

Applying Collaborative Approach in English Speaking Class at a University in Viet Nam

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Abstract

This study investigates the application of the collaborative approach in English speaking classes for first-year university students in Viet Nam. The study aims to examine how collaborative speaking activities contribute to students' English speaking performance, classroom participation, confidence, and interaction. Drawing on the principles of collaborative learning, the research emphasizes group-based oral activities such as discussion, role-play, problem-solving tasks, and peer interaction as means of increasing students' opportunities to use English in meaningful communicative contexts. A descriptive research design is proposed, using questionnaires, classroom observation, and speaking performance assessment to collect data from first-year university students enrolled in English courses. The expected findings indicate that the collaborative approach can create a more learner-centered speaking environment, increase student talking time, reduce speaking anxiety, and promote cooperation among students. However, possible challenges may include unequal participation, students' use of Vietnamese during group work, limited vocabulary, low confidence, and the need for careful teacher monitoring. The study concludes that the collaborative approach is a practical and effective pedagogical strategy for improving English speaking instruction at Vietnamese universities, particularly when teachers provide clear instructions, appropriate grouping, sufficient language support, and constructive feedback.

Keywords: Collaborative approach; English speaking skills; first-year university students; group work; Vietnamese higher education

1. Introduction

English speaking competence has become an essential learning outcome for university students in Viet Nam because it supports academic communication, future employment, and participation in international working environments. In the context of higher education, students are expected not only to understand English grammar and vocabulary but also to use English effectively in oral communication. However, many first-year university students still experience difficulties in speaking English, especially when they have to express ideas, respond spontaneously, and interact with classmates in real classroom situations. The previous thesis on collaborative speaking activities also showed that Vietnamese learners often had limited oral communicative ability, lacked confidence, and tended to rely on Vietnamese during speaking activities.

Speaking is a complex skill because it requires learners to manage several linguistic and communicative elements at the same time. These include pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, fluency, interaction, comprehension, and the ability to use language appropriately in context. Brown (1994) classifies classroom speaking performance into several types, including imitative, intensive, responsive, transactional,

interpersonal, and extensive speaking, suggesting that speaking instruction should move from controlled practice to meaningful communication. Similarly, Goh and Burns (2012) emphasize that the mastery of speaking skills is a priority for many second language learners and that learners often evaluate their language-learning success through their ability to speak English. Kayi (2006) also argues that teaching speaking involves helping learners produce speech sounds, use stress and intonation, select appropriate words and sentences, and use language according to social context.

For first-year university students, speaking English can be particularly challenging because they are often moving from school-based English learning to the more communicative demands of university education. Many students may have learned English mainly through grammar exercises, written tests, and teacher-centered instruction; therefore, they may not have had enough opportunities to use English for real oral interaction. Nation and Newton (2009) suggest that a balanced program for developing listening and speaking should include meaning-focused input, meaning-focused output, language-focused learning, and fluency development. This implies that speaking instruction should create regular opportunities for students to produce language, communicate meaning, and develop fluency in addition to learning linguistic forms.

One pedagogical approach that can respond to these needs is the collaborative approach. Collaborative learning allows students to work together, share ideas, solve problems, and support one another in completing learning tasks. Oxford (1997) identifies cooperative learning, collaborative learning, and interaction as important communicative strands in the language classroom. In English speaking classes, collaborative activities such as group discussion, role-play, problem-solving tasks, peer interviews, and short group presentations can increase student talking time and create more opportunities for learners to use English in meaningful contexts. These activities are also consistent with Swain's output hypothesis, which highlights the role of language production in helping learners develop communicative competence.

The theoretical foundation of the collaborative approach is also supported by sociocultural theory and social interdependence theory. Vygotsky's sociocultural theory emphasizes that learning is shaped through social interaction and support from others. This view suggests that students can develop speaking ability when they interact with peers, receive assistance, and participate in meaningful communication. Social interdependence theory further explains that cooperative learning is effective when students have shared goals, individual accountability, promotive interaction, and interpersonal support. Johnson and Johnson (2009) describe social interdependence theory as an important foundation for cooperative learning in educational practice.

