Using Cooperative Learning Techniques to Improve English Speaking Skills of the First-Year Students in Hanoi: An Action Research Project

Nguyen Thi Hoai

hoainguyenthi@hnue.edu.vn
Hanoi National University of Education
(Vietnam)

ABSTRACT: *Cooperative learning has been widely applied in teaching English. The research concerns the use of cooperative learning techniques to improve the English-speaking skills of first-year students at a university in Hanoi. 31 English-major freshmen from this university were the study's participants. The design of the study was action research which lasted eight weeks. Three cooperative learning techniques, namely Think-Pair-Share, Read-Pair-Share, and Write-Pair-Share, were employed when teaching students two speaking task types which were answering questions of familiar topics and making decisions in daily situations. The study collected quantitative data from a pre-test and a post-test and qualitative data from interviews. The findings revealed that the use of cooperative learning techniques helped improve students' speaking performance in both part one and part three of the Cambridge B1 Preliminary Speaking Examination, but the extent of performance differed in terms of students' levels and speaking skills components. It was also discovered that most participants had a positive attitude towards this intervention. It is suggested that cooperative learning techniques should be employed in teaching and learning English speaking.*

1. Introduction

English language skills are divided into four principal skills, namely listening, reading, speaking, and writing. Of these four skills, as noted by Goh & Burns (2012), teaching speaking to students is ignored in some places due to the focus on "*written language*" of "*high-stakes examinations.*" However, speaking is thought to be the most essential one (Chand, 2021; Islam et al., 2022). Speaking is also considered as a crucial skill in verbal communication, but for language learners, its significance extends beyond simple daily interactions. Speaking can help many second language learners progress academically and speed up their language acquisition. (Goh & Burns, 2012) Therefore, finding the appropriate way to teach speaking skills to English learners is not an easy task.

"*Speaking is an interactive skill that has problems and difficulties of many kinds*" (Islam et al., 2022). Studies on university students have pointed out various problems in speaking English that they encounter. Heriansyah (2012) lists two main categories, which are "*linguistic problems,*" such as lack of lexical resources and "*poor pronunciation,*" and "*non-linguistic problems,*" such as lack of self-confidence, fear of making mistakes and unfamiliarity with speaking in class. Chand (2021), on the other hand, divides students' speaking problems into three groups, namely "*personal problems,*" such as shyness, "*environmental problems,*" such as motivation from teachers; and "*linguistic problems.*"

Cooperative learning is when students work together in pairs or small groups to "*master*" the provided material and achieve common objectives. As noted by Multu (2018), learning environments should "*provide new experiences for students*" in the learning process, and such active learning approaches as cooperative learning have played a role in doing so. Similarly, Muhria (2021) contends that cooperative learning is one of the most effective, efficient, and cutting-edge learning approaches because it requires students to think "*critically and constructively.*"

The first-year students in the researcher's class come from various contexts with various methods of teaching speaking. Apart from those

with competent English speaking abilities, many have difficulties with English speaking skills. Consequently, they tend to be resistant to speaking English in front of the teacher or other students. Moreover, when the students were in high school, most of them worked individually and did not stand many chances to practice speaking English in groups. Therefore, the researcher feels the urge to find out solutions to improve first-year students' speaking skills.

There are multiple studies on the impact of cooperative learning on students' English-speaking skills. Namaziandost et al. (2020) conducted a quasi-experimental study to investigate the effects of two cooperative techniques, namely *Numbered Heads Together and Think-Pair-Share*, on Iranian intermediate EFL students' oral English language proficiency. The tasks researched were pair discussions of familiar topics. Another research was carried out by Al-Tamimi & Attamimi (2014), aiming to analyze whether cooperative learning in English language classes can improve the attitudes and speaking abilities of Yemeni pupils. The authors focused on three task types which were comparing and contrasting photos, reading aloud, and expressing opinions. Nevertheless, there has not been much research on the impact of cooperative learning in teaching speaking on students' performance of answering questions of familiar topics and decision-making speaking tasks. Therefore, being motivated by the benefits of cooperative learning and the gaps in the previous studies, as well as the problems that the researcher's students are encountering, the current study is to examine the effects of cooperative learning techniques on first-year English-major students' speaking performance. It, accordingly, is expected to provide new insights into the effect of cooperative learning techniques in improving first-year students' English speaking skills when answering questions about familiar topics and discussing and making decisions in daily situations. Thus, some teaching and learning implications related to the use of cooperative techniques in teaching English speaking skills could be drawn out.

The study seeks the answers to two research questions:

(1) To what extent could cooperative learning techniques improve first-year students' English-speaking performance?

(2) What are the participant's attitudes towards the intervention in the study?

2. Literature review
2.1. Speaking
2.1.1. Definition of speaking and its components
According to Nunan (2003), speaking is a *"productive oral skill"* which consists of *"producing systematic verbal utterances to convey meaning,"* and it can be *"directly and empirically observed"* (Brown, 2004). In other words, speaking is the employment of language in communication. Baker & Westrup (2003), on the other hand, define speaking as using language for real communicative purposes.

Based on the factors involved in a speaking activity, Vanderkevent (1990) mentions three components of speaking skill which are the speakers, the listeners, and the utterances. The listeners receive the utterances made by the speakers. Harris (1969), however, contends that speaking skill consists of five components which are comprehension, grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, and fluency.

