A Collaborative Learning Intervention Module To Improve Speaking Fluency

Muhammad Azhar Khan bin Ashfar Ahmad, Melor Md Yunus

Abstract: In the current English Syllabus in Malaysia, speaking skill is given the least importance when it comes to testing. Apart from the School Based Oral Assessment, speaking skills is not tested in Malaysia's most important public examination; the Malaysia Certificate of Education. This would almost always result into students who can score their writing and reading tests well but are not able to communicate effectively in English. Some of the reasons that influenced the lack of speaking skills among students are anxiety, inhibitions and the lack of opportunity to use the language. Hence, an intervention module is created with the aims to lower students' anxiety and inhibitions of using the language and also to give them the opportunities to speak. With Collaborative Learning, Creative and Critical Thinking skills are enhanced through 21st century learning. This project requires students to recreate a replica of Malaysia's Iconic Buildings and display them in an exhibition. Students organized the exhibition to the public which caters to creative and critical thinking skills together with developing a nationalistic identity. Data was collected through pre-test and post-test, students' reflections and researchers' field notes from a group of 27 form four students in a fully residential school in Kluang, Johor. Findings show that students' inhibitions and anxiety are lowered. Additionally, students' speaking skills are improved as a result of increase in motivation. This goes to show that using collaborative learning would benefit English language teaching and learning, especially the speaking skills.

Index Terms: Speaking, inhibitions, anxiety, speaking opportunity, fluency, motivation, collaborative learning

——————————————— ◆ ———————————————

1. INTRODUCTION

With the arrival of the Malaysia Education Blueprint (2013-2025), Malaysia envisioned to produce world-class human capitals by the year 2025 [1]. In its eleven shifts of educational transformation, the first shift focusses on how students should get significant gains in the development as students [1]. These significant gains are to prepare them to be more globally present and globally marketable. According to Moon and Park [2], English has become a crucial tool for one's development of success in careers and business, and also to compete in an ever expanding global economy [3]. Language is important that it help the structure of how one's mind operates [4]. Hence the Blueprint's focus on English Language Teaching and Learning is apropos to the requirement of the global market. The Blueprint also outlined 6 students' aspirations to further illustrate the vision it has for students in Malaysian Education System. In the second of the 6 aspirations, students are expected to attain bilingual proficiency. Thirusanku and Yunus [5] say that while Bahasa Melayu holds the status of Malaysia National Language, English has the status of the second language in Malaysia, this idea is also explored by Rashid, Rahman and Yunus [6] saying that policy reforms would always affect English Language Teaching signifying its importance in Malaysia Education System. Hence under the expectation of Malaysia Education Policy, students in Malaysia need to be proficient in both the National Language and also English as a second language. According to Leong and Ahmadi [7] speaking skill is believed to be the most important skills of language learning, they also discuss the idea that learners sometimes evaluate their success in language learning through speaking abilities. However, speaking skill is said to be the most difficult skill for language learners to acquire. As stated by Hashim, Yunus and Hashim [8] verbal and communicative skills of the second language are encountered by struggles and difficulties for university students to master. They further explored that this problem begins at the school level, where students most of the time showed an unwillingness to communicate or participate in English Class [8]. This is due to the issue that students have the anxiety to communicate in English. Leong and Ahmadi [7] explained that social constructs such as anxiety and inhibition often truncated the learning of English as a second language. This notion is further stressed by Khan [9] in which he pointed out that as the learners thinking process is influenced by inhibitions and anxiety, this will greatly impact the manner and the content of messages they want to convey in the second language. Leong and Ahmadi [7] further pointed out, making mistakes is a natural process of learning a language, and this will certainly pose a risk at one's ego. According to Ansari [10], this risk will cause learners to almost always choose to remain silent or most of the time choose to ignore or will always hesitate to speak in class

Therefore, social constructs such as anxiety and inhibitions could impede the lofty ambitions of Malaysia Education Blueprint in producing marketable human capital that can be competitive in the global world. In language learning, teachers are also expected to create a conducive environment to facilitate a stress-free learning situation [11]. Also, to have an effective English Language Learning, enhancing learners' interest in learning the language should be given a high priority [12]. Hence, it is believed that there is a need for intervention to improve students' communication skill in English to follow the visions set by Malaysia Education Blueprint. This action research study aims to identify the effectiveness of using a collaborative learning module in (1) improving participants' speaking skills and fluency and also in (2) lowering learner's inhibitions and anxiety to produce effective learning of speaking skill. The module is created by the researcher and employs a combination of collaborative learning principles and the six students' aspirations from the Malaysia Education Blueprint (2013-2025).

