Date: 13th May-2026

THE EFFECT OF GROUP WORK ON STUDENTS' SPEAKING CONFIDENCE IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE CLASSROOMS

Isomiddinova Yulduz
Namangan state institute of foreign languages
yulduzisomiddinova2@gmail.com
Scientific supervisor: **Sevara Mashrapova**

Abstract: This study investigates the effect of group work on students' speaking confidence in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms. Speaking confidently is one of the greatest challenges EFL learners face, and classroom anxiety often prevents students from taking the communicative risks necessary for language development. Using a six-week classroom-based research design with 15 fifth-grade primary school students, this study examined changes in participation rates, speaking frequency, and peer support behaviors before and after the systematic integration of group work into speaking lessons. Results show a dramatic increase in active participation from 27% to 80% of students, alongside a rise in speaking frequency from 1–2 turns per lesson to 4–6 turns. Peer support behaviors emerged as key mechanisms through which group work reduced anxiety and built confidence. The findings confirm that well-structured group work is an effective strategy for improving speaking confidence in primary EFL classrooms.

Keywords: group work, speaking confidence, EFL classroom, language anxiety, cooperative learning, peer support, primary education

I. Introduction

Speaking is widely regarded as one of the most demanding and high-stakes skills to develop in a foreign language. For learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), the classroom is frequently the primary — and sometimes the only — environment in which meaningful opportunities to practice spoken English arise. Yet despite this, a significant number of students remain silent during speaking activities, not because they lack vocabulary or grammar knowledge, but because of a powerful and often invisible barrier: the fear of being judged, the fear of making mistakes, and a deeply felt nervousness that makes speaking in a second language feel like an enormous personal risk.

This psychological barrier is widely known in second language acquisition research as language anxiety. Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986) formally defined foreign language anxiety as a complex set of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors related specifically to classroom language learning. High levels of this anxiety are consistently associated with reduced participation, shorter and less complex utterances, and a general avoidance of speaking opportunities — all of which significantly limit the learner's chances to develop communicative competence over time.

One pedagogical approach frequently proposed as a solution to this problem is group work. By allowing students to communicate in smaller, more intimate peer settings rather than in front of the whole class, group work fundamentally changes the social and

psychological dynamics of speaking practice. Students can take risks, experiment with language, and receive immediate feedback from peers rather than from an authority figure — a context that many learners find far less threatening and far more encouraging.

While the broad benefits of group work for language learning are well established in the literature (Harmer, 2007; Long & Porter, 1985; Slavin, 1995), considerably fewer studies have examined the specific relationship between group work and speaking confidence as a distinct educational outcome. Confidence — a learner's positive belief in their ability to communicate successfully — is not the same as linguistic ability, but it profoundly shapes how often students practice, how willing they are to take risks, and ultimately how much progress they make over time. A capable but unconfident student may consistently underperform, while a confident student may communicate effectively despite producing many errors.

This gap in the research motivates the present study. By conducting a focused, classroom-based investigation with primary school EFL learners over a six-week period, this paper asks: Does group work improve students' speaking confidence in EFL classrooms, and if so, through what mechanisms? The study follows the IMRAD structure and presents findings through both qualitative observation and three descriptive summary tables. The paper concludes with practical recommendations for EFL teachers seeking to build a more confident speaking culture in their classrooms.

II. Methods

2.1 Research Design

This study employed a small-scale qualitative classroom-based research design. Classroom-based research of this kind is valuable because it generates insights grounded in real teaching and learning situations, allowing the researcher to observe changes in student behavior within the natural context of everyday lessons. A six-week timeframe was chosen to allow students sufficient time to become familiar with group work and for meaningful shifts in confidence and participation to become visible. An observational before-and-after approach was used, comparing student behavior at the start of the intervention (Week 1) with behavior at the end (Week 6), in order to identify changes attributable to the group work activities carried out throughout the period.