Collaborative speaking activities may also help reduce speaking anxiety and improve students' confidence. Language anxiety can negatively affect learners' cognitive processing and performance in a second language, as shown by MacIntyre and Gardner (1994). In small-group speaking tasks, students may feel less pressure than when speaking individually in front of the whole class. Peer support can help them prepare ideas, find vocabulary, correct mistakes, and continue communication. Storch (2002) also shows that pair and group interaction can vary in terms of equality and mutuality, indicating that the quality of learner interaction is important for successful collaborative learning. Therefore, collaborative speaking activities should be carefully structured so that students have both support and responsibility during oral tasks.

Although the collaborative approach has clear pedagogical potential, its implementation in speaking classes may involve several challenges. Students may use their mother tongue during group work, depend on stronger classmates, participate unequally, or remain anxious about making mistakes. These problems were also identified in the previous thesis, which reported low English proficiency, use of Vietnamese during group activities, unequal participation, and classroom-management difficulties as common challenges in collaborative speaking lessons. This suggests that collaborative speaking activities require careful planning, clear instructions, appropriate grouping, language preparation, teacher monitoring, and constructive feedback.

Despite the relevance of collaborative learning to English speaking instruction, further classroom-based research is needed in the context of Vietnamese higher education, particularly with first-year university students. This group of learners has specific needs because they are adapting to university-level learning while also preparing for future academic and professional communication. Therefore, this study investigates the application of the collaborative approach in English speaking classes for first-year university students at a university in Viet Nam. Specifically, the study examines whether collaborative speaking activities improve students' speaking performance, participation, and confidence, and identifies the difficulties students experience when participating in these activities.

The study addresses the following research questions:

1. To what extent does the collaborative approach improve first-year university students' English speaking performance, participation, and confidence?
2. What difficulties do students experience when participating in collaborative speaking activities?

2. Introduction

2.1. English Speaking Skills in EFL Learning

Speaking is one of the most important skills in English language learning because it enables learners to express ideas, exchange information, negotiate meaning, and participate in real-life communication. In higher education, speaking competence is especially important because university students are expected to use English for academic discussion, presentations, future employment, and intercultural communication. However, speaking is also one of the most complex language skills because it requires learners to use linguistic knowledge and communicative strategies at the same time. Goh and Burns (2012) present speaking as a skill that should be taught through a holistic approach, combining linguistic knowledge, core speaking skills, communication strategies, and affective factors.

In EFL classrooms, speaking instruction should not focus only on repetition or controlled language practice. Brown (1994) classifies classroom speaking performance into different types, including imitative, intensive, responsive, transactional, interpersonal, and extensive speaking. This classification suggests that students need opportunities to move from controlled production to more meaningful and interactive oral communication. Bygate (1987) also treats speaking as a central area of language teaching and communicative competence, emphasizing that speaking involves more than the production of grammatically correct sentences.

Nation and Newton (2009) argue that a balanced program for listening and speaking should include meaning-focused input, meaning-focused output, language-focused learning, and fluency development. This framework is relevant to university speaking classes because students need both language support and repeated opportunities to produce spoken English. Kayi (2006) similarly suggests that speaking activities should help learners use pronunciation, stress, intonation, vocabulary, sentence structures, and social language functions in meaningful contexts. Therefore, effective speaking instruction should provide students with communicative tasks that allow them to use English actively rather than only study language forms.

2.2. Collaborative Learning in Language Classrooms

Collaborative learning refers to a learning approach in which students work together to complete tasks, solve problems, exchange ideas, and support one another's learning. In the language classroom, collaborative learning is closely related to interaction because learners develop language ability through communication with others. Oxford (1997) identifies cooperative learning, collaborative learning, and interaction as three important communicative strands in the second or foreign language classroom. Her work shows that these

strands are closely connected to communicative language learning because they create opportunities for learners to participate actively in classroom communication.

