

# Pre-Service Teachers' Strategies in Teaching Speaking in Secondary School: A Qualitative Study

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## ABSTRACT

In today's education system, the development of English language skills, particularly speaking skills, is paramount for students' academic success and future employability. Despite the recognised importance of these skills, research indicates that students' speaking proficiency remains unsatisfactory. While there is a significant amount of research on teaching speaking skills, studies focusing on pre-service teachers' strategies in this area are limited. As future educators, pre-service teachers must be equipped with effective strategies to address these challenges. This study aims to explore the strategies employed by pre-service teachers in teaching speaking skills to secondary school students in Malaysia. The research adopts a qualitative approach, utilising semi-structured interviews with two pre-service teachers. The findings reveal several strategies used by these teachers, including the use of debate, cooperative learning, role-play, and storytelling. This study aims to provide insights that can aid educators and policymakers in enhancing the quality of teaching and improving students' speaking skills in ESL contexts in Malaysia.

**Keywords:** ESL, pre-service teacher, secondary school, speaking skill, teaching strategies

## INTRODUCTION

English proficiency is recognised as an important factor in developing globally competitive citizens in Malaysia. Mastery of the English language extends beyond mere communication, enabling individuals to participate actively in a globalised world shaped by rapid technological advancements (Kashinathan & Aziz, 2022). Despite exposure to English from primary through secondary education, many students continue to struggle with speaking proficiency due to limited opportunities for real-life application outside the classroom (Kaur, 2022). In response, the Ministry of Education (MOE) has introduced initiatives such as the Oral Proficiency Programme and the Highly Immersive Programme to enhance English language acquisition (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2018; Kamsin & Mohamad, 2020). However, achieving the desired level of speaking proficiency remains a persistent challenge.

Teaching speaking skills in the ESL context extends beyond linguistic competence, it also focuses on learners' overall communicative ability (Miranda & Wahyudin, 2023). Effective communication requires not only the clear expression of ideas but also understanding cultural awareness, participating in discussions, and interacting confidently with diverse audiences (Chee et al., 2023). Proficiency in speaking is essential for academic success, professional advancement, and social engagement (Zainuddin et al., 2019). Nevertheless, many ESL learners in Malaysia encounter obstacles in developing these skills, highlighting the pivotal role of educators in supporting learners to overcome challenges and build language competence (Paneerselvam & Mohamad, 2019).

Pre-service teachers undergoing training within MOE teacher education programmes are entrusted with delivering high-quality instruction (Colognesi & März, 2022). They are expected to enhance learners' enthusiasm for language development and fulfil multiple pedagogical roles (Govindasamy & Shah, 2020). Practicum components allow trainee teachers to apply theoretical knowledge in authentic classroom settings, providing essential hands-on experience to develop teaching skills and professional competence (Velásquez et al., 2023).

Despite these initiatives, a notable gap exists between pedagogical theory and classroom practice. Pre-service teachers often face challenges when implementing strategies to develop learners' speaking skills, particularly in

post-pandemic contexts where students may exhibit reduced confidence and gaps in oral proficiency following prolonged online learning (Arini & Wahyudin, 2022). This study, therefore, seeks to explore the strategies employed by pre-service teachers to teach speaking skills to secondary school learners in Malaysia, providing insights to enhance pedagogical approaches and teacher preparation.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Speaking skills

Speaking skills are fundamental to human communication and are integral to language development alongside reading, writing, and listening (Singh et al., 2020). The ability to speak allows learners to articulate thoughts and viewpoints, contributing significantly to overall language acquisition (Sari & Zuhriyyah, 2023). Effective speaking involves clear conveyance of ideas to ensure listener comprehension (Arini & Wahyudin, 2022). Regular engagement in English conversations, particularly with proficient speakers, enhances vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, and fluency while simultaneously boosting learners' confidence (Kuvandikova, 2023; Singh et al., 2020).

Speaking is a dynamic process, characterised by interactive communication and continual improvement through practice in authentic contexts. Opportunities for active language use, rather than passive rule learning, are essential for developing communicative competence (Singh et al., 2020). Consequently, speaking skills are closely intertwined with interaction, self-expression, and practical application in real-world contexts.