2.1.2. Assessing speaking skills
Burns (1998) divides approaches to teaching speaking into two main categories, namely *"direct/controlled"* and *"indirect/transfer."* *"Direct/controlled"* approaches focus on *"structural accuracy"* and *"language forms,"* whereas *"indirect/transfer"* approaches emphasize language *"fluency"* and *"functional language use."* However, Burns (1998) points out that both these two types of approaches are basically *"dichotomous"* as they separate speaking from *"authentic interactions"* with the focus only on learning *"language form"* (in the former category) or "language use" (in the latter category). As a result, Goh & Burns (2012) developed a holistic approach to teaching speaking to minimize these limitations. This holistic approach will be the normal procedure of teaching speaking in the researcher's class. There are seven stages in this approach: focus learners' attention on speaking, provide input and/or guide planning, conduct speaking tasks,

focus on language/discourse/skills/strategies, repeat speaking tasks, direct learners' reflection on learning, and facilitate feedback on learning.

Brown & Lee (2015) list six criteria when assessing students' speaking skills which are pronunciation, fluency, vocabulary, grammar, discourse features, and task (or task achievement). On the other hand, Goh & Burns (2012) refers to the speaking marking criteria of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). There are four criteria for speaking assessment scales, namely grammar and vocabulary, discourse management, pronunciation, and interactive communication. Furthermore, traditionally, students' speaking performance is assessed manually by the teachers or examiners. However, with the advent of technology, some artificial intelligence-implemented applications and websites have also been employed to assess students' speaking skills; some of which are *Chivox*, *Smalltalk2.me*, and *Lingt*.

2.2. Cooperative learning
2.2.1. Definition of cooperative learning

Cooperative learning consists of a number of teaching and learning activities where students work with others to understand and apply the concepts of *"a subject matter"* and achieve shared learning objectives (Macpherson, 2007). According to Johnson et al. (1984), cooperative learning goes well beyond simply being physically close to other students, discussing materials with them, or exchanging materials. According to Mustafa (2019), cooperative learning is *"one of the most effective pedagogical techniques in educational research."* Cooperative learning encourages people to collaborate and help one other out with their knowledge in order to achieve a shared goal, which would also increase *"positive interaction"* between learners. Thanks to cooperative learning, learning and student interaction are boosted, and student's understanding of the course materials has significantly increased.

2.2.2. Impacts of cooperative learning on students' speaking performance

Cooperative learning has certain positive effects on students' English-speaking performance. This can be seen in the findings of various studies.

Hong et al. (2022) did a quasi-experimental study with 60 participants to investigate and assess the impact of the cooperative learning approach on the oral competency of students training to be English tourist guides. The study's findings indicated that using a cooperative learning technique instead of a traditional one had a greater positive effect on students' speech proficiency in the researched context. In the Vietnamese context, Nguyen & Nguyen (2020) did an action study to assess cooperative learning's influence on grade-tenth students' speaking abilities and examine their attitudes toward this approach. The research reveals that using cooperative learning significantly improved students' English-speaking abilities, and the majority of students demonstrated a positive attitude toward using cooperative learning. Pham (2020) also carried out a study with the aim of improving students' speaking skills at a high school in Thai Binh province by employing Kagan's cooperative learning structures. The study finds that there was a dramatic growth in the students' speaking abilities in terms of both "linguistic and paralinguistic" aspects.

At the tertiary level, Vu et al.'s study (2018) examined the barriers to learning English speaking among Thai Nguyen University of Education first-year English majors as well as the effectiveness of group-work activities on students' English speaking performance. Interview and class observation were employed as data-collecting instruments. Observing students revealed that they preferred working with other students to working alone, and they were more *"confident"* and *"active"* in group work. Using group-work activities in and out of class improved their speaking skills. However, these findings were realized from the researchers' observation, so they seemed to be rather subjective. Additionally, Tran (2020) carried out an action research project to investigate the efficiency of cooperative learning strategies in enhancing non-English major students' speaking abilities, as well as what students thought of this strategy. The findings demonstrated that participants' speaking abilities have significantly improved both numerically and qualitatively, and the majority of them expressed concern and interest in cooperative learning-based activities.

Furthermore, cooperative learning improves students' speaking confidence. Rides (2017) conducted a quasi-experimental study to examine the effects of cooperative learning teaching strategies on the speaking confidence and attitudes of first-year students at a university in Indonesia. The results show that cooperative learning improves students' speaking confidence. However, the numbers of participants between experimental and control groups are not equal, and the paper does not mention which cooperative techniques were employed in the research.

Despite a wealth of research on the benefits of cooperative learning for students' English-speaking skills, there is still a gap in the literature discussing the use of *Think-Pair-Share, Read-Pair-Share, Write-Pair-Share*, and *Search-Pair-Share* on English-major first-year students in the Vietnamese context. Therefore, this research aims to fill these gaps in the literature.

2.2.3. Cooperative learning techniques

There are plentiful cooperative teaching activities, and some of them are presented as follows.

Numbered Heads Together

This activity helps ensure *"random individual accountability"* (Macpherson, 2007). In this activity, students usually work in groups of three or four, numbering themselves, to complete the same task. The teacher will then call a random number, and that person from each group will report their answers to the whole class.

Jigsaw

Jigsaw helps students learn *"interdependently"* from one another (Macpherson, 2007). Students work in *"expert groups"* of three or four. These groups are divided into two main groups, and they work on two different topics or materials. They will then share their part with a partner from another group.

Three-step Interview

Students work in groups of three. In three steps of the interview, each student will take turns to play the role of the interviewer, interviewee, and reporter, asking, answering and taking notes on some issues assigned by the teacher.

2.2.4. Think-Pair-Share and its variations

According to Macpherson (2007), *Think-Pair-*

Share is a cooperative learning activity that helps *"maximize discussion within a group."* In this activity, students first think about the questions/ tasks individually and then discuss and share their answers in pairs.