Collaborative learning is particularly suitable for English speaking classes because speaking itself is social and interactive. Through group discussion, role-play, problem-solving tasks, peer interviews, and short group presentations, students can practice asking questions, giving opinions, responding to others, clarifying meaning, and negotiating ideas. McCafferty, Jacobs, and DaSilva Iddings (2006) also show that cooperative learning is strongly connected to second language teaching because structured peer collaboration can support interaction and language development.

The previous thesis also emphasized that collaborative learning provides students with more opportunities to work in groups, share responsibility, and practice speaking through oral group activities such as discussion, role-play, debate, brainstorming, and problem solving. It further noted that group-based learning can increase student talking time, promote cooperation, and create a more active speaking environment. These points are directly relevant to the present study, which investigates the application of the collaborative approach in English speaking classes for first-year university students in Viet Nam.

2.3. Theoretical Foundation of the Collaborative Approach

The collaborative approach is supported by sociocultural theory, social interdependence theory, and interaction-based views of second language acquisition. Vygotsky's sociocultural theory emphasizes that learning is shaped through social interaction and mediation. In this view, learners can develop knowledge and skills through interaction with more capable peers or teachers. In English speaking classes, this means that students may improve their speaking ability when they receive support from classmates, observe peer language use, and participate in meaningful communication.

Social interdependence theory also provides an important foundation for collaborative learning. Johnson and Johnson (2009) explain that cooperative learning depends on positive interdependence, individual accountability, promotive interaction, interpersonal skills, and group processing. These elements are essential because students do not automatically collaborate successfully simply by sitting in groups. They need shared goals, clear responsibilities, and opportunities to support one another's learning.

Interaction-based theories of second language acquisition further support the use of collaborative speaking tasks. Long's interaction hypothesis highlights the importance of interaction and negotiation of meaning in second language learning. Long (1996) is widely cited for explaining the role of the linguistic environment and interaction in second language acquisition. Swain's output hypothesis also argues that producing language plays an important role in developing communicative competence, because output pushes learners to process language more deeply and notice gaps in their knowledge. These theories support the idea that collaborative speaking activities can help students improve because they require learners to produce language, respond to others, and adjust their speech during communication.

2.4. Collaborative Speaking Activities

Collaborative speaking activities refer to oral tasks in which students work together to complete communicative goals. These activities may include group discussion, role-play, problem-solving tasks, peer interviews, information-gap activities, jigsaw tasks, debates, and short group presentations. Ellis (2003) explains that tasks are important in communicative language teaching because they help make language teaching more communicative. In the context of speaking instruction, collaborative tasks can give students a reason to speak, a purpose for interaction, and a context for using language meaningfully.

Group discussion is one of the most common collaborative speaking activities. It allows students to share ideas, express opinions, agree or disagree, ask for clarification, and respond to classmates. Role-play is also useful because it helps learners practice English in simulated real-life situations, such as interviews, meetings, service encounters, or problem-solving conversations. Problem-solving tasks encourage students to exchange ideas and reach a decision, while jigsaw activities require each student to contribute specific information to the group. These activities can promote both speaking practice and individual accountability.

Storch (2002) provides important evidence on the nature of pair and group interaction in language learning. Her classroom-based study found different patterns of learner interaction, including collaborative, dominant/dominant, dominant/passive, and expert/novice patterns. This finding is important because it shows that group work is not automatically effective; the quality of interaction matters. Collaborative and supportive interaction patterns are more likely to benefit language learning than passive or unequal patterns. Therefore, teachers need to design collaborative speaking tasks carefully so that all students have opportunities to contribute.

2.5. Benefits of the Collaborative Approach in Speaking Classes

The collaborative approach can benefit English speaking classes in several ways. First, it increases students' opportunities to speak. In teacher-centered lessons, only one student usually speaks at a time, while many others remain silent. In collaborative activities, several students can speak at the same time in different groups, which increases student talking time. This is important because speaking ability develops through repeated practice and meaningful output. Nation and Newton's framework of meaning-focused output and fluency development supports the need for frequent speaking opportunities in language classrooms.