### Importance of speaking skills in ESL education

Effective speaking is a recognised 21st-century skill, emphasised globally for its role in academic, professional, and social participation (Chee et al., 2023; Rao, 2019). In Malaysia, English proficiency has become increasingly important for career progression, education, and daily communication (Kamsin & Mohamad, 2020).

The Malaysian Education Blueprint (2013–2025) prioritises developing independent English users, as outlined by the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), enabling learners to engage in discourse, express opinions, and interact effectively in English (Ag-Ahmad et al., 2023). Initiatives such as the Oral Proficiency Programme and Highly Immersive Programme offer immersive experiences that bridge the gap between classroom learning and real-world communication (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2018; Kamsin & Mohamad, 2020).

This focus underscores the importance of equipping pre-service teachers with strategies to foster learners' communicative competence, enabling students to participate confidently across academic, social, and professional contexts.

### Strategies for Teaching Speaking Skills

Various pedagogical strategies have been identified to enhance learners' speaking skills, including debate, cooperative learning, role-play, and storytelling.

#### Debate

Debates provide learners with a structured platform to develop critical thinking, persuasive argumentation, and coherent oral expression in English (Chetvertakova, 2024). In addition to linguistic skills, debates foster active listening, respectful interaction, and appropriate responsiveness, which are crucial for real-world communication. Research indicates that learners who regularly participate in structured debate activities demonstrate improvements in confidence, vocabulary, and grammatical accuracy (Tarigan & Lubis, 2024; Taylor & Robinson, 2020). These findings highlight the value of debate as a tool for promoting both cognitive and linguistic development in speaking.

## Cooperative learning

Collaborative learning strategies, such as Think-Pair-Share (TPS), encourage learners to practise speaking in supportive peer environments. Pairing or grouping students reduces anxiety, increases engagement, and promote motivation, allowing learners to gain confidence through mutual support (Kuvandikova, 2023; Govindasamy & Shah, 2020). Puspita Dewi (2023) reported that the TPS strategy, applied in a short monologue activity, significantly enhanced learners' confidence and performance, illustrating the potential of cooperative learning to improve oral communication in low-pressure contexts. By engaging collaboratively, learners are able to experiment with language, make mistakes safely, and develop fluency and accuracy over time.

## Role-play

Role-play activities simulate real-life scenarios, offering learners the opportunity to practise speaking in authentic contexts (Nguyen & Dang Thao, 2023). By assuming different roles, learners can explore various conversational functions, adapt to diverse social interactions, and improve pronunciation, fluency, and selfconfidence (Kholmurodova, 2021). Role-play encourages active application of language in situations that mirror real-world communication, thereby bridging the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical usage.

## Storytelling

Storytelling engages learners in a creative and interactive process that strengthens speaking skills by improving intonation, tone, vocabulary, grammar, and narrative abilities (Pulatov & Zainiddinova, 2024). It allows learners to practice retelling, summarising, and acting out stories, fostering oral fluency and expressive confidence (Muttaqin, 2024). Fitriyeni (2022) highlighted that students participating in storytelling activities enjoyed the process and demonstrated improvements in vocabulary, grammar, and confidence, confirming the pedagogical value of storytelling in enhancing oral communication skills.

## Pre-service teachers' competency in 21<sup>st</sup> century landscape

The successful implementation of these strategies depends on pre-service teachers' competence, adaptability, and reflective practice. Practicum experiences provide opportunities to apply theory in authentic classrooms, observe learner responses, and tailor approaches to individual needs (Velásquez et al., 2023; Arini & Wahyudin, 2022). This is particularly critical in post-pandemic contexts, where learners returning from prolonged online learning may display gaps in proficiency, lower confidence, and hesitancy in speaking (Singh et al., 2020; Kuvandikova, 2023).

The application of speaking strategies aligns with Krashen's Second Language Acquisition (SLA) theory, including the Input Hypothesis and Affective Filter Hypothesis, which emphasise language acquisition through comprehensible input and supportive, low-anxiety environments (Krashen, 1982; Gong, 2023; Kuvandikova, 2023). Pre-service teachers facilitate these conditions by scaffolding learning, promoting participation, and reducing affective barriers (Arini & Wahyudin, 2022).