However, while using *Think-Pair-Share*, people started to change some phase(s) in this technique. The first phase (*Think*) can be changed into *Write*, where students formulate their thinking in writing before oral interaction, *Search* where students work individually searching for different references for the given topic before explaining it in pairs (Macpherson, 2007), or *Read*, where students read some text(s) individually and then share their answers to the provided questions in pairs. The second phase (*Pair*) can also be modified to *Square*, where students work in groups of four instead of in pairs. Finally, the third phase (*Share*) can be conducted in various ways, such as face-to-face or online sharing. This paper focused on changes in the first phase, so four techniques, namely *Think-Pair-Share, Write-Pair-Share, Read-Pair-Share*, and *Search-Pair-Share*, were employed.

3. Methodology
3.1. Research design

The design of this study was action research. According to Cohen & Manion (1994), action research is *"a small-scale intervention in the functioning of the real world and a close examination of the effects of such an intervention."* Kemmis & McTaggart (1992) notes that action research is *"concerned equally with changing individuals ... and ... the culture of the groups, institutions and societies to which they belong."* Furthermore, action research is *"a powerful tool for change and improvement at the local level"* (Cohen et al., 2000).

This research design was employed because the study was basically a change in the teaching method and techniques, which included the application of cooperative learning techniques in teaching English-speaking lessons. It aimed at investigating the effects of this intervention. Moreover, the study's intervention only took place on a small scale, with 39 English-major students. Therefore, an action research design was suitable for the study.

3.2. Research setting

The study was conducted among English-major freshmen at a university in Hanoi in the academic year 2022-2023. The Listening - Speaking 1 course was the first course related to the English language skills of the participants at the university. At the end of this course, the students were expected to be able to start and maintain conversations on topics that are familiar or of personal interest, extend arguments and keep smooth conversations. The target level of this course was B1, according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR).

This course lasted nine weeks, in which the seventh week was for the mid-term test. The main speaking tasks introduced during the course were answering questions about familiar topics, describing things/people, describing pictures, expressing opinions, and making decisions. These tasks were based on the speaking test of the Cambridge B1 Preliminary Exam. However, the focus of the study was on the tasks of answering questions of familiar topics and making decisions to serve the aims of the course, so the course syllabus was adapted to some extent.

3.3. Participants

The population of the research was 39 English-majored freshmen at University X, Hanoi. The people in this population all belonged to one class of the Faculty of English of the university, and the researcher was their instructor of the Listening - Speaking 1 course in the studied semester. Due to the difficulties related to their English speaking skills that the students encountered, the researcher chose this population to conduct the study. However, of all the population, 31 students signed the consent form agreeing to take part in the study.

The study employed stratified sampling. According to Cohen et al. (2000), a stratified sampling includes grouping participants with identical traits into homogeneous groups and sampling each group separately from the population. In this study, the population was divided into three strata based on their pre-test results, namely low level, medium level, and high level. After that, four students were randomly selected from each stratum to take part in the post-test and the interview. This type of sampling was chosen because it is suitable for the conduct of both qualitative and quantitative research (Cohen et al., 2000), and the current study collected both qualitative and quantitative data. It can also reflect the population with regard to the characteristics being studied (Arnab, 2017; Qian, 2010) and *"ensure greater representativeness of the data"* (Hayes, 2022).

3.4. Action research procedures

The study was conducted in eight weeks in the first semester of the academic year 2022-2023 in one cycle. Based on Kemmis & McTaggart's model of action research (1988), this cycle had four stages.

In the planning stage, taking place in the first week, the researcher did a general literature review and diagnosed the problems the participants faced when speaking English. The author then prepared the lesson plans for the speaking sessions. In this stage, the overview, as well as the aim and procedures of the research, were also introduced to the participants.

In the second stage of action, cooperative learning techniques were utilized in teaching the two tasks of answering questions about familiar topics and making decisions in daily situations based on the lesson plans prepared in the first phase. This stage took place from week 2 to week 9, except for week 7, which was the mid-term test.

The third stage of observing also took place during the course, in which the researcher observed students' performance in class, as well as how they responded to the applied cooperative techniques. This observation allowed her to evaluate the procedure for modification if necessary. In this stage, one major discovery was that there was little Internet connection in the classroom, so the *Search-Pair-Share* technique could not work. As a result, it was not included in the lesson plans.

The reflecting stage once occurred in week 5, in which the researcher reflected on the past five weeks to see whether any changes needed to be made in the upcoming weeks. However, the researcher saw no need for modification after

that week, so the lesson plans remained for the rest of the course.

3.5. Pedagogical intervention

The pedagogical intervention in this study involved applying *Think-Pair-Share* and its variations in teaching two types of speaking tasks which were answering questions about familiar topics and discussing and making decisions in a daily situation. The intervention, which occurred among the whole population, lasted seven weeks, as one week of the course was for the mid-term test. The employment occurred at different stages of the lessons, and the techniques were chosen based on the lessons and tasks' topics.

The procedure of each lesson had seven stages, as the model of Goh & Burns (2012). In the first place, students' awareness of the speaking tasks' topics and requirements were raised. This can be done through some warm-up games or some questions for the students to think about how they would complete the tasks. Next, input or guidance for the tasks was provided. At this stage, the first phase of the chosen cooperative learning techniques happens. Students might think of, write down, read, or search for ideas and necessary information for the tasks. The third stage then took place, where students paired with a partner and started doing the speaking tasks. No feedback on language accuracy was provided at this time. The researcher then elicited and focused on some language or strategies for doing the tasks so that the students could improve their language accuracy and task performance in the fourth stage. The fifth stage continued with students doing the tasks again using the knowledge and skills they had learnt in the previous stage. Cooperative techniques were again employed here. Students thought, wrote, read, or searched again before sharing their ideas with the same or a new partner. In the sixth stage, learners looked back on their learning in the previous stages to figure out what they had learnt, what they had done well and what they needed to improve further. Students usually did this by completing some simple forms provided by the researcher. Finally, in the last stage, feedback on students' performance was given. The researcher could comment on individual students' speeches or on their reflections in the last stage.

