

A REVIEW OF COLLABORATIVE LEARNING ACTIVITIES TO HELP STUDENTS REDUCE SPEAKING ANXIETY IN EFL CLASSROOM SETTINGS

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I. Introduction

In the domain of English Language Learning (ELL), the acquisition of speaking skills is widely regarded as pivotal, constituting one of the four fundamental macro skills alongside listening, reading, and writing (Bailey & Savage, 1994 as cited in Celce-Murcia, 2006). Despite this recognition, a substantial proportion of students encounter challenges, particularly in mastering the spoken aspect of a foreign or second language. These learners, proficient in other linguistic competencies, frequently report experiencing a psychological barrier referred to as a "mental block" when attempting to acquire spoken language proficiency (Horwitz et al., 1986 as cited in Linh, 2010). This phenomenon is often attributed to speaking anxiety, characterized by feelings of fear and apprehension that impede learners' ability to articulate in English.

In my pedagogical setting, Thai Nguyen University of Economics and Business Administration (TUEBA), English language courses are delivered across the initial three consecutive semesters. Despite this prolonged exposure, a significant majority of students exhibit limited proficiency in spoken English. Interestingly, this deficiency cannot be solely ascribed to their level of English language competence, as most students have undergone English language instruction for a duration spanning three to seven years, experiencing content of a significantly higher complexity in their academic curriculum compared to that at the university level. Furthermore, attributing this predicament solely to students' perceived laziness or lack of motivation overlooks the fact that many students are acutely aware of the significance of English proficiency in their personal and professional lives, exerting considerable effort in their language learning endeavors. Their commitment is palpable through their active participation in English classes and their dedication to self-directed learning outside the classroom. Paradoxically, despite displaying commendable performance in reading and writing tasks, many students exhibit profound hesitation and struggle with verbal expression.

It is both intriguing and disheartening to hear firsthand from students expressions such as "I know the answer but I cannot speak at that time because I was so nervous." This sentiment underscores the pervasive influence of speaking anxiety, which not only impedes oral proficiency but also undermines the broader language acquisition process. Unlike students who exhibit a lackadaisical approach toward language learning, individuals grappling with speaking anxiety experience a deep sense of dissatisfaction and despair. This emotional turmoil arises from a realization that their linguistic capabilities and efforts do not translate into tangible outcomes, potentially leading to feelings of inadequacy or even resignation from further language-learning endeavors.

To address the formidable challenge of speaking anxiety, various intervention strategies have been devised, predominantly focusing on collaborative language learning methodologies. These approaches, encompassing activities such as Jigsaw II, Students Team-Achievement Division (STAD), and Think-Pair-Share, are designed to create a supportive and engaging learning environment that fosters confidence and reduces speaking anxiety among learners. The primary objective of this action research initiative is to comprehensively assess the prevalence and severity of speaking anxiety among students and to evaluate the effectiveness of collaborative language learning activities in mitigating these anxieties. Through a rigorous examination of these dynamics, this research endeavors to contribute valuable insights into the efficacy of collaborative pedagogical approaches in enhancing students' oral proficiency within the context of ELL.

II. Collaborative Language Learning (CLL) Activities

Collaborative Language Learning (CLL) is pivotal in improving students' educational outcomes, as highlighted by Osman et al. (2010). Specifically, CLL enhances the potential for student engagement and collaboration, enabling them to work collectively toward achieving a unified objective (Wang, 2009). The methodologies encompassed within CLL, such as the Students Team-Achievement Division (STAD) introduced by Slavin in 1995, Jigsaw II (also by Slavin, 1995), and Think-Pair-Share (developed by Lyman in 1992), are instrumental in fostering this environment of cooperative learning.

2.1. Students Team-Achievement Division – STAD

Within the framework of the Students Team-Achievement Division (STAD), it is imperative to organize teams by assembling groups comprising four to five members. This composition intentionally incorporates individuals from diverse academic backgrounds, genders, and racial or ethnic identities to foster an inclusive and multifaceted learning environment. As delineated by Slavin (1986) and subsequently cited by Wang (2009), the STAD approach is characterized by five principal components: class presentations, teamwork activities, the administration of quizzes, the evaluation of individual improvement scores, and the acknowledgment of team achievements.

