

Peer Interaction in English Speaking Skills

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DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2025.924ILEIID0068>

Received: 23 September 2025; Accepted: 30 September 2025; Published: 31 October 2025

ABSTRACT

Speaking skills remain a challenging skill for learners of English as a Second Language (ESL), as compared to other language skills (reading, writing, and listening). This issue could stem from a variety of factors such as anxiety, interference of first language, or lack of interaction in the target language. This study aims to explore the role of peer interaction in English speaking skills among the ESL learners. In order to investigate this issue, this study employed a purely quantitative research approach, specifically through a survey research design. A set of questionnaire was utilised as the instrument to gather data among tertiary level ESL students of one public university in Malaysia. The respondents were chosen using simple random sampling to measure the viewpoints of students across different academic years in one faculty. Based on the findings of this study, it was found that students had a positive view towards peer interaction in English language, seeing it as helpful for becoming more fluent and building their confidence, as well as encouraging them to participate more in English language classes. While issues like anxiety and different level of proficiency among peers become a concern, these were not considered as major problems. These findings highlight the value of peer interaction in the field of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) and the teaching of English language in ESL classrooms.

Keywords: (Peer interaction, English speaking skills, ESL learners, second language acquisition, speaking skills)

INTRODUCTION

English language, which is a lingua franca in the modern world is vital in the cross-cultural communication and is widely used in international collaborations in many fields such as the fields of technology, business, education, and science (Rao, 2019). In today's globalisation, English language proficiency is a demand in many work industries, hence there is an increasing pressure in educational institutions to ensure students have a good proficiency of English language. However,

For a second language learner, especially in English language, a lot of efforts and strategies are needed to gain proficiency. However, when learning English as a second language (ESL), the traditional approach to learning this language is by prioritising writing and grammar accuracy over the proficiency in speaking skills. While writing skill and grammar accuracy is vital in ensuring understandable communication, speaking skill is also incredibly important in conveying messages. Nevertheless, the lack of emphasis in English speaking skill has led to a gap among the ESL learners whereby they might be able to write well, but they lack the confidence and proficiency to speak English interactively for real-world communication.

For ESL learners, a lot of them has problem to speak this language well due to several reasons such as anxiety or insecurity (Islam & Roy, 2024). Due to these reasons, a more holistic approach is needed to help the learners to master speaking skills. One way to support their learning is by ensuring they have increased verbal practice in their daily lives to bridge the gap between formal and informal language acquisition across various contexts. From the Vygotskian perspective on Sociocultural Theory (Vygotsky, 1978), peer interaction is seen as a promising strategy to address this issue. This is because in this theory, learning takes place through social interaction, hence peer interaction in English language is a potential tool to help learners speak better in the language. According to Nhan (2020), language learners would be able to improve their linguistic and cognitive

skills by interacting with more proficient peers within their Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). Through collaborative activities, ESL learners would be able to engage in a more authentic communication, and they would be able to practice their speaking skills in a low-stakes environment.

There is a significant gap in the existing literature on the use and benefits of peer interaction on speaking skills among ESL learners. This gap highlights the need to further investigate how peer interaction strategies can assist students in learning English speaking skills. Therefore, this study aimed to investigate the role of peer interaction in enhancing ESL learners' speaking skills. Based on this purpose, the objectives of this study were to:

- 1) examine the ESL learners' perceptions of peer interaction to enhance their English speaking skills
- 2) identify the challenges that ESL learners might face with peer interaction
- 3) determine the influence of peer interaction on ESL learners' speaking fluency.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory and Krashen's Input Hypothesis

In the Sociocultural Theory by Vygotsky (1978), it proposes that cognitive development occurs through a social interaction process, where a person collaborates or learns from someone who is more knowledgeable and have more experience. This process happens within the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which is a distance between what a learner can accomplish independently and what the learner can accomplish with a guidance and help from someone who is more knowledgeable (Nhan, 2020). In the context of ESL, the learners will be able to develop their cognitive and language skills by collaborating with peers or instructors who are more proficient in the language (Panhwar et al., 2016).