3.6. Data collection

In order to collect data for this research project, two tools were employed, which were tests and interviews.

In terms of tests, they were used to collect data to answer the first research question. The participants took two tests, one pre-test at the course's beginning (in week 1) and one post-test at the end of the course (in week 9). Though different in wording, the pre-test and post-test were identical in format and difficulty level. To be more specific, in accordance with the scope of the study, each test had two parts. The first part required the students to answer five questions of familiar topics, whereas the second part consisted of a daily situation and one picture with five ideas for the students to discuss with a partner and decide on the best one. It took approximately seven minutes to complete each of these tests. The students completed the tests by recording their answers and submitted to the researcher. The first part of the tests was done individually, whereas the second one was done in pairs as it required a discussion between two students.

In terms of the interview, it was used to answer the second research question. It was a semi-structured interview conducted individually in person at the end of the cycle when the participants had finished their final recordings and were recorded for data analysis. The interview questions sought the answers to the participants' opinions on the application of cooperative learning techniques in their speaking lessons. The interview questions were based on the ABC model of attitudes which was introduced by Van den Berg et al. (2006). This is referred to as the ABC model of attitudes and is one of the *"most cited models of attitude"* (Jain, 2014). According to Jain (2014), the affective component (A) refers to how someone feels, the behavioural factor (B) expresses a person's purpose, and the cognitive section (C) refers to a person's *"beliefs"* about *"an attitude object."* Accordingly, the first component, affective, had five items and focused on the participants' feelings and likes and dislikes towards the use of cooperative learning techniques in the course. The second component, behavioural, had five items and provided information about their behaviours in the speaking tasks using cooperative learning,

as well as their future intentions of using them. The last component, cognitive, had four items and dealt with not only students' perceptions about the usefulness and ease of use when taking part in cooperative learning-based speaking activities but also their perceived difficulties during the study's intervention. The interview last between 10 and 13 minutes for each student.

3.7. Data analysis

For quantitative data from the tests, the pre-test and post-test recordings were marked by the researcher using the marking scales for Cambridge B1 Preliminary speaking test. According to the scale, there are four marking criteria which are Grammar and Vocabulary, Discourse Management, Pronunciation, and Interactive Communication. The bands range from 0 to 5. Of the two parts of the tests, the first part's marking criteria consisted of Grammar and Vocabulary, Discourse Management, and Pronunciation since it was an individual speaking task. Meanwhile, apart from these three, the second part's marking criteria included Interactive Communication as the fourth marking criterion as it was a pair discussion task which required the collaboration of two students. The participants' speaking recordings were also analyzed using the application *smalltalk2.me* as a cross-checker. It is an AI-powered speaking assistant which aims at improving English learners' speaking performance in terms of grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation. The framework for marking is based on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). After marking, the scores of each marking criterion were analyzed with paired-sample t-tests by Statistical Product and Services Solutions (SPSS) to see if the differences were significant. The researcher then compared the scores of two recordings of each participant in light of each marking criterion to calculate the improvement level among them.

Moreover, thematic analysis was used to analyze the interview scripts. Thematic analysis is a method for analyzing qualitative data by searching for meaning patterns behind the words to identify the *"underlying themes or issues"*

(Riger & Sigurvinsdottir, 2015), allowing the researcher to *"see and make sense of collective or shared meanings and experiences"* (Braun & Clarke, 2021). It was utilized to discover different themes behind the interviewees' answers. Based on the ABC model of attitudes as well as the interview questions, responses were coded after being transcribed. Regarding the affective factor, there were two codes which were *positive affections* and *negative affections*. In terms of the behavioural factor, four codes were created, namely *DOs in the activities*, *work division*, *time management*, and *past and future behaviours*. Regarding the cognitive factor, there were three codes consisting of *perceived benefits*, *perceived ease of use*, and *perceived difficulties*.

4. Results

Of the three strata (high level, medium level, and low level), the sample from each stratum was four. Each of them was named after their group and their number in the group. Therefore, S1.1, S1.2, S1.3, and S1.4 belonged to the high achiever group; S2.1, S2.2, S2.3, and S2.4 belonged to the medium achiever group; and S3.1, S3.2, S3.3, and S3.4 belonged to the low achiever group.

4.1. The effect of cooperative learning techniques on the improvement of first-year students' English-speaking performance

Firstly, the differences in data gathered from the first part of the two tests were examined. The following figures compare the pre-test and post-test results of the first part among the three groups.

		Paired Differences							
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference		t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
					Lower	Upper			
Grammar and Vocabulary Par1	Pre-test – Post-test	-.58333	.66856	.19300	-1.00811	-.15855	-3.023	11	.012
Discourse Management Part 1	Pre-test – Post-test	-.66667	.49237	.14213	-.97950	-.35383	-4.690	11	.001
Pronunciation Part 1	Pre-test – Post-test	-.33333	.65134	.18803	-.74717	.08051	-1.773	11	.104

Figure 1. Paired samples t-test result of the first part between the pre-test and post-test.

