HOW DOES PAIR WORK IMPROVE THE SPEAKING FLUENCY OF INTERMEDIATE IELTS STUDENTS AGED 17-22 IN AN EFL CLASSROOMS

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Annotatsiya: Ushbu tadqiqot juftlikda ishlashning IELTS o‘rta darajadagi (17–22 yosh) o‘quvchilarning og‘zaki nutq ravonligini qanday oshirishini EFL sinf sharoitida o‘rganadi. Kommunikativ til o‘qitish yondashuvi va vazifaga asoslangan ta’limga tayangan holda, samarali juftlik faoliyatlarini aniqlash hamda motivatsiyaning rolini o‘rganish uchun action research dizayni qo‘llanildi. Ma’lumotlar to‘rt hafta davomida o‘qituvchi refleksiyalari, talabalar kundaliklari va yozib olingan nutq vazifalari orqali yig‘ildi. Kamolova va boshqalar (2025) tomonidan texnologiyalarni integratsiya qilish bo‘yicha ilgari surilgan g‘oyalar gamifikatsiyalangan juftlik topshiriqlarini qo‘llashga asos bo‘ldi. Natijalar shuni ko‘rsatadiki, tuzilgan juftlikda ishlash o‘quvchilarning ishtirokini va og‘zaki nutq hajmini sezilarli darajada oshiradi. Shuningdek, o‘quvchilar o‘rtasidagi hamkorlik past darajadagi o‘quvchilarning ishonchini oshirish orqali ularga yordam beradi..

Kalit so‘zlar: juftlikda ishlash, nutq ravonligi, EFL sinfi, IELTSga tayyorgarlik, kommunikativ til o‘qitish, action research (amaliy tadqiqot), o‘quvchilar o‘rtasidagi hamkorlik, texnologiyalarni integratsiya qilish

Аннотация: Данное исследование рассматривает, как работа в парах способствует развитию беглости речи у учащихся среднего уровня, готовящихся к IELTS, в возрасте 17–22 лет в условиях обучения английскому языку как иностранному (EFL). Основываясь на коммуникативном подходе к обучению языку и обучении, основанном на выполнении задач, используется дизайн педагогического исследования (action research) для выявления эффективных парных заданий и изучения роли мотивации. Данные собирались в течение четырёх недель с помощью рефлексий преподавателя, студенческих дневников и записей устных заданий. Идеи Kamolova et al. (2025) по интеграции технологий послужили основой для использования геймифицированных парных заданий. Результаты показывают, что структурированная работа в парах значительно повышает участие учащихся и объём устной речи. Взаимодействие между учащимися также поддерживает студентов с более низким уровнем, повышая их уверенность. Исследование предлагает практические рекомендации по внедрению работы в парах в классах, ориентированных на подготовку к IELTS.

Ключевые слова: работа в парах, беглость речи, EFL класс, подготовка к IELTS, коммуникативное обучение языку, педагогическое исследование (action research), взаимодействие учащихся, интеграция технологий

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Abstract: This study examines how pair work enhances the speaking fluency of intermediate IELTS learners aged 17–22 in an EFL classroom. Drawing on communicative language teaching and task-based learning, it uses an action research design to identify effective pair activities and explore the role of motivation. Data were collected over four weeks through teacher reflections, student journals, and recorded speaking tasks. Insights from Kamolova et al. (2025) on technology integration informed the use of gamified pair tasks. Findings show that structured pair work significantly increases participation and speaking output. Peer interaction also supports lower-level learners by improving confidence. The study offers practical recommendations for implementing pair work in IELTS-focused classrooms.

Key words: pair work, speaking fluency, EFL classroom, IELTS preparation, communicative language teaching, action research, peer interaction, technology integration

Introduction.

Developing oral fluency remains one of the most challenging aspects of foreign language acquisition, particularly for learners preparing for high-stakes examinations such as IELTS. Intermediate learners aged 17–22 often possess substantial declarative knowledge — grammar rules, vocabulary lists, reading comprehension — yet struggle to deploy this knowledge in real-time spoken communication (Harmer, 2007; Thornbury, 2005). This discrepancy between knowledge and performance is commonly referred to as the fluency gap, and it is precisely this gap that pair work, when thoughtfully implemented, can help to bridge.

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) theory posits that language is acquired most effectively through meaningful interaction (Littlewood, 1981). Pair work creates the low-anxiety, high-interaction environment that CLT prescribes: students speak to a peer rather than performing for a teacher, reducing affective inhibition and increasing the quantity and authenticity of spoken output (Nunan, 1989). However, pair work in IELTS preparation contexts does not automatically produce fluency gains. Poorly designed tasks, mismatched pairs, and inadequate monitoring can result in learners reverting to their first language, completing tasks superficially, or disengaging entirely (Dornyei, 2001; Harmer, 2007).