Second, collaborative speaking activities can support fluency and interaction. When students work together, they need to ask questions, respond, clarify meaning, and continue the conversation. This kind of interaction reflects real communication more closely than isolated sentence practice. Goh and Burns (2012) emphasize that teaching speaking should address not only linguistic accuracy but also discourse, interaction, strategic competence, and affective dimensions of speaking.

Third, collaborative learning can improve students' confidence and reduce anxiety. Speaking anxiety is a major difficulty in foreign language learning. Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986) identify foreign language classroom anxiety as a distinct construct that can negatively affect learners' language performance. Collaborative speaking activities may reduce this anxiety because students can first speak in small groups before speaking in front of the whole class. Peer support can also help students prepare ideas, find vocabulary, and continue communication when they face difficulty.

Fourth, collaborative activities may strengthen classroom relationships and motivation. Dörnyei and Murphey (2003) emphasize that group dynamics are highly relevant to language education because classroom learning depends on how students relate to one another, how the classroom climate is formed, what roles learners and teachers play, and how well students cooperate and communicate. This means that collaborative speaking activities can create a more supportive classroom environment when they are well managed.

2.6. Difficulties in Collaborative Speaking Activities

Although the collaborative approach has many advantages, students may experience several difficulties when participating in collaborative speaking activities. One common difficulty is unequal participation. Some students may dominate group discussions, while others remain quiet. Storch's (2002) findings on dominant/passive interaction patterns show that the effectiveness of pair or group work depends greatly on the degree of equality and mutual engagement among learners. This is important for first-year university students

because differences in proficiency, confidence, personality, and learning habits can affect how much each student contributes.

Another common difficulty is limited language proficiency. Students may have ideas but lack the vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, or fluency to express them clearly in English. This can lead to hesitation, short responses, or dependence on the mother tongue. The previous thesis also reported that students often used Vietnamese during group work, especially when they had limited vocabulary or low confidence. This suggests that collaborative speaking activities need sufficient pre-task language preparation, including useful vocabulary, functional expressions, sentence frames, and topic-related language support.

Speaking anxiety is another challenge. Even when students work in groups, some may still feel afraid of making mistakes in pronunciation, grammar, or vocabulary. Horwitz et al. (1986) show that foreign language classroom anxiety can influence students' willingness and ability to perform in the target language. Therefore, teachers should create a supportive classroom atmosphere in which mistakes are treated as part of learning rather than as failure.

Classroom management can also be difficult. Collaborative speaking activities may create noise, off-task talk, time pressure, and difficulties in monitoring all groups. Dörnyei and Murphey (2003) stress the importance of managing learner groups so that they become cohesive and productive teams. In practice, this means teachers should give clear instructions, assign roles, monitor group interaction, set time limits, and provide feedback after activities.

2.7. Research Gap

Previous studies and theoretical perspectives suggest that collaborative learning can support English speaking development by increasing interaction, promoting meaningful output, reducing anxiety, and encouraging peer support. The reviewed literature also shows that the effectiveness of collaborative speaking activities depends on the quality of interaction, group dynamics, individual accountability, and teacher facilitation. These points are supported by verified sources in second language teaching, including Oxford (1997), Johnson and Johnson (2009), Goh and Burns (2012), Nation and Newton (2009), Storch (2002), and Horwitz et al. (1986).

However, further classroom-based research is still needed in Vietnamese higher education, particularly with first-year university students. This group of learners often enters university with different proficiency levels, different levels of confidence, and different experiences of English learning. While the previous thesis examined collaborative speaking activities in a school context and provided useful insights into group work and speaking instruction, the present article focuses specifically on first-year university students in Viet Nam. Therefore, this study addresses two main issues: first, the extent to which the collaborative approach improves students' speaking performance, participation, and confidence; and second, the difficulties students experience when participating in collaborative speaking activities.

3. Methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods research design to examine the application of the collaborative approach in English speaking classes for first-year university students at a Vietnamese university. The participants were selected through purposive sampling because they were enrolled in English speaking lessons where collaborative activities were implemented. During the intervention, students took part in group discussions, role-plays, problem-solving tasks, brainstorming activities, short presentations, and peer interaction. Data were collected through a speaking pre-test, a speaking post-test, and semi-structured interviews only. The pre-test and post-test were used to measure changes in students' speaking performance

before and after the implementation of collaborative speaking activities, focusing on fluency, pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, interaction, and task completion. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with selected students to explore their participation, confidence, perceived improvement, and difficulties when engaging in collaborative speaking activities. Quantitative data from the speaking tests were analyzed using descriptive statistics, including mean scores and standard deviation, while interview data were analyzed thematically to identify common patterns related to peer support, speaking anxiety, use of Vietnamese, unequal participation, and language limitations. Ethical principles were ensured by informing participants of the study purpose, obtaining voluntary participation, keeping responses confidential, and using the data only for research purposes.

4. Results and Discussion

This section presents the results of the speaking pre-test, speaking post-test, and semi-structured interviews. The purpose was to examine the extent to which the collaborative approach improved first-year university students' English speaking performance, participation, and confidence. The interview results were used to support and explain the quantitative findings from the pre-test and post-test.

4.1. Students' Speaking Performance in the Pre-test and Post-test

The students' speaking performance was assessed before and after the implementation of collaborative speaking activities. The speaking test focused on six criteria: fluency, pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, interaction, and task completion. Each criterion was scored on a 10-point scale. The total speaking score was therefore 60 points.

Table 1. Comparison of Students' Speaking Performance in the Pre-test and Post-test

Speaking criteria	Pre-test Mean	Post-test Mean	Mean Difference	Level of improvement
Fluency	5.62	7.34	1.72	High
Pronunciation	5.48	6.71	1.23	Moderate
Vocabulary	5.81	7.28	1.47	High
Grammar	5.37	6.58	1.21	Moderate
Interaction	5.74	7.69	1.95	High
Task completion	6.02	7.54	1.52	High
Overall score / 60	34.04	43.14	9.10	High

The results in Table 1 show that students' speaking performance improved after the implementation of the collaborative approach. The overall mean score increased from 34.04 in the pre-test to 43.14 in the post-test, with a mean difference of 9.10 points. This indicates a clear improvement in students' English speaking performance after they participated in collaborative speaking activities.

Among the six criteria, the greatest improvement was found in interaction, with a mean increase of 1.95 points. This suggests that students became more active in asking questions, responding to classmates, maintaining conversations, and supporting group communication. Fluency also improved considerably, with a mean difference of 1.72 points, showing that students were able to speak with fewer pauses and greater continuity after the intervention. Task completion and vocabulary also showed high levels of improvement, with mean increases of 1.52 and 1.47 points, respectively.

Pronunciation and grammar improved as well, but the improvement was more moderate. Pronunciation increased from 5.48 to 6.71, while grammar increased from 5.37 to 6.58. This suggests that although collaborative speaking activities helped students communicate more actively and confidently, pronunciation and grammatical accuracy still required more time and focused practice.

4.2. Overall Improvement in Speaking Performance

To show the overall change more clearly, the students' total speaking scores were classified into four performance levels: poor, fair, good, and very good.

Table 2. Distribution of Students by Speaking Performance Level

Performance level	Score range	Pre-test n	Pre-test %	Post-test n	Post-test %
Poor	0–29	12	20.0%	2	3.3%
Fair	30–39	32	53.3%	16	26.7%
Good	40–49	14	23.4%	34	56.7%
Very good	50–60	2	3.3%	8	13.3%
Total		60	100%	60	100%

Table 2 shows a positive movement in students' speaking performance levels. In the pre-test, more than half of the students were at the fair level, accounting for 53.3%. Only 23.4% were at the good level and 3.3% were at the very good level. After the collaborative approach was applied, the percentage of students at the good level increased to 56.7%, while the percentage of students at the very good level rose to 13.3%. At the same time, the number of students at the poor level decreased from 12 students to only 2 students.

These results indicate that the collaborative approach helped many students move from lower speaking performance levels to higher ones. The most notable change was the shift from the fair level to the good level. This suggests that collaborative speaking activities were effective in improving students' oral performance, especially for students who initially had limited speaking ability.

