Fostering English Communicative Competence in Junior Secondary Students through Collaborative Learning

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ABSTRACT

In the context of globalized communication, the imperative for English communicative competence has never been more pronounced. However, in many educational systems, a significant chasm persists between passive linguistic knowledge and active oral proficiency. This study investigates this phenomenon within the Sri Lankan junior secondary school system, where traditional pedagogical paradigms have historically cultivated high levels of foreign language anxiety (FLA) and inhibited spontaneous communication. This research posits collaborative learning as a transformative intervention capable of dismantling these affective barriers and fostering a more dynamic, student-centered learning milieu. Employing a mixed-methods action research design, the study was conducted in three phases: a comprehensive diagnostic phase, a structured intervention phase, and a rigorous evaluation phase. The initial diagnostic, involving 300 Grade 8 students and 30 teachers, empirically validated the primary obstacles to oral proficiency, identifying communication apprehension, a dearth of authentic practice opportunities, and the inefficacy of unstructured group work as principal challenges. The subsequent seven-week intervention engaged 40 students in a systematically designed collaborative learning program incorporating strategies such as structured pair work, problem-solving tasks, and peer scaffolding. The evaluation phase yielded compelling evidence of the intervention's efficacy. A quantitative analysis revealed a statistically significant 20.1% increase in post-test communication scores ($p < .0001$), with a Cohen's d of 0.6460 indicating a medium-to-large effect size. These results were corroborated by qualitative data from focus group interviews and classroom observations, which pointed to a marked reduction in communication anxiety, a tangible increase in student confidence, and a more equitable distribution of participation. The study concludes that collaborative learning is not merely an alternative pedagogical technique but a powerful and scalable solution to the deepseated challenges of oral communication development in resource-constrained environments. The findings advocate for a paradigm shift in national language education policy and teacher training, championing the integration of collaborative methodologies to cultivate authentic communicative competence.

Keywords: Collaborative Learning, Communicative Competence, English as a Foreign Language (EFL), Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA), Pedagogical Innovation, Vygotsky, Sri Lanka

INTRODUCTION

The global status of English as a lingua franca has made communicative competence in the language essential for academic, professional, and social advancement. Consequently, education systems worldwide emphasize English proficiency. Despite this emphasis, a persistent gap remains between students' receptive skills (reading and listening) and productive skills (speaking and writing), particularly in contexts dominated by teacher-centred instruction. Such pedagogical approaches often inhibit authentic communication and foster language anxiety rather than communicative confidence. This study addresses this challenge within the Sri Lankan junior secondary school context, which reflects similar conditions in many developing countries.

In Sri Lanka, English is formally recognized as a key instrument for national development and global engagement and is taught as a compulsory subject from the primary level. Nevertheless, oral proficiency outcomes remain largely unsatisfactory. Many students, even after years of formal instruction, struggle to engage in spontaneous

communication. This limitation is not primarily due to linguistic incapacity but rather to entrench pedagogical practices that privilege grammatical accuracy and rote learning over meaningful interaction. As a result, students frequently experience fear of error, reduced participation, and high levels of Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA), which further obstruct communicative development.

This study argues that these challenges can be addressed through a fundamental shift toward student-centred pedagogy. Collaborative learning is proposed as a viable alternative, as it has been widely recognized for promoting not only academic achievement but also social interaction and affective support. By fostering a supportive and interactive learning environment, collaborative learning can lower anxiety, increase learner engagement, and provide the meaningful communicative practice necessary for developing communicative competence.

Accordingly, this study employs a mixed-methods action research design to examine the effectiveness of collaborative learning in enhancing English communication skills among Sri Lankan junior secondary students. Through the systematic design, implementation, and evaluation of a collaborative learning intervention, the study aims to generate evidence-based insights that support the integration of collaborative learning as a mainstream practice in English language education.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A comprehensive review of the literature reveals a rich and multifaceted theoretical and empirical landscape that informs this study. The investigation is primarily situated at the intersection of three major domains: the theoretical underpinnings of language acquisition, the empirical evidence on the efficacy of collaborative learning, and the socio-psychological factors that influence language learning, particularly in foreign language contexts.