————————————————————

- *Muhammad Azhar Khan bin Ashfar Ahmad is currently pursuing master's degree program in Teaching English as a Second Language in National University Malaysia. E-mail: cikguazharkhanashfar@gmail.com*
- *Melor Md Yunus is an associate professor in National Univeristy Malaysia, E-mail: melor@ukm.edu.my*

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Collaborative Learning

It is believed that Collaborative Learning approach could help in easing the anxiety and inhibition among learners in learning English, especially the speaking skill. According to Toyama and Mori [13] in their research among 35 English learners in Japan they found that after three collaborative learning session, there was a considerable lessening in learners' level of anxiety in learning English. According to Gerlach [14], collaborative learning occurs through natural social acts where participants talk among themselves. It is not believed that they learn because of just the existence of groupmates, it is because when learners do activities with peers, they would trigger a learning mechanism [15]. This approach, according to Gerlach [14], uses the concept that people, in general, learn through sharing ideas, beliefs and in the interaction they have with each other. This collaborative learning approach may begin with Intent Participation. This is a concept explored by Rogoff, Paradise, Arauz, Correa-Chavez and Angelillo [16] where they discuss the idea on learning can be accessed by learners through informal community involvement. This is similar to how children acquire their first language as they grow up in the community that speaks the language and they continue to be aware of the language continual importance in the life [16]. A similar idea had been discussed earlier by Vygotsky [17] in which he pointed out learning development is triggered when the learners interact with their environment and the cooperation they have with their peers. Hence this shows the importance of speaking opportunities and also the need for making second language learning relevant to the learners' life, especially in the case of Malaysian language learners. Smith and MacGregor [18] point out that Collaborative Learning can be successful through 5 premises;

1. Learning is an active process: This is where learners would surround themselves with new information and relate them with a framework they already know.
2. Learning depends on rich context: This is where learners need to actively engage their peers to process new information, solve problems or complete tasks
3. Learners are diverse: Learners will benefit from being exposed with other learners who have different backgrounds, experiences and viewpoints.
4. Learning requires social environments: This is where conversation and discourse are expected to happen between learners in a collaborative group.
5. Learning has affective and subjective dimensions: Collaborative learning activities are both socially and emotionally demanding, in discourses that happen in the social environment, learners are forced to give, accept and synthesize opinions from other members of a collaborative group to form their framework.

It is based on these premises that an intervention module in this action research study is designed as an intervention to promote speaking literacy and lower inhibitions and anxiety. These concepts of collaborative learning are also paralleled to the aspirations and shifts drawn in the Malaysia Education Blueprint [1] It had outlined in the first shift of educational transformation that learners need to study in conducive learning environments and will feel nurtured by their school experience [1]. This goes to show that creating a conducive learning environment, where inhibitions and anxiety is lowered and opportunities to speak is both abundant and relevant, is believed to be important in creating a very effective English Language Learning.

2.1 Inhibition and Anxiety in Second Language Learning

Inhibition and anxiety in speaking English amongst second language learners could happen because of several reasons. Most of the time it is because of the role of the language instructors or the teachers [9], [8], [7]. The responsibility to create a safe environment for learners to freely try without fear of being criticize fall on the teachers or language instructors [9]. It is because of this reason that both the Malaysia Education Blueprint (2013-2025) and English Roadmap (2015-2025) stresses on building a quality learning environment to produce a quality learning experience for learners [1], [19]. Apart from the role of the instructors, according to Leong and Ahmadi [7], learners may be diffident to use the language because they lack knowledge in vocabulary. This lack of knowledge in vocabulary or terms and meaning of words in target language often impede learners' desire to use the language, and what is more, knowledge on vocabulary is considered imperative in second language learning [20]. Second language learners often make mistakes of choosing words that would change the meaning of the sentence or the message they want to convey in total [21]. However, it is important to note that the learning of speaking will in time improve learners' knowledge of vocabulary and other language components including syntax and grammar [7]. Which means if they are not ready to take risks of making mistakes, the learning of vocabulary, or speaking skill altogether, will not take place [7].

3 METHODOLOGY

Action Research design is used for this study using the Kemmis and McTaggart model. This model is a continuous iterative process because it is reflective in nature [22], as continuous reflection is needed for the researcher in the process of designing the intervention module, improving the module in practice and implementing the module within the study [22]. This Action Research study employed a mixed methodology and was done both qualitatively and quantitatively. A pre-test and a post-test were carried out before and after the module was used with the participants. Participants had also written a reflection based on their experience in joining the activities outlined by the module. The instrument for the pre and post-tests is the official students' Oral Assessment form that is used under the School-Based Assessment Form [23]. This is used to collect data regarding the participants' speaking ability in English and to see the effectiveness in the oral marks of the participants involved in this action research. In order to emulate the collaborative learning in the intervention program, the researcher has created a module that was used with the participants chosen for this action research study. This module employed the collaborative learning approach while at the same time combined with the elements of the six students' aspiration according to the Malaysia Education Blueprint.

