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DEVELOPING EFL LEARNERS' SPEAKING FLUENCY THROUGH COLLABORATIVE LEARNING

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Abstract: Speaking fluency is a fundamental component of effective oral communication in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts. However, many EFL learners experience difficulties in maintaining continuous speech, responding spontaneously, and participating actively in classroom interaction. One possible explanation is the limited amount of meaningful oral practice available in teacher-centred classrooms. Collaborative learning provides an alternative instructional framework in which learners interact with peers, exchange information, negotiate meaning, provide mutual support, and participate in shared communicative tasks. This article examines the potential of collaborative learning for developing EFL learners' speaking fluency through a qualitative synthesis of relevant theoretical and empirical research. Particular attention is paid to peer interaction, opportunities for language production, negotiation of meaning, peer scaffolding, feedback, learner participation, and task design. The reviewed literature indicates that appropriately structured cooperative and collaborative activities can contribute to improvements in oral proficiency and speaking fluency. At the same time, the effectiveness of collaborative learning depends on factors such as task structure, individual accountability, participation patterns, proficiency differences, and teacher guidance. The article argues that collaborative learning should not be understood simply as placing learners into groups; rather, it should be implemented through purposeful communicative tasks that create sustained opportunities for meaningful oral interaction.

Keywords: EFL, speaking fluency, collaborative learning, cooperative learning, peer interaction, oral proficiency, speaking instruction

1. Introduction

The development of effective oral communication has become an important objective of contemporary English language education. In English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts, learners are expected not only to acquire grammatical and lexical knowledge but also to use English spontaneously and appropriately in communicative situations. Speaking fluency is therefore an essential dimension of successful language learning because it reflects learners' ability to maintain communication and express ideas with relative ease.

Despite the importance of speaking, EFL learners frequently have limited opportunities for sustained oral interaction. In teacher-centred classrooms, a considerable proportion of classroom discourse may be controlled by the teacher, while individual learners have relatively little time to produce extended spoken language. This creates a pedagogical challenge: learners may possess knowledge of vocabulary and grammar but still experience difficulty using that knowledge spontaneously during real-time communication.

Interaction-oriented approaches to second-language acquisition provide a theoretical explanation for the importance of communicative participation. Interaction creates opportunities for learners to receive language input, produce output, negotiate meaning, and notice aspects of their own and others' language use [1]. Consequently, classroom activities that increase meaningful learner-to-learner interaction may provide conditions conducive to oral development.

Collaborative learning is particularly relevant in this regard. Instead of positioning learners primarily as recipients of teacher explanations, collaborative learning organizes students into pairs or small groups in which they work toward shared communicative objectives. Such arrangements can increase the amount of time learners spend using English and can create opportunities for learners to assist one another during communication.

Empirical research provides support for this pedagogical perspective. Namaziandost, Homayouni, and Rahmani examined the effect of cooperative-learning strategies on EFL learners' speaking fluency and compared Think-Pair-Share and Numbered Heads with traditional instruction. Their study involved 72 intermediate EFL learners and an eight-week intervention; the researchers reported a significant difference in speaking fluency between learners receiving cooperative-learning instruction and those receiving traditional instruction [2].

Similarly, Namaziandost, Neisi, Kheryadi, and Nasri investigated cooperative learning among 90 intermediate Iranian EFL learners and reported improvements in oral proficiency among learners who received cooperative-learning instruction [3]. These findings provide empirical grounds for examining collaborative learning as a means of promoting oral language development.

The purpose of the present article is therefore to examine the relationship between collaborative learning and EFL speaking fluency and to identify the principal mechanisms through which collaborative activities may support oral development. The discussion focuses on opportunities for oral production, peer interaction, negotiation of meaning, collaborative scaffolding, feedback, learner engagement, and task design.

2. Literature Review

2.1. The Concept of Speaking Fluency

Speaking fluency is commonly associated with the ability to produce spoken language smoothly and efficiently. Fluency does not necessarily imply complete grammatical accuracy or the absence of hesitation. Rather, it concerns the learner's capacity to maintain speech and communicate meaning without excessive disruption.

For EFL learners, fluency development presents a particular challenge because speaking requires the simultaneous coordination of conceptualization, lexical retrieval, grammatical encoding, articulation, and interactional response. Opportunities for repeated communicative practice can help learners manage these processes more effectively.

A classroom environment that provides frequent opportunities for meaningful speech is therefore essential. When speaking practice is restricted to isolated responses to teacher questions, learners may have insufficient opportunities to develop the automaticity required for spontaneous communication. Collaborative learning can alter this participation pattern by allowing several learners to engage in oral production simultaneously.