Meanwhile, Krashen's Input Hypothesis (1992) is also a theory most referred to in the second language acquisition field. Krashen argues that learners could acquire language when they are exposed to inputs that are beyond one's level of proficiency but could still be understood by the learner ($i+1$). In relation to peer interactions, learners could potentially learn from one another through meaningful collaborative activities. When they are exposed to language inputs that are meaningful during classroom activities, it could help them to acquire language without feeling pressured compared to doing individual activities. Swain and Watanabe (2012) stated that authentic and meaningful conversations between peers would expose them to vocabulary, grammar, structure and pronunciation of English language, which would contribute to their speaking fluency.

In addition, Krashen (1982) also emphasised the Affective Filter Hypothesis, in which he argued that affective variables have influence in the second language acquisition. In this hypothesis, there are three affective variables that could affect one's acquisition of second language which are motivation, self-confidence, and anxiety. Second language learners that have high motivation, high self-confidence and low anxiety, generally perform better in the second language acquisition (Krashen, 1982). In this study, the peer interactions in English speaking activities might involve the affective variables mentioned by Krashen (1982), hence, justifying the use of this theory in this study.

ESL Learners' Perceptions of Peer Interaction

Peer interaction plays a crucial role in the language learning process, particularly in enhancing ESL learners' speaking and writing skills. Multiple studies (Siak et al., 2021; Husin & Hj Ariffin., 2008; Govindasamy & Shah, 2020) consistently highlighted the significance of peer interaction in language learning especially in writing and speaking skills. In a recent study, Siak et al. (2021) surveyed the perceptions of ESL learners towards peer interaction in an intermediate English writing course at a Malaysian university. Results indicated that learners appreciated peer feedback maximally to improve clarity and coherence of their writing, as it meant they had seen it from different perspectives and helped them build confidence. Cultural norms sometimes inhibited students from making critical comments, as noted by Siak et al. (2021). They, therefore,

suggested that peer feedback training could be a powerful means of improving the effectiveness of peer collaboration.

This argument is supported by Husin and Hj Ariffin (2008), who examined peer feedback among 19 Malay ESL learners in a Malaysian college writing course. Their findings overlapped with those of Siak et al. (2021) in demonstrating that peer feedback was essential for the refinement of students' writing. Both studies together indicate a clear need for structured peer feedback sessions that would also offer solid guidelines for better collaboration. However, Husin and Hj Ariffin (2008) further observed that linguistic competence affected the participative power of learners, hence the lower-level students being fearful of critiquing others, while the higher-level learners probably tended to disregard feedback made by less expert peers.

Challenges Associated with Peer Interaction

Various studies indicate that several challenges hinder effective peer interaction. Therefore, the studies of these works (Tinggie et al., 2023; Ying et al., 2021; Mendieta-Aragón et al., 2023) offer insights into barriers to peer interaction in different educational settings from ESL primary classrooms to online university courses and hybrid learning. Some of these barriers that have been raised include communication anxiety, unequal participation, technological barriers, and the lack of structured peer-learning frameworks.

The biggest challenge is caused by the students' reluctance to respond because of anxiety and lack of confidence in their speaking. Tinggie et al. (2023) show that ESL primary school students were hesitant to participate in peer discussion owing to fear of making mistakes, together limiting their potential to benefit from peer scaffolding. Similarly, Ying et al. (2021) reported that ESL learners studying online were afflicted with speaking anxiety and had issues interacting through video conferencing tools since they did not have face-to-face interactions, which made them feel more isolated and disengaged. Likewise, Mendieta-Aragón et al. (2023) had noticed that students creating digital content for peer learning in hybrid university settings encountered barriers to expressing their thoughts effectively. The combined findings here point to social and psychological factors that sometimes restrict peer interaction and should be addressed through certain other interventions to create a more supportive and inclusive environment.

The unbalanced participation levels amongst students formed another major barrier to enhanced peer learning. Tinggie et al. (2023) found the level of English amongst students, as well as personality traits (introversion versus extroversion), as variables influencing participation in peer scaffolding activities. Students with higher English language proficiency tend to dominate the discussions while students with lower proficiency sit back, gaining little from the interaction. Similarly, it was noted by Mendieta-Aragón et al. (2023) that those who played the role of "teachers" by creating digital learning content were far more engaged and motivated than those who did mere learning. The learner groups had a significantly lower level of participatory engagement, signifying the importance of carefully structured peer-learning activities which promote equal participation. Ying et al. (2021) stressed that the asynchronous discussions in online learning environments took place over their social media, where unequal engagement by the participating students was observed. These highlight the challenge of achieving balanced participation in peer learning in digital and hybrid modes.

