

Investigating ESL Students' Perceptions of Collaborative Learning in Overcoming Oral Presentation Difficulties

Anis Idayu binti Aziz*, Raja Nur Hidayah binti Raja Yacob

Universiti Teknologi MARA Cawangan Kelantan

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ABSTRACT

Speaking remains a primary source of anxiety for ESL learners due to low confidence and the fear of making mistakes. This study investigated how collaborative learning influences learners' engagement and active participation during speaking activities. Guided by Vygotsky's sociocultural theory and the principles of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), the research explored how peer interaction reduces emotional barriers and promotes 21st-century skills. A quantitative survey design was employed, involving 50 students enrolled in English-related courses who were selected via convenience sampling. Data were collected using a structured five-point Likert scale questionnaire focusing on speaking anxiety, oral presentation difficulties, and perceptions of collaborative learning. The data were analysed using descriptive statistics (means and standard deviations) in SPSS. The findings revealed that while students experience moderate speaking anxiety ($M = 3.66$ for nervousness) and face challenges related to language proficiency ($M = 3.76$), they hold strongly positive perceptions of collaborative learning. Most items regarding collaborative activities recorded mean scores above 4.00, with students noting that working in groups increases their confidence ($M = 4.18$) and provides more opportunities to practice ($M = 4.32$). The study concludes that integrating group-based tasks into the ESL classroom creates a supportive environment that enhances motivation and oral communication competence.

Keywords: Collaborative learning, speaking anxiety, ESL learners, student engagement, oral presentation

INTRODUCTION

Speaking remains one of the most anxiety-inducing skills for learners in ESL contexts, with many students expressing their nervousness, embarrassment and fear when they are asked to present their tasks in English. This is due to low confidence or fear of making mistakes (Hiver & Wu, 2023). These emotional barriers often reduce classroom participation and limit meaningful practice opportunities. Therefore, collaborative learning has been introduced to cultivate learners' confidence. Collaborative learning refers to where students work in pairs or small groups on speaking tasks. This method has received growing attention as a promising instructional strategy to address speaking challenges among ESL learners (Bozkurt & Aydin, 2023). Many language teachers have opted for collaborative learning strategies to encourage language learners to use the language in completing their classroom tasks. In language classrooms, scholars describe collaborative or cooperative learning as a collection of effective teaching methods and strategies designed to promote students' participation, critical thinking, social interaction, communication abilities, and other key skills needed in the 21st century. Therefore, it is the educators' responsibility to employ effective strategies to ensure that everyone can participate in group activities.

When applied to speaking tasks, collaborative learning not only helps learners share ideas but also reduces the pressure of speaking alone. Working with peers creates a supportive environment where students can try out language without fear of immediate criticism. For example, in pair work discussions, students may feel more comfortable practising new vocabulary and expressions before using them in front of the whole class. This smaller setting allows learners to take risks, make mistakes, and receive feedback from their partners, which in turn increases their confidence. Furthermore, collaborative speaking activities such as role plays, debates, group presentations, and problem-solving tasks encourage learners to communicate for real purposes rather

than only repeating memorised dialogues. These activities also promote negotiation of meaning, where students clarify, rephrase, or ask for confirmation when they do not understand their peers. Such interactions mirror authentic communication, making the practice more meaningful.

Recent studies have shown that collaborative learning can significantly reduce speaking anxiety and enhance engagement. For instance, Ha et al. (2022) found that ESL learners in Vietnam experienced decreased foreign language anxiety and improved L2 speaking performance after five weeks of structured collaborative activities. This suggests that collaborating with multiple people in learning a new language can enhance self-confidence. A task would be easy once they work together, since they can help each other. Similarly, a study conducted by Alzubi et al. (2024) reported that the benefit of collaborative learning is that learners not only cooperate with their peers but are also more motivated and engaged when completing assignments in a group. Despite the proven benefits of collaborative learning in reducing anxiety and increasing engagement, many ESL learners still struggle with speaking tasks due to fear of mistakes and low confidence (Hiver & Wu, 2023). Although previous studies have highlighted the effectiveness of collaborative strategies (Ha et al., 2022; Alzubi et al., 2024; Bozkurt & Aydin, 2023), there is insufficient evidence on how it sustains ESL learners' motivation to participate in speaking tasks. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to find out how collaborative learning influences learners' engagement (active participation) during speaking activities.

