

Using Collaborative Learning Activities To Enhance English Speaking Skills Of 7th Graders

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Abstract:

This study aims to examine the effectiveness of collaborative learning tasks in improving the English speaking skills of 7th-grade students at Tho Son Secondary School, with a focus on 35 students from Class 7A. The primary objective is to determine how these tasks can foster confidence, fluency, and active participation in speaking activities, thereby enhancing overall speaking performance. The research adopts a quasi-experimental design, dividing participants into an experimental group engaged in collaborative learning tasks such as group discussions, role plays, and pair work and a control group receiving traditional instruction. Speaking proficiency was assessed through pre-tests and post-tests specifically designed to evaluate speaking skills based on content, grammar and vocabulary, pronunciation, and fluency. Additional data were collected using surveys and classroom observations to capture students' attitudes, engagement levels, and perceived challenges. The results indicate that students participating in collaborative learning tasks achieved a mean improvement of 1.74 points in speaking scores, surpassing the control group. Quantitative data showed that 91% of students reported increased confidence, and 75% actively contributed to group work. Qualitative findings revealed enhanced speaking skill, higher motivation, and stronger teamwork abilities among participants. This study underscores the potential of collaborative learning in language education and recommends its integration into English teaching practices to foster a more dynamic and interactive classroom environment. It also calls for further research to explore the application of collaborative learning tasks in developing other language skills such as writing and listening.

Key Word: Collaborative learning tasks; Speaking skills; Quasi-experimental research design; Improvement; Attitudes.

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I. Introduction

English has become an indispensable global language, facilitating communication across diverse domains such as education, business, and international relations (Brown, 2004). In the context of Vietnam, proficiency in English is increasingly recognized as a critical skill for students to access global opportunities and succeed in a highly interconnected world. However, the development of English speaking skills among Vietnamese secondary school students remains a significant challenge due to traditional teaching methods that emphasize grammar and vocabulary over communicative competence (Nguyen Hong Thuy, 2017).

Speaking is a fundamental skill in language acquisition, enabling learners to express their ideas, engage in meaningful conversations, and build connections with others. Yet, in many Vietnamese classrooms, speaking is often overlooked or underemphasized. Studies by Derwing and Munro (2015) highlight that effective speaking requires a focus on pronunciation, fluency, and intelligibility, which are frequently neglected in traditional teaching practices. This gap in instruction limits students' ability to communicate effectively in real world situations, leaving them ill-prepared for both academic and professional challenges.

The rationale for this study stems from the urgent need to address the deficiencies in teaching speaking skills within Vietnamese secondary schools. Research by Goh and Burns (2012) emphasizes that speaking is a complex skill requiring not only linguistic proficiency but also psychological readiness, such as confidence and motivation. In Vietnamese classrooms, students often experience anxiety and fear of making mistakes when speaking English, which significantly hinders their progress (Leong & Ahmadi, 2017). To overcome these challenges, innovative teaching approaches are needed to create supportive and engaging learning environments.

Collaborative learning emerges as a promising pedagogical strategy to address these issues. Rooted in the principles of social constructivism, collaborative learning emphasizes the role of interaction and cooperation in building knowledge (Vygotsky, 1978). By working together on tasks, students are encouraged to practice speaking in authentic contexts, share ideas, and provide feedback to their peers. Luu (2019) asserts that

collaborative learning not only enhances speaking skills but also fosters critical thinking and teamwork, which are essential for overall academic and personal development.

The rationale for this study is grounded in the need to address the persistent challenges in teaching speaking skills within Vietnamese secondary education. By leveraging the potential of collaborative learning, the study seeks to contribute to the ongoing reform of English language teaching, equipping students with speaking skills necessary for success in an increasingly globalized world.

The following research questions were addressed in the study:

1. To what extent does the use of collaborative learning activities enhance 7th grade students' English-speaking skills?
2. What are the students' attitudes towards the use of collaborative learning activities in enhancing English speaking skills?