Influence of Peer Interaction on Speaking Fluency

Research indicates the ways in which collaborative learning environments, structured peer activities, and interactive techniques positively contribute to the development of oral communication skills. For instance, these studies (Namaziandost et al., 2020; Saeid, 2025; Fauzan, 2016), seem to point out that peer interaction significantly develops fluency, confidence, and engagement in language learning.

Namaziandost et al. (2020) investigated the effect of cooperative learning strategies on the speaking fluency of Iranian EFL learners. The study involved 72 intermediate-level students and showed that peer-based activities, including Think-Pair-Share and Numbered Heads, maximized their speaking fluency skills. The results indicated that structured peer interaction had a positive impact on the students' active participation, on-the-spot communication, and fluent use of language. Similarly, Saeid (2025) explored the effectiveness of peer interaction on secondary school Kurdish EFL learners. A quantitative approach revealed that peer discussions

and collaborative tasks improved listening and speaking skills. These findings coincide with Fauzan (2016), who looked into how debate and peer assessment could improve speaking abilities afloat on third-semester EFL students in Indonesia. His study found that structured peer collaboration and assessment afforded learners the opportunity to express themselves in a more fluent and confident manner.

METHODOLOGY

This research employed a quantitative approach, specifically a survey research design to achieve the research objectives of this study. This approach was suitable for this study as it could gather data in a large amount to help this study to identify ESL learners' perspectives of peer interaction on their speaking skills. The structured data collection and statistical analyses of this approach (Longe, 2019) and design helped this study to generate general conclusions on peer interaction and English speaking skills.

The target population of this study was ESL university students, who enrolled in two English language programs in a faculty in one public university in Selangor, Malaysia. The respondents involved were those from the first semester until the final semester. Additionally, the specific criteria for sampling frame in the study was students who could speak and understand English. In addition, simple random sampling was utilised to select the sample respondents to participate in this study. This sampling technique was chosen due to the probability of each respondent in the target population to be chosen equally to participate in the study, which made the sample of the study more representative (Taherdoost, 2016). The total number of sample size involved in this study was 100 respondents, with a response rate of 70.4%.

To collect data for this study, a questionnaire was selected as the research instrument to investigate the learners' perceptions on peer interaction in speaking skills. The questionnaire was adapted from two previous studies which were from Gong's (2023) and Ding's and Zhu's (2025) studies. There were four sections in the questionnaire: 1) demographic profiles, 2) perceptions of ESL learners on peer interaction in speaking skills, 3) challenges faced by ESL learners in peer interaction activities, and 4) the influence of peer interaction on ESL learners' speaking skills. The demographic profiles section utilised multiple choice question items for respondents to choose the options. Meanwhile, the second, third, and fourth sections of the study utilised a 5-point Likert Scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The questionnaire consisted of 26 items in total.

Before collecting data from the target population, this study applied the research ethics approval from the faculty to ensure that all processes and procedures of this study comply with the ethical standards for research. Once the ethics approval was obtained, this study started to contact the respondents through online platforms such as email, WhatsApp, and Telegram applications. To gather the data, an online Google Form survey link was distributed to the respondents for easy access and answering on the respondents' part. In the link distributed, respondents were asked to fill consent form to ensure that they participated in this study willingly, and to give brief information and explanation to them regarding this study. Confidentiality of their responses was also included in the consent form to assure them that their responses were strictly confidential and were used for the purpose of this study only.

In order to analyse the data of from the survey, this study employed the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) software. Responses gathered from the survey were keyed in into this software accordingly. For the purposes of data analysis, descriptive statistics analyses were conducted to analyse data pertaining to the ESL learners' perceptions regarding peer interaction, challenges they faced and influence of peer interaction on their speaking skills. Before the descriptive analyses were computed, this study determined the reliability of the instrument used through Cronbach's Alpha analysis, which yielded a result of acceptable reliability value according to George and Mallery (2003), as $\alpha = 0.724$.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Respondents' demographic profiles

The purpose of this study was to investigate the role of peer interaction in English speaking skills among ESL university learners in a public university in Selangor, Malaysia. The results are presented according to the three research objectives determined in this study for a structured and comprehensive understanding.

