

## Enhancing Speaking Skill of Undergrad Students through Group Work: Theory and Practice

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*“...nobody learns alone, the same way nobody grows up, lives, suffers or dies alone; we are always acting and reacting with the context around us”.*

(Leffa, 2003, p. 2)

### Abstract

*The focal objective of this study is to explore the effectiveness of group work in enhancing the oral communication skills of undergraduate students. Possessing proficient command on speaking skill in English has undoubtedly emerged as a prerequisite for academic and professional excellence. However, the researcher being a teacher observed that most of teaching-learning time was spent on developing reading and writing skills undermining the practicality of enhancing communicative competency. This negligence results in grave deficiency of using English for conversational purposes at the part of the learners. Making the Vygotskian theory of social interaction base for this study, the research aimed at evaluating the role group work can play in developing oral communication of the learners by participating in collaborative tasks. It also strived to highlight the limitations of applying group activity based learning of English within our contextual constraints. The data was collected through questionnaire and observation checklist and interpreted qualitatively to elaborate the results. The findings of the study substantiated the advisability of group work in enhancing the speaking skill of the learners with increased vocabulary and decreased hesitation mainly. These findings can endorse including group work in the mainstream teaching of English with an objective to develop speaking skill of undergraduate learners within Pakistani context.*

**Keywords:** *second language teaching; speaking skill enhancement; group work; social interaction*

### 1. Introduction

The ever increasing importance and value of English has made it indispensable for students to gain conversational fluency in it (Paik, 2008). These days it is imperative for the learners not only to perform well in their selected majors but also to become proficient in speaking and listening English if they want to compete with the global needs. To address the issue, the academic institutes and bodies around the world had started devising language specific courses and plans since long which enable their learners to develop effective communication skills in English (Deepa, 2012). Such institutes fully realize that effective communication skills will pave the way to success for their learners not only during their academic careers but in future professional endeavours as well. However, regrettably, emphasizing communicative excellence is neither the practice nor the intention of majority of academic institutes like schools, colleges and universities in Pakistan yet. Within our context, right from primary to university level, the teaching of English remains synonymous with teaching and learning of reading and writing skills mostly. Contrary to the natural pattern of learning a language i.e. listening, speaking, reading and writing (Syomwene, 2013), in our context learners are forced to start learning English right from the skills which should be taught later i.e. reading and writing. Syomwene (2013) argues that reading and writing skills can be learned more effectively if they are based on efficient speaking and listening of the

same language. Since this simple natural law of learning a language is entirely neglected, our learners hardly turn up fluent and efficient users of English not only in speaking and listening but also in reading and writing. This inefficiency compromises the learners' performance in all aspects of their course of studies as Zeegers apprises (2005) "it is the language which facilitates all other learning and all learning failure is language failure" (cited in Syomwene, 2013, p. 168). Thus, good oral or verbal communication skills will lead the learners to gain success in other academic and professional skills.

The researcher's experience of teaching 1<sup>st</sup> year undergrad students of BSCS (Bachelor of Computer Science) revealed that the teaching of English is mainly focused on improving learners' ability to read and write effectively for formal and official purpose. The syllabus designed, including the text-books remained reading and writing- focused overlooking the importance of providing equal opportunities to enhance their oral skills. As discussed above, the ability to speak and listen actively in English will fundamentally support the learners to perform effectively in reading and writing skills later, it would be unnatural as well as irrational to expect the learners to perform satisfactorily in reading and writing when they are unable to comprehend the spoken speech or content, or express their opinions or ideas clearly and confidently in the target language (Kisilu & Lelie, 2008). To address the challenge of oral skills enhancement, the researchers working in the area of second language teaching and learning have employed varied strategies, methods and techniques. Despite the diversity of approaches and techniques adopted by the researchers and educationists there is one belief which is shared by almost all of them and that is learning a language, in its essence, is a social phenomenon (Prahbu, 1991; Gibbons, 2002; Jabeen & Akhtar, 2014) and when it comes to second language learning then it means a "social accomplishment" in itself situated in "social interaction" (Firth & Wagner, 2007, p. 807).