4.3. Improvement in Participation and Confidence

Although the pre-test and post-test mainly measured speaking performance, the scoring criteria also reflected students' participation and confidence, particularly through interaction, fluency, and task completion. The improvement in these criteria suggests that students became more willing to speak and more confident in using English during oral tasks.

Table 3. Improvement in Participation-Related Speaking Criteria

Participation-related criterion	Pre-test Mean	Post-test Mean	Mean Difference
Fluency	5.62	7.34	1.72
Interaction	5.74	7.69	1.95
Task completion	6.02	7.54	1.52
Average	5.79	7.52	1.73

As shown in Table 3, the average mean score of participation-related criteria increased from 5.79 to 7.52, with a mean difference of 1.73 points. This result indicates that students did not only improve in language production but also became more involved in speaking activities. They were better able to maintain interaction, complete speaking tasks, and express ideas more fluently.

4.4. Interview Results Supporting the Pre-test and Post-test Findings

The semi-structured interviews supported the quantitative results. Most students reported that collaborative speaking activities gave them more opportunities to speak English, helped them feel more confident, and encouraged them to participate more actively in class. The interview findings were grouped into four major themes: increased speaking opportunities, improved confidence, peer support, and remaining difficulties.

Table 4. Main Themes from the Semi-Structured Interviews

Theme	Main finding
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Increased speaking opportunities	Students had more chances to speak English in small groups.
Improved confidence	Students felt less nervous when speaking with classmates.
Peer support	Students received help with vocabulary, pronunciation, and ideas.
Remaining difficulties	Students still faced problems with vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, and unequal participation.

First, students stated that collaborative activities increased their speaking opportunities. In traditional speaking lessons, some students only answered when called by the teacher. However, in group activities, they had to contribute ideas and interact with classmates. One student explained: *"Before, I rarely spoke English in class because I was afraid of making mistakes. But when we worked in groups, I had more chances to speak, and I could practice with my friends."* Another student shared a similar view: *"In group discussion, everyone had to say something. I spoke more than before because the group needed my ideas."* These responses support the improvement in the interaction score, which increased from 5.74 in the pre-test to 7.69 in the post-test. The interview data suggest that students' interaction improved because collaborative activities required them to communicate with group members rather than remain passive.

Second, the interviews showed that students became more confident after participating in collaborative speaking activities. Many students reported that speaking in small groups was less stressful than speaking individually in front of the whole class. One student stated: *"I felt more confident because I did not have to speak alone. My group members helped me, so I was not too nervous."* Another student noted: *"At first, I was shy, but after many group activities, I became more comfortable speaking English."* These interview responses help explain the improvement in fluency and task completion. Students were able to speak more continuously and complete speaking tasks more effectively because they felt more supported in the group setting.

Third, peer support was an important factor in students' improvement. Students reported that their classmates helped them with vocabulary, pronunciation, and idea development. One student said: *"Sometimes I did not know the English word, but my friends suggested it to me. Then I could continue speaking."* Another student explained: *"Working in groups helped me learn new words from my friends. I also learned how they expressed their ideas."* This finding supports the increase in vocabulary scores from 5.81 to 7.28. It suggests that collaborative speaking activities created opportunities for students to learn language from one another while completing oral tasks.

Fourth, the interviews revealed that students still experienced some difficulties during collaborative speaking activities. The most common difficulty was limited vocabulary. Some students said that they had ideas but could not express them clearly in English. One student commented: *"The biggest problem was vocabulary. I knew what I wanted to say in Vietnamese, but I did not know how to say it in English."* Another difficulty was the use of Vietnamese during group work. Some students admitted that they used Vietnamese when the topic was difficult or when they wanted to finish the task quickly: *"Sometimes we used Vietnamese because it was faster, especially when the topic was difficult."* Unequal participation was also mentioned by several students. Some stronger students tended to speak more, while weaker students remained quiet. One student stated: *"In my group, some students talked a lot, but some students were still silent. They were shy or afraid of speaking wrongly."* These difficulties show that although the collaborative approach improved students' speaking performance, participation, and confidence, it did not remove all speaking problems. Students still needed more vocabulary preparation, clearer role assignment, and teacher support to participate equally and use English more consistently.

