano (2020) studied the impact of the use of digital portfolios on EFL students' speaking. The study was conducted at a private university in southern Ecuador with 42 A2 level students registered in an English Language Integrated Skills course. The participants were in the age group of 19-25 years. The students made use of their mobile phones and audio/video-recorded interactions with people in various social situations and systematically store their recordings on Google Drive. They assessed their performance individually, in pairs, and in groups using a set of adapted rubrics provided to them by the teacher. The findings indicated a positive impact of digital portfolios on EFL speaking traced through aspects such as grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, and fluency. In another study, Cepik and Yastibas (2013)

explored the contribution of ePortfolios in improving speaking skills. The study was conducted with 17 participants, aged 18-29 years, upper-intermediate students in an English Language preparation department at a Turkish university. Conducted on Lore, a learning management system, and with the help of blogs and YouTube, in this study, students submitted individual projects which involved audio and video recording of speaking situations. They analyzed their submissions and obtained feedback from the teacher. The use of ePortfolios enhanced speaking in terms of grammar, pronunciation, and vocabulary, reduced anxiety, and increased self-confidence. The speaking ePortfolio also facilitated student autonomy through self-assessment and freedom to choose relevant subjects for assignments.

A study conducted by Safari and Koosha (2016) investigated the effects of a speaking portfolio as an alternative form of assessment for Iranian intermediate and advanced EFL learners' speaking ability. A total of 64 students aged 14-18 years were chosen from Kowsar Language Institute in Esfahan, Iran, to participate in the study. The students took part in pair and group work and the sessions were video recorded and shared with students. Then they participated in self-and peer-assessment with the help of checklists. The students also wrote reflections about their assessment experiences. The teachers monitored and facilitated the process. The results indicated a significant improvement in vocabulary and pronunciation in both intermediate and advanced EFL learners. Yekta and Kana'ni (2020) studied the effect of video recording in Google Drive as the self-assessing ePortfolio. The participants were 30 Iranian high school EFL students with an average age of 18 years. The participants video-recorded their narration of stories and uploaded the recordings to Google Drive. A set of rubrics written in Persian was used for self-assessment. The results demonstrated a positive benefit of self-assessment ePortfolios on high school Iranian EFL learners' speaking fluency. Similar findings are reported by Wulandari (2019), who employed Instagram vlogs as an ePortfolio base to develop her students' speaking skills, and Cheishvili (2018), who utilized ePortfolio as an assessment-for-learning tool. In their study, Bobkina and Romero (2020) revealed that students' self-produced videos, which can be considered an activity similar to ePortfolio development, helped them improve their oracy skills. If used strategically, EPA can reduce students' anxiety (Castillo, 2013), resulting in enhanced learning.

When it comes to spoken performance, task types do shape it (Gan, 2013; Khoram & Zhang, 2019; Taguchi, 2007; Trace et al., 2017; Vesal et al., 2015; Wigglesworth, 2008). It has been reported that task completion varies across different types of tasks (Kim, 2009) and that monologic task types lead to more linguistic demands than interactional ones (Ahmadi & Sadeghi, 2016; Gan, 2012). However, Michel et al. (2007) reported that students are significantly more fluent in the dialogic task than in monologic ones. Ahmadi and Sadeghi (2016) found no significant difference in scores across various types of responses in speaking tests though they found noteworthy differences in produced discourses. Foster and Skehan (1999) who focused on planning in their study found that solitary planners produced more fluent oral language than those who planned in groups. The structured nature of tasks can also facilitate better oral performance than unstructured ones (Ahmadian et al., 2015). It is almost established that involvement of reasoning, prior knowledge as a prerequisite, reduced planning time, and demand for extended responses could make a task difficult (Robinson, 2011). In this connection, Fulcher (2014) talked about various task types for the assessment of speaking skills. He drew attention to how

factual tasks can be cognitively and linguistically less demanding than those involving open-ended reasoning-based questions. Apart from all the factors discussed above, interpersonal content may also have an impact on task performance (Bygate, 1999).

