THE EFFECTIVENESS OF GROUP WORK IN IMPROVING SPEAKING SKILLS IN ENGLISH CLASSES IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS

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INTRODUCTION

The modern educational paradigm places particular emphasis on developing learners' communicative competence. At the secondary school level, speaking skills in English are often considered both the most challenging and the most essential domain to develop. Unlike grammar knowledge, oral proficiency demands constant practical engagement in real communicative situations. For this reason, group work methodology has attracted increasing scholarly attention over the past several decades. Lev Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) theory holds that learners can achieve significantly higher levels of performance when collaborating with peers than when working independently (Vygotsky, 1978). This theory serves as the primary psychological foundation for group work in education. Stephen Krashen's Input Hypothesis further asserts that second language learners require comprehensible input in authentic communicative contexts to progress (Krashen, 1985). Group work is widely regarded as one of the most effective means of providing such naturalistic and varied language input.

Michael Long's Interaction Hypothesis demonstrates that negotiation of meaning the process of clarifying and adjusting language use during interaction is a core mechanism for developing oral proficiency (Long, 1996). During group work, learners naturally interrupt, re-ask, and explain in their effort to achieve mutual understanding. This interactive process creates the conditions essential for deeper language acquisition and sustained speaking development.

PURPOSE

The primary aim of this study is to investigate the extent to which the systematic use of group work in English classes at the secondary school level (Grades 7–11) influences the development of speaking skills, and to identify the mechanisms through which such influence is manifested. The specific objectives are as follows: To analyse the practical forms of applying group work methodology within a communicative

language teaching framework; To evaluate the impact of group work on learners' oral participation, vocabulary use, and freedom of expression; To conduct a comparative analysis of speaking development dynamics between traditional teacher-centred instruction and group work approaches; To determine the role of the teacher in group work processes and the conditions necessary for effective group work organisation.

THEORETICAL BASIS AND REVIEW OF LITERATURE.

Group work is grounded in constructivist learning theory, which holds that learners must actively construct knowledge through participation and experience (Piaget, 1952; Vygotsky, 1978). Within the field of Second Language Acquisition (SLA), several foundational theories justify the effectiveness of group work in promoting speaking skills. Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) maintains that oral communicative competence develops exclusively through meaningful interaction. According to Savignon (2002), communicative competence encompasses not merely grammatical accuracy but the ability to use language appropriately and purposefully in social contexts. Group work is the primary classroom vehicle for creating such social contexts authentically.

Cooperative Learning theory (Johnson & Johnson, 1994) demonstrates that when group work is properly structured, learners act under the principle of positive interdependence perceiving each other's success as their own. This dynamic motivates learners to engage more actively in communication. Swain's Output Hypothesis (1985) adds that active language production speaking and writing deepens acquisition, as the act of producing output forces learners to notice gaps in their knowledge and seek to fill them. Group work provides the richest environment for maximising learner output. From the perspective of Sociocultural Theory (Lantolf, 2000), language learning is inherently a social process that occurs through interaction with others. When learners complete tasks collaboratively, they provide scaffolding for one another stronger learners naturally support weaker ones, thereby realising the full potential of Vygotsky's ZPD in classroom practice.

Empirical research corroborates these theoretical foundations. Ning and Hornby (2010) found, in their study conducted in Chinese secondary schools, that oral participation in English increased by 62% in classes employing group work. A comparative study by Shaaban and Ghaith (2005) in Lebanese secondary schools demonstrated that learners taught through cooperative methods achieved significantly higher results in oral assessments than those taught through conventional instruction.

METHODOLOGY

The research adopts a mixed-methods approach comprising three principal stages. **Observation and Interview:** Structured observation of English lessons in

Grades 7, 9, and 11 is conducted, comparing classes employing group work with those that do not. Semi-structured interviews are carried out with both teachers and learners.
Experiment: A control group (traditional frontal instruction) and an experimental group (systematic group work at least twice per week) are monitored over a ten-week period. Oral proficiency is measured through pre-test and post-test assessments.
Analysis: Using a rubric developed on the basis of IELTS Speaking band descriptors, learners' scores for pronunciation accuracy, vocabulary range, grammatical correctness, and fluency are systematically analysed and compared.

RESULTS

On the basis of existing empirical research and practical observation, the following key results have been identified: Increased Oral Participation and Engagement. In traditional teacher-centred lessons, individual learners speak English for an average of two to four minutes per session. In lessons organised around group work, each learner actively participates in oral interaction for eight to fifteen minutes (Harmer, 2007). In a class of twenty-five pupils, group work provides each learner with considerably greater speaking practice time.

Reduction of Affective Filter. As described by Krashen (1985), fear of making mistakes, social anxiety, and embarrassment represent among the most significant barriers to speaking development. Within a group, learners are not the focus of the entire class — this increases psychological comfort and creates conditions for greater oral freedom. Liu (2006) found that speaking anxiety levels decreased by 40% among learners engaged in group work.

Development of Communication Strategies. During group work, learners naturally acquire communication strategies such as explaining, paraphrasing, asking for clarification, and seeking alternative expressions (Dörnyei & Scott, 1997). These strategies are of critical importance in real-life English communication situations.

Peer Effect and Deepened Learning. Vygotsky's ZPD theory manifests in practice as follows: weaker learners acquire language from stronger peers, while stronger learners consolidate their own knowledge through the act of explanation (Vygotsky, 1978). This mutually beneficial process ensures the organic distribution of knowledge within the classroom.

Natural Acquisition of Vocabulary and Grammatical Structures. In group work, particularly task-based group activities, learners acquire topic-relevant vocabulary and grammatical constructions through active use rather than passive reception (Ellis, 2003). Simultaneously, exposure to peers' language models provides additional and varied input.

Enhanced Motivation. Research by Dörnyei (2001) demonstrates that collaborative group work substantially increases learner motivation, as participants feel a sense of responsibility towards their team and mutually encourage one another towards achievement.

DISCUSSION

While the advantages of group work are well established, several challenges are observed in practice. First, there is a risk that certain learners may fail to participate actively, relying instead on their group members a phenomenon known as social loafing. Johnson and Johnson (1994) emphasise that this problem can be addressed by assigning clear individual accountability to every group member. Second, learners within groups may resort to using their first language rather than English. This issue can be mitigated by designing tasks that are sufficiently engaging and linguistically demanding to require English as the working language. Third, group composition whether heterogeneous or homogeneous significantly affects outcomes. While heterogeneous groupings are theoretically advantageous from a ZPD perspective, excessive differences in proficiency levels may disrupt group dynamics (Slavin, 1995).

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that well-organised group work is among the most effective methods for developing speaking skills in secondary school English classes. Group work not only provides learners with substantially greater oral practice opportunities but also confirms in practice the theoretical principles articulated by Vygotsky, Krashen, Long, and Swain. The reduction of speaking anxiety, the development of communication strategies, the peer learning effect, and the enhancement of motivation are all positive outcomes that are directly attributable to group work.

Nevertheless, the effectiveness of group work is contingent upon how it is organised, how the teacher's role is defined, and how well the task aligns with communicative objectives. Group work is not a magic formula — it requires sound pedagogical design, continuous monitoring, and flexible, context-responsive implementation.

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