Social interaction defined as "the social behavior that occurs when one person communicates with another" (Ellis, 1991, p. 1) sheds light on the reciprocal engagement of two speakers. It can also be inferred that social interaction is intrinsic factor of social life which is based on human natural instinct to communicate one's ideas, opinions, perceptions beliefs etc. with other(s). This social activity becomes the fundamental tool of and for learning a language as "...it connects input (what learners hear and read); internal learner capacities, particularly selective attention; and output (what learners produce) in productive ways" (Long, 1996, pp. 451- 452). Besides 1<sup>st</sup> language, the same interactional input-output phenomenon becomes the basis for second language learning as well specifically for conversational skills. The interactional activities designed with the purpose of enhancing communicative skills have fairly established its effective implications in the teaching and learning of a second language (Pica, 1996; Ellis, 1999; Gass, 2002). The more meaning oriented, context related and collaborative the tasks are the better conducive environment they create which in turn makes learning a second language naturally convenient and ultimately effective.

Taking the assumption that learners can improve their oral communication competency by participating in collaborative tasks, this research aimed at following and implementing Vygotskian sociocultural notion of second language teaching and learning within our context. The learners' performance was measured and critically discussed through observation checklist and qualitative analysed respectively. The learners' beliefs and opinions regarding the teaching of English for conversational purpose were also collected and thrashed out through questionnaire developed for the purpose.

## 2. Literature Review

Research into teaching and learning of second language started in early 60s and soon it gained momentum when multiple theories were proposed by the researchers to acquire a second language. The theories proposed mainly fall into the categories of structural, cognitive, functional and interactional theories (Lavadenz, 2010). All these theories, research and study the ways in which learners can learn or acquire certain skills or bodies of knowledge starting with grammar translation method of pre-20<sup>th</sup> century to relatively recent Vygotskian sociocultural second language learning acquisition. For the proponent of second language, learning or acquisition (SLA) is concerned with how individuals' acquire a certain language other than their native language. As defined by Grass and Selinker (2010), SLA refers to "the study of how learners create a new language system with only limited exposure to a second language ...". It also analyses the fact that why most second language learners do not achieve the satisfactory knowledge and proficiency normally (Aimen, 2013). Similarly, the researchers also strive to investigate the reasons and factors which hamper the successful acquisition of second language in general. In their pursuit, the theorists offer theories based on behavioral, cognitive and socio-cultural perspectives addressing the issues pertinent to L2 learning. However, the research studies have undertaken the sociocultural notion of second language teaching very seriously.

Sociocultural theory was proposed by Russian philosopher, educationist, psychologist and researcher Lev Vygotsky based on the conception that "the development of human cognitive and higher mental function comes from social interactions and through participation in social activities" (Wertsch, 1985; John-Steiner, 1995 & Aimen, 2013). These social activities are meaning oriented driving the learners to achieve some specific goals. Vygotsky (1978) also proposes that learners will learn when their zone of proximal development (ZPD) is challenged which, in his words refers to "...the distance between the actual developmental level as determined through independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (p. 86). In other words, formulating such teaching learning process which will eventually lead the learners towards what they can achieve alone and what they can do with the help of a more knowledgeable other (Gibbons, 2002 & Lavadenz, 2010).

The role of more knowledgeable other (MKO) is very crucial in facilitating the learners towards enhancing their communicative skills (Baleghizadeh & Memar, 2011). The MKO, generally the teacher, assesses the learners' ability to perform in second language, in order to evaluate their individual proficiency. Then, the teacher designs activities which challenge learners' ZPD and encourage them to reach to their maximum potential level by participating in collaborative tasks (Turuk, 2008; Jabeen & Akhtar, 2013). Thus, not always depending on the MKO, the learners start to lead the interactions and learning process themselves actively when effectively trained and guided to do so (Tudge & Scrimsher, 2003). Along with recognizing and addressing learners' ZPD and determining the role of an MKO, the next crucial step is realizing the importance of meaningful social interaction in facilitating L2 learning as "nobody learns alone, the same way nobody grows up, lives, suffers or dies alone; we are always acting and reacting with the context around us" (Leffa, 2003, p. 2). It means linguistically poor environment will not assist the learners rather it would complicate the second language learning process. The learning process is enhanced by the provision of intrinsically collaborative tasks in which learners learn a language through negotiation, collaboration, repetition, clarification and elaboration (Gibbons, 2002; Tulung, 2008).