Following the delivery of audio-visual presentations that aim to introduce and elucidate the subject matter, students are encouraged to collaborate within their designated groups. This collaborative phase involves engaging in a comprehensive review of worksheets, engaging in discussions to tackle various problems, exchanging ideas and comparing answers, and undertaking the critical process of identifying and rectifying any misconceptions that may arise. After this phase of group engagement and learning, quizzes are administered on an individual basis to assess the understanding and retention of each student. During these quizzes, a strict protocol is observed where students are prohibited from seeking or offering assistance to their peers, ensuring that the assessment accurately reflects each individual's mastery of the material.

The grading system within the STAD methodology is meticulously designed to recognize and reward both individual progress and collective team performance. This dual focus aims to incentivize personal academic development while simultaneously promoting a sense of shared responsibility and collaboration among team members. The evaluation process places a significant emphasis on measuring the degree of improvement demonstrated by each student, in addition to assessing the collective achievements of the team as a whole. This approach not only acknowledges the efforts and advancements of individuals but also celebrates the collaborative achievements of the group, reinforcing the importance of teamwork and collective endeavor in the learning process.

By implementing such a structured flexible framework, STAD facilitates a dynamic and interactive learning environment that leverages diversity as a strength and promotes an inclusive culture of mutual support and academic excellence. Through the strategic composition of teams and the implementation of a comprehensive set of pedagogical components, STAD aims to enhance student engagement, deepen understanding, and foster an atmosphere of cooperative learning and academic achievement.

Research on STAD consistently demonstrates its effectiveness in promoting academic achievement, fostering social and emotional development, enhancing motivation and engagement, and creating inclusive learning environments. The following findings underscore the value of incorporating cooperative learning strategies like STAD into educational practice to optimize student learning outcomes.

Improved Academic Performance: Numerous studies have consistently demonstrated that implementing STAD in classrooms leads to significant improvements in students' academic performance across various subjects and grade levels. Students who participate in STAD activities often exhibit higher levels of understanding, retention, and application of course material compared to traditional instructional methods (Slavin, 1995; Wang, 2009).

Enhanced Social Skills: Research indicates that STAD promotes the development of important social skills, such as communication, teamwork, and problem-solving abilities. By working collaboratively towards common goals, students learn to effectively interact with their peers, share ideas, and negotiate solutions, thereby fostering a positive and supportive learning environment (Johnson & Johnson, 1994).

Increased Motivation and Engagement: Studies have shown that STAD enhances student motivation and engagement in learning activities. The cooperative nature of STAD encourages active participation and a sense of ownership over learning outcomes, leading to greater student interest and investment in the learning process (Webb, 1984).

Positive Attitudes Towards Learning: Implementing STAD has been found to cultivate positive attitudes towards learning among students. Research suggests that students who participate in STAD activities exhibit greater enthusiasm for academic tasks, increased confidence in their abilities, and a heightened sense of academic self-efficacy (Kagan, 1994).

Inclusive Learning Environments: STAD has been shown to contribute to the creation of inclusive learning environments where all students, regardless of academic ability or background, can actively participate and contribute to group learning activities. Research highlights the importance of carefully structuring group

composition and providing appropriate support to ensure that all students can benefit from the collaborative learning experience (Slavin, 1986).

2.2. Jigsaw II

The method of team grouping utilized in this activity mirrors that of the Students Team-Achievement Division (STAD). However, there are notable distinctions between this approach and the STAD model, particularly in the implementation of the Jigsaw II technique. In Jigsaw II, students are initially assigned reading material, with each team member focusing on a specific topic delineated within an 'expert sheet'. Following an allocated period for individual reading, students who have delved into the same topic from different teams convene in an 'expert group' to engage in a comprehensive discussion of their respective topics. Subsequently, these 'experts' return to their respective teams to disseminate the acquired knowledge, with each team member assuming responsibility for teaching their designated topic to their team peers. This collaborative teaching phase fosters a deep understanding of the material as students engage in reciprocal teaching and peer learning. To ensure comprehensive understanding and retention of the material, individual quizzes are administered by the teacher, thereby assessing each team member's grasp of the content. Similar to the STAD approach, team scoring mechanisms are employed to evaluate the collective learning achievements of each team, thereby reinforcing the collaborative nature of the learning process.