II. Material And Methods

This study adopts a quasi-experimental research design to examine the impact of structured collaborative learning techniques on the English-speaking proficiency of Grade 7 students. Unlike pure experimental designs, quasi experimental studies do not require random assignment of participants, making them well suited for authentic classroom contexts where intact classes are used (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The research involved implementing an intervention in Class 7A at Tho Son Secondary School, with all 33 students participating. Pre test and post test assessments were conducted to measure changes in speaking skills, and two rounds of teacher interviews complemented the quantitative data, providing qualitative insights into instructional effectiveness.

The data collection procedures were carefully structured to obtain robust and reliable evidence regarding the impact of collaborative learning activities on students' English speaking performance within a quasi experimental research design. The plan incorporated both quantitative and qualitative data sources to ensure a holistic understanding of how the intervention influenced learning outcomes and classroom interaction dynamics. Quantitative data were gathered to measure observable improvements in speaking proficiency, while qualitative insights provided deeper explanations of student engagement and behavior during the intervention.

Data for this study were collected from pre-tests, post-tests and student questionnaires. These different sources of information were examined through a mixed-methods approach that combined quantitative and qualitative techniques. The rationale for using such an approach lies in the need to capture both measurable improvements in student performance and the contextual factors that influenced learning outcomes. As Creswell and Plano Clark (2018) note, mixed-methods research provides a more comprehensive perspective by integrating statistical results with descriptive insights.

III. Result

Speaking Test Results

The comparison of results shows significant improvement in students' speaking ability after the 12-week intervention. A total of 33 students participated in both the baseline and the final assessment. The descriptive statistics are presented in Table 1.

Test	Mean Score (10-point scale)
Pre-test	5.42 (SD = ±1.03)
Post-test	7.16 (SD = ±0.87)

Table 1. Comparison of Pre-test and Post-test mean scores

The data in Table 1 indicates that the mean score increased by 1.74 points, while the reduction in standard deviation demonstrates that student progress was not only positive but also more consistent across the group.

A paired samples t-test confirmed the statistical significance of this improvement: $t(32) = 9.87, p < 0.001$. This result indicates that the enhancement in speaking performance was unlikely due to chance, providing strong evidence that the application of collaborative learning activities had a real and measurable impact on students' speaking skills.

A detailed analysis based on the speaking assessment rubric revealed clear progress across all four criteria, as presented in Table 2

Criteria	Max Score	Pre-test (Mean)	Post-test (Mean)	Improvement
Content & Reasoning	3.0	1.74	2.53	+0.79
Grammar & Vocabulary	2.5	1.28	2.05	+0.77
Pronunciation	1.5	0.68	1.23	+0.55

Fluency & Interaction	1.5	0.72	1.31	+0.59
Total Mean Score	8.5/10*	4.42	7.12	+2.70

Table 2. Comparison of Pre-test and Post-test scores by rubric criteria

Scores were first calculated on a 20-point rubric and then converted to the Vietnamese 10-point scale.

Table 2 illustrates several important findings. First, regarding Content & Reasoning, students' ability to develop ideas and defend their viewpoints improved significantly. The average score increased from 1.74/3.0 in the Pre-test to 2.53/3.0 in the Post-test. By the end of the intervention, students were able to produce more coherent responses, incorporate supporting evidence, and demonstrate stronger argumentation skills.

Second, in terms of Grammar & Vocabulary, substantial improvement was also observed. Scores rose from 1.28/2.5 to 2.05/2.5, reflecting higher grammatical accuracy and broader lexical range. Students began to use more complex sentence structures with fewer errors and applied vocabulary more appropriately to communicative contexts.

Third, Pronunciation improved steadily, with the average score increasing from 0.68/1.5 to 1.23/1.5. Students displayed clearer articulation, more accurate stress placement, and better control of intonation, which enhanced overall intelligibility in communication.