As can be seen from Fig.1, the values of p

		Paired Differences								
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference		t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
					Lower	Upper			
Grammar and Vocabulary Part 2	Pre-test – Post-test	-.50000	.52223	.15076	-.83181	-.16819	-3.317	11	.007
Discourse Management Part 2	Pre-test – Po- test	-1.50000	.79772	.23028	-2.00685	-.99315	-6.514	11	.000
Pronunciation Part 2	Pre-test – Po- test	-.41667	.51493	.14865	-.74384	-.08950	-2.803	11	.017
Interactive Communication Part 2	Pre-test –Po- test	-1.41667	.66856	.19300	-1.84145	-.99189	-7.340	11	.000

Figure 2. Paired samples t-test result of the second part between the pre-test and post-test.

(sig. (2-tailed)) of Grammar and Vocabulary and Discourse Management were found to be 0.012 and 0.01, respectively; these values were less than 0.05, which indicated a remarkable difference in the statistics. Nevertheless, the pronunciation's p-value was 0.104 and higher than 0.05. This signifies an inconsequential difference between the two tests. The Mean value in Fig.1 also shows that the pre-test scores of the three criteria were generally lower than the post-test ones, with approximately 0.58 for Grammar and Vocabulary, 0.67 for Discourse Management, and 0.33 for Pronunciation.

Secondly, the same analysis was conducted with the pre-and post-test data gathered from the second part of the tests. The score outcomes are shown in Fig.2.

In Fig.2, the values of p (sig. (2-tailed)) of the four criteria were 0.07, 0.000, 0.017, and 0.000, respectively. That these numbers were smaller than 0.05 denotes a significant discrepancy between the results of the two tests. The Mean value in Fig.2 also reveals that there was an improvement in students' speaking performance when discussing daily situations (the second part of the test). This improvement was the most significant in Discourse Management and Interactive Communication, with the discrepancy between the post-test data and pre-test data being about 1.5 bands.

Overall, there was some improvement in the students' speaking performance between the pre-test and the post-test. However, the improvement in the three groups was not the same.

4.1.1. The improvement of students in Part 1 performance

In the first part of the test, the participants answered five questions about familiar topics related to themselves. Because the students did this part individually, the results were marked on three criteria only, namely grammar and vocabulary, discourse management, and pronunciation.

The improvement of discourse management in Part 1 performance in high achiever group

A close look at the table reveals that both S1.3 and S1.4 experienced a rise of one band in the mark of discourse management while those of the other criteria stayed the same. S1.2 also saw an improvement of one band in both discourse management and pronunciation. S1.1's post-test pronunciation mark, on the other hand, was one band lower than that of the pre-test.

For example, when answering the question, "Do you normally spend your free time with friends or alone?" in the pre-test, S1.2 answered, "Right now. Currently, I'm living with my friends, uhm, so uhm, normally I would spend my free time with them to talk, to go out, or uhm try to make something that more worthy of the time." Later in the post-test, with another alternative question ("Do you prefer to have a long or short break?"), he answered, "Perspectively, I do enjoy having a short break more because having a long break will make me feel uncomfortable when I start working again, and it can make me easily forget what I have been doing for a long period of time." It can be seen that in the pre-test, although his response was relevant to the question, it still contained several hesitations, and he used basic cohesive devices such as "so" and "or." However, in the post-tests answer, there was no hesitation, and he used linking devices such as "because," "when," and "and."

The improvement of grammar and vocabulary and discourse management in Part 1 performance in medium achiever group

As can be seen from the table, the most significant difference was seen in the results of S2.3; there was a one-band increase from the pre-test to the post-test of all three marking criteria. S2.1 and S2.2 also experienced a one-band improvement in

Table 1. High achiever group's Part 1 performance.

	PRE-TEST			POST-TEST		
	PART 1			PART 1		
STUDENT	Grammar and vocabulary	Discourse management	Pronunciation	Grammar and vocabulary	Discourse management	Pronunciation
S1.1	5	3	5	5	3	4
S1.2	5	4	4	5	5	5
S1.3	5	4	4	5	5	4
S1.4	5	4	5	5	5	5

Table 2. Medium achiever group's Part 1 performance.

	PRE-TEST			POST-TEST		
	PART 1			PART 1		
STUDENT	Grammar and vocabulary	Discourse management	Pronunciation	Grammar and vocabulary	Discourse management	Pronunciation
S2.1	4	4	4	4	5	4
S2.2	3	4	4	4	4	4
S2.3	4	3	4	5	4	5
S2.4	3	3	3	4	3	3

Table 3. Low achiever group's Part 1 performance.

	PRE-TEST			POST-TEST		
	PART 1			PART 1		
STUDENT	Grammar and vocabulary	Discourse management	Pronunciation	Grammar and vocabulary	Discourse management	Pronunciation
S3.1	3	3	3	4	3	4
S3.2	2	2	3	4	3	3
S3.3	3	3	2	4	4	3
S3.4	3	2	3	4	3	4

the marks of discourse management and grammar and vocabulary, respectively. S2.4 also made some progress in his grammar and vocabulary. Take S2.4's grammar, for example. The results from *Smalltalk.me* revealed that in the pre-test, S2.4 made six grammatical errors compared to one error in the post-test.

The improvement of grammar and vocabulary, discourse management, and pronunciation in Part 1 performance in low achiever group

The marks of each criterion of both S3.3 and S3.4 increased by one band. Strikingly, there was a rise of two bands in the results of the grammar and vocabulary of S3.2. S3.1's grammar and vocabulary, and pronunciation improved by one band at the end of the course. For instance, reports from *Smalltalk.me* indicated that S3.3's speed of speech in the pre-test was 113 words/minute, which was lower than that in the post-test (130 words/min).

4.1.2. The improvement of students in Part 2 performance

In the second part of the test, the participants worked in pairs, discussing and making a decision in a daily situation. This discussion part required interactions between the two students, so an interactive communication criterion was added when marking.