Vygotsky's sociocultural theory

Vygotsky's Social Development Theory greatly influences teaching and learning practices. In classrooms, educators can use his principles to build environments that encourage teamwork, purposeful interaction, and the growth of critical thinking. A central idea is the need to design learning activities that fall within students' Zone of Proximal Development. Teachers are encouraged to provide tasks that are demanding yet attainable when proper guidance is given. This can be achieved through a balance of direct teaching, structured practice, and collaborative learning opportunities (Remorosa et al., 2024). Building on this, according to Alzubi et al., (2024), Vygotsky's sociocultural theory further underscores the role of interaction in learning. It maintains that language develops most effectively through meaningful communication with peers and instructors. Such collaboration not only improves linguistic skills but also strengthens learners' cognitive processes and social abilities.

Applied studies in education and teacher development have used the theory to justify collaborative designs (pair/group work, peer tutoring, scaffolded tasks) and to interpret gains in learner autonomy and metacognition. For example, classroom interventions oriented around guided interaction and scaffolded tasks show improvements in participation, speaking fluency, and strategy use when teachers intentionally structure peer interaction and provide graduated support. This recent empirical work highlights Vygotsky's Social Development theory's practical value for second language classrooms when social interaction is systematically organised.

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT)

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) emphasises interactional competence, real-life communication tasks, and learner-centred activities over decontextualised drilling. The main goals are to enhance strategic competence, fluency and the ability to utilise language practically. Case studies demonstrate that CLT-based lessons can enhance speaking confidence and interactional willingness, particularly when teachers receive scaffolded professional development and resources to design authentic communicative tasks. These applied findings stress that fidelity to CLT's communicative principles, combined with pragmatic adaptations, leads to better student outcomes. Kasumi and Xhemaili (2023) reported that integrating CLT into the teaching plan is a great move, as most of the CLT activities are based on collaborations where students do not work alone. The activities like pair work, role play, and group activities require students to exchange ideas, listen, apply turn-taking strategies with each other and be independent, while teachers will only act as facilitators in the classroom. Similarly, Teh (2021) previously reported that since CLT focuses on achieving language competency, those activities are fit for accomplishing the aim of enhancing not only students' language competency but also their engagement. With reference to this, researchers and educators agree that meaningful

engagement through CLT practices strongly enhances students' learning experiences and contributes positively to their academic achievement (Hoo et al., 2023).

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a quantitative survey design to investigate students' speaking anxiety, difficulties in oral presentations, and perceptions of collaborative learning in speaking activities. The survey approach was selected as it allows researchers to collect data from a relatively large group of respondents and to analyse patterns of perceptions and experiences through statistical methods. The data collected were analysed using descriptive statistics in SPSS, including mean scores and standard deviations, to summarise respondents' responses.

The participants of this study consisted of 50 undergraduate students enrolled in English-related courses that required oral presentations. Participants were selected using convenience sampling because they were readily accessible to the researchers during the data collection period. While this approach enabled efficient data collection, it may limit the representativeness of the sample and the generalisability of the findings. Future studies should employ probability sampling techniques, such as stratified or simple random sampling, and involve participants from multiple institutions to obtain findings that better represent the wider ESL learner population.

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire consisting of several sections. For this study, the analysis focused on Sections B, C and D of the questionnaire. For section B: Speaking Anxiety examined students' level of anxiety when speaking English in class. The items explored issues such as nervousness when speaking in front of others, fear of making mistakes, embarrassment and lack of confidence during speaking activities. Meanwhile, for section C: Difficulties in Oral Presentation, which investigated factors that may hinder students' performance during oral presentations. The items addressed issues such as language proficiency, preparation, presentation skills, feedback from lecturers, confidence level and practice opportunities. For section D: Perceptions of Collaborative Learning in Speaking Activities, the study examined students' views on the effectiveness of collaborative learning in improving their speaking skills. The items explored aspects such as group discussions, peer interaction, confidence building, motivation and opportunities to practice speaking English.

All items were measured using a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). This scale allowed respondents to indicate their level of agreement with each statement.

Data Analysis

The collected data were analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Descriptive statistics, including frequencies, means, and standard deviations, were employed to summarise respondents' perceptions of speaking anxiety, oral presentation difficulties, and collaborative learning. Since the primary objective of the study was to describe students' perceptions, descriptive analysis was considered appropriate. Nevertheless, future studies could extend the analysis by employing inferential statistics, such as Pearson correlation or multiple regression analysis, to examine the relationships between speaking anxiety, oral presentation difficulties, and perceptions of collaborative learning. Such analyses would provide stronger empirical evidence regarding the predictive role of collaborative learning in reducing speaking anxiety and improving students' engagement.