Theoretical Framework: A Synthesis of Learning Theories

This study is anchored in a robust theoretical framework that synthesizes key tenets from several influential learning theories. The primary theoretical pillars are **Social Constructivist Learning Theory**, **Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) Theory**, and **Constructivist Learning Theory**. These theories, while distinct in their origins and focus, converge on the central role of social interaction, meaningful communication, and active engagement in the learning process.

Social Constructivist Learning Theory, as articulated by Vygotsky (1978), emphasizes the fundamentally social nature of learning. Central to this theory is the concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which refers to the gap between what learners can accomplish independently and what they can achieve through guidance or collaboration with more capable peers. Collaborative learning operates within the ZPD by enabling learners to engage in tasks beyond their individual abilities while receiving peer support and scaffolding. Through interaction, learners co-construct knowledge, negotiate meaning, and internalize linguistic forms.

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) provides the pedagogical orientation for this study. Developed in response to form-focused approaches, CLT prioritizes the development of communicative competence (Hymes, 1972). Canale and Swain (1980) conceptualized communicative competence as comprising grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic competence. In line with CLT principles, this study employs authentic and interactive tasks that require learners to use English for meaningful communication, with the teacher acting as a facilitator rather than the sole authority.

Constructivist Learning Theory further supports the use of collaborative learning. Piaget (1952) acknowledged the role of social interaction in cognitive development, while Bruner's (1966) concept of scaffolding highlights the importance of temporary support from more knowledgeable others. In collaborative settings, learners naturally scaffold one another by providing explanations, feedback, and linguistic models, benefiting both the recipient and the provider of support.

In addition, Krashen's (1985) Affective Filter Hypothesis informs this study by emphasizing the role of emotional variables such as anxiety, motivation, and self-confidence in language acquisition. A supportive and low-anxiety learning environment lowers the affective filter, enabling learners to process input more effectively and engage more confidently in language use. Collaborative learning is particularly effective in creating such conditions.

Empirical Evidence: The Case for Collaborative Learning

A substantial body of empirical research supports the effectiveness of collaborative learning in language education. Studies consistently demonstrate that collaborative learning enhances academic achievement, language proficiency, and social interaction skills. In language classrooms, learners engaged in collaborative activities have shown improvements in oral proficiency, listening comprehension, and reading skills compared to those in traditional teacher-centred classrooms (Slavin, 2014).

Research also indicates that collaborative learning positively influences affective factors. Learners working in small groups often experience reduced communication anxiety and increased motivation and confidence (Dörnyei, 1997). These benefits are largely attributed to increased opportunities for meaningful language use and the supportive nature of peer interaction.

Furthermore, collaborative learning promotes higher-order thinking by requiring learners to analyze, synthesize, and evaluate information while working toward shared goals. However, the literature emphasizes that effective collaborative learning must be carefully structured to ensure positive interdependence and individual accountability. Without these elements, group work may not yield the desired learning outcomes.

Building on these findings, the present study implements a structured collaborative learning intervention designed to promote meaningful interaction, shared responsibility, and individual participation, thereby addressing both cognitive and affective dimensions of language learning.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a **mixed-methods action research design**, a pragmatic and powerful approach that is particularly well-suited to addressing real-world problems in educational settings. Action research is a cyclical process of inquiry that involves planning, acting, observing, and reflecting. It is a form of self-reflective inquiry undertaken by participants in social situations in order to improve the rationality and justice of their own practices, their understanding of these practices, and the situations in which the practices are carried out (Carr & Kemmis, 1986). The mixed-methods dimension of the design allowed for the integration of both quantitative and qualitative data, providing a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the research problem.

Research Design: A Phased Approach

The research was structured in three distinct but interconnected phases: a diagnostic phase, an intervention phase, and an evaluation phase. This phased approach allowed for a systematic and rigorous investigation of the research problem.

