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THE IMPACT OF COLLABORATIVE LEARNING STRATEGIES ON STUDENTS' SPEAKING SKILLS IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE CLASSROOMS

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Abstract: This mixed-methods study examines how structured collaborative learning strategies affect speaking development among B1–B2 EFL learners in a tertiary Uzbek context. Grounded in sociocultural theory and interactionist perspectives on second language acquisition (SLA), the eight-week intervention integrated varied collaborative tasks (jigsaw, problem-solving, role-play, dialogue reconstruction, and project-based speaking). Quantitative methods comprised pre–post standardized speaking assessments scored on fluency, accuracy, lexical complexity, pronunciation, and communicative competence (n = 40). Qualitative data included systematic classroom observations, audio-recorded interactional samples, and learner reflective journals. Statistical analysis (paired t-tests; effect size calculations) revealed significant gains across all speaking dimensions (overall gain Cohen's d = 1.02). Thematic analysis of qualitative data produced three principal themes: (1) increased willingness to communicate and lowered speaking anxiety; (2) development of strategic competence through peer scaffolding; (3) transfer of autonomous speaking practices beyond controlled tasks. Findings suggest that scaffolded collaborative tasks mediate learners' movement through the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), yielding measurable gains in oral proficiency. Pedagogical implications for curriculum design and teacher training in Uzbek EFL contexts are discussed, along with limitations and directions for longitudinal research.

Keywords: collaborative learning; speaking skills; EFL; mixed-methods; sociocultural theory; peer interaction; classroom observations;

1. Introduction

Speaking proficiency is a pivotal component of communicative competence (Canale & Swain, 1980). Yet, in many EFL contexts—characterised by limited exposure to target-language communities and teacher-centred pedagogy—oral skills lag behind receptive competencies (Richards, 2006). Uzbekistan's higher education language classrooms often select accuracy-focused practice and written assessment, which can marginalize interactive oral production (author observations). Consequently, learners struggle with fluency, lexical variety, and risk-taking in speech. Collaborative learning (CL) has been proposed as an effective pedagogical orientation to foster communicative practice, learner autonomy, and social negotiation of meaning (Johnson & Johnson, 2009; Slavin, 2015). Nonetheless, empirical studies assessing CL's impact on oral skills often vary in methodological rigor, task design, and measurement of speaking gains (Gillies, 2016). This study aims to contribute a methodologically robust investigation—grounded in contemporary SLA theory—into how specific CL strategies affect speaking development among B1–B2 students in Uzbekistan.

Objectives and research questions

The primary objective is to evaluate the effect of scaffolded collaborative tasks on speaking performance. Research questions:

1. To what extent do collaborative learning strategies improve measurable speaking performance (fluency, accuracy, lexical complexity, pronunciation, and communicative competence) among B1–B2 EFL learners after an eight-week intervention?
2. What interactional and affective processes (e.g., peer scaffolding, anxiety reduction, strategic use of language) mediate observed changes in speaking performance?
3. How do learners perceive the role of collaborative tasks in their speaking development?

This study synthesizes socio-constructivist and interactionist perspectives. Vygotsky's sociocultural theory highlights mediation and the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) where peers and more capable others scaffold learner performance (Vygotsky, 1978). Interactionist SLA theories posit that negotiation of meaning and modified interaction facilitate intake and eventual language acquisition (Long, 1996). Task-based language teaching (TBLT) complements these theories by foregrounding meaning-focused tasks that require negotiation and real-time language use (Ellis, 2003). Together, these frameworks predict that collaborative, meaning-focused tasks will create conditions for observable gains in speaking.

2. Materials and Methods.

A concurrent mixed-methods design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018) combined quantitative pre–post experimental measures with qualitative interactional and perceptual data to triangulate findings and unpack mechanisms of change. Forty (n = 40) undergraduates (age 18–22) registered in intermediate–upper-intermediate (B1–B2) academic English classes at Oriental University volunteered. Participants were organized into eight heterogeneous groups of five. Proficiency assignment used institutional placement scores and CEFR-aligned diagnostics. Ethical procedures included informed consent, anonymisation, and the option to withdraw.