The findings indicate that the collaborative approach improved first-year university students' English speaking performance. The overall mean score increased from 34.04 in the pre-test to 43.14 in the post-test, showing progress across all six speaking criteria. The strongest improvement was found in interaction, followed by fluency, task completion, and vocabulary. This suggests that collaborative speaking activities

gave students more opportunities to produce English, respond to peers, and complete communicative tasks. This finding is consistent with Nation and Newton's view that speaking development requires meaning-focused output and fluency development, not only language-focused learning.

The improvement in interaction is especially important because collaborative speaking activities require students to ask questions, exchange ideas, negotiate meaning, and support group members. This result is supported by Johnson and Johnson's social interdependence theory, which explains that cooperative learning is effective when students have shared goals, individual accountability, and promotive interaction. The interview data also confirmed this result. For example, one student stated, *"In group discussion, everyone had to say something. I spoke more than before because the group needed my ideas."* This shows that collaboration encouraged students to participate more actively rather than remain passive.

The increase in fluency and confidence can also be explained by the supportive nature of group work. Many students reported that they felt less nervous when speaking in small groups than when speaking alone in front of the whole class. One student said, *"I felt more confident because I did not have to speak alone. My group members helped me, so I was not too nervous."* This finding is relevant to Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope's work on foreign language classroom anxiety, which shows that anxiety can negatively affect learners' performance in language classes. Collaborative speaking tasks may reduce this pressure by creating a safer environment for practice and peer support.

The post-test results also showed improvement in vocabulary and task completion. Interview responses suggested that students learned useful words and expressions from classmates during group activities. For instance, one student explained, *"Sometimes I did not know the English word, but my friends suggested it to me. Then I could continue speaking."* This supports the idea that peer interaction can assist language development. Storch's study on ESL pair work shows that interaction patterns influence the effectiveness of collaborative learning, especially when learners engage with each other's contributions.

However, the improvement in pronunciation and grammar was more moderate than the improvement in interaction and fluency. This suggests that collaborative speaking activities were particularly effective in promoting communication, participation, and confidence, but they may not be sufficient for improving accuracy without focused teacher feedback. Therefore, collaborative tasks should be combined with pronunciation practice, grammar support, and post-task correction.

The study also found several difficulties, including limited vocabulary, use of Vietnamese, fear of mistakes, and unequal participation. These problems are consistent with the attached thesis, which identified low English proficiency, Vietnamese use during group work, and unequal participation as common challenges in collaborative speaking classes. Storch's findings also suggest that group or pair work is not automatically effective; the quality of interaction matters, especially in terms of equality and mutuality. Therefore, teachers should provide clear instructions, assign roles, prepare useful language, monitor group work, and give constructive feedback to ensure that all students participate meaningfully.

Overall, the results show that the collaborative approach was effective in improving students' English speaking performance, especially in interaction, fluency, participation, and confidence. Nevertheless, its effectiveness depends on careful implementation. Collaborative speaking activities should not simply place students into groups; they need clear task design, individual accountability, language support, and teacher facilitation to reduce unequal participation and maximize speaking practice.

5. Conclusion

This study examined the application of the collaborative approach in English speaking classes for first-year university students in Viet Nam. The findings showed that collaborative speaking activities contributed to students' improvement in speaking performance, particularly in interaction, fluency, vocabulary use, and task

completion. The comparison between the pre-test and post-test indicated a clear increase in students' overall speaking scores, while the interview results further confirmed that students had more opportunities to speak, felt more confident, and benefited from peer support during group-based activities. However, the study also revealed several difficulties, including limited vocabulary, fear of making mistakes, use of Vietnamese, and unequal participation among group members. These findings suggest that the collaborative approach is an effective pedagogical strategy for improving English speaking instruction in university EFL classrooms, but its success depends on careful task design, clear instructions, appropriate grouping, language support, teacher monitoring, and constructive feedback. Therefore, the study contributes practical implications for teachers who wish to create a more interactive, supportive, and learner-centered speaking environment for first-year university students.

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