Using Guided Pair work to Enhance University Students' Engagement in English Speaking Lessons

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Abstract- This study examines the effectiveness of guided pair work in enhancing university students' engagement in English speaking lessons in a Vietnamese tertiary EFL context. A quasi-experimental design was employed with 53 second-year non-English-major students divided into a control group (n = 25) and an experimental group (n = 28). Over a 12-week period, the experimental group participated in guided pair work activities, while the control group received conventional speaking instruction. Data were collected through a student engagement questionnaire, structured classroom observations, and semi-structured interviews. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and independent-samples t-tests, and qualitative data were examined thematically. The results showed that students exposed to guided pair work demonstrated significantly higher levels of behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement than those in the control group. Students also reported increased confidence, clearer understanding of tasks, and more active participation during speaking activities. The findings suggest that guided pair work is an effective strategy for promoting multidimensional engagement in university EFL speaking classrooms.

Index Terms- guided pair work; student engagement; EFL speaking; Tan Trao university context; communicative language teaching.

I. INTRODUCTION

IN the context of globalization and international integration, English has become a crucial medium of communication in higher education and professional domains worldwide. As noted by Crystal (2003), English functions as a global lingua franca, making communicative competence in English increasingly important for university graduates. Among the four language skills, speaking is often regarded as both the most essential and the most challenging skill for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners because it requires real-time language processing, interactional management, and immediate responses (Bygate, 1987). Despite its centrality in communicative competence, speaking remains a persistent area of difficulty in many tertiary EFL classrooms.

In Vietnamese university contexts, particularly in provincial institutions, non-English-major students frequently demonstrate low participation and high levels of speaking anxiety during oral activities. Research has shown that foreign language anxiety, especially in speaking tasks, can significantly inhibit learners' willingness to communicate (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986; MacIntyre, Clément, Dörnyei, & Noels, 1998). In addition, speaking lessons are sometimes characterized by teacher-dominated interaction or loosely structured group work, which may result in unequal participation and limited student engagement. These challenges suggest that improving speaking instruction requires not only increasing opportunities for oral practice but also creating instructional conditions that foster active and sustained engagement.

Student engagement has been widely conceptualized as a multidimensional construct encompassing behavioral, emotional, and cognitive components (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004). Behavioral engagement refers to observable participation and effort; emotional engagement involves learners' affective responses, such as interest and anxiety; and cognitive engagement concerns mental investment and strategic involvement in learning tasks. In speaking classrooms, engagement is particularly critical because language development occurs through active participation and meaningful interaction. Therefore, identifying pedagogical strategies that enhance engagement across these dimensions is essential for improving learning outcomes.

Pair work has long been advocated within Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) as a means of maximizing learners' speaking opportunities and promoting interaction (Harmer, 2007). From an interactionist perspective, peer interaction facilitates negotiation of meaning and pushed output, processes that contribute to second language development (Swain, 1995; Ellis, 2003). However, research also indicates that pair work does not automatically lead to effective interaction or high engagement. When tasks are insufficiently structured, learners may engage in superficial exchanges, unequal participation, or off-task behavior (Storch, 2002). This underscores the importance of guided pair work, in which interaction is supported through clear instructions, prompts, role assignments, and teacher monitoring.

Guided pair work aligns with sociocultural theory, which emphasizes the role of scaffolding and interaction in learning (Vygotsky, 1978). By providing structured support, guided pair work may reduce learners' anxiety, promote balanced participation, and encourage deeper cognitive involvement in speaking tasks. Nevertheless, empirical research examining the

impact of guided pair work on multidimensional student engagement in university EFL speaking classrooms, particularly in Vietnamese provincial contexts, remains limited.

To address this gap, the present study investigates the effectiveness of guided pair work in enhancing university students' behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement in English speaking lessons at Tan Trao University. Specifically, the study seeks to examine (1) the extent to which guided pair work influences students' engagement and (2) students' perceptions of this instructional approach. By focusing on engagement as a central outcome variable and employing a quasi-experimental design in an authentic classroom setting, this study aims to contribute to both theoretical discussions on structured peer interaction and practical efforts to improve speaking instruction in tertiary EFL contexts.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. English Speaking Instruction in Tertiary EFL Contexts

Speaking is a central component of communicative competence and a primary goal of English language instruction at the university level. In EFL contexts, oral proficiency is closely linked to learners' academic and professional opportunities (Crystal, 2003). However, speaking is also one of the most demanding skills because it requires real-time language processing, interactional management, and immediate responses (Bygate, 1987).