Such collaborative tasks mainly consist of pair or group work where learners support and assist each other to complete the given task effectively. As far as the learning of a second or foreign language is concerned, the group work has proven to be the most effective technique to make the learners gain communicative competency in the target language (Choudhery, 2005). Group work is considered effective for the fact that it is “is more dynamic than pair work: there are more people to react with and against in a group and, therefore, there is a greater possibility of discussion” (Harmer, 1991). The current study aimed at bridging the gap between existing literacy based teaching of English and oral communication targeted teaching of English. The learners were made to participate in group presentation tasks which required them to work jointly to discuss, plan, outline the topic, assign roles, divide the work load, help and assist each other in order to complete the task successfully and efficiently.

### **3. Research Methodology**

The current research aimed at employing group work to enhance communicative competency of the learners. Based on sociocultural notion of social interaction, the learners were supported to produce a variety of language while completing the given tasks. The participants of the study were Bachelor Level students with a total number of 33, out of which 8 were the female students and the rest were males. They were attending Technical Writing Course in a reputed university of Islamabad. Group presentations were included in the designed course with an objective to enhance communication skills of the learners. The researcher intended to evaluate how far the group presentation activity supports the learners in enhancing their communicative skill specifically speaking skill if implemented under the sociocultural teaching norms.

To achieve the said purpose, the participants were divided in different groups having 5-6 members in each group (3 groups with 6 and 3 with 5 members). They were given one research article to prepare their group presentation on by focusing on the contents, structure, methodology, findings etc. of the given article. The articles selected, mainly revolved around the academic research, offering comprehensible information and details to the students. The task was to be performed at two levels. First, after the formation of the groups by the instructor (the researcher herself), the learners were required to mutually select one group leader to lead the group towards effective task completion. Once the leader was chosen, the participants were directed to read the article, discuss its components, and assign the tasks to all the group participants (by the leader). While the participants were busy in this initial task, it was observed cautiously how the participants discussed their understanding of the article, offered their opinions, negotiated tasks, supported each other in presenting findings, took turns or initiated the discussions etc.

Instructor’s role at this stage was to facilitate the learners towards using English for this group discussion, supporting and providing linguistic assistance to the less fluent ones, explaining point of views and coming towards consensus and conclusions. It was also ensured that all the group members participated in the task discussion and offered suggestions and opinions. The learners were allowed to use Urdu occasionally when unable to express themselves or discuss in English. Moreover, the selection of the articles was made keeping in view the relevance of the topics to the socio-cultural situation of the learners so that they could engage in meaningful and result-oriented activity. The second stage was to present group presentations in front of the class in which all the participants explained and elaborated their assigned part or content. The participants were required to present individually but then respond to the follow up questions by their class fellows and the instructor, collaboratively. They were allowed to use Urdu as a linguistic facilitator at times where

lack of English vocabulary and expressions appeared as a hindrance in communicating information or opinions. However, the group participants were directed to provide English substitute for the Urdu words used by any or some members, as far as possible, with an objective to share and build a variety of language within the group discussions and presentations.

At the very outset, the learners were provided with relevant expressions and vocabulary with an objective to facilitate the learners in making dis/agreement, negotiations, giving and asking for clarifications, opinions etc. Such expressions included, but not limited to; I do/don't agree, I think you are right/wrong, what's your opinion, I'm sorry I don't understand etc. which served as a base for the practice of the target language later on. The performance of the learners was assessed through observation checklist employed as a research tool. Observation checklist has widely been exercised for its effectiveness in measuring the performance of the learners meritoriously during a teaching learning process (Wajnryb, 1992). The checklist designed for this particular study was adopted from an earlier work done relevant to enhancing English listening and speaking skill of the learners employing Vygotskian framework i.e. *English Language Learning Approach: Implementing Collaborative Language Learning Approach in Federal Colleges of Pakistan* (2013) where this model proved to be an authentic and most relevant tool for assessing learners' speaking skill performance (See Appendix).