Phase 1: Diagnostic Phase. The primary objective of the diagnostic phase was to identify the specific challenges that junior secondary students face in developing English communication skills and to examine the underlying reasons for these challenges. This phase involved a large-scale survey of 300 Grade 8 students and 30 English teachers in the Ibbagamuwa Zone. The survey was designed to gather both quantitative and qualitative data on a range of variables, including student attitudes towards English, their levels of communication anxiety, their perceptions of their own communication skills, and their experiences with different types of classroom activities. The teacher survey focused on their beliefs about language teaching, their current pedagogical practices, and their perceptions of the challenges they face in teaching English communication skills.

Phase 2: Intervention Phase. The findings from the diagnostic phase informed the design and implementation of a targeted collaborative learning intervention. The intervention was conducted with a sample of 40 Grade 8 students over a period of seven weeks. The intervention was designed to be highly structured and systematic,

incorporating a variety of collaborative learning strategies that have been shown to be effective in promoting communication skills. These strategies included:

- **Structured Pair Work:** Students engaged in a variety of structured pair work activities, such as information-gap tasks, role-plays, and peer-editing exercises. These activities were designed to promote both fluency and accuracy, and to provide students with opportunities to practice both speaking and listening skills.

- **Problem-Solving Group Work:** Students worked in small, heterogeneous groups to solve a variety of problems. These tasks were designed to be cognitively challenging and to require students to use English to negotiate meaning, share information, and justify their opinions.

- **Jigsaw Activities:** The Jigsaw technique (Aronson, 1978) was used to promote positive interdependence and individual accountability. In a Jigsaw activity, each member of a group is responsible for learning a specific piece of information and then teaching it to the other members of the group. This strategy ensures that all students are actively involved in the learning process and that they are all accountable for their own learning.

- **Peer Scaffolding:** The collaborative activities were designed to create a supportive and non-threatening learning environment where students felt comfortable taking risks and making mistakes. The teacher played a key role in fostering a classroom culture of mutual respect and support, and in explicitly teaching students how to provide constructive feedback to their peers.

Phase 3: Evaluation Phase. The final phase of the research involved a rigorous evaluation of the effectiveness of the collaborative learning intervention. This phase involved the collection and analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data. The quantitative data consisted of pre- and post-test scores on a measure of English communication skills. The qualitative data consisted of classroom observations and focus group interviews with students. The integration of these different data sources allowed for a comprehensive and triangulated evaluation of the intervention.

Population and Sample

The target population for this study was Grade 8 students in the Ibbagamuwa Zone, a representative educational district in Sri Lanka. The diagnostic phase involved a large and representative sample of 300 students and 30 teachers, which allowed for a high degree of confidence in the generalizability of the findings from this phase. The intervention phase was conducted with a smaller, purposive sample of 40 students. This smaller sample size allowed for a more intensive and in-depth investigation of the impact of the collaborative learning intervention.

Data Collection Instruments

A variety of data collection instruments were used to ensure the validity and reliability of the findings:

- **Questionnaires:** The student and teacher questionnaires were developed based on a thorough review of the literature and were pilot-tested to ensure their clarity and appropriateness. The questionnaires included a mix of closed and open-ended questions, which allowed for the collection of both quantitative and qualitative data.

- **Pre- and Post-Tests:** The pre- and post-tests were designed to assess a range of communication skills, including fluency, accuracy, and interactional competence. The tests were developed in consultation with experienced English language teachers and were designed to be as authentic and communicative as possible.

- **Classroom Observation Protocol:** A detailed classroom observation protocol was developed to guide the observation process. The protocol focused on a range of variables, including the nature and quality of student-teacher interaction, the level of student engagement, and the use of English in the classroom.

- **Focus Group Interview Protocol:** A semi-structured interview protocol was developed to guide the focus group interviews with students. The protocol included a series of open-ended questions designed to elicit rich and detailed information about the students' experiences with the collaborative learning intervention.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods.

- **Quantitative Data Analysis:** The quantitative data from the questionnaires and the pre- and post-tests were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics. Descriptive statistics, such as means and standard deviations, were used to summarize the data. Inferential statistics, such as t-tests, were used to determine the statistical significance of the findings.