With the adoption of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), speaking instruction has increasingly emphasized meaningful interaction and fluency rather than isolated grammar practice (Richards, 2008). From a task-based perspective, learners need opportunities for meaning-focused output and interaction in order to develop oral proficiency (Nation, 2007; Ellis, 2003). Nevertheless, research shows that many tertiary EFL classrooms continue to face limited student participation and high speaking anxiety. Foreign language anxiety, particularly in oral tasks, can significantly reduce learners' willingness to communicate (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986; MacIntyre et al., 1998). In Vietnamese university contexts, students often hesitate to speak due to fear of making mistakes and negative evaluation (Le & Tran, 2020).

These challenges suggest that effective speaking instruction must provide structured and supportive interactional formats that both increase speaking opportunities and reduce affective barriers.

B. Student Engagement in Language Learning

Student engagement is widely recognized as a key predictor of learning success and is commonly conceptualized as a multidimensional construct comprising behavioral, emotional, and cognitive components (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004). Rather than referring simply to participation, engagement reflects the quality of students' involvement in learning activities (Kuh, 2009).

Behavioral engagement refers to observable actions such as participation, effort, and on-task behavior. In speaking classrooms, this includes frequency of oral contributions and responsiveness to peers. Emotional engagement involves learners' affective reactions, including interest, enjoyment, confidence, and anxiety. Positive emotions can enhance

motivation, whereas anxiety may inhibit participation (Dörnyei, 2005; MacIntyre et al., 1998). Cognitive engagement concerns students' mental investment in tasks, such as organizing ideas, using strategies, and exerting effort to communicate meaningfully (Fredricks et al., 2004).

These dimensions are interrelated and particularly relevant in EFL speaking lessons, where effective learning depends on active participation, positive emotional involvement, and sustained cognitive effort.

C. Pair Work and Peer Interaction in EFL Speaking Classrooms

Pair work is a common instructional arrangement in Communicative Language Teaching, designed to increase learners' opportunities for spoken interaction. By working in dyads, students are able to maximize speaking time and reduce the pressure associated with whole-class performance (Harmer, 2007). From an interactionist perspective, peer interaction promotes negotiation of meaning, feedback, and modified output, which are considered beneficial for second language development (Swain, 1995; Ellis, 2003).

Empirical research has shown that collaborative tasks can create valuable opportunities for language use in tertiary EFL contexts (McDonough, 2004; Storch, 2002). However, studies also indicate that the quality of pair interaction varies depending on task design and learner roles. Unequal participation, superficial exchanges, or off-task talk may occur when tasks lack clear structure or guidance (Storch, 2002). These findings suggest that pair work alone does not guarantee effective engagement; rather, its effectiveness depends largely on how it is implemented.

D. Guided Pair Work as Structured Interaction

Guided pair work refers to a structured form of peer interaction in which learners are provided with explicit support, such as clear instructions, guiding questions, role assignments, and teacher monitoring. This approach aligns with sociocultural theory, which emphasizes the role of scaffolding in supporting learners' performance within their zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978). Structured support can reduce uncertainty, clarify task expectations, and encourage balanced participation.

Research on structured peer interaction and interaction strategy instruction suggests that providing guidance enhances both the quality of interaction and learner involvement (Dao, 2020; Sato & Lyster, 2012). When learners receive procedural or linguistic support, they are more likely to engage in meaningful exchanges and demonstrate deeper cognitive processing. In speaking classrooms, guided tasks can also reduce anxiety by creating predictable and manageable interactional conditions.

Therefore, guided pair work may contribute not only to increased speaking opportunities but also to improved behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement during speaking activities.

