AJEMATES
African Journal of Educational Management, Teaching and Entrepreneurship Studies
VOL.17 (1), January-April, 2026; https://ajemates.org

EFFECTS OF SMALL-GROUP INTERACTION STRATEGY ON ENGLISH SPEAKING ACHIEVEMENT AMONG SENIOR SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS IN EBONYI STATE, NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the effects of Small-Group Interaction Strategy (SGIS) on senior secondary school students' achievement in English speaking skills in Ebonyi State, Nigeria. A quasi-experimental pretest–posttest non-equivalent control group design was adopted. The population comprised 9,300 Senior Secondary School II students, from which a sample of 128 students was drawn. Two schools were assigned to the experimental group and two to the control group. The experimental group was taught speaking skills using SGIS, while the control group received conventional instruction. Data were collected using the English-Speaking Achievement Test (ESAT), validated by experts and yielding a reliability coefficient of 0.88. Means, standard deviations, and ANCOVA were used for analysis at 0.05 significance. Results revealed that students exposed to SGIS achieved significantly higher posttest scores than those taught using conventional methods. Findings indicate that structured peer interaction enhances oral proficiency by increasing opportunities for practice, feedback, and collaborative learning. It is recommended that SGIS be adopted in secondary school English classrooms to improve students' speaking achievement and communicative competence.

Keywords: Small-group interaction, speaking skills, achievement, English as a second language, secondary education

Introduction

Oral proficiency in English is a critical component of communicative competence and academic success for secondary school students in English as a Second Language (ESL) contexts. Globally, effective speaking skills are essential for social interaction, academic discourse, and employability (Canale & Swain, 1980; Richards, 2008). However, research indicates that ESL

learners, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa, continue to demonstrate limited oral proficiency despite formal instruction (Afolayan, 2015; Ewulo, 2015).

In Nigeria, English functions as both a core subject and the principal medium of instruction across secondary schools. Senior secondary students are expected to demonstrate competence in speaking, writing, and comprehension. Yet, classroom observations and external examination reports, including WAEC Chief Examiner's reports (2022), highlight persistent challenges: limited vocabulary, weak grammar, mispronunciations, and lack of confidence in oral communication. Such deficits hinder learners' academic performance and reduce their ability to engage in meaningful interactions in English.

Studies have shown that traditional teacher-centred instructional approaches contribute significantly to these challenges. Lessons are often dominated by teacher talk, with students assuming passive roles as listeners (Harmer, 2007; Johnson & Johnson, 2009). The lack of active participation limits opportunities for authentic oral communication, negotiation of meaning, and collaborative learning. Consequently, students may struggle to internalize language structures and develop fluency.

Recent scholarship advocates learner-centred and interactive strategies as effective in addressing these limitations. Small-group and cooperative learning approaches encourage collaboration, peer feedback, and frequent engagement in meaningful oral tasks, promoting both accuracy and fluency (Gillies, 2016; Johnson, Johnson & Holubec, 2014). Specific strategies such as group discussions, role-plays, and problem-solving exercises have been shown to improve speaking skills by offering repeated practice in supportive environments (Chen, 2015; Li, 2017). However, most empirical studies in Nigeria have focused on reading or writing skills, leaving speaking underexplored. This gap underscores the need for context-specific investigations on instructional strategies that enhance oral proficiency.

The Small-Group Interaction Strategy (SGIS) is designed to operationalize these pedagogical principles. It involves structuring learners into small, manageable groups to collaboratively engage in speaking tasks. This approach provides learners with frequent opportunities to speak, receive feedback, and learn from peers, all of which are critical for developing communicative competence (Gillies, 2016). Empirical studies in ESL contexts outside Nigeria indicate that structured small-group activities significantly improve learners' oral fluency, accuracy, and confidence (Chen, 2015; Li, 2017). There remains, however, a paucity of evidence regarding the efficacy of SGIS in Nigerian secondary schools.