Finally, the criterion of Fluency & Interaction also showed notable progress, from 0.72/1.5 to 1.31/1.5. Students exhibited fewer hesitations, spoke at a more natural pace, and relied less on memorized sentence patterns. They also demonstrated improved responsiveness in sustaining conversations with peers.

Taken together, these results confirm that collaborative learning activities contributed to consistent improvement across all dimensions of speaking skills. The most significant gains were recorded in Content & Reasoning and Grammar & Vocabulary, indicating that the interactive and task-based nature of the intervention effectively supported both linguistic accuracy and communicative competence.

The results were further analyzed by topic across the Pre-test (Units 1 - 4) and Post-test (Units 5 - 8). The instructional program and test content were designed in alignment with the English 7 - Global Success curriculum, published by the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) in 2022 and currently implemented at Tho Son Secondary School. The speaking topics in the Pre-test and Post-test were therefore mapped onto the thematic units of the textbook, as summarized in Table 3.

Topic	Pre-test Mean Score	Remarks	Post-test Mean Score	Remarks
Unit 1: Free Time	5.82/10	Able to answer personal questions but responses to extended questions lacked depth.	7.36/10 (Unit 5: Science & Technology)	Demonstrated richer vocabulary, stronger reasoning, and use of specific examples.
Unit 2: Life in the Countryside	5.34/10	Limited vocabulary related to rural traditions and culture.	6.88/10 (Unit 6: Life on Other Planets)	More confident responses despite the abstract nature of the topic.
Unit 3: Protecting the Environment	4.98/10	Struggled to present opinions clearly; weak argumentative structure.	7.02/10 (Unit 7: Teens)	Connected responses to personal experiences; spoke more fluently and confidently.
Unit 4: Natural Disasters	5.09/10	Pronunciation and vocabulary remained limited.	6.79/10 (Unit 8: Ethnic Traditions)	Showed improved vocabulary use, coherent expression, and clearer pronunciation.

Table 3. Topic-based comparison of Pre-test and Post-test speaking scores for Grade 7A, Tho Son Secondary School

The findings indicate that familiar and personally relatable topics (e.g., Teens) yielded higher scores, reflecting the role of personal experience in facilitating more confident and fluent speech. Nevertheless, even abstract topics (Life on Other Planets) and culturally complex themes (Ethnic Traditions) showed marked improvement in student performance.

Overall, the Post-test results reveal mean score increases ranging from 1.5 to 2.4 points across topics compared with the Pre-test. This consistent upward trend highlights the broad and positive impact of collaborative learning activities, demonstrating their effectiveness in enhancing both topic-specific language competence and overall speaking performance.

Students' Attitudes towards collaborative learning

The distribution of student responses to the five survey statements is presented in Table 4.

No.	Survey Statement	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
1	I feel more confident speaking English after participating in collaborative activities.	0%	3%	6%	61%	30%
2	Collaborative learning makes it easier for me to practice speaking than working alone.	0%	3%	12%	58%	27%
3	I encountered difficulties when working in groups.	6%	27%	24%	33%	9%
4	The teacher's clear instructions helped me understand how to participate in collaborative activities.	0%	3%	9%	64%	24%
5	I learned more vocabulary and grammar through group work than individual study.	0%	6%	9%	52%	33%

Table 4. Distribution of students' responses to the collaborative learning attitude survey (n = 33).

The Likert-scale results indicate an overall positive perception of collaborative learning. A large majority of students (91%) agreed or strongly agreed that collaborative activities made them feel more confident in speaking English (Statement 1). Similarly, 85% reported that working in pairs or groups was more effective for practicing speaking than working individually (Statement 2). However, 42% of students acknowledged experiencing difficulties in group work (Statement 3), mainly due to unequal participation or conflicts of opinion among group members.