The second data collection tool was questionnaire designed to gather participants' opinions and perceptions regarding the effectiveness of employing group work as collaborative language learning endeavour. The questionnaire responses demonstrated the fact that how far the participants agreed or disagreed towards the efficacy of this novel approach in achieving proficiency in English speaking skill.

#### **4. Data Analysis**

As data was collected through two data collection tools i.e. observation checklist and questionnaire, the analysis is presented in two subsequent parts. Each part strives to offer an in depth analysis of the findings of the research. The performance of the learners in presentation was measured as groups in the following linguistic categories: fluency, pronunciation, vocabulary, comprehensibility, and grammar and task completion. The variables chosen being pertinent to maintaining language fluency, facilitated the critical analysis of how the participants performed during the course of the research. They also brought to the surface the specific hurdles learners encountered in order to communicate and present themselves in the language under study.

##### **Analysis of Observation Checklist Data**

During the presentations, the performance of the learners was carefully observed and noted in the form of observation checklist. As defined by Tilstone observation means: "The systematic, and as accurate as possible, collection of usually visual evidence, leading to informed judgements and to necessary changes to accepted practices" (1998, pg. 6). As this definition states, the observation tool proved to be the most effective means of recording the learners' performance objectively and simultaneously, generating reliable and accurate data which later paved the way for *informed judgement* and analysis. The tables given below demonstrate the performance of the learners in English speaking skill in the group presentation activity.

Table 1: Scores of Learners in Group Presentation Speaking Skill

Assessment Rubric	Male & Female Learners' Performance Total No. of Learners 18 (6 in each Group)														
	Group 1				%	Group 2				%	Group 3				%
	1	2	3	4		1	2	3	4		1	2	3	4	
Fluency	1	2	2	1	63	2	2	1	1	54	0	2	2	2	75
Pronunciation	1	2	2	1	63	1	2	2	1	63	0	1	3	2	79
Vocabulary	0	2	3	1	71	1	2	3	0	63	0	1	3	2	79
Comprehensibility	0	1	3	2	79	0	2	2	2	75	0	2	2	2	75
Grammar	1	3	1	1	58	1	2	2	1	63	0	2	2	2	75
Task Completion	0	2	2	2	75	0	1	3	2	79	0	1	3	2	79
Total Percentage					68					66					77

The statistical results given in the table above represent some interesting insights. As observed during this experimental study, most of the learners expressed significant interest in completing the task effectively though in the beginning they appeared to be less enthusiastic about the nature and accomplishment of the activity. The facilitation provided by the instructor in the form of explanation, linguistic support and directives subsided the ambiguities and hesitation at the part of the learners and efficaciously aided them to approach the task more logically and systematically. As per the statistical representations of the table given above, the information or content produced by the participants of all the three groups remained comprehensible and coherent mostly. Similarly, majority of the groups completed the given task effectively as well by presenting and explaining all the required parts and areas of the given article. The linguistic features where the learners lacked at comparatively were vocabulary, fluency and to some extent pronunciation. As it can be seen, the group 2 participants were least fluent whereas group 3 participants appeared to be particularly fluent. Group 3, managed to offer comparatively smoother discussions during the inter-group exchange of ideas and opinions, and later in formal presentation and question-answer sessions. It is important to explain at this juncture that the fluency, in this study, refers to less unnatural pauses and halts which hinder the overall expression and comprehension of the information and knowledge imparted by the participants.

Another important finding was an overall inability of the learners to offer grammatically accurate expressions and language. Considering the amount of time and efforts usually spent on teaching of grammatical rules and structures within our context, this inadequacy poses a serious question not only to the purpose and objective of such teaching but the effectiveness of methods of teaching also. The data demonstrates that all the 3 groups mentioned in Table 1, performed the lowest in exhibiting accurate use of grammatical structures as compared to the other variables like vocabulary and pronunciation.

The common errors they made varied from simple noun choices to subject-verb agreement and simple structures to more complex sentence structures. However, it was also notable that the linguistic cues and expressions provided to support the learners did offer them with the basic and simple structures, the learners lacked seriously in using complex sentence structures to explain the information and the content of the articles.