The brief review of relevant literature indicates that EPA in speaking is an under-researched area. Very few of these studies concentrate on academic speaking skills which have to do with speaking skills required to be functional in a formal academic system. They are different from general speaking skills in terms of the purposes and the contexts in which spoken language is used. The differences stem from the definitions of general and academic English which are extensively discussed in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) literature though Basturkmen (2010) agrees that the differences are based on narrowing down of skills from general to academic. Inou et al. (2018) discuss the construct of academic speaking skills and mention agreement among researchers about the organization of content, clarity, various interactional skills, and coping with a variety of discourse contexts (p. 12) as some of the regular focus areas. However, research on the assessment of academic speaking is generally centered around standardized tests. Classroom-based teaching and assessment of academic speaking skills are scarce in the literature. Even when it comes to assessing academic speaking, comparison among students' performance in various communicative contexts has been rarely made. Moreover, strong experimental designs have not been used to verify the impact of EPA on academic speaking skills.

Research questions

The current study builds on the gaps identified in the literature and addresses the following questions.

- Does the implementation of EPA as an instructional strategy have any significant impact on the performance of tertiary ESL students' academic speaking skills?
- Does task type impact the EG students' academic speaking performance?

Methodology

Since the study aimed to verify the cause-effect relationship between the use of EPA in the instructional process and the improvement in speaking skills, an experimental design (Rogers & Révész, 2019) was chosen. In this case, the independent variables are EPA and the task types, and the dependent one is speaking skills.

Participants

A batch of 90 first-year undergraduate students was randomly chosen to participate in this study. The participants were pursuing their bachelor's degrees in science, commerce, humanities, and social sciences in a reputed college in Hyderabad, India. None of them had any prior exposure to EPA. They were given the option of participating in the study. Those who agreed were asked to sign a written consent form. They were clearly explained their role in the research, and all their queries were also addressed before they signed the document. A total of 90 students returned the signed forms and agreed to be

part of the study. They were randomly divided into two classes, each comprising 45 students. They used English as their second language and were aged between 18 and 19 years. However, only the participants who attended at least 90% of the classes used for experimenting were included in the study. A few students withdrew, citing personal reasons. Finally, 36 students from the CG and 39 from the EG took the post-test. The following inclusion/exclusion criteria were used:

Table 1
Inclusion-exclusion criteria

Criteria	Inclusion	Exclusion
Age	Age group of 18-19 years	Anyone less than 18 and more than 19
Current academic semester and year of Bachelor's degree	Any student in their first semester of the first year in any discipline in the college	Any student in any other semester or year who is majoring in English in the college
Use of English as a language	English as a second language	English as a first language
Attendance in the speaking course	At least 90%	Anything less than 90%
Contact with members of the other group in the study	No personal contact with any student from the other group (between CG and EG)	Any personal contact with any student from the other group
Peer-feedback	Providing timely feedback to peers during the course of the study	Those offering delayed feedback
Privacy	Respecting other group member's privacy (only for CG) and not sharing voice clips with anyone without permission	Those who are found sharing peer's audio clips with others without permission

Several steps were taken to ensure the validity of the study. Firstly, regular contact was maintained with students, and information was collected from them about regular exposure to academic speaking outside their classroom situations. No participating student had any significant exposure to academic speaking outside their college hours. Secondly, two scorers were used for evaluating the performance of students to eliminate bias. Thirdly, the tasks were randomly chosen from a pool of tasks that were piloted and validated by two applied linguists (see Appendix 4 for sample tasks). Fourthly, the CG and the EG were created through randomization. Fifthly, only the performance of those students who remained part of the study till the end of the study was considered which minimized the impact of motivation as a variable. Sixthly, the John Henry effect was avoided by keeping both groups separate and no group was aware till the end of the study that their performance was being compared to another group. Sixthly, the content of the course was the same for the CG and the EG. Finally, the CG and the EG took the pre-test and post-test which helped minimize any reactive effectiveness of the test.

A set of tests were performed on pre-test scores of CG and EG students to check homogeneity and normality and identify outliers and significant differences if any.