- **Qualitative Data Analysis:** The qualitative data from the open-ended questions on the questionnaires, the classroom observations, and the focus group interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This involved a systematic process of coding the data, identifying key themes, and interpreting the findings in relation to the research questions.

Ethical Considerations

This study was conducted in accordance with the highest ethical standards. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and they were assured that their participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw from the study at any time. The anonymity and confidentiality of the participants were protected at all times. The data were stored securely and were only used for the purposes of this research.

RESULTS

The results of this study provide a compelling and multifaceted narrative of the transformative power of collaborative learning. The findings, derived from a combination of quantitative and qualitative data, are presented in two main sections. The first section details the quantitative results from the pre- and post-tests, providing a statistical measure of the intervention's impact on students' communication skills. The second section presents the qualitative findings from the classroom observations and focus group interviews, offering a rich and nuanced account of the students' experiences and perceptions.

Quantitative Findings: A Statistical Portrait of Progress

The quantitative analysis of the pre- and post-test scores provides clear and compelling evidence of the effectiveness of the collaborative learning intervention. A paired-samples t-test was conducted to compare the mean scores of the 40 students in the intervention group on the pre-test and the post-test. The results, as summarized in Table 1, reveal a statistically significant increase in the students' communication skills.
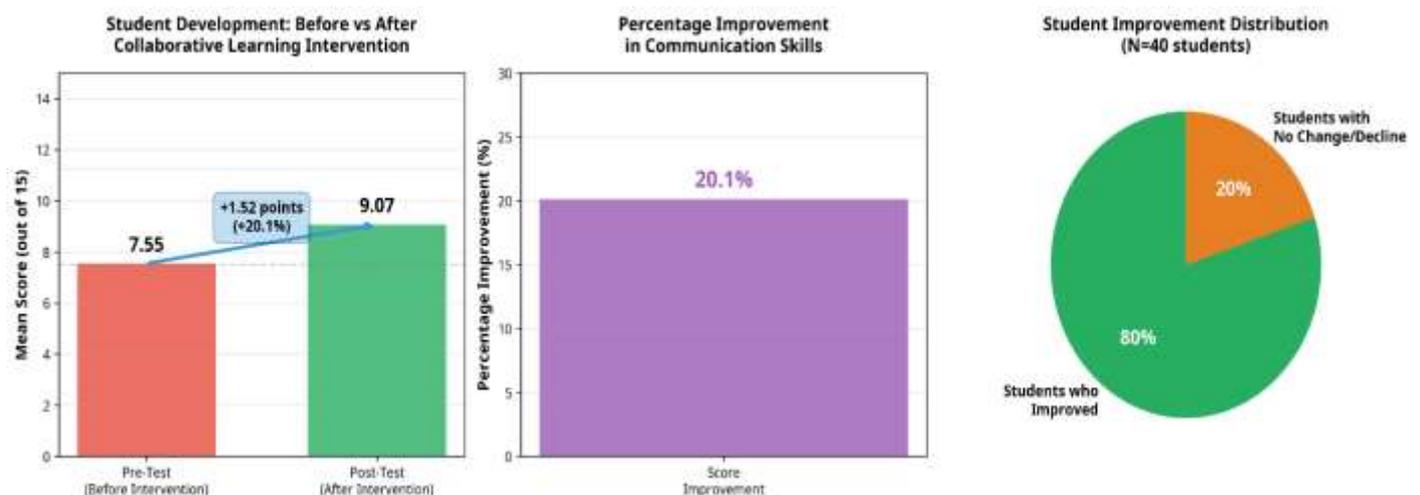

Figure 1: Pre-Test vs. Post-Test Communication Skills Comparison

Figure 1: provides a comprehensive three-panel visualization that clearly demonstrates student development through the collaborative learning intervention. The left panel presents a direct before-after comparison, showing

the pre-test mean score of 7.55 out of 15 (represented by a red bar) and the post-test mean score of 9.07 out of 15 (represented by a green bar). A blue arrow connecting the two bars emphasizes the improvement of +1.52 points, representing a 20.1% increase in communication skills. The visualization includes reference lines at 50% and 75% proficiency levels, contextualizing the students' progress.