Moreover, strategies are underpinned by socio-constructivist principles, emphasising collaborative learning, guided interaction, and knowledge construction (Vygotsky, 1978; Akpan et al., 2020). By designing scaffolded tasks and interactive activities, pre-service teachers enable learners to construct meaning actively, enhancing speaking proficiency alongside cognitive and socio-emotional skills.

Ultimately, pre-service teachers' ability to adapt strategies, reflect on practice, and respond creatively to classroom challenges is central to develop effective oral communication among ESL learners, aligning with the competencies required in 21<sup>st</sup> century education.

Building on this theoretical and pedagogical framework, the present study adopts a qualitative approach to investigate the specific strategies employed by pre-service teachers in teaching speaking skills to secondary school learners in Malaysia.

## METHODOLOGY

## Research design

This study adopts a qualitative case study approach to investigate pre-service teachers' strategies for teaching speaking skills. A qualitative design is appropriate for exploring participants' perspectives, experiences, and classroom practices in depth, particularly when aiming to understand complex phenomena within real-life contexts (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The dual case study method enables an in-depth examination of two preservice teachers working in distinct but comparable secondary school environments, providing rich, contextualised insights into teaching strategies under challenging conditions.

## Participants

The study involves two pre-service teachers who have completed practicum training in teaching English at secondary schools in Selangor. Participants were selected through purposive sampling, ensuring they teach English in public schools and have relevant practicum experience. Pseudonyms (P1 and P2) are used to maintain confidentiality. Although qualitative research often recommends six to ten participants to achieve thematic saturation, a smaller dual case study is justified here because the focus is on detailed, contextualised understanding of specific teaching contexts. Both participants were assigned to classes affected by the Movement Order Control (MOC) policy, where learners returned from extended online learning with observable gaps in oral proficiency and reluctance to participate in speaking activities. This unique context provides a valuable opportunity to examine teaching strategies in depth.

## Instrument

Semi-structured interviews served as the primary instrument for data collection. This method allows participants to articulate their experiences in their own words while enabling the researcher to probe emerging topics during the discussion (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Semi-structured interviews are widely recognised for exploring perceptions, decision-making, and reflections on professional practice.

## Data collection procedure

Interviews were conducted face-to-face and lasted between 30 and 60 minutes. Participants were contacted via WhatsApp to arrange convenient times. Prior to each interview, participants received a consent form outlining the study's purpose, confidentiality measures, and voluntary participation. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim to ensure accurate capture of participants' contributions.

## Data analysis

Data were analysed through three key stages: transcription, coding, and thematic analysis. Initially, audio recordings were transcribed verbatim. Transcripts were then coded line by line to identify patterns, concepts, and recurring ideas. Thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step framework, was applied: familiarisation with data; generating initial codes; searching for themes; reviewing themes; defining and naming themes; and producing the final report. This structured approach ensures transparency and rigour, linking interpretations clearly to the data and research questions.

## Researcher positionality

As a postgraduate student and former pre-service teacher, the researcher recognises that personal experiences may influence data collection and interpretation. To ensure trustworthiness, the researcher employed reflexive journaling, member checking, and iterative review of transcripts. Reflexive journaling documented thoughts, assumptions, and potential biases. Member checking involved sharing transcripts and preliminary interpretations with participants to confirm the accuracy and authenticity of their perspectives. Iterative review ensured that themes and interpretations were firmly grounded in the data.

## FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

RQ 1: What are the strategies employed by pre-service teachers in teaching speaking skills to secondary pupils?

**The findings of the research can be divided into a theme and subthemes as follows:**

## **Strategies Employed by Pre-Service Teachers in Teaching Speaking to Secondary Pupils**

The study identifies four primary strategies used by pre-service teachers to enhance secondary students' speaking skills: debate, cooperative learning, role play, and storytelling. These strategies were implemented in response to the students' varied proficiency levels, classroom dynamics, and challenges such as shyness, low confidence, and time limitations. Pre-service teachers were observed to adapt these strategies according to the needs of the class and their pedagogical judgement, highlighting their reflective practice in real classroom contexts.