Levene's test for equality of variances was conducted to ensure homogeneity of CG and EG (F= 0.444, p>0.05). The result was *not* significant at $p < .05$, which indicated homogeneity across the two groups. A Shapiro-Wilk test was performed to check for normality of distribution. While the EG showed normality (W= 0.946, p>0.05), the CG showed a minor deviation from normality (W= 0.918, p<0.05). However, according to the central limit theorem, normality can be assumed in the case of a sample size exceeding 30 which is the case here. The results of a Grubbs test performed to detect outliers in both groups did not indicate the presence of any outliers. Furthermore, the result of an independent *t*-test with a t-value of 0.81733 and a p-value of .2082 also established that the difference in students' writing ability in both groups was not significant at p < .05.

Procedure

The following figure shows how the study was conducted in different phases.

Figure 1
Design of the Study
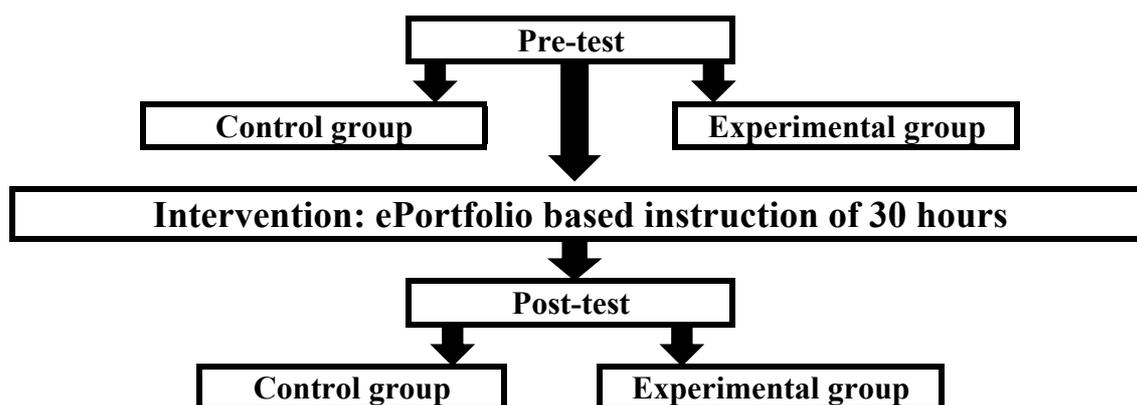
Pre-and post-test

Informal interviews were conducted with 10 faculty members to trace frequently occurring communicative events in the classroom involving students' use of academic speaking skills. A small-scale online questionnaire survey was carried out with students from various departments of science, commerce, humanities, and social sciences disciplines to obtain information about the situations in which students are required to speak in English for English academic purposes. The collected data from the faculty members were sorted and the most recurrent communicative events mentioned by them were listed. The list was compared with the list of situations traced through the analysis of students' responses to the questionnaire. Finally, four common functions were identified, which formed the basis of the four task types of the pre-and post-test (see Table 2).

Table 2
Four task types

Task	Description of the task
T1 (10 marks)	Responding to a written prompt: 15-30 seconds for reading and getting ready and 60 seconds for responding orally to the prompt
T2 (10 marks)	Short response type questions: instantly responding to questions on familiar topics for 60 seconds
T3 (10 marks)	Extended response type question: 30-60 seconds for getting ready and 60 seconds for responding orally to the question
T4 (10 marks)	Pair-discussion: 30-60 seconds for getting ready and 2-3 minutes for completing the discussion

Three sets of questions were prepared for the pre-and the post-test. A set of rubrics adapted from 'Qualitative aspects of spoken language use', proposed by CEFR, and speaking rubrics of the TOEFL iBT Test was used for evaluation. Five bands (similar to CEFR bands), each representing a range between two scores, were created based on the evaluation criteria consisting of task completion, fluency, organization, and language use. The rubrics were validated with the help of both the evaluators and the experts. The evaluators utilized the rubrics for scoring the responses to the piloted questions and offered some feedback. A discussion was organized with the evaluators and the experts in which the evaluators explained their assigned scores which were further analyzed. A few minor modifications were made to the rubrics, and they were finalized for use.