E. Research Gap

Although previous studies highlight the benefits of peer interaction and structured tasks, engagement is often examined indirectly through interactional features or language outcomes rather than as a multidimensional construct (McDonough, 2004; Sato & Lyster, 2012). Few studies have explicitly investigated

the impact of guided pair work on behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement in university EFL speaking classrooms. Moreover, empirical evidence from Vietnamese provincial university contexts, particularly involving non-English-major students, remains limited. Given the challenges of low participation and speaking anxiety in such settings, there is a need for classroom-based research examining whether guided

III. METHODOLOGY

This study employed a quasi-experimental research design to examine the effects of guided pair work on university students' engagement in English speaking lessons in a Vietnamese tertiary EFL context. The research was conducted at Tan Trao University with 53 second-year non-English-major students enrolled in the English 3 course in the Preschool Education program. Two intact classes were selected using convenience sampling due to administrative constraints: one class (n = 25) served as the control group and received conventional speaking instruction characterized by teacher-fronted explanation and loosely structured pair or group discussion, while the other class (n = 28) served as the experimental group and participated in guided pair work activities over a 12-week period. Both groups followed the same syllabus and used the same coursebook (Life, A1–A2, Vietnam edition), covering Units 9–12, to ensure content comparability. The instructional difference lay in the treatment: in the experimental group, speaking tasks were systematically implemented through guided pair work, which included clear task objectives, step-by-step procedures, assigned roles (e.g., Student A/Student B), guiding questions, sentence frames, and ongoing teacher monitoring and feedback designed to scaffold interaction in line with sociocultural principles (Vygotsky, 1978). Data were collected using three instruments to allow methodological triangulation: a Student Engagement Questionnaire adapted from the multidimensional engagement framework of Fredricks, Blumenfeld, and Paris (2004), a structured classroom observation checklist focusing on behavioral indicators (time-on-task, turn-taking, and responsiveness), and semi-structured interviews with 6–10 students from the experimental group to explore perceptions of guided pair work. The questionnaire consisted of 18 Likert-scale items measuring behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement and demonstrated acceptable internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha values above .70). Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS to compute descriptive statistics and conduct independent-samples t-tests comparing engagement levels between the two groups, while observation scores were averaged and similarly compared. Qualitative interview data were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed thematically to identify patterns related to the three engagement dimensions. The integration of quantitative and qualitative findings enabled a comprehensive examination of the extent to which guided pair work influenced students' multidimensional engagement in English speaking lessons.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. Quantitative results

This section reports the quantitative findings derived from the Student Engagement Questionnaire and the structured classroom

pair work can systematically enhance multidimensional engagement.

The present study addresses this gap by investigating the effects of guided pair work on university students' engagement in English speaking lessons using a quasi-experimental design and multiple data sources.

observation checklist. The analyses aimed to determine whether guided pair work significantly enhanced students' behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement in English speaking lessons.

a. Student Engagement Questionnaire

Descriptive statistics were first computed to examine overall engagement levels in the control and experimental groups. As presented in Table 1, the experimental group consistently obtained higher mean scores across all three engagement dimensions.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of Student Engagement by group

Engagement Dimension	Group	N	Mean	SD
Behavioral Engagement	Control	25	3.12	0.54
	Experimental	28	3.78	0.49
Emotional Engagement	Control	25	3.05	0.60
	Experimental	28	3.81	0.52
Cognitive Engagement	Control	25	3.18	0.57
	Experimental	28	3.85	0.50

Students exposed to guided pair work reported higher levels of behavioral engagement (M = 3.78), emotional engagement (M = 3.81), and cognitive engagement (M = 3.85) compared with the control group. These descriptive results suggest a positive effect of the instructional treatment.

To determine whether the differences were statistically significant, independent-samples t-tests were conducted. The results are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Independent-samples t-test results for Engagement Dimensions

Engagement Dimension	t	df	p
Behavioral Engagement	−4.67	51	< .001
Emotional Engagement	−4.94	51	< .001
Cognitive Engagement	−4.56	51	< .001

The analysis revealed statistically significant differences between the two groups across all three dimensions (p < .001). These findings indicate that guided pair work significantly enhanced students' multidimensional engagement in English speaking lessons.

b. Classroom Observation Results

To complement the self-reported questionnaire data, structured classroom observations were conducted to measure observable behavioral engagement. Three indicators were assessed: time-on-task, turn-taking, and responsiveness. Descriptive statistics are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Descriptive statistics of Classroom Observation Indicators

Observation Indicator	Group	Mean	SD
Time-on-Task	Control	2.12	0.42

	Experimental	2.68	0.36
Turn-Taking	Control	2.05	0.47
	Experimental	2.71	0.34
Responsiveness	Control	1.98	0.45
	Experimental	2.65	0.38

The experimental group demonstrated higher levels of engagement across all observed indicators. Students engaged in guided pair work remained on task longer, participated more evenly in turn-taking, and responded more actively to their partners.