Recent research from the Uzbek educational context provides additional theoretical grounding for this study. Kamolova et al. (2025), in a mixed-methods investigation spanning schools in Tashkent, Samarkand, and Bukhara, found that students who engaged more frequently with interactive technologies outperformed low-tech peers by an average of 8.5 points across core subjects. Crucially, 92% of teachers and 88% of students identified interactive tools as effective in increasing engagement — a finding that resonates with our own observations regarding the role of task interactivity in pair work. The convergence of these findings suggests that the key variable driving both technology-enhanced learning and effective pair work is not the medium itself, but the degree of interactive engagement it facilitates.

Literature Review and Methodology

The theoretical foundations of pair work in EFL settings draw from several interconnected traditions. Littlewood (1981) established pair and group interaction as the cornerstone of communicative language teaching, arguing that authentic communication — however simulated — provides the cognitive and social conditions

necessary for language acquisition. Nunan (1989) extended this framework through task-based language teaching (TBLT), demonstrating that information-gap activities, opinion-exchange tasks, and collaborative problem-solving exercises are significantly more effective than form-focused drills in promoting spoken fluency.

Thornbury (2005) offers a detailed analysis of what fluency actually involves: automaticity in lexical retrieval, the chunking of language into prefabricated phrases, and the management of real-time processing demands. He argues that fluency is developed through extensive practice under time pressure — precisely the conditions that well-designed pair tasks create. Dornyei (2001) brings a motivational lens to pair work, identifying pair compatibility as a key variable. When learners are paired with someone of a similar proficiency level and compatible personality, both partners tend to engage more fully and take greater communicative risks.

Vygotsky’s (1978) concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) provides perhaps the most powerful theoretical rationale for pair work: learners achieve more in collaboration with a more capable peer than they could independently. In the EFL speaking context, this manifests as lexical scaffolding — a higher-proficiency partner supplies a word or phrase that the lower-proficiency partner then incorporates into their own production. Harmer (2007) adds an important practical dimension, noting that the benefits of pair work are contingent upon clear task design, appropriate pairings, and active teacher monitoring.

Kamolova et al. (2025) contribute a specifically Uzbek perspective that is directly relevant to the present study. Their finding that interactive and collaborative uses of technology — educational apps, online platforms — are far rarer in Uzbek classrooms than basic presentation tools (such as PowerPoint), despite being significantly more effective, parallels our finding that interactive pair tasks dramatically outperform worksheet-based pair activities. In both cases, the higher-engagement modality is underutilized despite its demonstrable superiority.

The study by Kamolova et al. (2025) employed a mixed-methods design, collecting data from 400 students and 50 secondary school teachers across schools in Tashkent, Samarkand, and Bukhara during the 2023–2024 academic year. Using questionnaires, academic achievement records, and semi-structured interviews, the researchers examined the relationship between technology use and student learning outcomes. Quantitative analysis revealed a statistically significant positive correlation: students in the high-technology-use group scored an average of 8.5 points higher across core subjects (Mathematics, Science, and Languages) than their low-technology-use counterparts. Furthermore, 92% of teachers and 88% of students reported that interactive tools made lessons more engaging and helped students understand complex concepts more effectively.

However, Kamolova et al. (2025) also identified critical infrastructure and management challenges that limit the full realization of technology’s potential in Uzbekistan. Only 45% of classrooms had access to reliable high-speed internet, and 80% of teachers reported needing further digital training. The study found that technology use was largely confined to passive presentation tools such as PowerPoint, while more interactive and collaborative modalities — educational apps, online collaborative platforms — remained significantly underutilized. This paradox between high potential and infrastructural limitation is directly relevant to the present study: just as Kamolova et al. (2025) demonstrate that the type of technology use matters more than its mere

presence, our findings confirm that the design and interactivity of pair tasks — rather than the simple act of pairing students — is the decisive factor in developing speaking fluency.

Research Design and Methodology

The study employed an action research design (Burns, 2010), which was selected for its capacity to integrate systematic inquiry with immediate pedagogical application. Action research is particularly well-suited to EFL classroom investigations because it positions the teacher as a reflective practitioner who generates knowledge from within the educational context rather than applying externally derived prescriptions (McNiff, 2013). The research was conducted over four weeks with 18 intermediate (B1–B2) learners aged 17–22 enrolled in an IELTS preparation programme at Uzbekistan State World Languages University.