In sum, the present study aims to examine the effect of Small-Group Interaction Strategy on

senior secondary students' achievement in English speaking skills in Ebonyi State, Nigeria. By comparing the performance of students taught with SGIS to those taught using conventional methods, the study seeks to generate empirical evidence that informs both classroom practice and curriculum design in Nigerian ESL contexts.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on socio-cultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978) and constructivist learning theory (Piaget, 1972), both of which emphasize the centrality of social interaction, collaboration, and active knowledge construction in learning.

Socio-Cultural Theory

Vygotsky (1978) posits that learning occurs through meaningful social interaction and that language is a critical mediator in cognitive development. A key concept is the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which represents the gap between what a learner can do independently and what they can achieve with guidance. In the context of English-speaking skills, small-group interactions allow learners to operate within their ZPD, receiving scaffolding from more capable peers. This facilitates internalization of language structures, vocabulary, pronunciation, and communicative strategies, leading to improved oral proficiency.

Constructivist Learning Theory

Constructivist theory emphasizes that learners actively construct knowledge rather than passively receive information (Piaget, 1972). Learning occurs when students engage in authentic tasks, reflect on their experiences, and collaborate with peers. Small-Group Interaction Strategy (SGIS) aligns with constructivism by encouraging learners to participate in discussions, role-plays, and problem-solving exercises. In these tasks, learners negotiate meaning, clarify language use, and co-construct understanding, which fosters fluency, accuracy, and confidence in speaking English.

Integration of Theories for SGIS

Combining socio-cultural and constructivist perspectives provides a strong theoretical rationale for SGIS. By structuring speaking activities in small groups, the strategy:

- Increases opportunities for active participation
- Facilitates peer scaffolding and feedback
- Promotes collaborative problem solving
- Supports meaningful practice in authentic contexts

Thus, SGIS is theoretically expected to enhance students' English-speaking achievement by creating interactive, learner-centred, and socially mediated learning environments.

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Methodology

A quasi-experimental pretest–posttest non-equivalent control group design was adopted. Intact classes were used because random assignment of individual students was impractical in the school context. This design allows for comparison of student achievement in English speaking skills before and after exposure to SGIS, controlling for pretest differences. The study was conducted in senior secondary schools in Ebonyi State, Nigeria, where English is both a core subject and the principal medium of instruction. Senior Secondary School II (SS II) students were selected because they had acquired foundational English skills suitable for structured speaking tasks. The population consisted of 9,300 SS II students in public secondary schools in Ebonyi State. A total of 128 students were selected using multi-stage sampling. Four schools were randomly selected; two were assigned to the experimental group (n = 68) and two to the control group (n = 60). Intact classes were used to maintain classroom structure. The English-Speaking Achievement Test (ESAT) was used to measure students' achievement in vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, and fluency. The ESAT consisted of structured speaking tasks scored on a standardized scale. The ESAT was validated by two experts in English language education, one expert in measurement and evaluation, and one expert in educational psychology. Validity ensured that the instrument adequately measured the targeted aspects of speaking. Reliability was established using the split-half method, yielding a coefficient of 0.88, indicating strong internal consistency.

Experimental Procedure

The study was conducted in three phases:

1. **Pretest:** ESAT administered to both experimental and control groups to determine baseline equivalence.
2. **Treatment:** The experimental group received SGIS instruction, organized into small groups to perform collaborative speaking tasks (discussions, role-plays, problem-solving, and peer feedback). The control group received conventional teacher-centred instruction.
3. **Posttest:** ESAT administered to both groups to measure achievement after the instructional period.

Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics (Mean, SD) were used to answer the research question, while Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) was used to test the hypothesis at $\alpha = 0.05$, controlling for pretest differences. Additional analyses included gender comparisons and strategy × gender interaction.

Results

Research Question 1: What is the difference in mean achievement scores of students taught English speaking skills using Small-Group Interaction Strategy (SGIS) and those taught using the conventional method?

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Table 1 presents the mean and standard deviation of students' pretest and posttest scores in English speaking achievement.

Table 1. Mean and Standard Deviation of Students' Achievement Scores by Teaching Strategy

Group	N	Pretest Mean	Pretest SD	Posttest Mean	Posttest SD
Small-Group Interaction	68	42.15	5.21	78.34	6.12
Conventional Method	60	41.82	5.05	63.47	5.98

Note: N = number of students.

