

A Scaffolding Framework for Optimising Collaborative Oral Proficiency in Secondary ESL Classrooms

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Abstract:

This study examined whether a structured set of collaborative learning activities, designed around scaffolding principles, could improve the English oral communication ability of secondary learners in a developing-country setting. A pre-experimental, one-group pretest-posttest design was applied with 58 Grade 10 students enrolled in a bilingual programme at an international school in Dhaka, Bangladesh. The instructional package consisted of ten structured lesson plans, each built around a single collaborative technique and sequenced across a ten-week period. Three language specialists rated the package on a five-point scale and returned an overall mean of 4.68 (SD = 0.53), placing it at a good level of suitability. Oral communication ability was measured with a 30-item multiple-choice test and a speech-drafting task. Item validity was confirmed through Item-Objective Congruence values ranging from 0.67 to 1.00, with item difficulty between 0.30 and 0.70 and discrimination between 0.30 and 0.80, and the Kuder-Richardson 20 reliability coefficient was 0.92. A separate out-of-class performance task was assessed with a six-dimension rubric (Cronbach's alpha = 0.91). The Wilcoxon Signed-Ranks Test showed a significant rise from pretest (M = 26.72, SD = 2.04) to posttest (M = 29.78, SD = 1.89), $z = 6.639$, $p < .001$. A One-Sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test indicated that performance scores (M = 76.33, SD = 3.73) stood above the institutional criterion of 70 per cent, $p = .005$. The results suggest that sequencing collaborative tasks within a learner's zone of proximal development supports measurable gains in spoken English and offers a practical model for comparable classrooms.

Keywords: collaborative learning; scaffolding; oral communication ability; zone of proximal development; secondary ESL; Bangladesh.

1. Introduction

English holds the position of an international language of education, commerce, and technology, and in many developing countries a working command of it is treated as a condition for access to opportunity [1]. Bangladesh, with a population of about 160 million, sends a large number of students into tertiary education each year, where English is the usual medium of instruction. Many of these students complete their primary and secondary schooling in Bangla, so the move into an English-medium environment at university is demanding. A recurring outcome is that graduates struggle to secure suitable employment because their command of spoken English remains weak [2].

Although communicative language teaching has been written into national policy, studies of English language education in Bangladesh report persistent difficulty in putting it into practice [3]. Classrooms are frequently marked by student silence, anxiety about speaking, and few authentic opportunities for interaction. An

examination system that rewards memorisation over spoken performance, together with the heavy use of commercial guidebooks and private coaching, reinforces rote study and leaves little room for communicative work. Even schools that describe themselves as English-medium often produce learners who can manage written grammar exercises yet cannot speak the language with confidence.

Among the four language skills, speaking is often treated as the one that carries the others, since productive spoken practice supports listening, reading, and writing and allows learners to express ideas and to manage social and academic relationships [4]. The difficulty for many secondary learners is not an absence of structural knowledge. They have studied grammar and vocabulary, but they cannot put that knowledge to use accurately, fluently, and spontaneously when a real exchange requires it. Speaking anxiety and limited rehearsal in low-stakes settings make the problem worse [5].

Collaborative learning offers one route out of this pattern. By organising learners into small groups that work towards a shared goal, it increases the amount of interaction each learner receives and lowers the pressure that often silences them [6]. Collaborative tasks are not automatically productive, however. When groups are simply told to discuss a topic without structure, weaker speakers tend to withdraw and stronger ones tend to dominate. The present study therefore asked whether a set of collaborative activities, each built deliberately around scaffolding principles and sequenced across a term, could raise the oral communication ability of Grade 10 learners at an international school in Dhaka, Bangladesh. The study had three aims: to develop and validate a structured set of collaborative learning activities; to compare oral communication ability before and after the activities; and to compare spontaneous oral performance against an institutional criterion of 70 per cent. Two hypotheses followed: that the posttest mean would be significantly higher than the pretest mean, and that the mean performance score would exceed the 70 per cent criterion.

2. Theoretical Framework

The study is grounded in the social constructivism of Lev Vygotsky, which holds that higher mental functions appear first in social interaction and only afterwards become internal to the individual [7]. Knowledge, on this account, is built jointly before it is held privately, so language learning is by its nature a social activity. The classroom is treated not as a place where a teacher transmits fixed content to passive receivers, but as a setting in which learners construct understanding together through talk.