3.1 Sample

A total of 27 participants with mix abilities were selected as sample for this study. All of them are 15-16 years old and are currently enrolled as fourth-formers in a fully-residential

secondary school in Johor. The sampling was made based on the participants' PT3 scores. Participants who can score well in their English reading and writing test are known to have very little participation in English classes and are very shy to speak. Participants who have lower scores in reading and writing test are even more passive in English Class, because of these reasons, these 27 participants are chosen for this study.

3.2 Intervention Module Design
This module was designed to have three phases. In the input phase, the participants were introduced to Malaysia's Historical and National Buildings from all over the country. This is in line with the Malaysia Education Blueprint [1], the sixth students' aspiration is National Identity. This aspiration aims for students to understand the country's history to build patriotism [1]. With the National Building as a theme for this project, participants learnt about the nation's history and legacy while at the same time improve and develope their speaking skill. The second phase was when collaborative learning took place and teachers role had been reduced from teaching to facilitating the participants' progress and development. The third phase was when the participants would test their newfound confidence that they gained from phase two. Phase three was where they were going to present their work to the masses.

The procedure of the phases is explained in the table below;

3.3 Procedure
The module was carried out in the span of two weeks, two hours each day for 20 days. The first day was devoted to phase one of the module and phase 2 was carried out in the 10 following days. The last 6 days were used for phase 3. After the module is completed, participants will be asked to write a reflection detailing their experience. The researcher will observe the results of the pre and post-test scores, participants' reflections and also the researcher's field notes before concluding

4 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION
Primarily, this study has shown that the module can effectively enhance participants' acquisition for speaking skill. The results obtained from this study are discussed according to the following themes.

1. Participants' improvement in speaking skill and speech fluency
2. Participants' improvement from anxiety and inhibition in speaking English.

4.1 Participants' Improvement in Speaking Skill and Speech Fluency
100% of the participants showed an increase of Oral Test Scores based on the pre-test and post-test carried out before and after the implementation of the module. In the pre-test, the average score of the participants is 22.56. After the implementation of the module, the average score in the post-test increased to 27.74, this shows an increment of 5.18 points. Participants showed considerable improvement in the fluency of speaking. They ignored the grammatical error while speaking and focused on the information they want to convey.

Grammatical error is one of the reasons why English Language Learners avoid from speaking English [7], [8], [10].

TABLE 1
PROCEDURES OF THE INTERVENTION MODULE

Phase	Details
Phase 1	1. Pre-Test using Oral Forms is carried out 2. Students are given comprehension sets to learn about Malaysia's National Buildings 3. Students work in groups to understand the buildings and its significance
Phase 2	1. Students put down their signature of an English Zone Contract 2. Students collect used cardboard boxes 3. Students work together to create replica of Malaysia's National Buildings 4. Students are only allowed to converse in English while creating the replica
Phase 3	1. Students display their replicas in a self-organised exhibition to the public 2. Students become the guide for the public explaining the wonders of Malaysia's building through the replicas 3. Post-Test using Oral forms is carried out. 4. Students' feedback

Participants showed that they have hesitation fillers and lengthy pauses during the pre-test but after the implementation of the module, participants improved and managed to maintain their fluency. Participants also showed an improvement in the expansion of vocabularies, they could comfortably use words that are relevant to the activities in Phase 3 of the module. These results show that students managed to enrich their vocabulary while at the same time improve their speaking fluency through the intervention program created by the researcher. The module, which employs real-life interactive activities managed to help participants in improving their speaking proficiency. This is paralleled to the conclusion drawn out by Ramamuruthy [24], in which he said that exposure towards a target language in real-life interactive activities helps in eliminating lengthy pauses while speaking and enriching lexical resources.