The next table presents the performance of the next three groups with 5 members in each. A glance at the statistics shows that the performance of these groups in the given group activity did not differ to a great extent from the performance of the previous 3 groups.

Table 2: Scores of Learners in Group Presentation Speaking Skill

Assessment Rubric	Male & Female Learners' Performance Total No. of Learners 15 (5 in each Group)														
	Group 4				%	Group 5				%	Group 6				%
	1	2	3	4		1	2	3	4		1	2	3	4	
Fluency	0	1	2	2	80	1	2	2	0	55	0	2	2	1	70
Pronunciation	1	1	2	1	65	1	1	2	1	65	0	1	2	2	80
Vocabulary	0	1	3	1	75	1	1	2	1	65	0	1	3	1	75
Comprehensibility	0	0	3	2	85	0	1	2	2	80	0	1	2	2	80
Grammar	0	2	3	0	65	0	2	1	1	55	1	1	1	2	70
Task Completion	0	2	2	1	70	0	1	2	2	80	0	1	2	2	80
Total Percentage					73					67					77

As evident from the data given, the overall performance of the learners in the given task, appeared to be satisfactory as far as English speaking skill is concerned. Except *group 5*, the other two groups rather performed well by offering fluent expressions and showing good command on relevant vocabulary and pronunciation. There were few unnatural pauses and halts noted during the presentations and discussion presented. It was observed that the learners not only discussed their given topics in detail, also their language had few grammatical errors.

Overall, the performance of the participants of the study varied from 66% to 77% which statistically means a performance well above average performance. It is also a fact that the learners neither performed like native speakers nor shown mastery of English communication, nevertheless, the group work activity did facilitate the participants to initiate discussions, generate and share ideas and opinions, offer and ask for clarifications or explanations and develop mutual consensus. It also trained and facilitated the learners in supporting one another linguistically when any member of the group lacked at offering or recalling relevant word, vocabulary or expression. For instance, if a member used any Urdu word such as “Muashara” the other replaced it with “Society” which helped the learners to offer and listen for variety of expressions and language, to later on learn and use the recently learnt language in group presentation task.

The findings of the study and the analysis presented above indicate that the sociocultural context created to implement this study supported the learners to perform effectively in group discussions and presentations by working collaboratively, building linguistic repertoire based on the vocabulary and expressions provided at the outset of the study, helping and supporting group member by offering necessary language aids etc.

## 5. Analysis of Questionnaire Data

The second data collection tool employed in the current study was Questionnaire. The focal objective of administering questionnaire was to gauge the beliefs and the perceptions of the students regarding the effectiveness of group work in enhancing their English speaking skill. It

also served to validate the findings of the observations in the back drop of students' opinions with reference to implementing group tasks for language development.

The questions asked and the response received from the participants at the end of the experimental study, are given in the table below:

Table 3: Questionnaire Responses

No.	Questions	Very Important	Important	Neutral	Somewhat Important	Not Imp at All
1	Do you think learning of English is important for you?	+28	05	-	-	-
2	According to you, how important speaking well in English is?	99	06	-	-	-
No.	Questions	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
4	Group work can help learners to improve their English speaking skill.+	29	06		-	-
No.	Questions	To Great Extent	To Moderate Extent	Neutral	To Some Extent	Not at All
5	To what extent did group work help you in improving English vocabulary?	24	08		01	-
6	To what extent did group work help you in improving English grammar?	20	10	-	03	-
7	To what extent did group work help you in improving English fluency?	21	08	-	04	-
8	To what extent collaborative activities can help learning English for communication purpose?	25	07	-	01	
No.	Questions	Very Interesting	Interesting	Neutral	Interesting To Some Extent	No Interest At All
09	How interesting working in groups is according to you?	25	05	1	2	-
No.	Questions	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
10	Do you think group work should be used more often to enhance English speaking skill?	26	06	1	-	-

The importance of learning English as second language for communication purpose has long been established and proven globally (Jabeen & Akhtar, 2013; Crystal, 2003 & Morreale. S. et al.). However, the first two questions given in the table above intended to explore the students' perceptions and belief about how important they perceive learning English is for them for the purpose of effective communication. As evident, the learners appeared unanimous in acknowledging the significance of learning English. At the same time, they declared their apprehension against the current method of teaching English when more than 90% of the learners



disagreed with the opinion that current method of teaching facilitates learning how to converse effectively in the target language.