Central to this position is the zone of proximal development, the distance between what a learner can accomplish alone and what the same learner can accomplish with guidance from a teacher or a more capable peer. Instruction aimed below this zone asks learners to rehearse what they already control and produces little growth, while instruction pitched far above it produces confusion and withdrawal. Learning is greatest when a task sits just beyond independent reach and is supported until the learner can manage it without help. For oral communication, this means that a speaking task should stretch the learner slightly while support keeps the demand within tolerable limits.

Scaffolding is the instructional means by which a task within the zone of proximal development is made achievable. The teacher provides temporary support for content, process, or strategy, then withdraws it gradually as competence grows [8]. A widely used way of organising this withdrawal is the three-stage sequence of explicit instruction. In the first stage the teacher models the target behaviour and thinks aloud, taking full responsibility for the performance, a stage often summarised as 'I do'. In the second stage teacher and learners work the task together, with responsibility shared, summarised as 'We do'. In the third stage learners carry out the task in pairs or small groups on their own, summarised as 'You do'. Across these stages, ownership of the spoken exchange moves steadily from the teacher to the group, which is precisely the transfer that a silent, teacher-dependent classroom needs.

Collaborative learning provides a repertoire of techniques through which this transfer can be staged. Barkley, Cross, and Major group such techniques into families that include discussion-based methods, reciprocal peer teaching, problem-solving formats, graphic organisers, and writing-based methods [9]. Techniques such as Think-Pair-Share, Jigsaw, Thinking-Aloud Pair Problem Solving, and Fishbowl each impose a clear structure on

who speaks, when, and about what. That structure is what turns an open and potentially intimidating group task into a series of manageable steps, and it is the feature on which the present intervention is built.

3. Method

3.1 Design

The study used a pre-experimental, one-group pretest-posttest design with a quantitative approach. A single cohort was tested before the intervention, taught through the set of collaborative activities, and tested again afterwards, with the difference between the two measurements taken as evidence of change. A single-cohort design was appropriate here because the study was a focused curricular intervention conducted within one authorised classroom rather than a controlled trial, and because withholding the activities from a comparison group would have raised practical and ethical difficulties within the school timetable. The absence of a control group is acknowledged as a limitation and is addressed later.

3.2 Participants

The participants were 58 Grade 10 students enrolled in the bilingual programme of an international school in Dhaka during the 2024 academic year. Purposive sampling was used to select one intact Grade 10 classroom, since the programme contained a single class of this size at the relevant level. All participants were taught in both Bangla and English and shared the broad profile of learners who hold written structural knowledge but have limited spoken fluency.

3.3 Instructional package

The instructional instrument was a set of ten lesson plans, each running for fifty-five minutes and each built around one collaborative technique. The sequence opened with Real-Life Scenarios using Role Play, then moved through Group Storytelling with Think-Pair-Share, Debate Teams with Critical Debates, Panel Discussions with Jigsaw, Problem-Solving Tasks with Thinking-Aloud Pair Problem Solving, Interview and Report with the Three-Step Interview, Peer Presentation with Concept Mapping, Group Discussion with Round Table, Speed Networking with Talking Points, and Language Learning Games with Fishbowl. Each plan applied the scaffolding sequence described above, opening with teacher modelling, moving to guided joint practice, and closing with independent group performance. Before use, the set was rated by three language specialists on a five-point scale and returned an overall mean of 4.68 (SD = 0.53), which placed it at a good level of suitability. The package was then trialled with a non-participating Grade 10 class to check timing, language load, and materials, and was adjusted in light of that trial.

3.4 Instruments

Oral communication ability was measured with a two-part test. Part 1 contained 30 multiple-choice items, and Part 2 required learners to draft a short speech or presentation about daily life. The test was built from a table of specifications that distributed items across the ten lesson topics and across levels of cognitive demand. Three specialists judged the agreement between each item and its objective using the Item-Objective Congruence procedure, scoring each item as consistent, uncertain, or inconsistent with the learning content [10]. The resulting index ranged from 0.67 to 1.00, with every item above the accepted threshold of 0.50. The test was then trialled with a non-participating group to obtain item statistics, and only items with a difficulty value between 0.30 and 0.70 and a discrimination value between 0.30 and 0.80 were retained. Internal consistency, calculated with the Kuder-Richardson 20 formula, was 0.92, well above the 0.70 standard. The categories assessed across the instrument followed Brown's scheme of grammar, vocabulary, comprehension, fluency, pronunciation, and task completion [11].