Interpretation:
Students taught with SGIS scored higher in the posttest (M = 78.34) than those taught with the conventional method (M = 63.47). The pretest means were nearly equivalent, indicating baseline comparability.

Hypothesis 1: There is no significant difference in mean achievement scores between students taught using SGIS and those taught using conventional methods.

Table 2. ANCOVA Summary of Teaching Strategy Effect on Achievement

Source	SS	df	MS	F	p
Pretest (Covariate)	1024.87	1	1024.87	36.21	.000
Teaching Strategy	2210.65	1	2210.65	78.06	.000
Error	3543.12	125	28.35		
Total	6778.64	127			

Decision:

Since $p < .05$, the null hypothesis is rejected. SGIS had a significant positive effect on students' English-speaking achievement compared to the conventional method.

Interpretation:
The ANCOVA results confirm that the difference in posttest scores is statistically significant, even after controlling for pretest scores. This demonstrates the effectiveness of SGIS in improving speaking skills.

Research Question 2: Are there gender differences in achievement scores under SGIS and conventional methods?

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Table 3. Gender Differences in Achievement Scores

Group	Male Mean	Male SD	Female Mean	Female SD
SGIS	77.89	5.97	78.76	6.20
Conventional Method	63.12	6.05	63.81	5.92

Interpretation:
Both male and female students benefited from SGIS. There is no substantial difference between genders, indicating that the strategy is effective for all students.

Research Question 3: Is there an interaction effect between teaching strategy and gender on achievement?

Table 4. Interaction Effect of Strategy × Gender

Source	SS	Df	MS	F	p
Strategy × Gender	12.45	1	12.45	0.44	0.508

Interpretation:
The interaction effect is not statistically significant ($p > .05$), suggesting that the effect of SGIS on speaking achievement is consistent across genders.

Summary of Findings

1. Students taught using SGIS achieved significantly higher English-speaking scores than those taught using conventional methods.
2. Both male and female students benefitted similarly from SGIS.
3. There was no significant interaction between gender and teaching strategy.
4. The descriptive and inferential statistics support the effectiveness of SGIS in enhancing speaking achievement.

Discussion
The findings of this study indicate that Small-Group Interaction Strategy (SGIS) significantly improved senior secondary school students' achievement in English speaking skills compared to conventional, teacher-centred methods. Students in the experimental group recorded higher posttest scores (M = 78.34, SD = 6.12) than those in the control group (M = 63.47, SD = 5.98), confirming the effectiveness of the strategy (see Table 1). This finding aligns with socio-cultural theory, which emphasizes the importance of social interaction and peer scaffolding in cognitive and language development (Vygotsky, 1978). By participating in structured small-group activities, learners were able to internalize language rules, practice vocabulary, and receive corrective feedback from peers, leading to improved oral performance.

The ANCOVA results (Table 2) further confirmed that the difference in achievement was statistically significant even after controlling for pretest scores, demonstrating that the observed gains were attributable to the instructional strategy rather than baseline differences. This outcome supports prior research that interactive, collaborative learning strategies enhance students' language proficiency more effectively than traditional, teacher-dominated instruction (Gillies, 2016; Johnson & Johnson, 2009). It reinforces the notion that active engagement and meaningful peer communication are critical for developing fluency, accuracy, and confidence in speaking English.

The analysis of gender differences (Table 3) revealed that both male and female students benefited similarly from SGIS, with no substantial disparities in posttest scores. This suggests that the strategy is equally effective across genders, promoting inclusivity and equity in language learning. The lack of significant interaction between teaching strategy and gender (Table 4) further confirms that SGIS enhances speaking achievement irrespective of gender, which is consistent with previous studies indicating that collaborative learning benefits all students when structured appropriately (Chen, 2015; Li, 2017).

From a pedagogical standpoint, the findings underscore the limitations of conventional methods that rely heavily on teacher exposition and passive learner participation. In such classrooms, opportunities for authentic oral practice are limited, which constrains students' development of communicative competence (Harmer, 2007). In contrast, SGIS creates an environment where students can negotiate meaning, articulate thoughts, and engage in peer feedback, all of which contribute to deeper learning and sustained improvement in speaking skills.