2.2 Participants

The participants were 15 fifth-grade students aged 10 to 11 years, studying English as a foreign language at a primary school. All students had broadly comparable levels of English proficiency at an elementary stage, with some prior experience of basic classroom activities in English but limited exposure to structured, task-based speaking activities. No students had prior extensive experience with regular group work in EFL lessons. The relatively small sample size reflects the practical constraints of single-classroom research but allowed for close, sustained observation of each individual student across all six weeks. Ethical considerations were observed throughout: participation was part of normal classroom instruction, and no personally identifiable information was recorded or reported.

2.3 Intervention: Group Work Activities

Students were divided into small groups of three to four members, deliberately mixed in terms of personality type and participation style, ensuring that shyer students were paired with more outgoing peers. This design decision was informed by the cooperative learning principle of positive interdependence (Slavin, 1995), whereby students need one another in order to complete tasks successfully.

Over the six weeks, two to three speaking lessons per week incorporated structured group work activities. These were carefully designed to be communicatively meaningful, accessible at the students' current level, and genuinely interactive. Activity types included: role-plays based on familiar everyday situations such as shopping or making introductions; picture description tasks where groups collaboratively interpreted an image; short discussions on familiar topics such as hobbies or school subjects; and structured question-and-answer exchanges. The complexity of activities was gradually increased as students' confidence with the format grew. Throughout group sessions, the teacher circulated to offer support while deliberately avoiding public error correction, in order to preserve the low-anxiety atmosphere that group work is designed to create.

2.4 Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected through systematic classroom observation. During each lesson, the teacher-researcher kept detailed field notes recording which students participated actively, how frequently individuals produced speaking turns, the nature of peer support behaviors, and observable signs of growing confidence such as body language and willingness to volunteer. At the beginning (Week 1) and end (Week 6) of the study, a structured observational count was also conducted, recording the number of active participants, average speaking turns per lesson, and the proportion of students engaging in peer support behaviors. The qualitative field notes were analyzed thematically, and the structured counts provided the descriptive data presented in the three tables in the Results section below.

III. Results

3.1 Changes in Student Participation and Speaking Frequency

The most striking finding of the study was the dramatic change in participation rates between Week 1 and Week 6. During initial observations, only 4 out of 15 students (27%) could be classified as active participants — students who volunteered readily, engaged spontaneously with group members, and showed no visible reluctance to speak. The remaining 11 students (73%) were noticeably hesitant, falling silent during group tasks and relying on others to carry the communicative load.

By Week 6, 12 out of 15 students (80%) were observed to be active participants — initiating conversations, asking spontaneous questions, and contributing without prompting. Only 3 students (20%) continued to show limited participation, though even within this group some improvement was recorded. The average number of speaking turns per student per lesson rose from 1–2 in Week 1 to 4–6 by Week 6. Table 1 below summarizes these changes across five key participation indicators.

Table 1

Student Participation and Speaking Frequency: Week 1 vs. Week 6

Indicator	Week 1 (Before)	Week 6 (After)	Change	Interpretation
Active Participants	4 students (27%)	12 students (80%)	+53%	Major increase
Hesitant / Silent Students	11 students (73%)	3 students (20%)	–53%	Significant drop
Avg. Speaking Turns / Lesson	1–2 turns	4–6 turns	+3–4 turns	Consistent growth
Students Volunteering Answers	2 students	10 students	+8 students	Strong improvement
Students Silent During Tasks	9 students (60%)	2 students (13%)	–47%	Very positive shift

Note. Data are based on structured observational counts conducted at the beginning (Week 1) and end (Week 6) of the six-week intervention period. Speaking turns were counted across full 45-minute lesson periods.

3.2 Distribution of Confidence Improvement Levels

While the overall direction of change was clearly positive, students did not all improve at the same pace or to the same degree. To capture this variation, students were categorized into three groups based on observable changes in their speaking behavior over the six weeks. The largest group — approximately 70% of students — showed high improvement: by Week 6 these students were speaking freely and frequently, initiating interaction with peers, and in many cases actively helping others in their group. Their body language had visibly changed — they sat forward, made eye contact, and smiled when speaking — suggesting genuine confidence rather than merely surface-level behavioral compliance.

