COLLABORATIVE LEARNING AND PEER SCAFFOLDING TO OVERCOME SPEAKING APPREHENSION IN ESL/EFL STUDENTS

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Abstract: Speaking apprehension is a common issue among ESL/EFL students, often caused by fear of making mistakes, lack of confidence, and anxiety in front of peers. This paper explores how collaborative learning and peer scaffolding strategies can help reduce speaking anxiety and improve oral communication skills. Collaborative learning allows students to work in supportive groups, encouraging participation and mutual understanding. Peer scaffolding, where students guide and support each other during tasks, helps create a safe and low-pressure learning environment. Together, these approaches promote learner confidence, build fluency, and increase motivation. The paper concludes that incorporating collaborative and peer-supported activities into language classes can be an effective way to overcome speaking apprehension and boost learner engagement.
Keywords: Speaking apprehension, collaborative learning, peer scaffolding, ESL students, EFL students, speaking skills, language anxiety, learner interaction, oral fluency

In English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms, speaking is often considered one of the most challenging skills to develop. Many students experience speaking apprehension, which refers to the fear or anxiety associated with oral communication. This fear may stem from various factors such as low self-confidence, fear of making mistakes, limited vocabulary, or past negative experiences in speaking situations. As a result, students may avoid participation, leading to slower language development and reduced classroom engagement.

To address this issue, educators have explored the use of **collaborative learning** and **peer scaffolding** as effective teaching strategies. Collaborative learning involves students working together in small groups to complete tasks, solve problems, or discuss ideas, which helps create a supportive and interactive learning environment. Peer scaffolding, on the other hand, allows students to support one another by offering feedback, modeling language use, and encouraging mutual growth. These strategies not only reduce anxiety but also promote learner confidence, communication skills, and a stronger sense of community within the classroom. Speaking anxiety is a form of communication apprehension experienced by many language learners. According to Horwitz et al. (1986), language anxiety manifests in nervousness, fear of negative evaluation, and communication difficulty. Learners often hesitate to participate due to fear of making mistakes or being judged by peers and instructors (Liu & Jackson, 2008). This apprehension limits language output, delays progress, and leads to avoidance behavior (Young, 1991). Individuals communicate with one another using a variety of linguistic styles and methods. When speaking a foreign language, language learners might employ a variety of techniques. We refer to these tactics as communication strategies (Rastegar & Gohari,)

Anxiety associated with speaking a foreign language can hinder English fluency among EFL students. Anxiety related to language use is a significant issue that could affect pupils'

speech output. To minimize its influence on their ability to communicate in class when speaking a foreign language, it is crucial to identify this fear. In a few years, phobia of using a foreign tongue will be a phenomenon that is worthwhile to investigate.

Collaborative learning involves students working together to solve problems, complete tasks, or understand new concepts. Vygotsky (1978) emphasized the importance of social interaction in cognitive development, introducing the concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). Collaborative activities like group discussions, pair work, and project-based learning facilitate peer interaction and shared responsibility, leading to increased motivation and reduced anxiety (Gillies, 2007). Collaborative learning can take many forms within the language classroom. Group projects, for instance, require students to work together to research a topic or prepare a presentation. This activity not only allows them to use the language in context but also helps them develop essential teamwork skills. Similarly, peer teaching, where more proficient learners assist their classmates, can enhance mastery of the material as both parties engage in meaningful dialogue. Role plays and simulations add an element of fun while giving students the chance to practice language use in various situations, from casual conversations to formal interviews. The role of the teacher in a collaborative environment is pivotal. Rather than simply delivering information, the teacher becomes a facilitator, guiding discussions, providing resources, and ensuring all students have an opportunity to contribute. By assessing group dynamics and intervening when necessary, educators can keep collaboration productive and focused. Implementing collaborative learning requires careful planning. Teachers must consider how to form groups effectively, aiming for diversity in skills and experiences. Setting clear objectives and providing structured guidelines can help maintain focus and ensure that all students understand their roles and responsibilities. However, challenges may arise, such as unequal participation or varying language proficiency levels within groups. To address these issues, strategies like assigning specific roles or pairing stronger students with those needing additional support can help create a more balanced learning experience. Peer scaffolding refers to the support learners provide each other within collaborative tasks. It includes modeling correct language use, offering feedback, and emotional support (Donato, 1994). When peers assist each other, it enhances understanding, builds confidence, and lowers the affective filter (Krashen, 1982). Scaffolding is particularly effective in speaking tasks where learners feel safer practicing with classmates rather than in front of the entire class (Aljaafreh & Lantolf, 1994). One of the main benefits of scaffolded instruction is that it provides for a supportive learning environment. In a scaffolded learning environment, students are free to ask questions, provide feedback and support their peers in learning new material. When you incorporate scaffolding in the classroom, you become more of a mentor and facilitator of knowledge rather than the dominant content expert. This teaching style provides the incentive for students to take a more active role in their own learning. Students share the responsibility of teaching and learning through scaffolds that require them to move beyond their current skill and knowledge levels. Through this interaction, students are able to take ownership of the learning event.

Collaborative learning provides a supportive atmosphere that mitigates fear. Think-Pair-Share, small group dialogues, and peer reviews foster gradual exposure to speaking. Students gain confidence through repetition, peer affirmation, and shared challenges. Studies by Tabatabaei et al. (2015) and Badr (2020) confirm that structured collaboration significantly lowers speaking apprehension. Positive peer relationships and consistent interaction foster a sense of belonging, reducing the emotional burden of performance.

Practical Strategies and Classroom Implications Practical applications include:

- Think-Pair-Share: Promotes private reflection before public speaking.
- Discussion Circles: Encourages democratic turn-taking and engagement.
- Role-plays and Peer Feedback: Build fluency and critical listening skills.
- Online Platforms: Tools like Zoom, Flipgrid, and Padlet provide asynchronous and synchronous speaking opportunities in lower-pressure settings (Kamarulzaman et al., 2020).

Teachers are encouraged to cultivate supportive classroom environments, normalize mistakes, and facilitate consistent peer interactions.

In conclusion, speaking apprehension presents a significant barrier to language acquisition among ESL/EFL learners. However, the integration of collaborative learning and peer scaffolding into language classrooms offers a practical and effective means of reducing this anxiety. These strategies promote emotional safety, peer support, and meaningful interaction, allowing learners to develop confidence and fluency over time. Grounded in Vygotsky's social learning theory, such approaches not only enhance speaking competence but also foster a more inclusive and supportive classroom environment. Educators who implement structured peer collaboration and supportive communication practices can empower students to overcome their fears and actively engage in language learning.

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