The study also highlights the role of structured group activities in promoting consistent performance across students. The reduced variability in scores among experimental group students (SD = 6.12) compared to the control group (SD = 5.98) suggests that SGIS supports learners of varying abilities, offering scaffolded opportunities for skill development. This aligns with Vygotsky's ZPD concept, whereby learners achieve beyond their independent level through guided interaction.

Furthermore, these findings contribute to the growing body of research demonstrating the effectiveness of interactive and cooperative strategies in ESL contexts, particularly in under-researched settings such as Nigerian secondary schools (Afolayan, 2015; Ewulo, 2015). Unlike most prior studies, which focused on reading and writing, this study provides empirical evidence on the development of speaking skills, filling a notable gap in the literature.

In practical terms, the results suggest that teachers should incorporate SGIS into routine English language instruction, organizing learners into small, manageable groups to perform meaningful speaking tasks. Activities such as role-plays, group discussions, and problem-solving exercises allow for repeated, scaffolded practice, enhancing both fluency and accuracy. Teacher training programs should emphasize strategies for facilitating collaborative learning, monitoring group interactions, and providing timely feedback. School administrators should also support classroom environments conducive to group work, including appropriate class sizes and instructional resources.

Finally, the study demonstrates that SGIS not only improves oral proficiency but also promotes learner confidence and engagement, which are essential for lifelong language learning. By fostering interactive, socially mediated learning, SGIS aligns with both socio-cultural and constructivist perspectives, validating its theoretical and practical relevance in the ESL classroom.

Conclusion and Educational Implications

The present study investigated the effects of Small-Group Interaction Strategy (SGIS) on senior secondary school students' achievement in English speaking skills in Ebonyi State, Nigeria. The results demonstrated that students taught using SGIS significantly outperformed their peers who received conventional teacher-centred instruction. The strategy proved effective for both male and female students, with no significant interaction between gender and teaching strategy, highlighting its applicability across diverse learner groups.

The findings provide strong empirical support for the theoretical propositions of socio-cultural theory and constructivist learning theory, which emphasize learning through social interaction, collaboration, and active knowledge construction. By engaging students in structured small-group activities, SGIS facilitates peer scaffolding, meaningful oral practice, and negotiation of meaning, all of which contribute to enhanced speaking proficiency.

From an educational perspective, the study has several important implications:

1. **Classroom Practice:** English language teachers should integrate SGIS into regular classroom instruction to create interactive and learner-centred learning environments. Activities such as group discussions, problem-solving exercises, and role-plays provide learners with multiple opportunities for practice, feedback, and collaborative learning. Teachers should actively monitor group interactions and provide scaffolded guidance to maximize learning outcomes.
2. **Teacher Education and Professional Development:**

Teacher training programs should emphasize strategies for facilitating small-group interactions, including group formation, task design, and feedback provision. Professional development workshops can equip teachers with the skills necessary to implement SGIS effectively, ensuring that students benefit fully from interactive learning opportunities.

3. **Curriculum Design and Policy:** Curriculum planners and policymakers should encourage instructional approaches that prioritize **communicative competence** alongside grammatical accuracy. Policies should support the inclusion of learner-centred, interactive strategies in English language curricula to improve oral proficiency, particularly in secondary school contexts.
4. **School Administration and Resource Provision:** School administrators should provide adequate support for SGIS implementation, including appropriate class sizes, classroom arrangements conducive to group work, and teaching resources. These measures can enhance the effectiveness of SGIS and ensure sustainable practice.
5. **Future Research:** Further studies should examine the long-term effects of SGIS on English speaking skills, as well as its impact on other language domains, such as writing, listening, and reading comprehension. Researchers may also explore the integration of SGIS with **digital tools** to enhance engagement and provide additional opportunities for oral practice.

Overall, the study confirms that Small-Group Interaction Strategy is an effective, inclusive, and theoretically grounded instructional approach for improving speaking skills among senior secondary school students. Its adoption in ESL classrooms has the potential to transform language learning, fostering both academic achievement and learner confidence in oral communication.

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