Spontaneous oral performance was measured separately through an out-of-class simulated task, the 'Travel Trouble' simulation, in which small groups resolved a difficult travel problem through negotiation in English. Performance was scored against a six-dimension rubric covering fluency and coherence, grammar and accuracy, vocabulary and lexical range, pronunciation and intonation, task completion and content, and

interaction. The design of a performance task of this kind follows the principle that assessment should present a hands-on task and should judge both the product a learner creates and the process used to create it [12]. It also reflects the view that a performance test should rest on real language use rather than test-only exercises [13]. Internal consistency of the rubric, estimated with Cronbach's alpha, was 0.91.

3.5 Procedure and analysis

Data collection proceeded in a fixed order. The proficiency pretest was given before the activities began. The ten lesson plans were then taught over successive weeks, one technique per session. The proficiency posttest was given at the end of the sequence. The spontaneous performance task was administered after the activities during scheduled morning and post-lunch sessions. Because the proficiency scores did not meet the assumptions required for a parametric paired test, the difference between pretest and posttest was examined with the Wilcoxon Signed-Ranks Test. The mean performance score was compared with the institutional criterion of 70 per cent using a One-Sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test. Means and standard deviations were calculated throughout, and all analyses were run in SPSS.

4. Results

The three specialists judged the set of activities favourably. The overall mean rating was 4.68 (SD = 0.53), described as a good level. Four techniques reached a very good level: Think-Pair-Share (M = 4.75, SD = 0.25), Jigsaw (M = 4.83, SD = 0.29), Concept Mapping (M = 4.75, SD = 0.25), and Fishbowl (M = 4.83, SD = 0.14). The remaining techniques were rated at a good level, with Critical Debates receiving the lowest mean (M = 4.42, SD = 0.29). Table 1 reports the full set of ratings.

Table 1. Expert evaluation of the ten collaborative lesson plans (n = 3 specialists)

Lesson topic	Collaborative technique	M	SD	Level
Real-Life Scenarios	Role Play	4.67	0.14	Good
Group Storytelling	Think-Pair-Share	4.75	0.25	Very good
Debate Teams	Critical Debates	4.42	0.29	Good
Panel Discussions	Jigsaw	4.83	0.29	Very good
Problem-Solving Tasks	Thinking-Aloud Pair Problem Solving	4.58	0.29	Good
Interview and Report	Three-Step Interview	4.58	0.38	Good
Peer Presentation	Concept Mapping	4.75	0.25	Very good
Group Discussion	Round Table	4.50	0.25	Good
Speed Networking	Talking Points	4.67	0.14	Good
Language Learning Games	Fishbowl	4.83	0.14	Very good
Overall		4.68	0.53	Good

The comparison of pretest and posttest scores produced a clear result. Scores rose from a pretest mean of 26.72 (SD = 2.04) to a posttest mean of 29.78 (SD = 1.89). The Wilcoxon Signed-Ranks Test returned a standardised statistic of $z = 6.639$ with an asymptotic significance of $p < .001$ (df = 57, N = 58). The null hypothesis of no difference was rejected, and the posttest scores were significantly higher than the pretest scores. Table 2 summarises the analysis.

Table 2. Wilcoxon Signed-Ranks Test of pretest and posttest oral communication scores

Measure	n	Mean	SD
Pretest	58	26.72	2.04
Posttest	58	29.78	1.89

Note. Wilcoxon Signed-Ranks Test: $z = 6.639$, $df = 57$, $p < .001$.

The spontaneous performance task gave a mean score of 76.33 ($SD = 3.73$) on a 100-point scale, above the institutional criterion of 70. The One-Sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test returned a test statistic of 0.14 with an asymptotic significance of $p = .005$ ($df = 57$). The result was significant at the 0.05 level, and the observed mean stood above the 70 per cent mark. Table 3 reports the result.

Table 3. One-Sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test of performance scores against the 70 per cent criterion ($n = 58$)

Measure	n	Mean	SD
Performance test (maximum = 100)	58	76.33	3.73

Note. One-Sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test against criterion = 70: test statistic = 0.14, $df = 57$, $p = .005$.

5. Discussion

The central finding is that a structured, scaffolded set of collaborative activities raised oral communication ability over a single term. The result is best understood by first considering why unstructured peer tasks so often fail in low-proficiency settings. When learners with limited spoken fluency are placed in an open group discussion, they face several demands at once: retrieving vocabulary, forming grammatical utterances, monitoring pronunciation, tracking the contributions of others, and managing the social risk of speaking. For a learner whose resources are already stretched, this combination produces a cognitive and linguistic overload that ends in silence or in reliance on the first language. The structure supplied by a defined technique reduces that load by fixing some of the variables. A learner who knows the format, the role, and the order of turns can give attention to the language itself.