4.1 Participants' Improvement from Anxiety and Inhibition in Speaking English
100% of the participants generally shows enhancement in their fluency and their attitudes towards speaking in English. Phase 2 of the module began with a little hiccup in which the students were still showing inhibitions in speaking. They were shy and a few were making fun of each other after they were made to put down their signature of the English-Speaking Zone Contract. These were evidenced by the participants' reflections; quoting "…it is funny to see all of us speaking English in class." On the first day of phase 2, 100% of the participants reflected that it was funny to suddenly speak in English and it was also awkward to mispronounced words. However, as the participants became aware that the date of the exhibition drawn out in phase 3 was coming close, they started to use English regardless of the anxiety and inhibitions. This was evidenced by the participants' reflections; quoting "…Laughing at our friends is okay, but it is bad if visitors laugh at us" and "I

don't want the visitors to come and see my work unfinished." Furthermore, as participants realized that all of them were making mistakes as they speak in the English-Speaking Zone, they became more comfortable to try and speak with each other regardless of mistakes, this is evidenced by their reflections; quoting "…everyone is laughing at everyone, it is funny but I am happy." This shows that the atmosphere created by the module is more relaxed for the participants to acquire a new skill. This is supported by Ansari [10] when he said the selection of activities play a huge role in decreasing the level of anxiety among learners. Participants could also answer questions given by the visitors during the exhibition regarding the buildings albeit there were still mistakes in pronunciation. In the span of one week as participants discussed among themselves in preparing for the exhibition, the conversation in English became more fluid and more automatic. They have ignored their speaking anxiety to focus on getting their tasks done. Some participants even spoke English outside the English-Speaking Zone, quoting their reflection "I even spoke English with the canteen staff." During Phase 3, the participants were observed to be very comfortable explaining the replicas to the visitors in English. The researcher noted that participants are comfortable in answering questions given by visitors who came from outside and inside their school. Participants reflected that the experience from phase 2 had given them the confidence to just speak without the fear of being corrected by the public, quoting "…it is awkward at first, but I like explaining my replica to them.". This shows that participants are more engrossed and excited to show their work rather than think about their speech anxiety. This shows that a departure from a traditional classroom environment is effective in creating a conducive learning environment. This is supported by Khan [9], Kandasamy and Habil [25] in which they explained the importance of classroom condition. He noted that a friendlier classroom setting could be more beneficial to learning rather than the traditional strict classroom setting. This idea is also explained by Gerlach [14], she stated that learning in a traditional setting favor quietness rather than social interaction. Social interaction, she added, would lead to advance cognitive development. This is shown when the speaking module that did not require a traditional classroom setting and the learning process was more relaxed and more successful as described in participants' reflections. The English Language Roadmap (2015-2025) pointed out that in order to create high quality learning outcome in English Classroom, the creation of high quality learning environment is needed, this will in turn create a quality culture, where teaching and learning of English will be highly effective [19]. Collaborative learning played a big role in creating the opportunity for students to speak with each other and also in making the classroom situation to be more relaxed within the implementation of all three phases of the module. This is in line with the Malaysia Education Blueprint's take on teaching which is teaching and learning had gone beyond the classroom and into all societal domains [26].

6   CONCLUSIONS

Anxiety and inhibitions are major problems that often truncated the teaching and learning of second language speaking skill. The development of fluency is often impeded by the lack of motivation and drive among learners to overcome their inhibitions and anxiety. As Ramamuruthy [24] had stated in his research saying that there is a negative relationship between

learners' anxiety and inhibitions. However, teaching approaches such as collaborative learning could solve this problem by creating a conducive environment, as had been portrayed by the findings in this action research study. This action research study has identified the effects of Collaborative Learning intervention module in creating and facilitating an environment that is believed to be conducive for effective speaking skill acquisition. This had been illustrated by the findings of the post-test in which participants had an increment in their oral scores. It is also important to note that, based on their reflections, participants find the activities from the module both challenging and fun. As a conclusion, the use of Collaborative Learning in the English Language Teaching and Learning can lead to effective teaching and conducive learning environment. Collaborative Learning increases learners' participation and gives learners more opportunities to use the target language in their daily conversations. Therefore, teachers should use Collaborative Learning to promote speaking in English Language Teaching and Learning to meet the vision of the Malaysia Education Blueprint.

REFERENCES

[1]   Ministry Of Education, Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013 - 2025. 2013.

[2]   W. Moon and O. Park, "Factors affecting English Language Learning Motivation of Korean Freshmen and their General Characteristics," Int. J. Recent Technol. Eng., vol. 8, no. 2S6, pp. 22–26, 2019.

[3]   M. R. Khan, S. R. Khan, and S. Ahmad, "Students' Perceptions about the Importaance of Communication Skills: A Case Study of EFL Learners at Jazan University, Saudi Arabia," Int. J. English Lang. Educ., vol. 4, no. 1, pp. 63–78, 2016.

[4]   M. MacLeod, R. G. Sumillera, J. Surman, and E. Smirnova, Language as a Scientific Tool, 1st Editio. New York: Routledge, 2016.