Independent-samples t-tests were again conducted to examine the statistical significance of these differences. The results are shown in Table 4.

Table 4. Independent-samples t-test results for Observation Indicators

Observation Indicator	t	p
Time-on-Task	−5.18	< .001
Turn-Taking	−5.80	< .001
Responsiveness	−5.82	< .001

The differences between groups were statistically significant for all three indicators ($p < .001$), providing objective evidence that guided pair work substantially improved students' observable behavioral engagement during speaking activities.

In summary, the quantitative findings from both questionnaire and observation data consistently demonstrate that guided pair work had a significant positive impact on students' behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement in English speaking lessons. The following section presents qualitative findings to further explore students' perceptions and experiences of guided pair work.

B. Qualitative Results

To gain deeper insight into how guided pair work influenced students' engagement, semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight students from the experimental group. The interviews explored students' experiences during the 12-week intervention and were analyzed thematically in relation to behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement. The qualitative findings not only supported the quantitative results but also provided detailed explanations of how and why guided pair work affected students' learning experiences.

a. Perceived Effects on Behavioral Engagement

A recurring theme across interviews was the noticeable increase in active participation during speaking lessons. Nearly all participants reported that guided pair work required them to speak more frequently than in previous lessons. One student explained, *"Before, in group discussion, I sometimes just listened. But in guided pair work, I must speak because my partner is waiting for my answer."* Another stated, *"If I don't speak, the activity cannot continue, so I try to answer every question."* These comments indicate that the structured format created a sense of responsibility and accountability within each pair.

Students also highlighted the importance of assigned roles (e.g., Student A asks, Student B answers) in ensuring balanced interaction. Several participants mentioned that role assignment prevented stronger students from dominating. As one student noted, *"The roles make it fair. We take turns clearly, so everyone has a chance to talk."* This perception aligns with the observation findings showing higher turn-taking scores in the experimental group.

Improved time-on-task behavior was another commonly mentioned effect. Students reported that the guiding questions helped them stay focused on the speaking task. One participant remarked, *"The questions are already prepared, so I just follow them step by step. I don't feel confused."* Another added, *"Because we have to finish all the questions, we don't talk about other topics."* These responses suggest that structured prompts reduced distraction and maintained sustained participation.

b. Perceived Effects on Emotional Engagement

Students consistently described guided pair work as creating a more comfortable and supportive learning environment. Reduced anxiety was one of the most prominent themes. Many participants compared pair work with whole-class speaking and emphasized feeling less pressure. One student explained, *"When I speak in front of the class, I am very nervous. But with one partner, I feel relaxed."* Another noted, *"Even if I make mistakes, only my partner hears me, so I feel less embarrassed."* These comments illustrate how guided pair work lowered affective barriers that typically inhibit participation in EFL speaking contexts.

In addition to reduced anxiety, students reported increased confidence. One participant stated, *"Because I practice more in pairs, I feel more confident when speaking later."* Another commented, *"The questions help me prepare my ideas, so I feel more sure about what I say."* The structured guidance appeared to provide psychological support by clarifying expectations and reducing uncertainty.

Students also described higher levels of enjoyment and motivation. Several participants used words such as "interesting," "fun," and "lively" to describe speaking lessons involving guided pair work. For example, one student shared, *"The class is more active. I feel excited when we discuss in pairs."* Another explained, *"I look forward to speaking activities because I know I can do them."* These statements suggest that guided pair work fostered positive emotional engagement, which likely contributed to sustained participation.

c. Perceived Effects on Cognitive Engagement

Beyond participation and emotional comfort, students also reported deeper cognitive involvement during speaking tasks. Many participants indicated that guiding questions helped them organize their ideas more logically. One student explained, *"Before, I sometimes didn't know how to start. Now I follow the question and think step by step."* Another stated, *"The prompts help me arrange my ideas clearly, so my answer is better."* These reflections demonstrate increased strategic thinking and structured idea development.