The test was validated through piloting the questions with a small group of first-year undergraduate students from similar academic backgrounds and thorough scrutiny by two experienced applied linguists. Since the students did not know each other, the questions could be randomly chosen and used. To ensure reliability, two evaluators, who had more than 10 years of experience teaching EAP courses at the university level, evaluated students' performance in all four tasks. The average score for each task was calculated and considered.

Furthermore, Pearson's correlation coefficient (see Table 3) was calculated for the pre-and post-test scores assigned to students from CG and EG by two scorers. The intention was to ensure inter-rater reliability, which was strong across all the pre-and post-test scores.

Table 3
Person's Correlation Coefficient for pre-and post-test scores across raters

Group →	Pre-test CG	Pre-test EG	Post-test CG	Post-test EG
Pearson's Correlation Coefficient (R)	.92	.96	.96	.97

The intervention

The intervention happened through Google Meet for the CG and the EG as face-to-face teaching was cancelled due to the spread of Covid-19. The students in the control and experimental group were taught academic speaking online for 30 hours by the same teacher (one of the researchers). The syllabus of the course is presented in the following table.

Table 4
Syllabus for the intervention

Core Component	Description	Classroom Time
Responding to questions requiring short answers	Understanding the meaning and structure of the question/s Providing appropriate and adequate information in an accurate manner	4 hours
Responding to questions requiring slightly extended answers	Comparing ideas, sharing opinions, describing processes, occasions, events, places, people, and things Using transition words	10 hours
Responding to written prompts	Reading for gist Reflective response Critical response	6 hours
Participating in a short discussion with peers	Understanding the topic Gathering information Turn-taking Agreeing and disagreeing Asking questions Summarizing	10 hours

These topics were taught to students in the control and experimental group. However, only the experimental group was taught with the help of EPA. The students in that group were trained in creating folders in Google Drive, recording classroom-based speaking, selecting audio clips for the ePortfolio, editing audio clips, uploading the audio file to a folder in Google Drive, sharing the folder with peers and the teacher, using checklists (Appendix 1), rating scales (Appendix 2), and rubrics (Appendix 3) for self- and peer-assessment, respecting privacy and obtaining permission from peers and the teacher about creating audio clips, before the ePortfolio-based instruction was taken up. After obtaining consent from their teachers and peers, the students collected samples of their speaking from various subject classrooms. A competency-based approach was followed to select the clips. It made the use ePortfolio different from a simple collection of audio clips in the sense that the selected clips were a demonstration of performance in the pre-identified skill areas. There was a sense of continuity across the clips submitted for each category. The checklists, rubrics, and rating scales guided students in selecting

audio samples. Each student was required to submit four samples at the beginning of each fortnight during the intervention period. Each of these samples was required to demonstrate its performance in one of the four main components of the syllabus/test.

The teaching in the EG followed a pre-designed lesson plan. As per the lesson plan, students were engaged in self-and peer-assessment of their submitted audio samples, which were shared in the form of links with their classmates through Google Forms. They used checklists, rating scales, and rubrics to carry out self-and peer-assessment and offered oral feedback to peers, which they recorded with the help of Mote, an extension of Google Forms. The teacher consolidated the feedback. First, she identified and made notes of common patterns in the oral and written feedback received from various sources. Then, she classified those under various aspects of academic speaking that were focused on during the instruction. After that, she drew the class's attention to areas where students did well and in those areas where they faced problems. She also asked students to work in small groups and explain to each other how they assessed their own and their peers' performance. These discussions happened in Breakout Rooms on Google Meet. The teacher visited the rooms and gave them some meta-feedback. On several occasions, students demanded corrective feedback, and the teacher immediately provided them with oral corrective feedback to keep students involved in the process and ensure optimum participation.

Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics were used to compare the mean and standard deviation for pre-test and post-test scores of the CG and the EG. A one-tailed paired t-test was run to check if there is a significant difference between the pre-test and the post-test performance of the CG and EG students. In addition, Cohen's d was calculated to ascertain the effect size for each group. In the next step, an independent samples t-test was run to trace any significant difference in the post-test scores of the two groups. . For the second research question, an RM ANOVA was run to compare the EG students' gains in each task type. According to Smolkowski (2019), the use of RM ANOVA is a viable option to analyze within-subjects gain scores. Finally, a post hoc Bonferroni test, as recommended by Loewen and Plonsky (2015), was run to correct the problem of running multiple comparisons that RM ANOVA involved and to identify significant differences in gains about various pairs of tasks.