[5]   J. Thirusanku and M. M. Yunus, "Status of English in Malaysia," Asian Soc. Sci., vol. 10, no. 14, pp. 254–260, 2017.

[6]   R. A. B. Rashid, S. B. A. Rahman, and K. Yunus, "Reforms in the policy of English language teaching in Malaysia," Policy Futur. Educ., vol. 15, no. 1, pp. 100–112, 2017.

[7]   L.-M. Leong and S. M. Ahmadi, "An Analysis of Factors Influencing Learners' English Speaking Skill," Int. J. Res. English Educ., vol. 2, no. 1, pp. 34–41, Mar. 2017.

[8]   H. U. Hashim, M. M. Yunus, and H. Hashim, "3-minutes pitching with flip grid: An antidote of innovation for speaking anxiety," Int. J. Innov. Technol. Explor. Eng., vol. 8, no. 7, pp. 1798–1801, 2019.

[9]   S. M. Khan, "Influence of Speech Anxiety on Oral Communication Skills among ESL/EFL Learners," Adv. Lang. Lit. Stud., vol. 6, no. 6, pp. 2–6, 2015.

[10]   M. S. Ansari, "Speaking anxiety in ESL/EFL classrooms: A holistic approach and practical study," Int. J. Educ. Investig., vol. 2, no. 4, pp. 38–46, 2015.

[11]   L. Leong and S. M. Ahmadi, "An Analysis of Factors Influencing Learners ' English Speaking Skill," Int. J. Res. English Educ., pp. 34–41, 2017.

[12]   H. C. Chan, M. M. Yunus, and M. Mohamad, "' Who We Are ' in Enhancing Rural Students ' English as a Second Language (ESL) Learning The Asian EFL

Journal Professional Teaching Articles December 2016 Indonesian International Conference Edition Volume 2 Senior Editors : Paul Robertson and John Ada," Asian EFL J., vol. 2, no. April, pp. 5–18, 2017.

[13]   M. Toyama and K. Mori, "Reducing Student Anxiety : The Effects of Collaborative Learning through Computer Conferencing," vol. 7, no. 12, pp. 10–13, 2017.

[14]   J. M. Gerlach, "Is this collaboration?," New Dir. Teach. Learn., vol. 1994, no. 59, pp. 5–14, 1994.

[15]   P. Dillenbourg, "What do you mean by collaborative learning ?," in Collaborative- learning: Cognitive and Computational Approaches, Elsevier Science & Technology Books, 1999, pp. 1–19.

[16]   B. Rogoff, R. Paradise, R. Mejía Arauz, M. Correa-Chávez, and C. Angelillo, "Firsthand learning through intent participation," Análise Psicológica, vol. 22, no. 1, pp. 11–31, 2012.

[17]   L. Vygotsky, "The interaction between learning and development," in Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Process, London: Harvard University Press, 1978, pp. 29–39.

[18]   B. L. Smith and J. MacGregor, "Learning and Innovation Skills," in Collaborative Learning: A sourcebook for Higher Education, University Park, PA: National Center on Postsecondary Teaching, Learning and Assessment (NCTLA), 1992, pp. 9–22.

[19]   Ministry Of Education, English Language Education Reform in Malaysia: The Roadmap 2015-2025. 2015.

[20]   M. M. Yunus, H. Salehi, and M. Amini, "Impact of Using CALL on Iranian EFL Learners ' Vocabulary Knowledge," English Lang. Teach., vol. 9, no. 1, pp. 173–187, 2016.

[21]   S. Mahripah, "Exploring Factors Affecting EFL Learners' Speaking Performance: from Theories into Practices.," Proc. 3rd UAD TEFL Int. Conf., 2014.

[22]   H. Altrichter et al., "The Learning Organization Emerald Article : The concept of action research The concept of action research," Learn. Organ., vol. 9, no. 3, pp. 125–131, 2002.

[23]   Ministry Of Education, Pengendalian Ujian Lisan Berasaskan Sekolah. 2002.

[24]   V. Ramamuruthy, "The Effects of Task-based Approach on Speaking Anxiety among ESL Low Proficiency Diploma Students," Univers. J. Educ. Res., vol. 7, no. 6, pp. 1363–1375, 2019.

[25]   C. Kandasamy and H. Habil, "Exploring Cooperative Learning Method to Enhance Speaking Skills Among School Students," LSP Int. J., vol. 5, no. 2, pp. 1–16, 2018.

[26]   H. Azman, "Implementation and Challenges of English Language Education Reform in Malaysian Primary Schools," 3L Southeast Asian J. English Lang. Stud. –, vol. 22, no. 3, pp. 65–78, 2012.