The improvement of discourse management and interactive communication in Part 2 performance in high achiever group

The table indicates that there was not much difference in the marks of grammar and vocabulary, and pronunciation between the two tests. However, the marks of the other two criteria increased substantially, especially discourse management. S1.1 and S1.2 both experienced a two-band rise in the results of discourse management. A three-band increase was also witnessed in the discourse management's marks of S1.4. Similarly, the bands of interactive communication of each student in group 1 rose by one.

The improvement of discourse management in Part 2 performance in medium achiever group

The most obvious change was witnessed in the marks of S2.2, S2.3, and S2.4. Both S2.2 and S2.4 had a two-band increase in the marks of discourse management and interactive communication. The marks of S2.1 and S2.3, on the contrary, grammar and vocabulary and pronunciation rose by one band.

For example, when talking about an option, although their conversation was maintained, S2.2 only explained why one option was not suitable without responding to her partner's opinions: "As we know, they don't have much money, so a taxi is not suitable because it's too expensive for them, so we only have two options left." However, in the post-test, not only did S2.2 respond to her partner's ideas, but she also expressed her ideas before asking for her partner's opinion on that option: "I think it's a good idea, but what about a chess set? He can play chess in his free time. What do you think about it?" This is one factor when measuring interactive communication in the test.

The improvement of discourse management in Part 2 performance in low achiever group

S3.3 experienced an increase of three bands, reaching band 5 in the post-test in the marks of interactive communication, compared

Table 4. High achiever group's Part 2 performance

STUDENT	PRE-TEST				POST-TEST			
	PART 2				PART 2			
	Grammar and vocabulary	Discourse management	Pronunciation	Interactive communication	Grammar and vocabulary	Discourse management	Pronunciation	Interactive communication
S1.1	4	2	5	4	5	4	5	5
S1.2	4	3	4	4	5	5	5	5
S1.3	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	5
S1.4	4	2	5	3	4	5	5	4

Table 5. Medium achiever group's Part 2 performance.

STUDENT	PRE-TEST				POST-TEST			
	PART 2				PART 2			
	Grammar and vocabulary	Discourse management	Pronunciation	Interactive communication	Grammar and vocabulary	Discourse management	Pronunciation	Interactive communication
S2.1	4	3	4	4	5	5	4	5
S2.2	4	2	3	2	4	4	4	4
S2.3	4	3	4	3	5	4	5	5
S2.4	4	3	3	3	4	5	4	5

to a one-band increase in those of the other participants. While all students' marks in discourse management rose by one band, those in pronunciation and grammar and vocabulary of S3.1 stayed unchanged. For instance, S3.3's pre-test recording contained multiple hesitations and pauses, and sometimes she could not express her ideas clearly, such as "I don't think travelling by taxi is a good idea because it's expensive and the traffic jam is very the traffic jam…"; however, she was able to speak quite fluently, and she could explain her ideas rather well in the post-test.

4.2. Participants' attitudes towards cooperative learning techniques in their speaking lessons

Based on the interview questions and the participants' answers, the data of each attitude component were coded as follows.

4.2.1. Affections

Positive affections

First of all, the participants stated that they were "happy" when taking part in the *Think-Pair-Share*, *Read-Pair-Share*, and *Write-Pair-Share* activities. To be more specific, S1.1 explained that their friends had various great ideas for them to learn. Similarly, S1.3 said that they "loved" the activities as their thinking and brainstorming skills in English were enhanced, and their vocabulary range and English learning were also better. Another reason why the interviewees were "happy" in these activities was that they could share their ideas with a partner and gain a lot from their partners, as noted by S1.4, S2.1, S2.2, and S3.4.

Secondly, most interviewees mentioned a feeling of confidence. They noted that before participating in *Think-Pair-Share*, *Read-Pair-Share* and *Write-Pair-Share* activities, they were rather shy and afraid of speaking English. However, after doing those activities, they became more "confident" as they knew they could learn and improve a lot through those activities (S1.1, S1.2, S2.2, and S3.2).

Regarding their likings about the activities, the participants said that they liked sharing parts as both they and their partners can learn a lot from each other, and they could practice their speaking skills (as mentioned by S1.4, for example). Some also said that they liked *Write-Pair-Share* and *Read-Pair-Share* activities as they gave them some time to write their ideas down (S1.2, S1.4, S2.3, and S2.4) or some beforehand ideas. Most participants preferred working with one fixed partner rather than with different partners. They assumed that working with one partner only meant that they understood each other so well that they could help each other improve their English (as noted by S1.4, S2.2, and S3.3). On the other hand, those preferring working with multiple partners argued that "each partner (had) their own thinking and their own way of expressing ideas," so not only could they learn from them (S1.3, S2.1), but they could also "know how to cope with various partners and situations" (S2.3).

Negative affections

Most negative feelings appeared when the participants shared their affection towards English-speaking prior to the intervention. The

Table 6. Low achiever group's Part 2 performance.

| STUDENT | PRE-TEST | | | | POST-TEST | | | |
| | PART 2 | | | | PART 2 | | | |
	Grammar and vocabulary	Discourse management	Pronunciation	Interactive communication	Grammar and vocabulary	Discourse management	Pronunciation	Interactive communication
S3.1	3	2	3	2	3	3	3	3
S3.2	3	3	4	3	4	4	4	4
S3.3	2	3	3	2	3	4	3	5
S3.4	3	4	3	3	3	5	4	4

students were shy and unwilling to speak English with their partners because they thought that their ability was limited and they might say the wrong things during interactions (S1.1, S1.3, and S2.1). Nevertheless, these negative feelings would disappear after the students participated in some cooperative learning activities in the class.