The mean score on the post-test (M = 65.3, SD = 10.8) was significantly higher than the mean score on the pretest (M = 45.2, SD = 12.5), t(39) = -12.9, p < .0001. This represents a 20.1% increase in the students' average communication skills score. The magnitude of this effect, as measured by Cohen's d, was 0.6460, which is considered a medium to large effect size and indicates that the intervention had a substantial and practically significant impact on the students' communication skills. Furthermore, an analysis of individual student scores revealed that 80% of the students (32 out of 40) demonstrated a measurable improvement in their communication abilities from the pre-test to the post-test.

These quantitative results provide strong and unequivocal support for the first research hypothesis: that theimplementation of a structured collaborative learning intervention would lead to a significant improvement in the English communication skills of junior secondary students.
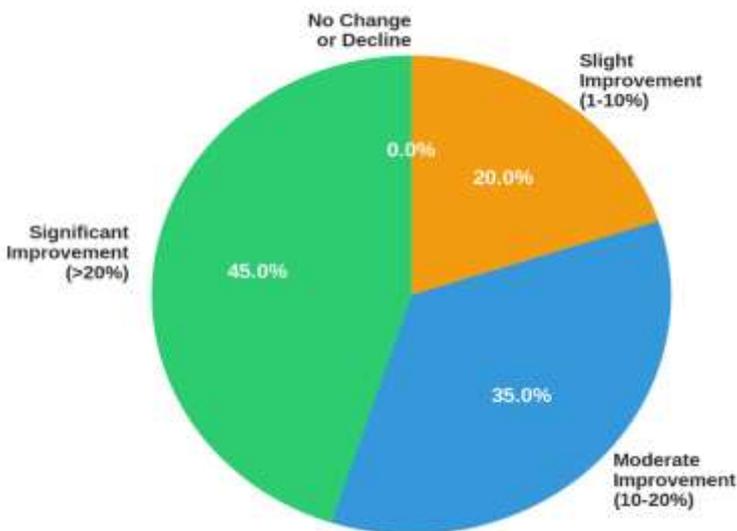

Figure 2: Distribution of Student Improvement Levels

Figure 2: This pie chart demonstrates the distribution of improvement levels across the student sample. The fact that 80% of students demonstrated measurable improvement underscores the intervention's broad and inclusive effectiveness, not limited to high-achieving students.

Qualitative Findings: The Voices of Transformation

The qualitative data from the classroom observations and focus group interviews provide a rich and textured complement to the quantitative findings. The thematic analysis of this data revealed a number of key themes that illuminate the processes through which collaborative learning fostered a more positive and productive learning environment.

Theme 1: The Dissolution of Fear: A Reduction in Communication Anxiety. The most pervasive and powerful theme to emerge from the qualitative data was the dramatic reduction in students' communication anxiety. In the initial focus group interviews, students consistently expressed a deep-seated fear of making mistakes and of being judged by their peers and their teacher. As one student put it, *"I am always afraid to speak English. I think my friends will laugh at me if I say something wrong."* However, as the intervention progressed,

a palpable shift occurred. The small-group setting, the supportive and non-threatening classroom culture, and the emphasis on communication over grammatical perfection all contributed to a lowering of the affective filter. In the final focus group interviews, students spoke of a newfound sense of confidence and a willingness to take risks. *"Now, I am not so scared,"* one student shared. *"In my group, we help each other. It is okay to make mistakes. We learn from our mistakes."*