The techniques used here each create a controlled space for interaction. Jigsaw assigns every member a defined piece of content and a defined moment to teach it, so participation is built into the structure rather than left to chance. Thinking-Aloud Pair Problem Solving fixes the roles of solver and listener and gives each a set of expected moves. Fishbowl separates speaking from observing, allowing learners to rehearse a discussion mentally before they enter it. In each case the technique breaks a complex spoken task into smaller steps and supplies a frame that holds the learner steady while ability develops. This is scaffolding in practice, and it places the activity within the zone of proximal development rather than beyond it. As learners gain control, the frame can be loosened, and ownership of the exchange passes from teacher to group.

These findings agree with recent work on scaffolding in speaking instruction. Bouzenoune and Chelgoum found that learners depend on teacher support during group speaking tasks and that such support encourages reticent students to speak without fear [14]. Chamani reported significant gains in speaking performance for both teacher-scaffolded and peer-scaffolded groups over a control group, with no significant difference between the two forms of support, a result that fits the view that scaffolding within the zone of proximal development drives the improvement [15]. Setiawan and Hasim, using a one-group pretest-posttest design close to the present one, likewise found a significant effect of a scaffolding strategy on speaking skill [16].

The proficiency gain is also consistent with the interaction hypothesis, which holds that language develops through conversation in which meaning is negotiated, errors are corrected through feedback, and output is adjusted in response [17]. Collaborative tasks such as role play and problem solving create natural points at which communication can break down and must be repaired, and it is in repairing these breakdowns that

learners test and revise their developing language. The structured activities provided repeated, low-pressure occasions for exactly this kind of negotiation.

The result sits within a body of studies reporting similar effects. Gul and colleagues found that tenth-grade learners taught through collaborative language learning outperformed peers taught by traditional methods in speaking and listening [18]. Rampanniyom and Lornklang found that a collaborative learning process raised seventh-grade speaking scores above both the pretest and a fixed standard [19]. Yanti reported a significant effect of collaborative learning on junior secondary speaking achievement [20], and Pattanpichet found improved speaking performance and positive learner feedback after collaborative instruction at the tertiary level [21]. Govindasamy and Shah found that secondary learners preferred collaborative speaking tasks and felt able to speak more confidently with peers [22].

The performance result, in which the mean exceeded the 70 per cent criterion, indicates that the gains were not confined to a controlled test but also appeared in a spontaneous, out-of-class task that approximated real use. This is consistent with the purpose of a performance assessment, which is to judge what a learner can do in conditions close to authentic communication [13]. The wider benefits of collaborative learning help to explain the outcome. Working in groups builds the social and psychological conditions for speaking, lowering anxiety and raising willingness to take part, while also engaging the higher-order thinking that spoken reasoning requires [23]. A scaffolded collaborative model brings these benefits together with the staged support that lower-proficiency learners need [24].

5.1 Implications

Several practical points follow. Teachers should prepare collaborative tasks fully before use, assign clear roles within groups, and structure activities so that interaction and mutual support are built in rather than hoped for. Curriculum designers should write collaborative speaking tasks into school and national programmes and should treat spoken communication as an assessed outcome rather than an optional extra. School leaders should provide the training, the time, and the classroom arrangements that group-based interaction requires.

5.2 Limitations

The study has limitations that bound its claims. The one-group design, without a control group, makes it difficult to rule out the influence of maturation, repeated testing, or the ordinary effect of classroom time. The work was carried out in a single international school whose English-medium setting and learner profile may not match government or rural classrooms, which limits how far the findings generalise. The posttest followed the intervention immediately, so the durability of the gains is unknown. The study addressed only oral communication, leaving open whether the same approach benefits listening, reading, and writing. Future research should use a controlled or quasi-experimental design, draw on more varied schools, include delayed measurement, and examine group dynamics and task difficulty as further variables.

6. Conclusion

Within these limits, the study offers evidence that a structured, scaffolded set of collaborative activities can improve the spoken English of secondary learners in a developing-country setting. Sequencing collaborative techniques so that each one breaks a spoken task into manageable steps and supports the learner through the zone of proximal development appears to convert otherwise dormant structural knowledge into usable oral performance. The model is practical, low in cost, and suited to classrooms where silence and anxiety, rather than a lack of grammar, are the main barriers to speaking.

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