A second group of approximately 20% showed moderate improvement: they became more responsive than at baseline but still showed some residual hesitation, tending to wait to be addressed rather than volunteering. The remaining 10% showed little observable change, continuing to rely heavily on more active group members. Table 2 presents the full breakdown of confidence improvement levels and the behaviors associated with each category.

Table 2

Distribution of Confidence Improvement Levels After Six Weeks of Group Work

Confidence Level	No. of Students	% of Class	Observable Behaviors

Confidence Level	No. of Students	% of Class	Observable Behaviors
High Improvement	~10–11 students	~70%	Spoke freely, initiated talk, helped peers actively
Moderate Improvement	~3 students	~20%	Responded when prompted; some hesitation remained
Little Change	~1–2 students	~10%	Relied heavily on group; limited independent speech
Total	15 students	100%	Overall positive trend observed across the whole class

Note. Confidence levels were determined through qualitative observation of speaking behaviors and do not represent results from standardized speaking assessments.

3.3 Peer Support Behaviors

One of the most notable findings was the prominent and spontaneous emergence of peer support behaviors within the groups. From early in the research period, students began helping one another — explaining vocabulary, encouraging hesitant speakers, modeling phrases, and managing turn-taking so that quieter members had space to contribute. These behaviors became more frequent and varied as the weeks progressed.

By Week 6, approximately 73% of students had been observed helping peers with vocabulary, and 67% had verbally encouraged a group member who seemed reluctant to speak. Groups became noticeably warmer and more collaborative over time, and students who had previously been among the most reticent began to open up as they experienced encouragement rather than judgment from their peers. Table 3 presents the full range of peer support behaviors observed, their frequency, and their apparent effect on speaking confidence.

Table 3

Peer Support Behaviors Observed During Group Work Activities

Peer Support Behavior	Frequency Observed	% of Students Involved	Effect on Speaking Confidence
Vocabulary Explanation	Very Frequent	73%	Reduced fear of unknown words; students felt supported to speak
Verbal Encouragement	Frequent	67%	Boosted willingness to try; students attempted more after praise
Modeling Correct Phrases	Moderate	53%	Provided natural scaffolding in a low-pressure peer context
Peer Error	Occasional	40%	Less intimidating than teacher

Peer Support Behavior	Frequency Observed	% of Students Involved	Effect on Speaking Confidence
Correction			correction; generally accepted well
Turn-Taking / Prompting	Frequent	60%	Ensured shy students had a voice; reduced one-member dominance

Note. Frequency categories — Very Frequent: observed in most lessons across most groups; Frequent: observed in the majority of lessons; Moderate: observed regularly but not consistently; Occasional: observed in fewer than half of lessons.

IV. Discussion

The results of this study provide clear and consistent evidence that group work had a substantial positive effect on students' speaking confidence over the six-week intervention period. The increase in active participation from 27% to 80% represents a genuine transformation in classroom dynamics rather than a marginal shift. Three interconnected mechanisms appear to account for this improvement: reduced anxiety, increased speaking opportunities, and the emergence of peer support.

First, the reduction in anxiety that group work appears to produce aligns closely with Dörnyei's (2001) argument that a supportive and positive classroom atmosphere is essential for encouraging communication. When students speak in small groups among familiar peers rather than in front of the whole class, the social stakes of making a mistake are considerably lower. Errors become learning moments rather than sources of embarrassment, and students are freed to focus on communicating rather than on performing.

Second, the dramatic increase in speaking frequency — from 1–2 turns per lesson to 4–6 turns — directly supports Long and Porter's (1985) argument that group work fundamentally increases student talk time. Each additional speaking turn represents an opportunity to practice and to build the kind of routine confidence that comes from repeated successful communication. Over six weeks, this cumulative effect proved significant.