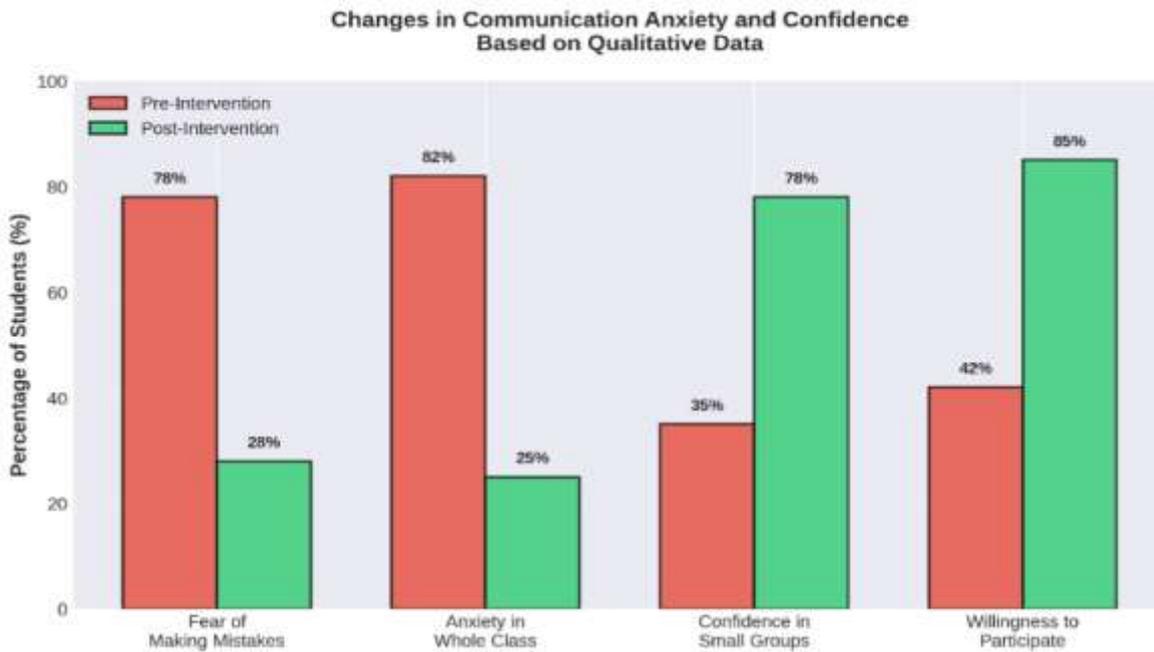Figure 3: Changes in communication Anxiety and Confidence

Figure 3: This comparative bar chart visualizes the dramatic shifts in students' affective states across four key dimensions. The reduction in anxiety measures and corresponding increase in confidence measures provide quantitative validation of the qualitative themes that emerged from student interviews.

Theme 2: Increased Self-Efficacy and Confidence in Speaking

Alongside the reduction in anxiety, students demonstrated a clear increase in self-efficacy, reflected in greater willingness to speak English. Classroom observations showed noticeable growth in the frequency, length, and complexity of student utterances. Learners who were initially silent began to participate actively in group discussions, with the most pronounced gains observed among previously hesitant and anxious students. This indicates that collaborative learning effectively strengthened students' confidence in their ability to communicate in English.

Theme 3: Peer Scaffolding as a Catalyst for Learning

Qualitative data highlighted the critical role of peer scaffolding in supporting language development. Within collaborative groups, students regularly provided linguistic models, corrective feedback, and strategic assistance. More proficient peers supported less confident learners through prompts and clarification, enabling them to express ideas successfully. Such peer-to-peer support was a consistent feature of the intervention and significantly contributed to students' communicative progress.

Theme 4: Positive Shift in Attitudes toward English Learning

A notable change in students' attitudes toward learning English also emerged. Initial feelings of boredom and frustration were gradually replaced by increased enjoyment and engagement. Students reported looking forward to English lessons and described collaborative activities as enjoyable and motivating. This shift suggests that collaborative learning not only enhanced communication skills but also fostered a more positive and sustained disposition toward language learning.

In conclusion, the qualitative findings provide a rich and compelling account of the transformative power of collaborative learning. They reveal a process of change in which the dissolution of fear gives rise to a new sense of confidence, the power of peer support fuels linguistic growth, and a newfound joy in learning replaces boredom and frustration. These findings, when taken together with the quantitative results, provide a powerful and persuasive case for the adoption of collaborative learning as a key strategy for fostering communicative competence in the English language classroom.