Findings

The findings of the study are presented in the form of answers to the research questions. Hence, the first part of this section focuses on the impact of portfolio assessment as an instructional strategy on students' academic speaking skills, and the last part concentrates on comparing the impact of task types on the EG students' academic speaking performance.

Impact on students' academic speaking performance

The descriptive statistics for the pre-and post-test scores of students in the CG and the EG are displayed in Table 5. When it comes to the intra-group comparisons, the post-

test mean scores of both groups are significantly higher than the pre-test scores though the increase is considerably higher in the case of the EG. However, there was no difference in the minimum pre-and post-test scores across the groups, and the only difference can be found in the maximum post-test scores.

Table 5
Descriptive statistics

	Pre-CG	Post-CG	Pre-EG	Post-EG
N	36	36	39	39
Mean	16.431	20.417	15.628	24.603
Std. Deviation	4.206	3.593	4.285	4.593
Minimum	7.500	14.000	7.500	14.000
Maximum	22.500	26.500	22.500	30.500

The pre-test scores of both groups were not significantly different from each other. Though the scores increased for both groups in the post-test, the post-test scores of the EG were considerably higher than that of the CG.

A paired samples t-test was run for the pre-test and post-test scores of the CG and the EG to trace the impact of the intervention on students' academic speaking ability and an independent samples t-test was employed to compare the post-test scores of both the groups and determine if there is a significant difference between them. Results from the paired t-test (see Table 6) show a significant difference between the pre-test and post-test scores of the CG ($t = 14.283$, $p < .001$) and the EG ($t = 46.157$, $p < .001$) with 95% confidence interval. The effect size of the differences was traced through Cohen's d, which was large for the CG ($d = 2.348$) and the EG ($d = 7.298$). However, the magnitude of the effect size is considerable for the EG, which indicates the positive impact of EPA on students' academic speaking skills.

Table 6
Paired sample t-test

Pre-test	Post-test	t	p	Mean Difference	SE Difference	Cohen's d
CG	CG	14.283	< .001	3.986	0.279	2.348
EG	EG	46.157	< .001	8.974	0.194	7.298

When the post-test scores of the CG and the EG were compared using an independent samples t-test (see Table 7), the performance of the EG was found to be much better than that of the CG at a 95% confidence interval ($t = 4.371$, $p = 4.032e-5$).

Table 7
Independent samples t-test

	t	df	p
Scores	-4.371	73	4.032e -5

Note. Student's t-test.

Impact of task types on EG students' performance

To address the second research question about the impact of task types on the academic speaking ability of the EG students, the gain scores (= post-test score – pre-test score) across four tasks were compared using RM ANOVA (see Table 8). The results (F [3, 114] = 11.505, p = 1.204e-6, η^2 = 0.232) indicate that there is a significant difference among some of the mean gain scores across the four task types. To identify the exact pairs of tasks which are significantly different in terms of the impact caused by the intervention, a multiple comparison test in the form of the Bonferroni post-hoc test was performed. As shown in Table 11, statistically highly significant differences were found between the pain scores in the first and the third task ($p < .001$, d = 0.692), the first and the fourth task ($p < .01$, d = 0.718), and significance differences between the second and third task ($p < .05$, d = 0.501) and the second and the fourth task ($p < .05$, d = 0.615). However, the difference between the performance of the EG students in the first and the second task, and between the third and the fourth task was not found to be significant. The findings indicate that the gain scores in the first (Mean = 2.487) and the second task (Mean = 2.359), i. e., responding to written prompts and providing immediate short answers to questions, were better than that in the third (Mean = 2.103) and the fourth (Mean = 2.026) task, i. e., responding with extended answers and participating in a pair-discussion.