Data were collected through three complementary instruments. First, teacher reflective journals were maintained after every lesson, recording observations of student engagement, speaking time, language switching behaviour, and pair interaction quality. Second, student reflection notes were collected at the end of each week, inviting learners to comment on which tasks they found most engaging, where they experienced difficulty, and how comfortable they felt speaking with their partners. Third, audio recordings of pair speaking tasks were made from the second week onwards and subsequently analysed for fluency markers including pause frequency, speech rate (words per minute), and lexical variety. The four-week intervention progressed from baseline data collection (Week 1), through structured pair tasks (Week 2), gamified and interactive activities (Week 3), to mixed-proficiency pairing with rotation (Week 4).

Discussion

Week 1 observations established that conventional worksheet-based pair tasks produced limited speaking engagement. Over 60% of learner turns consisted of one or two-word responses, and first-language switching occurred frequently. Average English-language speaking time across the group was estimated at 30–40% of total task time — a figure consistent with the pattern identified by Harmer (2007) when pair tasks lack communicative purpose.

The introduction of structured communicative tasks in Week 2 — including problem-solution discussions, personal opinion exchanges on IELTS-relevant topics, and picture-based narrative tasks — produced an immediate and marked increase in English-language speaking time, rising to an average of 68–75% of task time. Crucially, this increase was observed across proficiency levels, suggesting that task structure rather than individual proficiency was the primary driver of engagement. This pattern closely mirrors Kamolova et al.’s (2025) finding that the frequency of technology use matters less than the type of technology used: interactive and collaborative tools outperform passive ones regardless of learner level.

Week 3 gamified activities — hypothetical scenario discussions (’What would you do if...?’), competitive opinion-justification tasks, and collaborative story-building exercises — produced the highest levels of engagement across the four-week period. Four learners who had been consistently reluctant to speak in Weeks 1 and 2 became among the most active participants during gamified activities. Student reflection notes attributed this shift to reduced self-consciousness. This affective dimension resonates strongly with Dornyei’s (2001) motivational framework and underscores the importance of designing tasks that lower the emotional stakes of speaking.

Week 4 mixed-proficiency pairing yielded complex results. In line with Vygotsky's (1978) ZPD theory, lower-proficiency learners benefited from exposure to their higher-proficiency partners' more sophisticated lexis and discourse strategies. However, in several pairs, the higher-proficiency learner dominated the interaction to such an extent that their partner's contribution was reduced to minimal backchannelling. This finding reinforces Dornyei's (2001) warning about proficiency mismatches and Harmer's (2007) emphasis on active teacher monitoring.

Audio analysis of recorded speaking tasks revealed that pause frequency decreased by an average of 30% over the four-week period, while speech rate increased by approximately 15–20 words per minute. These gains were most pronounced in learners who worked consistently with the same partner, suggesting that relational familiarity and accumulated shared context facilitate fluency development in ways that task design alone cannot replicate.

Results

The results confirm five key findings. First, structured pair tasks more than doubled speaking activity (from 30–40% to 68–75% of task time). Second, gamified and interactive tasks engaged previously reluctant learners and produced the highest participation rates of the four-week period. Third, peer support was found to be a more effective confidence-building mechanism for lower-proficiency students than teacher correction. Fourth, audio analysis showed that pause frequency decreased by an average of 30% and speech rate increased by 15–20 words per minute over the intervention period. Fifth, students' affective state — motivation, anxiety level, interest — directly influenced the effectiveness of pair work (Dornyei, 2001).

Conclusion

This action research study provides strong empirical evidence for the effectiveness of structured, gamified, and interactive pair work tasks in improving the speaking fluency of intermediate IELTS learners in an EFL context. A key finding is that task interactivity, rather than pair work itself, is the decisive factor influencing learner engagement and speaking development. This highlights the importance of how pair activities are designed and implemented in the classroom. The results align with Kamolova et al. (2025), whose research in the Uzbek educational context demonstrated that interactive approaches supported by technology or pedagogy consistently produce better outcomes than passive, form-focused methods in language learning environments.

Based on these findings, several pedagogical recommendations can be made. EFL teachers should design pair tasks with clear communicative objectives and strict time limits to maximise student output. Priority should be given to interactive and gamified activities instead of traditional worksheet-based exercises. Teachers must also carefully consider pairing strategies, taking into account both proficiency levels and motivational compatibility. In addition, active monitoring of pair interactions is essential to ensure balanced participation and to support quieter learners. Finally, integrating digital interactive tools, as suggested by Kamolova et al. (2025), can further enhance engagement, authenticity, and spontaneous speech production in classroom communication.

Future research should focus on the long-term impact of sustained pair work interventions on IELTS speaking band scores and examine how technology-mediated pair tasks contribute to fluency development in the Uzbek EFL context, particularly in

relation to learner autonomy, interaction quality, and sustained motivation over extended instructional periods.

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