### **1) Debate**

Debate activities were used to promote structured argumentation, critical thinking, and public speaking. Preservice teachers reported that debates encouraged students to express their opinions clearly, articulate their reasoning, and engage with peers in a respectful, competitive setting.

Excerpt:

*"During the English class, I organised debates on various topics. This activity required the students to think critically and express their opinions in English. It also helped them build confidence in speaking publicly." – P1*

*"Well, I did a debate activity in the class for the speaking lesson, the students did show interest in participating during it." – P2*

Debates allow learners to practise formal registers, develop coherent arguments, and negotiate meaning with peers. This is particularly relevant for students who previously relied heavily on online learning during the Movement Order Control (MOC) period, as debate activities provide structured oral practice. The findings align with prior studies suggesting that debates enhance motivation, confidence, and linguistic accuracy (Tarigan & Lubis, 2024; Taylor & Robinson, 2020). The implementation of debates reflects Krashen's Input Hypothesis, as students are exposed to meaningful, comprehensible input and engage in authentic communication in low anxiety settings (Krashen, 1982). Furthermore, the competitive yet guided nature of debate encourages critical thinking and active participation, which are key aspects of socio-constructivist learning (Vygotsky, 1978).

Despite the benefits, teachers faced challenges such as time constraints and uneven participation. To address this, pre-service teachers sometimes limited debate topics to shorter, manageable discussions and structured groups to ensure every student contributed. This adaptation demonstrates the teachers' responsiveness to classroom realities and learner needs.

### **2) Cooperative Learning**

Cooperative learning strategies, including Think-Pair-Share (TPS) and small group work, were widely implemented to encourage interaction, peer support, and active language use. By grouping students strategically according to proficiency levels, teachers aimed to balance peer scaffolding with opportunities for independent contribution.

Excerpt:

*"I also utilised group work activity, when choosing members, I ensure there are mixed-ability students in each group. Sometimes, I do Think-Pair-Share, where they discuss and present their ideas." – P1*

*"I often used cooperative learning activities, where students worked in groups to complete tasks. This setup allowed them to interact more in English, support each other, and learn collaboratively." – P2*

Cooperative learning promotes a supportive environment that reduces anxiety and encourages risk-taking in speaking. It aligns with socio-constructivist principles, as students co-construct knowledge through collaboration and dialogue (Vygotsky, 1978; Akpan et al., 2020). The practice also provides opportunities for reflective learning, students can observe peers' use of language and adjust their own output accordingly.



Teachers noted challenges such as dominant students taking over discussions and quieter students remaining passive. Pre-service teachers addressed this by rotating group roles, encouraging turn-taking, and monitoring interactions closely. These adaptations reflect reflective teaching practice and highlight the importance of scaffolding to ensure equitable participation (Velásquez et al., 2023). Cooperative learning thus not only improves speaking proficiency but also enhances social and emotional skills, including teamwork, empathy, and peer support.

### 3) Role Play

Role play was employed to simulate real-life scenarios, providing opportunities for students to practise authentic conversational skills, apply vocabulary, and develop fluency. By adopting different roles, learners experienced diverse communicative functions and social contexts, reinforcing language use beyond the textbook.

Excerpt:

*"In my class, I used role plays frequently. It was a fun way for students to practise speaking English. They acted out various scenarios, which made lessons more engaging and helped them use the language in real-life situations."* – P1

Role play encourages adaptive language use and fosters confidence. It mirrors the findings of Nguyen and Dang Thao (2023), who highlighted that simulated scenarios provide meaningful interaction and contextualised practice. For students returning from extended online learning, role play allowed them to rehearse real-world English communication in a low-stakes setting.

Challenges included initial reluctance among shy students and managing class time effectively. Pre-service teachers adapted by pairing students strategically, providing clear role instructions, and modelling dialogues before practice. These strategies demonstrate teachers' responsiveness and the application of Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis, as reducing anxiety enhances language acquisition (Krashen, 1982; Gong, 2023).