Table 8
RM ANOVA - within-subjects effects

Cases	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	p	η²
Task Type	5.462	3	1.821	11.505	1.204e-6	0.232
Residuals	18.038	114	0.158			

Note. Type III Sum of Squares

Table 9
Between subjects effects

Cases	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	p
Residuals	14.744	38	0.388		

Note. Type III Sum of Squares

Table 10

Descriptives

Task Type	Mean	SD	N
T1	2.487	0.532	39
T2	2.359	0.458	39
T3	2.103	0.384	39
T4	2.026	0.472	39

Table 11

Post hoc comparisons - task type

		Mean Difference	SE	t	Cohen's d	p_{bonf}
T1	T2	0.128	0.103	1.239	0.198	1.000
	T3	0.385	0.089	4.323	0.692	6.425e-4 ***
	T4	0.462	0.103	4.485	0.718	3.919e-4 ***
T2	T3	0.256	0.082	3.132	0.501	0.020 *
	T4	0.333	0.087	3.840	0.615	0.003 **
T3	T4	0.077	0.072	1.062	0.170	1.000

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Note. Cohen's d does not correct for multiple comparisons.

Note. P-value adjusted for comparing a family of 6

Discussion

The current study investigated the impact of EPA as an instructional strategy on the performance of tertiary ESL learners' academic speaking skills. The findings indicate that EPA had a significant impact on students' academic speaking skills and that the improvement in the performance of EG students varied across task types.

A significant impact of EPA on students' academic speaking skills

While both the CG and the EG showed improvement in speaking skills, the EG demonstrated a significantly higher achievement in their academic speaking ability. Though the focus of this study does not match those of previously conducted studies on the use of EPA for improving speaking skills, the overall findings do have similarities with them. The enhancement in speaking ability owing to EPA-based intervention was also reported by Cabrera-Solano (2020), Cepik and Yastibas (2013), Cheishvili (2018), Huang and Hung (2010), and Yekta and Kana'ni (2020). At a macro level, the findings also add to the literature on the impact of EPA on productive language skills. It must be noted that like the studies carried out by Cheishvili (2018) and Yekta and Kana'ni (2020), the study utilized EPA as an assessment-for-learning tool and incorporated activities such as self-and peer-assessment regularly during the process of intervention. The intention was to encourage self-regulated and autonomous learning which the employment of EPA

has been reported to do (Al-Hidabi et al., 2020; Segaran & Hasim, 2021). The positive impact could be attributed to the carefully planned EPA-driven intervention as few variables had any real influence on students' academic speaking ability. Another factor that could have contributed to the controlling of external variables is the random distribution of students to control and experimental groups. During the intervention, the students in the EG collected and edited samples of their classroom speaking. They were instructed to provide samples that demonstrated their performance in each of the four core components of the syllabus which involved specific communicative contexts. The students participated in self-and peer-assessment of the speaking samples submitted by them. In addition, they were provided with regular feedback by the teacher. These activities could have encouraged reflection (Ngui et al., 2020), enhanced confidence, and reduced anxiety among students (Castillo, 2013; Cepik & Yastibas, 2013) which are key to effective language learning, especially speaking.

The study strengthens the claim about the positive effect of EPA as an AFL tool or an instructional strategy in an ESL/EFL language classroom, especially in academic speaking contexts. The results confirm the epistemological positions of AFL, reflection in learning, and social constructivism. Though the study did not directly delve into the process of participation of learners in various self-and peer-assessment activities, the use of feedback shared by peers and teachers, and learners' reflections on their performance, the EPA-driven intervention that forms the core of the study is grounded in the theories mentioned above. The participation of EG learners in various activities of self-and peer-assessment of their academic speaking samples, and their use of checklists, rating scales, and instructional rubrics for offering feedback separated was possibly the only factor that explains the difference between the academic speaking performance of learners in the CG and the EG. EPA facilitated reflection on the performance as learners were able to examine samples in the ePortfolio. As claimed by Dewey (1933), reflection is a key to improving future performance which could have been aided by learners' interaction with their peers during the process of peer assessment and with the teacher when she discussed their performance and provided feedback. The latter activities are foundational to learning as per social constructivism proposed by Vygotsky (1978).

The positive impact of EPA also opens doors for further inquiry into more sustained and systematic use of EPA in academic speaking classrooms in a variety of ESL/EFL contexts. Factors such as access to the internet, portable computing devices, and digital literacies could be some of the determining factors when it comes to achieving the desired effect with the employment of EPA. These gaps can be explored in future EPA research.