IV. Discussion

The findings of this study are largely consistent with previous scholarship on the role of collaborative learning in language development. Johnson and Johnson (1994) emphasized that collaborative learning fosters positive interdependence and individual accountability, creating a supportive classroom environment that enhances oral participation. This aligns with the present study, where over 90% of students reported greater confidence in speaking English through collaborative activities, and 75% were actively engaged in group tasks.

Similarly, Slavin (2014) highlighted that collaborative learning improves not only academic achievement but also social skills and learning motivation. This was reflected in the mean improvement of 1.74 points in the speaking test scores and the increased willingness of students to participate in communicative tasks.

Gillies (2007) further argued that collaborative learning promotes critical thinking and reasoning skills through group interaction. In this study, students made significant gains in Content and Reasoning, with mean scores rising from 1.74 to 2.53. These improvements illustrate that debates and group discussions enabled learners to construct more coherent arguments, justify opinions, and develop stronger reasoning abilities.

The results clearly demonstrate the relationship between collaborative learning and the development of speaking proficiency. Role-plays and pair work provided opportunities for students to practice English in meaningful and practical situations, which enhanced fluency and spontaneity. In contrast, debates and group discussions challenged students to develop more complex arguments, defend their viewpoints, and engage in critical reasoning, thereby improving coherence and logical organization.

These findings strongly support Long's Interaction Hypothesis (1996), which asserts that meaningful interaction promotes second language acquisition by enabling learners to negotiate meaning and receive feedback. They also resonate with Vygotsky's (1978) Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), emphasizing that peer support and teacher scaffolding help learners reach higher levels of communicative competence. In this study, students demonstrated greater progress when guided by peers or teachers, confirming the importance of collaborative scaffolding in language development.

In addition to linguistic progress, the study revealed positive effects on students' attitudes and motivation. More than 91% of students agreed that collaborative activities helped them feel more confident speaking English, and 85% believed that pair or group work was more effective than individual practice. These findings suggest that collaborative learning not only develops oral proficiency but also fosters a positive learning attitude, reducing anxiety and enhancing willingness to communicate.

This is consistent with Dörnyei's (2001) emphasis on the importance of supportive environments for sustaining motivation in language learning. Similarly, Gillies (2016) observed that collaborative settings encourage learners to participate actively and enjoy the learning process. In this study, students' reflections highlighted role-play and debates as particularly engaging, indicating that well-structured interactive tasks can simultaneously promote linguistic development and strengthen learner motivation.

Taken together, the findings demonstrate that collaborative learning provides a dual benefit: it advances speaking proficiency while cultivating positive learner attitudes that support sustained engagement with English learning.

V. Conclusion

The findings of this study provide clear evidence that the implementation of collaborative learning activities had a significant and positive impact on the development of lower secondary school students' speaking skills. Over a 12-week intervention period, students demonstrated not only measurable linguistic progress but also more positive attitudes and greater confidence in their ability to communicate in English.

In terms of language performance, students showed improvement across all four core criteria of speaking assessment: they developed more coherent and well structured content and reasoning, used grammar and vocabulary with greater accuracy and variety, achieved clearer and more accurate pronunciation, and demonstrated enhanced fluency with fewer pauses and more natural speech delivery. These improvements suggest that collaborative learning created opportunities for students to practice English in authentic and meaningful contexts, thereby strengthening their communicative competence.

Beyond linguistic development, students' attitudes toward speaking also shifted positively. The majority expressed greater confidence in contributing during speaking tasks, reported feeling less anxious about using English in front of peers, and valued pair and group work as an effective way to practice speaking. These attitudinal changes highlight the role of collaborative learning not only in building language proficiency but also in fostering motivation and learner engagement.

Taken together, the results confirm that collaborative learning is not only suitable for the context of lower secondary classrooms but also an effective strategy for enhancing students' real world communicative abilities. This reinforces the pedagogical value of collaborative approaches in English language teaching and underscores their potential to improve both language outcomes and learner confidence in diverse educational settings.

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