2.2. Interaction as a Resource for Second-Language Development

Interaction has an important role in instructed second-language acquisition. Loewen and Sato's review of interaction research identifies input, negotiation, output, and noticing as central constructs in research on interaction and second-language learning [1]. From this perspective,

learners do not merely receive linguistic information during communication; they actively process language while attempting to understand and be understood.

Collaborative speaking activities can create precisely these conditions. A learner may need to clarify an unfamiliar expression, reformulate an idea, respond to a partner's question, or modify an utterance when communication fails. These processes require active engagement with language.

Peer interaction is particularly valuable because it can distribute communicative opportunities more evenly among learners. While teacher-led interaction often involves one speaker addressing many listeners, pair and group work allows multiple interactions to take place concurrently.

However, interaction should not be equated automatically with effective learning. The nature of the task, participants' roles, proficiency differences, and patterns of participation can influence the quality of collaborative interaction. Therefore, the pedagogical structure surrounding peer interaction is an important factor.

2.3. Collaborative Learning and Speaking Fluency

Research directly examining cooperative learning and speaking provides particularly relevant evidence. Namaziandost et al. [2] investigated two cooperative-learning techniques—Think-Pair-Share and Numbered Heads—and compared them with traditional instruction. Their results indicated that cooperative-learning instruction was associated with significantly greater improvement in speaking fluency.

The importance of this finding is not simply that students worked in groups. The techniques used in the study structured participation and required learners to formulate and communicate ideas. The effectiveness of collaborative learning can therefore be partly explained by the additional opportunities it creates for active oral production.

A related study by Namaziandost et al. [3] examined the effect of cooperative learning on oral proficiency and motivation among intermediate EFL learners. The researchers used a pre-test/post-test design with 90 participants and found that the cooperative-learning group demonstrated improvement in oral proficiency compared with the control group.

More recent evidence also supports the relevance of cooperative learning to oral proficiency. Hong et al. [4] examined cooperative learning among learners in an English tourist-guide training programme and investigated its effect on oral proficiency. The study provides further evidence that cooperative approaches can be applied to contexts in which successful oral communication is a central instructional objective.

Taken together, these studies suggest that collaborative learning has considerable potential for supporting oral language development. Nevertheless, the findings should be interpreted in relation to the particular populations, instructional settings, tasks, and assessment procedures used in each study.

2.4. Peer Interaction, Scaffolding, and Feedback

An important characteristic of collaborative learning is that learners can provide assistance to one another during communication. A learner who lacks a particular word may receive a suggestion from a peer; another learner may reformulate an utterance or explain an expression. Such interaction can function as a form of peer scaffolding.

Sato's research on peer interaction and corrective feedback demonstrates the pedagogical relevance of training learners to engage productively with their peers and provide feedback during collaborative language-learning activities [5]. Peer feedback can encourage learners to pay attention to linguistic form while maintaining interaction with other learners.

More recent research has also examined the relationship between peer correction and speaking performance. Li and Hu investigated peer versus teacher correction in both electronic learning communities and face-to-face classroom interactions and examined outcomes including EFL learners' speaking fluency and accuracy [6]. Their study provides contemporary evidence that the source and mode of corrective feedback can be relevant to speaking development.

However, feedback during fluency-oriented activities should be carefully managed. If learners are interrupted after every error, the communicative flow of the activity may be disrupted. A more balanced pedagogical approach is to allow learners to complete a communicative task and then provide an opportunity for reflection and feedback.

3. Discussion

3.1. Increased Speaking Opportunities

The first and perhaps most immediate contribution of collaborative learning is the increase in speaking opportunities. If twenty learners are working individually while one learner answers the teacher's question, only a small proportion of the class is producing language at a given moment. In pair or small-group interaction, several learners can speak simultaneously.

This increased quantity of oral production is important because fluency develops through repeated use. Learners need opportunities to formulate ideas, respond to interlocutors, maintain turns, and repair communication problems.

The findings of Namaziandost et al. [2] support this interpretation. Their cooperative-learning intervention created structured opportunities for learners to think, discuss, and communicate ideas with peers, and the researchers reported significant improvement in speaking fluency.

3.2. Negotiation of Meaning

Collaborative tasks can also encourage negotiation of meaning. When learners encounter communication difficulties, they may ask for clarification, repeat information, modify their wording, or check whether their interlocutor has understood them.

Such processes can make learners more actively aware of the relationship between linguistic form and communicative meaning. Interaction research emphasizes the importance of these processes in understanding how classroom interaction can contribute to second-language development [1].

For this reason, effective speaking tasks should include a genuine communicative purpose. If learners already possess all the information required to complete an exercise individually, there may be little need for meaningful interaction. Information-gap and problem-solving tasks are more likely to create a communicative need.