A significant impact of task type on EG's performance

The study employed four task types for assessing the academic speaking skills of students: responding to questions requiring short answers (T1), responding to questions requiring slightly extended answers (T2), responding to written prompts (T3), and participating in a short discussion with peers (T4). An RM ANOVA was run to compare the EG students' gain scores in four task types. The analysis revealed varying levels of impact on performance which partially confirms Kim's (2009) and Gan's (2013) claims about the variance in task completion across task types. Students' performance in two tasks: responding to written prompts and providing immediate short answers to questions,

was found to be better than those in the other two contexts which is not in line with the findings of Ahmadi and Sadeghi (2016). The length of the output did seem to have some bearing on students' oral performance as a significant difference was found between the gain scores for short answer and extended answer type tasks which correlate well with Robinson's (2011) claim. The findings did not seem to conclusively concur with what was reported by Michel et al. (2007) about students being significantly more fluent in dialogic than in monologic tasks since no significant different difference was found between the gain scores for extended response and paid discussion type tasks. The lowest mean gain score in the pair-interaction task could be due to the impact of pair-planning, which was highlighted by Foster and Skehan (1999) as a crucial factor, the unstructured nature of tasks (Ahmadian et al., 2015), and students' unfamiliarity with each other (Bygate, 1999). The difference in performance should be interpreted cautiously because the cognitive and linguistic investment could be slightly less in the two former contexts than in the latter ones. The study did not look into these aspects and therefore, it may not be appropriate to comment on these with any kind of certainty. However, the results can be explained with the help of Robinson's (2011) claims about task difficulty caused by reasoning as a factor. The questions inviting discussion and demanding extended answers may have required students to invest more reasoning than the other two categories. It is also true that the short response-type questions were mostly factual which could have been cognitively and linguistically less demanding, as rightly pointed out by Fulcher (2014). The ePortfolio use may have contributed to the improvement in students' performance in all four categories, but the latter ones require more time for improvement as they demand more linguistic readiness. Future researchers can look into the impact of cognitive and linguistic investment on performance in various oral production tasks.

Conclusion

The experimental study set out to verify the impact of EPA as an instructional tool on undergraduate students' academic speaking ability. The findings indicate that the use of EPA led to a significant gain in students' academic speaking skills and students performed better in tasks demanding short responses and responses to reading-based prompts than those which required them to give extended responses and participate in a pair-discussion. While the effectiveness of ePortfolio use as a teaching tool can be traced in writing literature, the results of the study add to its productive use in academic speaking literature. Considering that ePortfolio-based studies are particularly rare in speaking, the study is significant. The study contributes to the knowledge base on ePortfolio use. No previous study focusing on EPA of academic speaking skills so clearly described the empirical procedures which increase replicability of the study. Furthermore, the use of various oral task types and the assessment of their impact on the oral performance of students advance understanding of the impact of task types on oral performance. Lastly, the study describes the process of employing EPA for teaching academic speaking skills in the classroom. The steps in the process are rooted in theories of constructivism and reflection and by doing so, it conceives of EPA as a cyclical reflective-collaborative instructional model.

The findings can be expected to pave the way for further investigations into the possibilities offered by EPA in the speaking classroom. The study could have possibly

benefited from more qualitative information about students' portfolio use, classroom interactions, and students' experiences. However, that could not have aligned with the experimental design that the study adopted. Apart from a delayed post-test, an early post-test could have also strengthened the reliability of the findings. It could not be done as carrying out oral tests for so many students raised issues related to practicality. Also, students were not willing to participate in more tests. Nevertheless, the study has several implications. Firstly, when ePortfolio is chosen as a classroom-based assessment tool, the teacher should prepare and plan well in advance. Identifying specific skill areas (sub-skills), task types, materials, and a progress-check strategy can go a long way in making the implementation effective. Nevertheless, the study also demonstrates that it is not so difficult to integrate EPA into a normal college English language classroom that focuses on speaking skills, of similar size. Secondly, starting with structured monologic prompt-dependent tasks, then moving on to structured short-response tasks and then unstructured dialogic tasks could help learners make good progress. Before using dialogic tasks, it may be a good idea to familiarise students with each other which will curb performance anxiety among students. Finally, the study has also implications for teacher training in TBLT. Unless teachers are aware of how task difficulty and complexity work and tasks are graded, creating and choosing appropriate tasks could become a challenging task. Future researchers can adopt methodological innovations for studies with a similar focus and explore how students engage with feedback during EPA. It will be interesting to investigate students' attitudes towards the use of ePortfolio in speaking classrooms and how their attitude shapes their performance. Finally, there is scope for further inquiry into how various task types shape students' oral performance.