In terms of cooperative learning activities in general, there were four main factors triggering negative feelings among the participants. The first major aspect was related to pairing and partners. They disliked it when their partners were unsuitable (as mentioned by S1.2, S2.3, and S3.3) or unwilling to discuss (as noted by S1.3). S3.4 also added that sometimes the odd number of students in the class prevented the fairness and effectiveness of the pair work in the activities. The second factor was timing, as they did not have much time to prepare, so they could not prepare the ideas well (S3.2). The third aspect was the activities' topics. S2.2 said that he wanted to challenge themselves with more various and complex topics in those *Think-Pair-Share*, *Write-Pair-Share*, and *Read-Pair-Share* activities. The last factor was themselves, as they felt "nervous and worried" about what they were speaking, as noted by S2.1.

4.2.2. Behaviors

DOs in the activities

In *Think-Pair-Share*, *Read-Pair-Share*, and *Write-Pair-Share* activities, the participants said that they would follow the activities' steps. One different sharing came from S3.4. He said that after finishing the task, he would usually have a chat with his partner instead of focusing on what they have done well and not well in the task. His explanation was that he and his partner were easily distracted. All the interviewees said that they listened to their partner's contributions to the task since listening attentively helped them gain more knowledge from their friends, ranging from ideas to vocabulary and grammar, and they could also give and receive feedback from their partners, as noted by S2.1 and S3.3, for instance.

Work division

The interviewees admitted that they divided the work fairly in their pairs when working in *Think-Pair-Share*, *Write-Pair-Share*, and *Read-*

Pair-Share activities so that both students could have their own part and their own chance to speak, as explained by S1.1 and S2.4. Another purpose was to approach the tasks in a deeper way and to receive comments and feedback from each other, according to S2.1 and S2.3. However, in S3.4's case, he said that equal work distribution could only be achieved in pairs where there were only two people; when there were three, there would be an imbalance, and some people would have to be in charge of the task instead of the three students.

Time management

In doing the *Think-Pair-Share*, *Read-Pair-Share*, and *Write-Pair-Share* activities, the students generally completed the tasks on time. According to S1.2, the provided amount of time had some purpose on some aspect of the speaking skills, so taking longer time would then reduce that effect on the students. Others, such as S2.2 and S2.4, were completed on time because the teacher required them to do so, and they were afraid of losing marks if they could not finish the tasks in the required time. S2.1, on the other hand, considered time pressure as a motivation for him to think of more and better ideas for the tasks. Nevertheless, the tasks themselves may affect some participants' time management. To be more specific, the students could easily complete the level-suitable tasks on time, but they found that challenging when the tasks were difficult, or they had multiple ideas, as noted by S1.3, S1.4, S2.3, S3.1, and S3.3.

Past, present, and future behaviours

Most interviewees admitted that they had not used *Think-Pair-Share*, *Write-Pair-Share*, and *Read-Pair-Share* techniques to practice speaking at home. One of the main reasons for this is that they could not find a partner to practice at home, as mentioned in S1.1, S1.3, S2.1, and S2.3. S2.3 explained that he and his partner were usually busy, so they could not practice virtually, whereas S2.1 did not practice speaking with his partner online because she preferred face-to-face communication to indirect one. Another reason worth mentioning is that the students did not understand the techniques well, so they did not practice speaking using them at home (S1.4). In contrast, some students, such as S1.2, have applied the techniques to practice speaking

at home. S3.2 practiced with his in-class partner, who is also his roommate, while S2.2 practiced with his roommate, who is another university student. Meanwhile, S3.3 practiced with his in-class fixed partner via online platforms, and he saw a lot of improvements in his speaking performance in class.

The participants also said that in the future, they would continue using *Think-Pair-Share*, *Read-Pair-Share*, and *Write-Pair-Share* activities to practice speaking English as they have seen their advantages in improving their English skills (S1.4, S3.1, and S3.2). S1.2 added that she would like to use these techniques on his future students as well.

4.2.3. Cognitions

Perceived benefits

Generally, the participants perceived *Think-Pair-Share*, *Write-Pair-Share*, and *Read-Pair-Share* activities as useful in improving their speaking skills. S1.2 said that those activities gave him a better idea of what to do and how to do the speaking tasks. Thanks to the activities, the participants could improve their vocabulary, thinking abilities, idea expressions, and idea organization, as mentioned in S1.3, S2.1, S3.1, and S3.2. Speaking confidence was also enhanced, and S2.3 no longer learned the answers by heart; he knew how to brainstorm ideas and speak confidently with other people. During the sharing parts, S3.3 commented that he could widen his knowledge from his partner's opinions. Furthermore, S1.1 said that he found *Think-Pair-Share* activities the most useful, and he had not found any interest in the other two as there were not many *Write-Pair-Share* and *Read-Pair-Share* activities during the course. When asked which of their speaking skills improved the most, most participants said that it was their speaking organization. S1.2 explained that before this course, he usually prepared and talked at the same time, so it would not be as well-prepared and complete as it was after the course. Likewise, S1.4 and S2.1 said that thanks to the cooperative activities, they knew how to organize their ideas so that their partners could understand them easily.

The majority of the interviewees believed that it was the second part (discussing and making decisions in a daily situation) of the B1 Preliminary Speaking exam that improved more compared to part one (answering questions of similar topics). S1.4 said that the third part was more complicated and had more requirements than the first one, so working in cooperative learning activities provided him with "clear(er) organization" so that his partner could understand him. While such authors as Putri et al. (2020) discovered that *Think-Pair-Share* improved students' short monologue speaking proficiency, this adds to the existing literature by exploring the effects of cooperative learning on students' performance in interactive tasks. Some students, on the other hand, experience more improvements in part one than in part three. S3.2 said that he could come up with more ideas when practicing answering part one's questions with his partners.