3.3. Learner Engagement and Motivation

Collaborative learning can also affect learners' engagement in classroom activities. Namaziandost et al. [3] reported not only oral-proficiency benefits but also motivational differences associated with cooperative learning.

A possible explanation is that collaborative activities provide learners with greater opportunities to participate actively in classroom processes. Learners can contribute ideas, receive support from peers, and experience successful completion of shared tasks.

Nevertheless, motivation should not be presented as an automatic consequence of group work. Poorly organized collaboration may produce unequal participation, interpersonal difficulties, or dependence on more proficient learners. Consequently, teachers need to establish clear expectations and meaningful roles.

3.4. The Role of Task Design

The evidence indicates that **grouping learners alone is insufficient**. Collaborative learning is most likely to support speaking development when tasks are carefully designed.

Several principles are particularly important.

First, tasks should promote **positive interdependence** by giving learners a shared objective that requires communication. Second, they should establish **individual accountability**, so that every learner has a meaningful opportunity to speak. Third, teachers should provide appropriate linguistic and interactional support. Fourth, group composition and learner proficiency should be considered when assigning learners to groups.

Collaborative presentation tasks provide one useful example. Indriati et al. [7] investigated collaborative presentations among 54 EFL learners and focused on interactional synchrony during preparation and delivery. Their findings highlight the relevance of collaborative preparation, peer scaffolding, and turn-taking to students' experiences of fluency development.

Thus, collaborative speaking should be viewed as a carefully structured pedagogical process rather than simply a classroom-management technique.

4. Pedagogical Implications

The literature reviewed in this article suggests several practical recommendations for EFL teachers.

First, teachers should incorporate regular pair and small-group speaking activities into language lessons. Such activities can increase individual speaking time and reduce exclusive dependence on teacher-fronted interaction.

Second, collaborative tasks should have clear communicative purposes. Information-gap activities, problem-solving tasks, group discussions, collaborative storytelling, role-based discussions, and presentations can provide meaningful reasons for learners to communicate.

Third, teachers should explicitly teach interactional strategies. Learners can be trained to ask for clarification, request repetition, express agreement or disagreement, support a partner's idea, and provide constructive feedback.

Fourth, teachers should monitor participation. Rotating roles, assigning individual responsibilities, and using structured turn-taking can prevent highly proficient or confident learners from dominating group discussions.

Fifth, fluency and accuracy should be balanced rather than treated as identical objectives. During a fluency stage, learners should be encouraged to maintain communication. After the activity, teachers can address recurring grammatical, lexical, or pronunciation problems.

Finally, collaborative activities can benefit from a progression from supported to less-supported production. Learners may first discuss an idea in pairs, then exchange it in a larger group, and finally present their conclusions to the class. This sequence provides opportunities for rehearsal while gradually increasing communicative demands.

5. Limitations and Directions for Future Research

The present article is based on a qualitative synthesis of existing literature and does not report original classroom data. Therefore, its conclusions should not be interpreted as the results of a newly conducted experimental study.

A further limitation is the diversity of research contexts. The reviewed studies involve different countries, learner populations, proficiency levels, instructional settings, and intervention procedures. Consequently, the effectiveness of collaborative learning cannot be assumed to be identical across all EFL classrooms.

Future research should investigate which specific collaborative techniques are most effective for different dimensions of fluency. Quantitative studies could examine speech rate, pause frequency, breakdown and repair fluency, while qualitative studies could investigate learners' interactional behaviour, peer scaffolding, and perceptions of collaborative speaking tasks.

Longitudinal studies would also be valuable because speaking fluency is unlikely to develop through a small number of isolated classroom activities. Research over longer periods could provide stronger evidence concerning the sustainability of collaborative-learning effects.

6. Conclusion

Collaborative learning offers a promising framework for developing EFL learners' speaking fluency. Its principal value lies in its capacity to increase opportunities for oral production and create conditions in which learners interact, negotiate meaning, provide peer support, and participate actively in communicative tasks.

The empirical literature reviewed in this article provides evidence that structured cooperative-learning approaches can contribute to improvements in EFL learners' speaking fluency and oral proficiency [2–4]. Interaction-oriented research provides a theoretical explanation for these effects by emphasizing the role of input, output, negotiation, and noticing in second-language development [1].

At the same time, collaborative learning should not be reduced to simply placing learners in groups. Its effectiveness depends on purposeful task design, balanced participation, individual accountability, appropriate scaffolding, and effective teacher guidance. When these conditions are present, collaborative learning can transform speaking practice from limited individual responses into sustained peer-to-peer communication.

Therefore, the central pedagogical implication is that EFL learners need not merely more opportunities to speak, but **well-designed opportunities to communicate meaningfully with others**. Collaborative learning can provide such opportunities and, when systematically implemented, can become a valuable component of speaking-fluency instruction.

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