Students further reported making greater effort to use appropriate vocabulary and grammar. One participant commented, *"I try to choose better words because I want my partner to understand clearly."* Another noted, *"I think more carefully before speaking, especially about the grammar."* This suggests that guided pair work not only increased speaking frequency but also encouraged students to invest mental effort in language production.

Listening and responsiveness were also associated with cognitive engagement. Several students emphasized that they had to listen carefully to their partners in order to respond appropriately. As one student explained, *"I cannot just wait for my turn. I must listen because I need to answer the next question."* This indicates active processing of peer input rather than passive turn-taking.

Overall, the qualitative evidence demonstrates that guided pair work fostered engagement holistically. Students became more behaviorally active, emotionally confident, and cognitively invested in speaking tasks. These rich descriptions provide contextual depth to the statistical findings and illustrate how structured interaction can transform students' experiences in university EFL speaking classrooms.

C. Discussion

This section integrates the quantitative and qualitative findings to interpret the impact of guided pair work on university students' engagement in English speaking lessons. The results consistently demonstrate that guided pair work significantly enhanced behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement, supporting the multidimensional engagement framework proposed by Fredricks, Blumenfeld, and Paris (2004).

First, the significant improvement in behavioral engagement, reflected in higher participation rates, balanced turn-taking, and increased time-on-task, suggests that structured peer interaction effectively promoted active involvement in speaking activities. The questionnaire and observation data both showed statistically significant differences between the control and experimental groups. These findings align with interactionist perspectives, which emphasize that increased opportunities for output and negotiation of meaning support language development (Swain, 1995; Ellis, 2003). Unlike loosely structured pair or group discussions, guided pair work required all students to assume clear roles and complete specific prompts, thereby reducing passivity and unequal participation—issues commonly reported in tertiary EFL classrooms (Storch, 2002).

Second, the findings reveal a strong positive effect on emotional engagement. Students reported increased confidence, enjoyment, and reduced speaking anxiety when working in structured pairs. This supports previous research indicating that smaller interactional settings can lower affective barriers and enhance willingness to communicate (MacIntyre et al., 1998; Dörnyei, 2005). The guided nature of the tasks appears to have created a psychologically safe learning environment by clarifying expectations and minimizing fear of negative evaluation. In Vietnamese EFL contexts, where students often demonstrate high levels of speaking anxiety (Le & Tran, 2020), this emotional support is particularly significant.

Third, guided pair work fostered greater cognitive engagement. Students reported organizing their ideas more clearly, thinking more carefully before speaking, and exerting greater effort in vocabulary and grammar use. Structured prompts and guiding questions likely functioned as scaffolding, consistent with sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978), enabling learners to operate within their zone of proximal development. These findings correspond with research suggesting that structured tasks promote deeper processing and strategic language use (Nation, 2007; Dao, 2020).

Importantly, the three dimensions of engagement appeared interrelated. Increased behavioral participation contributed to positive emotional experiences, which in turn encouraged deeper cognitive investment. This interconnected pattern reinforces the view that engagement operates holistically rather than in isolation (Fredricks et al., 2004).

Overall, the findings extend previous research on structured peer interaction by demonstrating that guided pair work not only enhances interactional quality but also systematically strengthens multidimensional engagement in a Vietnamese tertiary EFL context. The results highlight the pedagogical value of combining communicative principles with structured scaffolding to improve speaking instruction for non-English-major university students.

V. CONCLUSION

This study investigated the effectiveness of guided pair work in enhancing university students' behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement in English speaking lessons within a Vietnamese tertiary EFL context. Using a quasi-experimental design and triangulated data from questionnaires, classroom observations, and interviews, the findings consistently demonstrated that guided pair work significantly improved students' active participation, confidence, enjoyment, and cognitive involvement compared with conventional speaking instruction. The structured nature of guided pair work—through clear prompts, role assignments, and teacher scaffolding—helped reduce speaking anxiety, promote balanced interaction, and encourage deeper mental processing during oral tasks. By integrating communicative interaction with explicit guidance, this approach proved particularly suitable for non-English-major students who often struggle with low confidence and limited speaking practice. Overall, the study highlights guided pair work as a practical and pedagogically effective strategy for fostering multidimensional engagement in university EFL speaking classrooms and suggests its potential for broader implementation in similar educational contexts.

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