Table 1 Respondents' demographic profiles

Variables	Category	Frequency (n = 100)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	48	48
	Female	52	52
Age group	18-20	14	14
	21-23	63	63
	24-26	23	23
Study year	First	14	14
	Second	23	23
	Third	63	63

Table 1 above presents the respondents' demographic profiles of this study. Based on the table, there were 48% of male respondents and 52% of female respondents. A majority of the respondents were in the age group of 21 to 23, with a percentage of 63%. The second highest group was the respondents from 24 to 26 years old (23%) and the least was respondents in the age group of 18 to 20 years old (14%). In regard to the respondents' study year, most of the respondents in this study were from third year (63%), and 23% of them were from the second year, while respondents from the first year were only 14% from the total respondents involved in this study. In general, it is concluded that a majority of respondents in this study were female respondents, in the age of 21 to 23 years old, and mostly are in their third year of education.

Perceptions of ESL learners of peer interaction to enhance English speaking skills

Table 2 Descriptive statistics of peer interaction to enhance English speaking skills

Items	Mean	Std. Deviation
1) I believe that peer interaction helps me improve my English speaking skills.	4.27	0.81
2) I feel more confident in speaking English when interacting with my peers.	4.00	0.79
3) I think peer interaction provides a better opportunity to practice speaking English compared to speaking with teachers.	3.99	0.93
4) I enjoy participating in peer interaction activities to enhance my English fluency.	3.95	1.02
5) I find that engaging in conversations with my peers helps me become more comfortable with speaking English.	4.11	0.99

6) I feel motivated to use English more frequently because of peer interaction.	4.04	0.89
7) I believe that peer interaction encourages me to express myself in English more naturally.	4.14	0.86
Total mean score	4.07	0.53

Table 2 presents the results of the descriptive statistics analysis for ESL learners' perceptions of peer interacting to enhance English speaking skills. Based on the table, it was found that the highest mean score is 4.27 (SD = 0.81), which refers to the item 'I believe that peer interaction helps me improve my English speaking skills'. This is followed by the item 'I believe that peer interaction encourages me to express myself in English more naturally' (M = 4.14, SD = 0.86). On the other hand, most of the respondents somewhat agree that they enjoy participating in peer interaction activities to enhance their English fluency, as this item obtained the lowest mean score (M = 3.95, SD = 1.02). The respondents also somewhat agreed that peer interaction provides better opportunity to practise speaking English compared to speaking with teachers (M = 3.99, SD = 0.93). The total mean score for this section was 4.07 (SD = 0.53), which indicates that respondents in this study had positive perceptions of peer interaction in enhancing their English speaking skills.

The findings above showed that generally, ESL learners feel positive about having peer interactions when speaking in English language. They believed that peer interactions helped to improve their English speaking skills, and they were more encouraged to use English more naturally. This result confirms Vygotsky's (1978) Sociocultural Theory, whereby a learner is able to gain more knowledge through social interaction and scaffoldings from someone who is far more knowledgeable within their Zone of Proximal Development. Not only that, peer interaction is believed to provide more inputs, thus helping a learner to further improve their knowledge. This aligns with Krashen's Input Hypothesis (1992) where a learner is able to acquire language better when they are exposed to something slightly beyond their knowledge, but still comprehensible (i+1).

Challenges faced during peer interaction

Table 3 Challenges faced during peer interaction

Items	Mean	Std. Deviation
1) I experience anxiety when interacting with my peers in English.	3.64	1.18
2) I find it difficult to express my thoughts clearly when speaking with my peers.	3.56	1.06
3) I sometimes struggle with understanding my peers during peer interaction activities.	3.58	1.05
4) I feel uncomfortable when my peers correct my English during interactions.	3.46	1.13
5) I find that my limited vocabulary hinders my ability to interact effectively with peers.	3.82	1.07
6) I feel that cultural differences create challenges during peer interactions	3.69	1.14
7) I have difficulty maintaining the flow of conversation with my peers in English.	3.58	1.13
Total mean score	3.62	0.76

Table 3 above displays the respondents' challenges that they faced during peer interactions. From the table, it is observed that respondents mostly had problem with their limited vocabulary that hinders their ability to

interact effectively with peers, as this item obtained the highest mean score ($M = 3.82$, $SD = 1.07$). This is followed by the challenge of cultural differences that create challenges during peer interactions ($M = 3.69$, $SD = 1.14$). In the contrary, the respondents somewhat agreed that they had uncomfortable feelings when their peers corrected their English during interactions as this item had the lowest mean score ($M = 3.46$, $SD = 1.13$). This indicates that they do not really have issues with their peers correcting them. The total mean score of the challenges that respondents faced during peer interactions was 3.62 ($SD = 0.76$), which is a moderate mean score. The moderate score indicates that the respondents in this study encountered challenges during peer interactions, however the challenges were not really significant to their English-speaking skills.