Researches below on Jigsaw II demonstrate its effectiveness in promoting academic achievement, fostering positive intergroup relations, developing cognitive skills, enhancing motivation and engagement, and promoting inclusive education practices across diverse educational settings.

Academic Achievement: Studies such as that by Aronson et al. (1978) and Aronson and Patnoe (2011) have consistently found that students engaged in Jigsaw II activities demonstrate improved academic performance compared to traditional instructional methods. By actively engaging students in cooperative learning tasks and peer teaching, Jigsaw II facilitates deeper understanding and retention of subject matter across diverse content areas.

Interpersonal Relations: Research by Johnson and Johnson (1989) and Johnson et al. (2014) highlights the positive impact of Jigsaw II on interpersonal relations within diverse groups of students. Through collaborative learning experiences, students develop empathy, respect for diversity, and effective communication skills, leading to improved intergroup relations and a more inclusive classroom environment.

Cognitive Skills Development: Studies by Gillies (2007) and Gillies and Boyle (2010) indicate that Jigsaw II enhances students' cognitive skills, including critical thinking, problem-solving, and metacognitive awareness. By actively participating in cooperative learning tasks and engaging in meaningful interactions with peers, students develop higher-order thinking skills essential for academic success and lifelong learning.

Motivation and Engagement: Research by Slavin (1983) and Slavin and Madden (2011) suggests that Jigsaw II promotes student motivation and engagement in learning activities. Through collaborative group work and shared responsibility for learning outcomes, students experience increased intrinsic motivation, leading to greater academic persistence and achievement.

Inclusive Education: Studies by Cohen and Lotan (1997) and Cohen et al. (2014) highlight the role of Jigsaw II in promoting inclusive education practices. By structuring cooperative learning activities that require positive interdependence and individual accountability, Jigsaw II ensures the active participation and contribution of all students, regardless of their academic ability or background.

2.3. Think-Pair-Share

In this enhanced learning activity, students initially engage in individual work, allowing them time to process and prepare their thoughts independently. Following this phase, they proceed to engage in a turn-taking exercise with a partner, where each student alternates between telling a story or describing a concept, and listening. This interactive exchange fosters a deeper understanding and allows for the clarification of ideas. After this collaborative dialogue, students collectively participate in a discussion phase. This culminates in a reporting segment where groups or pairs present their findings, insights, or summaries to the entire class. This structured approach not only facilitates individual reflection but also promotes collaborative learning and enhances public speaking and presentation skills, as students articulate their learnings in a supportive classroom environment.

Research on the Think-Pair-Share (TPS) instructional strategy spans various educational contexts and disciplines, focusing on its effectiveness in promoting active engagement, fostering collaborative learning, and enhancing student achievement. Below is a summary of typical research themes and findings related to the use of the Think-Pair-Share technique:

Active Engagement: Studies consistently demonstrate that Think-Pair-Share encourages active participation and engagement among students. By providing opportunities for individual reflection followed by peer discussion, TPS prompts students to actively process information, articulate their thoughts, and engage in meaningful dialogue with their peers (Tanner & Allen, 2007; Yerushalmi et al., 2019).

Enhanced Conceptual Understanding: Research indicates that Think-Pair-Share contributes to a deeper conceptual understanding of course content. Through the process of articulating and discussing their ideas with

a partner, students clarify their own understanding, address misconceptions, and gain new perspectives, leading to improved learning outcomes (Lyman, 1981; Topping & Ehly, 1998).

Promotion of Peer Learning: Think-Pair-Share promotes peer learning and collaboration, as students engage in structured discussions to exchange ideas, provide feedback, and construct meaning together. This collaborative learning process fosters a supportive classroom environment where students learn from each other and develop communication and interpersonal skills (Prichard & Bizo, 2000; Tanner & Allen, 2007).