The eight-week intervention (four sessions per week, 90 minutes/session; total ≈ 48 hours) incorporated progressively complex collaborative tasks designed to elicit sustained oral interaction:

1. Weeks 1–2: Controlled-to-free transition tasks (structured interviews, think–pair–share, guided information gap).

2. Weeks 3–4: Jigsaw reading-to-speaking tasks where learners synthesized and orally reported unique subtexts.

3. Weeks 5–6: Problem-solving and negotiation tasks (case studies, decision-making) requiring justification and persuasive language.

4. Weeks 7–8: Role-plays, debates, and a culminating project presentation emphasizing extended discourse.

Teacher roles shifted from direct instruction to facilitator and interactional feedback provider. Tasks included explicit pre-task planning, language-analytic phases (focus-on-form moments), and post-task reflection.

Pre- and post-intervention speaking assessments used a standardized rubric adapted from the Common European Framework descriptors and validated oral proficiency scales. Assessments comprised two tasks: (A) a 3–4 minute individual monologic narrative (picture-cued) and (B) a 4–6 minute interactive discussion (paired). Five analytic dimensions were scored (0–5 each): fluency, accuracy, lexical complexity, pronunciation, and communicative effectiveness. Composite scores (0–25) were converted to percentages. Inter-rater reliability: Two practiced raters (EFL instructors)

independently scored recordings; inter-rater intraclass correlation coefficient (ICC) = .92 indicating high reliability.

Qualitative: interactional data and perceptions

a) Audio recordings of selected group interactions (20 sessions; purposive sampling across groups).

b) Systematic classroom observation using an interactional checklist (participation frequency, turn-taking equality, on-task talk ratio).

c) Learner reflective periodicals (weekly prompts about perceived progress and affect).

d) End-of-intervention semi-structured focus group interviews (n = 4 groups).

Quantitative analysis

Pre–post comparisons used paired-samples t-tests for analytic dimensions and composite scores. Effect sizes (Cohen's d) were calculated. Normality was assessed (Shapiro–Wilk), and nonparametric tests used if dishonored. Statistical significance set at $p < .05$.

Qualitative analysis

Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) processed transcripts and reflection entries. Interactional micro-analysis highlighted evidence of negotiation, uptake, recasts, and collaborative repair. Data were triangulated to identify mediating mechanisms.

3. Results

This section presents the findings of the study derived from quantitative performance assessments and qualitative sources, including classroom observations, audio-recorded interactional data, weekly learner reflections, and post-intervention focus group interviews. The integration of these datasets provides a comprehensive understanding of how collaborative learning strategies shaped learners' speaking improvement over the eight-week intervention period. Quantitative results illustrate measurable gains in speaking proficiency, while qualitative findings reveal the interactional and affective mechanisms underlying these gains.

3.1. Quantitative results

3.1.1. Descriptive statistics and gains

Table 1 shows mean scores (pre & post) and inferential statistics.

Table 1. Pre–post speaking scores (n = 40)

Dimension	Pre M (SD)	Post M (SD)	t(df=39)	p	Cohen's d
Fluency (0–5)	2.45 (0.56)	3.42 (0.48)	9.12	< .001	1.44
Accuracy (0–5)	2.58 (0.63)	3.36 (0.55)	7.03	< .001	1.11
Lexical complexity (0–5)	2.40 (0.60)	3.30 (0.51)	8.15	< .001	1.29
Pronunciation (0–5)	2.62 (0.58)	3.21 (0.50)	5.12	< .001	0.81
Communicative effectiveness (0–5)	2.40 (0.61)	3.50 (0.49)	9.73	< .001	1.54
Composite (0–25)	12.45 (2.45)	16.79 (2.22)	12.98	< .001	1.02

All dimensions showed statistically significant improvement with large effect sizes, indicating practical and pedagogically meaningful gains.

3.1.2. Subgroup patterns

B2 learners (n = 18) exhibited higher absolute post-test means but B1 learners (n = 22) displayed greater relative gains proportionally—consistent with the idea that lower-proficiency learners have more room for measurable improvement in a short intervention.

3.2. Qualitative findings

Thematic analysis yielded three major themes that explain quantitative improvements.