Third, the emergence of spontaneous peer support behaviors played a central and somewhat unexpected role in building confidence. Students who were helped with vocabulary, encouraged by a classmate, or gently prompted to take their turn showed — through observable behavior — a greater willingness to contribute. This aligns with Slavin's (1995) cooperative learning framework and with Vygotskian notions of scaffolded peer interaction: students can accomplish together what they cannot yet manage alone.

The 20% of students who showed only moderate improvement, and the 10% who showed little change, highlight an important limitation of group work as a universal strategy. Gillies (2006) observed that without careful task design and monitoring, passive students may remain peripheral even within a group setting. This study's findings confirm that observation: a minority of students continued to rely on more dominant peers rather

than developing independent speaking confidence. This suggests that group work alone may not be sufficient for all learners, and that targeted individual encouragement or more carefully scaffolded tasks may be needed for the most anxious or reluctant students.

Overall, however, the evidence from this study strongly supports the conclusion that group work, when well designed and consistently implemented, is a powerful and practical tool for building speaking confidence in primary EFL classrooms.

V. Conclusion

This study set out to investigate whether group work improves students' speaking confidence in EFL classrooms, and the findings offer a clear and encouraging answer: it does. Over six weeks of structured group work activities, students in this fifth-grade EFL classroom became noticeably more willing, more frequent, and more confident speakers of English. Active participation rose from 27% to 80%, average speaking turns per lesson tripled, and the classroom atmosphere shifted from one marked by hesitation and silence to one characterized by peer collaboration, mutual encouragement, and genuine communicative engagement.

Three mechanisms drove these changes: a reduction in the anxiety that whole-class speaking situations produce; a dramatic increase in the quantity of speaking practice each student received; and the spontaneous development of peer support behaviors that made group settings feel safe, supportive, and motivating. These findings are consistent with and supportive of the theoretical frameworks proposed by Dörnyei (2001), Long and Porter (1985), Slavin (1995), and others.

The study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. The sample size of 15 students from a single classroom limits the generalizability of the findings. The six-week period, while sufficient to observe meaningful change, is relatively short, and it is not yet known whether the gains in confidence were sustained over a longer period. Future research should consider larger, multi-classroom studies with more varied data collection methods, including student self-report surveys and audio or video recordings of group interactions.

For classroom teachers, the practical message of this study is both simple and important: creating regular, structured opportunities for students to speak in small peer groups can make a meaningful difference to their confidence and willingness to communicate in English. Group work is not a magic solution, and it requires thoughtful task design, mixed grouping, and careful monitoring to reach its full potential. But when implemented well, it offers every student something that whole-class instruction rarely can: a safe space to find their voice.

REFERENCES:

Dörnyei, Z. (2001). Motivational strategies in the language classroom. Cambridge University Press.

Gillies, R. M. (2006). Teachers' and students' verbal behaviours during cooperative and small-group learning. British Journal of Educational Psychology, 76(2), 271–287. https://doi.org/10.1348/000709905X52337

Harmer, J. (2007). How to teach English. Pearson Longman.

Horwitz, E. K., Horwitz, M. B., & Cope, J. (1986). Foreign language classroom anxiety. The Modern Language Journal, 70(2), 125–132.

Long, M. H., & Porter, P. A. (1985). Group work, interlanguage talk, and second language acquisition. TESOL Quarterly, 19(2), 207–228. https://doi.org/10.2307/3586827

Nunan, D. (1991). Language teaching methodology. Prentice Hall.

Slavin, R. E. (1995). Cooperative learning: Theory, research, and practice. Allyn & Bacon.

Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes. Harvard University Press.

Yule, G., Powers, M., & Macdonald, D. (1992). The variable effects of some task-based learning procedures on L2 communicative effectiveness. Language Learning, 42(2), 249–277.