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Appendix 1

Checklist - Responding to questions requiring short answers

Conditions	Yes/No
The provided response contains adequate information in relation to the question.	
The information is conveyed in a precise manner.	
The language used is grammatically correct.	
The information is provided in an organized manner.	
The pronunciation was intelligible.	

Appendix 2

Rating scale - Responding to written prompts

Conditions	1 ⬌ 10
The response is in line with the given instructions (e. g., gist, critical observation, opinion, etc.).	
The response is appropriately based on the given prompt.	
The length of the response is as per the given instruction.	
The language used is grammatically correct.	
The vocabulary is academic in nature.	
Signalling words are used judiciously to organize the information.	
The pronunciation is intelligible.	

Appendix 3

Rubrics - Participating in a short discussion with peers

Criteria	Doing well	Can do better	Needs significant improvement
Engagement	Actively participates in the discussion by focusing on the topic and offering ideas related to the topic, politely agrees/disagrees and raises relevant questions, takes turn democratically, identifies key ideas and sums them up for taking the discussion forward, ensures validity and	Actively participates in the discussion on most occasions by focusing on the topic and offering ideas related to the topic, politely agrees/disagrees and raises relevant questions, needs to take turns more democratically, identifies key ideas	Needs to participate in the discussion actively, must be polite when agreeing or disagreeing, needs to take turns democratically, must make efforts to take the discussion forward, needs to ensure validity and reliability of claims

	reliability of claims made during the discussion	for taking the discussion forward, needs to ensure validity and reliability of claims made during the discussion	made during the discussion
Preparedness	Demonstrates readiness in terms of organization during the presentation of information and ideas shared during the discussion, displays awareness about the topic under discussion. displays clarity in thinking	On a few occasions, demonstrates readiness in presenting information and ideas in an organized manner during the discussion, displays awareness about the topic under discussion	Needs to demonstrate readiness in presenting information and ideas in an organized manner during the discussion, must display awareness about the topic under discussion
Delivery	Maintains intelligibility and a flow without any unnecessary pauses, uses an appropriate tone suitable for the intended message, makes use of correct pronunciation and sentences and proper academic vocabulary	Maintains intelligibility and a flow with some difficulty, uses an appropriate tone on some occasions, makes use of correct pronunciation and sentences with some minor problems and utilizes academic vocabulary on some occasions	Needs to maintain intelligibility and flow, use an appropriate tone, make use of correct pronunciation and sentences and utilize academic vocabulary

Appendix 4

Sample tasks

Task 1
Read the following piece of text. You have 1 minute to complete the reading. I will ask you a few questions based on the text.

> Science and religion cannot go hand-in-hand since science is driven by evidence and logic, religion is almost entirely about human beliefs.

Q1. Do you agree that science and religion cannot go hand-in-hand? Why/why not?
Q2. What will happen if religions start following principles of science?

Task 2
Respond to each question in a sentence.
Q1. Where are you from?
Q2. What do you like about xxx?
Q3. What languages do people speak there?
Q4. What are some of the places around xxx that you would recommend me to visit?

Task 3
After I let you know the question, you can take 30-60 seconds to get ready, and then you can answer the question.
Q. What is your opinion about caste-based reservation in India?

Task 4
After I let you know the topic, you can take one minute to prepare, and then you can start discussing the topic. You will have 2-3 minutes to complete the discussion.
Q. Teachers in our college are working hard to find ways to increase student participation in online classes. Can you think to discuss and recommend a few strategies to improve student participation?