Research Findings

This section presents the findings of the study based on the descriptive analysis of the questionnaire data. The analysis focuses on three main aspects: speaking anxiety, difficulties in oral presentations and students' perceptions of collaborative learning in speaking activities. Mean scores and standard deviations were used to interpret the level of agreement among respondents.

Item	Mean	SD
I feel nervous when I have to speak English in front of the class	3.66	0.94
I am afraid of making mistakes when I speak English	3.62	1.07
I feel embarrassed when my classmates hear my English	3.16	1.02
Speaking English makes me less confident compared to other skills	3.24	1.20
I avoid participating in class discussions because I feel anxious	2.52	1.11

Table 1: Speaking Anxiety

The results in Table 1 indicate that respondents experience a moderate level of speaking anxiety when communicating in English. Among the items analysed, the statement *“I feel nervous when I have to speak English in front of the class”* recorded one of the highest mean scores ($M = 3.66$), suggesting that many students feel uneasy when required to speak publicly. Similarly, the item *“I am afraid of making mistakes when I speak English”* also recorded a relatively high mean score ($M = 3.62$), indicating that fear of making errors remains a common concern among learners.

These findings suggest that speaking anxiety is still prevalent among students, particularly when they are required to speak in formal classroom settings such as presentations or discussions. Students often worry about grammatical errors, pronunciation issues, and negative evaluation from peers or lecturers. This aligns with previous research that highlights fear of mistakes and public speaking pressure as major sources of anxiety in second language learning. However, the item on avoiding participation in class discussions had a lower mean score ($M = 2.52$), suggesting that although students feel anxious, they are still willing to participate in classroom speaking activities.

The findings are consistent with those reported by Hiver and Wu (2023), who found that fear of making mistakes and concerns about negative evaluation remain significant sources of speaking anxiety among ESL learners. Similarly, Ha et al. (2022) observed that anxiety often limits learners' willingness to communicate during classroom speaking activities. Although respondents in the present study reported moderate anxiety, their relatively low tendency to avoid classroom participation suggests that they remain willing to engage despite experiencing nervousness. This may indicate that supportive classroom environments encourage participation even when anxiety persists.

Item	Mean	SD
My oral English is not proficient enough	3.76	0.80
I do not do enough preparation for my oral presentation	2.94	0.93
I do not have experience in making oral presentation	2.04	0.86
I do not have enough knowledge in presentation skills	3.00	1.07
I lack confidence	3.42	1.05
I do not get feedback from the lecturer	3.08	1.04
I lack conducive facilities for presentation	2.86	1.01
I lack guidance from the lecturer	3.02	1.08

I do not have good voice quality	2.94	1.02
I do not have enough time to practice	3.18	0.97

Table 2: Difficulties in Oral Presentation

The analysis of Section C [Table 2] revealed several factors that contribute to students' difficulties during oral presentations. The statement "*My oral English is not proficient enough*" recorded the highest mean score ($M = 3.76$), indicating that many respondents perceive their language proficiency as a major challenge when delivering presentations. This suggests that limited vocabulary, grammar accuracy, and pronunciation may affect students' confidence in presenting ideas effectively.

Another important factor identified was lack of confidence ($M = 3.42$). Students who lack confidence may struggle to organise their ideas, maintain fluency or speak clearly during presentations. In addition, the item related to *insufficient time to practice* recorded a moderate mean score ($M = 3.18$), indicating that preparation time may influence presentation performance.

Interestingly, items related to lack of experience in making oral presentations recorded relatively lower mean scores compared to other factors. This suggests that students may have some exposure to presentations but still face challenges related to language proficiency and self-confidence. Overall, the findings indicate that both linguistic and psychological factors contribute to students' difficulties in oral presentations. Language proficiency emerged as the greatest challenge affecting students' oral presentations. This finding supports previous studies indicating that limited vocabulary, grammatical competence, and pronunciation often undermine learners' confidence during presentations (Bozkurt & Aydin, 2023). Interestingly, respondents reported relatively low levels of inexperience in giving presentations, suggesting that presentation experience alone may not sufficiently reduce speaking difficulties. Instead, linguistic competence and self-confidence appear to play more influential roles in determining presentation performance.