### 4) Storytelling

Storytelling encouraged students to narrate personal experiences or fictional events, promoting fluency, pronunciation, and narrative skills. It provided a relaxed, enjoyable context for language practice, enhancing confidence and expressive ability.

Excerpt:

*"I encouraged my students to tell stories, whether they were real experiences or fictional tales. This activity helped them practise speaking more naturally and improved their confidence in using English."* – P2

Storytelling allows students to integrate vocabulary, grammar, and intonation while practising higher-order cognitive skills such as sequencing, summarising, and reflecting. The findings correspond with studies indicating that storytelling increases oral fluency, motivation, and creativity (Pulatov & Zainiddinova, 2024; Muttaqin, 2024). Pre-service teachers highlighted that students were more willing to take risks in storytelling compared to structured exercises, demonstrating the motivational impact of narrative activities.

Time constraints and variability in student participation were challenges that teachers mitigated by limiting story length, providing prompts, and scaffolding with guiding questions. The approach exemplifies reflective practice, as teachers continually evaluated student responses and adjusted support to optimise learning outcomes (Velásquez et al., 2023; Arini & Wahyudin, 2022).

Overall, pre-service teachers combined these strategies to create interactive, learner-centred environments. Debate and role play offered structured, realistic opportunities for communication, while cooperative learning and storytelling facilitated peer collaboration, social support, and enjoyment. This blended approach aligns with socio-constructivist theory, emphasising collaborative knowledge construction, scaffolding, and authentic interaction (Vygotsky, 1978; Akpan et al., 2020).

Challenges such as student reluctance, lack of motivation, and limited classroom time necessitated adaptations in real-time. Teachers scaffolded tasks, rotated roles, simplified instructions, and combined methods to maintain engagement. Such adaptations demonstrate reflective practice and pedagogical agility, highlighting the importance of pre-service teachers' flexibility in navigating classroom realities (Velásquez et al., 2023; Arini & Wahyudin, 2022).

The strategies collectively support Krashen's SLA principles, offering comprehensible input in low-anxiety settings, promoting active participation, and facilitating acquisition of functional speaking skills (Krashen, 1982; Gong, 2023). Students' positive responses to these methods suggest that a diverse, adaptive approach is essential for fostering confidence, fluency, and motivation in ESL classrooms.

Furthermore, the findings reveal that pre-service teachers' decision-making was guided by both pedagogical knowledge and reflective awareness. Teachers assessed students' proficiency levels, interests, and engagement patterns before choosing strategies, highlighting the role of reflective and adaptive teaching in effective language instruction. By merging theory, practice, and observation, pre-service teachers operationalised strategies in ways that addressed both linguistic and socio-emotional needs.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study provides insight into how pre-service teachers implement strategies to develop speaking skills among secondary ESL learners in Malaysia. The findings reveal that teachers employ debate, cooperative learning, role play, and storytelling not only to enhance language proficiency but also to build student confidence, motivation, and engagement. Importantly, the study highlights the adaptive practices of pre-service teachers as they navigate classroom challenges such as student hesitance, diverse proficiency levels, and the need to balance language support with active participation.

These experiences underscore the significance of reflective teaching and contextual awareness. Pre-service teachers who critically evaluate their strategies and adjust activities to suit learners' needs foster more supportive and interactive learning environments. The study also reinforces the relevance of socio-constructivist principles and Krashen's Second Language Acquisition theory, demonstrating that scaffolded, meaningful interactions and low-anxiety conditions are central to developing oral competence.

Practical implications emerge for mentor teachers, teacher educators, and institutions. Mentor teachers can provide targeted guidance to pre-service teachers in managing classroom dynamics and tailoring strategies to learners' abilities. Teacher education programmes should prioritise hands-on, contextually grounded training that equips pre-service teachers with diverse methods and problem-solving skills. Institutions and policymakers can support this by facilitating practicums, professional development, and resources to address the challenges of teaching speaking skills effectively.

By linking strategies to classroom realities and reflective practice, this study offers actionable insights for enhancing pre-service teacher preparedness and promoting effective ESL speaking instruction, while providing a foundation for future research on pedagogical innovation, technology integration, and culturally responsive teaching.

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## Conflict Of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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