This finding supports Ying's et al. (2021) study, whereby they stated that having sufficient vocabulary is vital to communicate competently, and the lack of vocabulary could lead to ineffective collaborative interactions. The respondents in this study also did not really feel uncomfortable when their peers corrected them during interactions, which shows that ESL learners appreciate the feedback that they received from their peers. As stated by Husin and Hj Ariffin (2008), a respectful feedback with a clear purpose from peers would actually increase students' motivation, self-reflection, and their willingness to improve. This aligns with Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis whereby with high motivation and self-confidence, learners would be able to learn the language better. In addition, Tinggie et al. (2023) asserted that through peer feedback and scaffolding, the learners are encouraged to provide mutual support, understanding, and encouragement to each other.

Influence of peer interaction on speaking fluency

Table 4 Influence of peer interaction on speaking fluency

Items	Mean	Std. Deviation
1) I have noticed an improvement in my English speaking fluency through peer interaction.	4.10	0.93
2) I feel more confident speaking English in real life situations because of peer interaction.	4.06	0.79
3) I believe peer interaction has helped me become more fluent in speaking English.	4.01	0.88
4) I can speak English more easily and fluently after participating in peer interaction activities.	4.18	0.81
5) I feel more comfortable using English in both formal and informal settings due to peer interaction.	4.07	0.91
6) I believe peer interaction has increased the opportunities for me to practise speaking English.	4.08	0.80
Total mean score	4.08	0.53

Table 4 above shows the respondents' perceptions on the influence of peer interactions on their speaking fluency. Based on the table, a majority of the respondents agreed that they can speak English more easily and fluently after participating in peer interaction activities ($M = 4.18$, $SD = 0.81$). This is followed by them noticing an improvement in their English speaking fluency through peer interactions ($M = 4.10$, $SD = 0.93$). On the other hand, the lowest mean score is 4.01 ($SD = 0.88$), which refers to the item 'I believe peer interaction has helped me become more fluent in speaking English'. Despite this item has the lowest mean score, the score is a high score, indicating positive influence of peer interactions on their speaking skills. The total mean score for this section is 4.08 ($SD = 0.53$), which is a high mean score.

The findings of this study showed that the respondents had a generally positive perceptions on the influence of peer interactions on their English speaking skills. This could be attributed to the opportunities for learners to negotiate meaning, receive constructive feedback, and practice speaking repeatedly which contribute to their speaking fluency (Namaziandost et al., 2020) during peer interactions. When learners interact with each other respectfully and constructively, it enhances the learners' motivation to continue interacting with one another in English. This kind of interaction also lowers the pressure that learners might have, which could reduce their

anxiety, thus increasing their willingness to communicate in the target language (Nakatsukasa & Loewen, 2015).

CONCLUSION

This study investigated the role of peer interactions in enhancing ESL learners' speaking skills and has found positive perceptions among the ESL learners on peer interactions. Even though there are challenges that they faced during the interactions, ESL learners in this study did not think that the challenges are significant to disrupt their learning process. They believed that peer interactions helped them to speak English more easily and fluently.

The findings of this study have several implications to the teaching and learning of English language, particularly in teaching speaking skills. Firstly, the overall positive perception of peer interactions suggests that instructors should integrate more collaborative learning strategies in the classroom more intentionally. When teaching speaking skills, instructors should allow the learners to have as much authentic activities as possible to encourage more practise and participation among the learners. Moreover, this study found that vocabulary deficiency is the main challenge that the learners face during interactions, which means that instructors should provide as much resources as possible to the learners during classroom activities. Learners should be exposed to as much related vocabulary as possible for them to practise with their peers.

To conclude, the findings of this study support the sociocultural theory by Vygotsky and the Krashen's Input Hypothesis. These theories highlight the importance of meaningful interactions among the learners in language acquisition, and social learning could foster a collaborative and low pressure environment for learners to feel more confident to speak in English language.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Sincere thanks and appreciation are bid to the respondents in this study, who provided valuable data for this study.

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