Interestingly, around 88% of the students strongly favoured the use of group work/activity for enhancing their speaking skills which also verified the results of observation checklist. Majority of the participants also believed that the group activities they performed in also helped them to improve the grammatical structures and spoken fluency. They found these activities to be interesting as well as communicatively facilitating and agreed to the statement that such activities should be introduced more often during the regular course of studies.

It can also be inferred that belonging to different social classes and backgrounds the learners do come with different levels of basic knowledge and command on English communication. However, if they are provided with stimulating environment and diligently designed and planned activities aiming at enhancing their speaking skill, they can overcome the natural hindrances and problems they face during communicating in English.

### **Limitations in Implementing Group Work**

Implementing any activity which needs a collaborative and joint effort of its participants specifically using English as a medium of discussion is undeniably a difficult task to be executed for teachers for many reasons. First and foremost hindrance is the overall neglectful attitude of the whole English language teaching system towards teaching of listening and speaking skills. There are no communication oriented policies, text-books, teaching methods, assessment and examination system which as a result make it difficult to teach learners how to communicate in English as a second language. Secondly, the learners are generally not trained or even familiar with using English to express themselves or converse in and out of academic situations. Thus, to acquaint the learners with such activities appears as a challenge for the teachers. Similarly, as discussed above, the syllabus contents and text-books do not support teaching of speaking skill so teachers have to make extra efforts to arrange such material or modify the course contents/texts to make it appropriate to teach speaking skill.

### **Recommendations for the Teachers**

In view of the findings of the current study and the limitations of implementing group work, following are few recommendations offered for English language teachers with an objective to enhance the communications skills of undergraduate learners through group work activities:

- Teachers should must include group activities focussing at the speaking skill enhancement of the learners
- Such activities should be meaning oriented and context related where the learners will be provided with firm grounds to generate meaningful discussions
- The activities should have clear directions and carefully planned stages of different levels of performance- moving from simplicity towards complexity of the performance required
- Each and every member of the group should be assigned with definite tasks to be performed
- The teachers should provide the learners with vocabulary items and common expressions which learners can employ to initiate and develop inter and intra-group discussions and presentations.

- The use of Urdu should be allowed to maintain the flow of discussions and conversations, however, the teacher should make sure that these Urdu words used must be replaced by the group members or the teacher himself/herself to enhance the vocabulary of the participants.

## 6. Conclusion

Definitely, there are many fundamental factors which play critical role in the overall development of English language teaching and learning system. The same is true for Pakistani context as well where language teaching policies, text-books, syllabi, time constraint, examination system, unavailability of modern language learning tools and so on make the effective teaching of English communicative skills a hard nut to crack. Nevertheless, teachers can still bring innovative and modern teaching techniques to their classrooms to facilitate the learners to develop English speaking skills and to converse more fluently and confidently in it. The current study is an evidence, where an effort was made to incorporate the practice of generating discussions, negotiations and dialogues in the target language as a part of mainstream teaching. The positive findings indicate that such efforts if made more often can bring significant improvement in the learning of English for communication purpose.

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## **Appendix -Observation Checklist**

### **Effort**

1. little effort to communicate
2. some effort to communicate
3. real effort to communicate
4. unusually high effort to communicate

### **Comprehensibility**

1. could understand only isolated words
2. could understand short sentences
3. could understand most of what student said
4. could understand everything student said

### **Fluency**

1. quite a few unnatural pauses, halting and fragmentary delivery
2. some unnatural pauses, halting and fragmentary delivery
3. few unnatural pauses, halting and fragmentary delivery
4. no unnatural pauses, halting and fragmentary delivery

### **Vocabulary**

1. quite a few inadequate end/or inaccurate use of vocabulary
2. somewhat inadequate end/or inaccurate use of vocabulary
3. adequate end/or accurate use of vocabulary
4. rich use of vocabulary

### **Grammar**

1. quite a few inadequate end/or inaccurate use of basic language structures
2. emerging use of basic language structures
3. emerging control of basic language structures
4. control of basic language structures