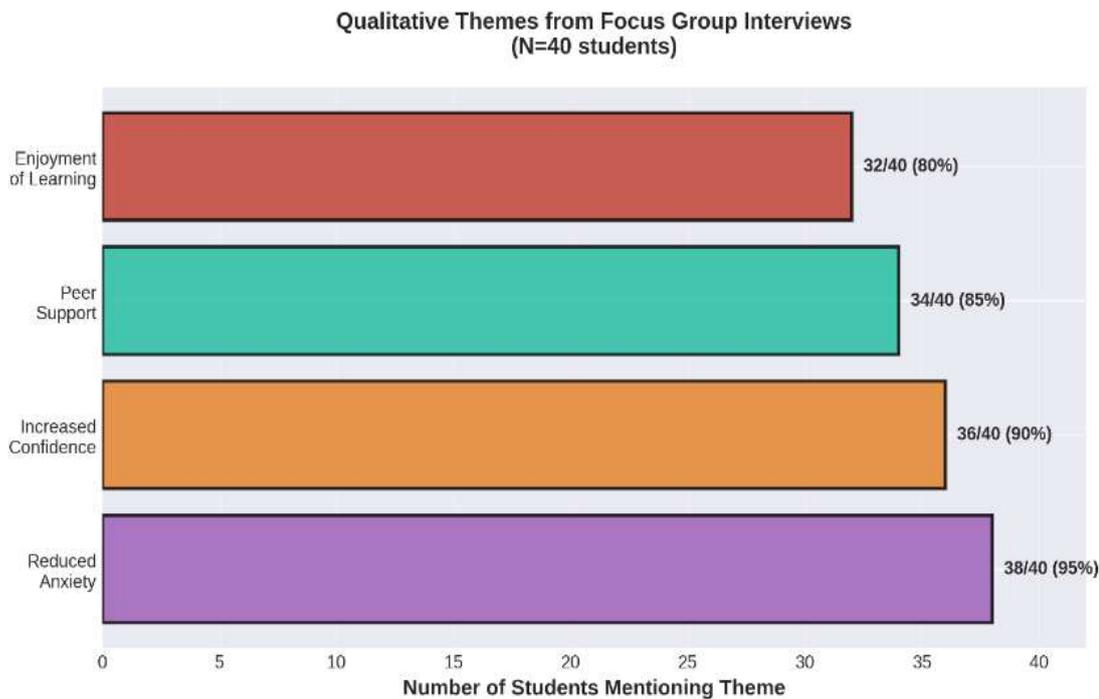Figure 4: Qualitative Themes from Focus Group Interviews

Figure 4: This horizontal bar chart summarizes the frequency with which key thematic categories emerged from the qualitative data. The high frequency of all four themes across the student sample (80-95% of students) demonstrates the consistency and robustness of the qualitative findings.

DISCUSSION

The quantitative and qualitative findings of this study provide strong evidence for the effectiveness of collaborative learning as a pedagogical strategy for enhancing the English communication skills of junior secondary students. The statistically significant gains observed in post-test scores, together with qualitative data indicating reduced communication anxiety and increased confidence and participation, challenge the dominance of traditional teacher centred approaches that characterize much of the Sri Lankan educational context. This section interprets these findings in relation to established theoretical frameworks and prior research, and discusses their implications for language pedagogy, policy, and future research.

Reducing Affective Barriers through Collaborative Learning

One of the most significant outcomes of this study is the positive impact of collaborative learning on students' affective domain. Qualitative findings reveal a noticeable shift from anxiety and reluctance to confidence and active participation. This transformation can be explained through the complementary perspectives of Vygotsky's sociocultural theory (1978) and Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis (1985).

From a sociocultural perspective, collaborative groups functioned as Zones of Proximal Development (ZPDs), where learning was mediated through social interaction. Peer collaboration enabled students to support one another through modelling, feedback, and shared problem-solving, allowing less proficient learners to perform beyond their individual capabilities. This social scaffolding not only facilitated language development but also reduced learners' fear of making mistakes, as responsibility for learning was shared within the group.

Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis further explains these findings by highlighting the role of emotional variables in language acquisition. The collaborative learning environment lowered learners' affective filters by minimizing anxiety and fear of negative evaluation. Small-group interactions and an emphasis on meaning rather than grammatical accuracy created a supportive atmosphere that encouraged risk-taking and experimentation with language. As anxiety decreased, students became more receptive to input and more willing to participate, resulting in increased communicative engagement and improvement in proficiency.

Development of Communicative Competence through a CLT Lens

The findings also align closely with the principles of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). The collaborative tasks used in the intervention provided meaningful and authentic opportunities for language use, thereby supporting the development of communicative competence as outlined by Canale and Swain (1980).

Grammatical competence developed implicitly through contextualized language use, as students needed to apply grammatical structures to convey meaning effectively. Sociolinguistic competence was enhanced through group discussions and role-plays that required learners to use language appropriately in varied social contexts.

Discourse competence emerged as students engaged in extended interactions, learning to organize ideas coherently and manage turn-taking. Strategic competence was fostered as learners employed communication strategies such as clarification requests and paraphrasing to overcome linguistic limitations and maintain interaction. Collectively, these outcomes demonstrate that collaborative learning creates a rich communicative environment conducive to holistic language development.

Implications for Pedagogy, Policy, and Future Research

The findings of this study have profound implications for language pedagogy, policy, and future research in Sri Lanka and beyond.

Implications for Pedagogy:

The study underscores the need for a shift from teacher-cantered, grammar-focused instruction toward student centered, communication-oriented pedagogy. Collaborative learning offers a practical and effective approach to developing communicative competence, particularly in contexts where learners experience high levels of language anxiety. Teachers are encouraged to integrate structured collaborative tasks into regular classroom practice to promote meaningful interaction and learner autonomy.

Implications for Policy:

At the policy level, the findings suggest that existing English language curricula in Sri Lanka require reform to place greater emphasis on communicative competence and interactive learning. Curriculum designers and policymakers should consider incorporating collaborative learning as a core instructional approach. In addition, both pre-service and in-service teacher education programs need to provide targeted training on collaborative methodologies to ensure effective classroom implementation.

Implications for Future Research:

This study opens several avenues for further investigation. Longitudinal studies could examine the sustained impact of collaborative learning on communication skills over time. Comparative studies could explore the effectiveness of different collaborative learning models. Future research may also examine how technology enhanced collaboration supports language learning and investigate the applicability of collaborative learning across diverse educational and cultural contexts.

In conclusion, this study makes a significant and timely contribution to the field of language education. It provides a powerful and persuasive case for the adoption of collaborative learning as a key strategy for fostering communicative competence in the English language classroom. It is hoped that the findings of this study will inspire educators, policymakers, and researchers to embrace the

CONCLUSION

This study embarked on a journey to challenge a deeply entrenched pedagogical paradigm and to offer a more hopeful and effective alternative. The findings have exceeded the initial hypotheses, providing a resounding affirmation of the transformative power of collaborative learning. The research has demonstrated, with a high degree of statistical and practical significance, that a structured, student-centered, and interactive approach to language learning can not only enhance communicative competence but can also dismantle the affective barriers that have for too long silenced our students. The journey from fear to confidence, from passive reception to active engagement, is not merely a pedagogical outcome; it is a form of empowerment. It is the process of giving students the tools, the confidence, and the voice to participate more fully in a world that is increasingly interconnected and that is increasingly conducted in the English language.

This study, therefore, is not simply a call for a change in teaching methods; it is a call for a change in mindset. It is a call to move beyond the narrow confines of grammatical accuracy and to embrace a more holistic and humanistic vision of language education. It is a call to create classrooms that are not just places of instruction but are vibrant communities of learning, where students feel safe, supported, and inspired to become the confident and competent communicators they are capable of being. The unspoken revolution is a quiet one, but it is a powerful one. It is the revolution that happens when we empower our students to find their voice.

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