Theme 1: Peer scaffolding and strategic language use

Learners frequently used negotiation strategies (clarification requests, confirmation checks), which led to uptake and immediate repetition or reformulation—an interactional mechanism conducive to intake.

"When my partner corrected me and asked to repeat, I tried different words and the sentence became clearer." (Learner journal, Week 4)

Micro-analysis revealed repeated episodes of scaffolding where more verbally active peers modelled lexical items or phrase frames; others then appropriated these forms in subsequent turns.

Theme 2: Reduced anxiety and increased willingness to communicate (WTC)

Reflection data indicated decreased self-reported anxiety. Group tasks created a "safer" environment for risk-taking.

"I felt less afraid to speak because everyone had a turn and we supported each other." (Focus group)

Observation checklists recorded increased voluntary contributions and decreased teacher prompts for participation over time.

Theme 3: Emergence of autonomous speaking practices

Learners reported transferring task strategies to outside-class communication (e.g., planning before speaking, using discourse markers).

"Now I plan two sentences before I start; it helps me speak longer." (Learner journal, Week 7)

This indicated metacognitive growth and strategy internalization, important for long-term development.

3.3. Interactional evidence of learning mechanisms

Transcripts displayed evidence of input enhancement (peers repeating corrected utterances), recasts by peers, and collaborative output modification—elements linked in SLA literature to language learning opportunities (Long, 1996).

5. Discussion

The results corroborate sociocultural and interactionist predictions: collaborative tasks produced significant measurable improvement in speaking and fostered conditions for learning within the ZPD. The large effect sizes (Cohen's d > 1 for most dimensions) indicate robust pedagogical impact within the eight-week timeframe; such scale aligns with intervention studies emphasizing intensive, interaction-rich pedagogies (e.g., Swain & Lapkin, 2001).

Peer scaffolding observed in interactional data mirrors Vygotskian mediation: more capable peers provided language resources that learners appropriated. The increase in WTC and lowered anxiety supports affective filter hypotheses (Krashen, 1982) and corroborates empirical studies linking collaborative classroom climates to increased oral participation (Gillies, 2016). The emergence of autonomous planning and strategic competence suggests that collaborative tasks promote not only performance achievements but also the development of learner internal resources required for sustained L2 use—a crucial pedagogical outcome (Bygate, 2018).

4.2. Pedagogical implications

1) **Task design:** Teachers should sequence tasks from controlled to free production and include pre-task planning and post-task reflection to maximize uptake and consolidation.

2) **Teacher role:** Effective CL requires instructors to adopt facilitator stances, monitor for linguistic opportunities, and provide timely corrective feedback that encourages peer-mediated repair rather than teacher dominance.

3) **Assessment:** Oral assessment frameworks should integrate analytic dimensions and encourage both quantitative measurement and qualitative observation of interactional processes.

4.3. Limitations and validity concerns

Generalisability: Single-institution sample constrains external validity; replication across diverse Uzbek contexts is warranted.

Duration: Eight weeks shows initial gains; longitudinal studies are needed to assess retention and proceduralization.

Simulated control: This study did not include a control group due to practical constraints; future quasi-experimental designs could strengthen causal claims.

5. Conclusions. This study demonstrates that structured collaborative learning strategies can produce significant and pedagogically meaningful gains in EFL learners' speaking skills over a concentrated eight-week intervention. The combined quantitative and qualitative evidence indicates that collaborative tasks operate via interactional mechanisms (peer scaffolding, negotiation of meaning) and affective processes (lowered anxiety, higher WTC) that together facilitate oral development. For Uzbek tertiary EFL contexts, integrating scaffolded collaborative tasks into curricula and teacher training can enhance communicative outcomes. Further research should employ longitudinal, multi-site designs, include control comparisons, and examine digital modalities for collaborative interaction.

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Institutional Review Board Statement

Not applicable (classroom pedagogical intervention with voluntary anonymized data; ethical standards observed).

Informed Consent Statement

Informed consent was obtained from all participants.

Data Availability Statement

Anonymized aggregated data supporting the findings are available from the author upon reasonable request.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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