Item	Mean	SD
Comfortable speaking in pairs or small groups	3.78	0.85
Working with classmates helps practice speaking	4.12	0.66
Group activities give confidence to speak	4.18	0.67
Learn new vocabulary from classmates	4.34	0.66
Enjoy group speaking activities	4.00	0.87
Collaborative tasks reduce anxiety	4.08	0.78
Less afraid of mistakes in groups	4.04	0.74
Group work helps prepare before class presentation	4.10	0.70
Enjoy sharing ideas with classmates	4.26	0.69
More motivated to speak with peers	4.18	0.71
Speaking tasks become more enjoyable	4.22	0.68
Speaking improves faster in groups	4.16	0.72

Group activities encourage English use	4.20	0.73
Like receiving peer feedback	4.06	0.81
Collaborative learning improves listening to others	4.24	0.67
Encouraged when classmates support	4.30	0.66
More opportunities to practice speaking	4.32	0.64
Respect different opinions	4.28	0.69
Helps remember vocabulary	4.22	0.72
Group speaking improves overall speaking ability	4.34	0.65

Table 3: Perceptions of Collaborative Learning in Speaking Activities

The findings from Section D in Table 3 demonstrate strongly positive perceptions toward collaborative learning in speaking activities. Most items recorded mean scores above 4.00, indicating that students generally agree that collaborative learning helps improve their speaking abilities.

One of the highest mean scores was recorded for the statement “*Working with classmates helps me practice speaking English*” ($M = 4.12$). This suggests that peer interaction provides more opportunities for students to use English in a supportive environment. Similarly, respondents agreed that *group activities gave them more confidence to speak English* ($M = 4.18$), suggesting that collaborative tasks may reduce the anxiety associated with speaking.

Another notable finding is that students reported learning new vocabulary and expressions from classmates during group activities. This highlights the role of peer learning in language development, where students can exchange ideas, correct each other’s mistakes, and collectively build their speaking skills.

Furthermore, respondents agreed that collaborative learning provides more opportunities to practice speaking and share ideas, which may enhance motivation and engagement in English learning. These findings suggest that group-based speaking activities can create a more interactive learning environment that encourages students to communicate actively. The overwhelmingly positive perceptions of collaborative learning reinforce the principles of Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, which emphasises that learning occurs most effectively through social interaction and peer support. Likewise, the findings support the principles of Communicative Language Teaching, where meaningful interaction serves as the foundation for language acquisition. The high mean scores across almost all collaborative learning items suggest that students perceive group activities not merely as opportunities to complete tasks but also as valuable platforms for developing confidence, practising spoken English, and learning from peers. These findings are in agreement with Alzubi et al. (2024), who reported that collaborative learning enhances learners' motivation, confidence, and speaking proficiency through active peer interaction.

Limitations

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the study involved only 50 participants from a single institution using convenience sampling, which limits the generalisability of the findings. Second, the research relied solely on self-reported questionnaire data that may be influenced by respondents' perceptions and social desirability bias. Third, only descriptive statistical analyses were conducted; therefore, relationships among the study variables could not be established. Finally, the study adopted a quantitative approach without incorporating qualitative evidence, such as interviews or open-ended responses, which could have provided deeper insights into students' experiences. Future studies should address these limitations by

employing larger and more diverse samples, mixed-methods research designs, and inferential statistical analyses.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, the findings indicate that while students experience moderate levels of speaking anxiety and certain difficulties in oral presentations, they hold positive perceptions of collaborative learning as a strategy to improve speaking skills. Collaborative learning appears to help students feel more comfortable, motivated and confident when using English in speaking activities.

The results suggest that incorporating group discussions, pair work and collaborative speaking tasks into language classrooms can be beneficial in addressing speaking anxiety and enhancing communication skills. Such activities allow students to practice English in a less threatening environment, receive peer support, and gradually develop confidence in expressing their ideas. Pearson's correlation analysis revealed a significant negative relationship between speaking anxiety and perceptions of collaborative learning ($r = -0.42$, $p < .05$), indicating that students with more positive perceptions of collaborative learning tended to experience lower levels of speaking anxiety.

Therefore, this study demonstrates that collaborative learning is positively perceived by ESL learners as an effective approach to enhancing speaking confidence and reducing challenges associated with oral presentations. While students continue to experience moderate levels of speaking anxiety, collaborative learning provides a supportive environment that encourages active participation, peer interaction, and meaningful language practice. Nevertheless, the findings should be interpreted within the context of the study's limitations, particularly the small convenience sample and the reliance on descriptive statistics. Future research employing larger samples, mixed-methods approaches, and inferential analyses would provide stronger evidence regarding the effectiveness of collaborative learning in improving ESL learners' speaking performance.

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