Development of Metacognitive Skills: Research suggests that Think-Pair-Share enhances students' metacognitive skills by prompting them to reflect on their own thinking processes and monitor their understanding of the material. Through self-reflection and discussion with peers, students become more aware of their learning strategies and gain insights into how to improve their learning (Tanner & Allen, 2007; Topping & Ehly, 1998).

Increased Student Confidence: Think-Pair-Share has been found to increase students' confidence in their ability to engage with course material and participate in classroom discussions. By providing a structured format for sharing ideas in a low-stakes environment, TPS encourages all students to contribute and feel valued, leading to greater confidence in their own abilities (Feldman & Capobianco, 2018; Meyers & Jones, 1993).

Overall, research on Think-Pair-Share highlights its effectiveness in promoting active engagement, enhancing conceptual understanding, fostering peer learning, developing metacognitive skills, and increasing student confidence. These findings underscore the value of incorporating Think-Pair-Share as a pedagogical tool to promote collaborative learning and improve student outcomes in diverse educational settings.

III. Recommendations for Applying Collaborative Activities in EFL Settings

Implementing collaborative learning activities in the EFL (English as a Foreign Language) classroom can significantly reduce speaking anxiety among students. These activities encourage learners to engage actively with the material, their classmates, and the language itself, fostering a more inclusive and supportive learning environment. Collaborative learning strategies, such as STAD (Students Team-Achievement Division), Jigsaw II, and Think-Pair-Share, have been shown to not only improve language proficiency but also build confidence in language learners as they navigate the challenges of acquiring a new language. By creating opportunities for interaction, collaboration, and mutual support, these strategies can address the common issue of speaking anxiety, enabling students to practice and enhance their speaking skills in a more relaxed and less intimidating setting.

Here are practical recommendations for effectively applying these three strategies in an EFL setting to maximize their benefits and help students overcome speaking anxiety:

STAD (Students Team-Achievement Division)

- **Group Formation:** Form heterogeneous groups of students based on their English proficiency levels, ensuring a mix of high and low-proficiency learners in each team to foster peer support and collaboration.
- **Structured Tasks:** Design tasks that require teamwork and collaboration, such as group discussions, peer teaching, or collaborative projects, to enhance students' speaking skills and encourage active participation.
- **Peer Assessment:** Implement peer assessment mechanisms where team members provide feedback and evaluate each other's contributions to promote accountability and reflection.
- **Regular Monitoring:** Monitor teams' progress regularly and provide guidance and support as needed to ensure that all students are actively engaged and making progress toward achieving their learning goals.

Jigsaw II

- **Topic Selection:** Choose topics that are relevant and engaging for students and align with the learning objectives of the lesson or unit.
- **Expert Groups:** Organize expert groups based on students' interests or strengths, assigning each group a specific aspect of the topic to research and become experts in.
- **Collaborative Learning Tasks:** Design collaborative learning tasks, such as group presentations, debates, or problem-solving activities, where students can share their expertise and learn from each other.
- **Whole-Class Discussion:** Facilitate whole-class discussions where students can share their findings, insights, and questions, promoting peer learning and collaborative knowledge construction.

Think-Pair-Share

- **Topic Relevance:** Select topics or discussion prompts that are meaningful and relevant to student's lives and interests to enhance engagement and motivation.
- **Pairing Strategy:** Pair students strategically, pairing stronger and weaker speakers together to provide peer support and create opportunities for language practice and learning.
- **Structured Discussion:** Provide clear instructions and guidelines for the Think-Pair-Share activity, including specific prompts or questions for students to consider during the individual thinking and pair discussion phases.

- Whole-Class Sharing: Facilitate whole-class sharing where pairs can report their ideas, insights, or solutions to the class, promoting active participation and providing opportunities for feedback and reflection.

By carefully integrating these collaborative learning strategies into the EFL curriculum, educators can create a dynamic and engaging classroom environment that not only enhances language skills but also builds confidence and reduces speaking anxiety among learners.

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