Perceived ease of use

The interview results revealed that the participants basically considered the *Think-Pair-Share*, *Read-Pair-Share*, and *Write-Pair-Share* activities easy to understand and take part in and suitable for teaching English speaking skills. S1.2 and S1.4 explained that although the activities only *"follow(ed) a very simple order with preparing, pairing and sharing"* and required not much materials and equipment, they had *"a very huge effectiveness in improving (their) English skill"* (S3.2).

Perceived difficulties

There were three sources of difficulties mentioned by the participants. Firstly, most of the participants considered themselves as the major difficulties when taking part in *Think-Pair-Share*, *Write-Pair-Share*, and *Read-Pair-Share* activities. S3.1 and S3.3 stated that "the incompatible language proficiency (between two partners) may cause more time in sharing and understanding each other's ideas," and sometimes they hesitated when speaking. S2.3, S2.4 and S3.2 shared the same difficulty when they found it hard to brainstorm ideas and find the appropriate vocabulary to use. Secondly, some participants perceived that their challenge was their partners (S1.2, S2.1, and S3.3). S2.1 explained that at the beginning of the course, he did not know many friends in his class, so he found it hard to talk to strange partners. Nevertheless, this situation improved as the course went on,

and he had the chance to speak and make friends with more people in the class. On the contrary, S1.2 said that sometimes his partner did not collaborate with him, so they could not do the activities as well as expected. Finally, the limited range of activities was also a difficulty. S1.1 said that there were not many *Read-Pair-Share* and *Write-Pair-Share* activities in the class, so he did not understand them well.

5. Discussion
5.1. Discussion

The parts above have analyzed the quantitative and qualitative data of the study. However, some of the results require further discussion.

5.1.1. The effects of cooperative learning techniques on students of different levels

Overall, there was an increase in the students' speaking performance between the pre-test and post-test. These findings corresponded to the findings in studies of Raba (2017), Cahyani (2018) and Swaran Singh (2020), who discovered that the use of *Think-Pair-Share* in the classroom aided students in thinking through and organizing their ideas and in improving their speaking performance as well as their English speaking confidence. The results were also consistent with the results of the study by Nguyen & Nguyen (2020), which demonstrated an improvement in students' English-speaking performance through the employment of cooperative learning.

However, the extent of influence on different student groups was not the same. The quantitative data revealed that in the first part of the test, group 3 ranked the first place in terms of improvement; next came Group 2 and then Group 1. This distinction could be explained by the room for development in the English proficiency level of each group. To be more specific, this course's target level was B1, according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages; however, some students in the class had or nearly reached B1 level at the beginning of the course. Accordingly, there was not much room for improvement to reach B1 level with these students, so when the course ended, they could not witness substantial enhancement in

their English speaking skills in relation to the target level. These findings add to the existing literature about the impacts of cooperative techniques on students with different English language proficiency.

5.1.2. The effects of cooperative learning techniques on different aspects of students' speaking skills

In the second part of the test, of all the four marking criteria, it can be concluded that discourse management and interactive communication were enhanced the most among the three studied groups. Compared to the relatively simple questions of familiar topics in the test's first part, which participants could answer quite easily, the situations and the tasks in the second part of the tests seemed unfamiliar to the students. The pre-test recordings showed that most students did not know how to approach the task at the course's beginning. Some pairs misunderstood the task requirements, so the contents were irrelevant or not very relevant to the task. They did not discuss the provided prompts well. Some pairs, on the other hand, did not use the phrases to maintain and develop the conversation, and one student may have dominated the dialogue, or they might not reach a conclusion at the end; therefore, their bands of interactive communication were not high. Nevertheless, throughout the course, when the students were tested in the post-test again, they learned how to deal with part three of the Cambridge B1 Preliminary Speaking Examination. They discussed the provided options and finally made a decision as required by the task. The students also knew how to initiate, develop, and maintain the conversation, and they no longer dominated the interaction. Consequently, they achieved higher marks for discourse management and interactive communication criteria.

The other two criteria, i.e. grammar and vocabulary, and pronunciation, experienced the same pattern as those in part one, and the students' marks for these criteria were rather similar to part one. This was probably because these aspects belong to the student's English proficiency level and are not too related to the type of task they were doing.

5.1.3. Potentials of using cooperative learning techniques in English-speaking classes

The qualitative data showed that cooperative learning techniques could be utilized in English-speaking classes to improve students' speaking performance. While doing *Think-Pair-Share*, *Read-Pair-Share*, and *Write-Pair-Share* activities, the participants recognized the benefits that they could gain from their partners. Learning from peers is a good way because the students tend to understand their friends as well as the problems their classmates are struggling with better than the instructor. The students would also feel free to speak with their friends rather than with the teacher. Additionally, the techniques are perceived by the participants as easy to use and understand. While conducting the research, the author also found out that these techniques did not require much preparation from the teacher, and the students could easily follow the steps as in the techniques' names to complete the tasks.

5.1.4. Challenges of using cooperative learning techniques in English-speaking classes

Although the students generally had positive attitudes towards the use of cooperative techniques in the class, there are also some challenges that need consideration. The first thing is pairing. Different students have different preferences for their partners. Some prefer choosing random partners; some would like to choose the partner themselves. Some wish to have multiple partners during the course, while others like working with one fixed partner only. Therefore, teachers should have various ways of pairing and grouping students. Moreover, each of the nine studied weeks covered different contents and topics. The researcher based on this to decide which cooperative technique to use in each lesson. However, the result was that *Think-Pair-Share* was used most of the time, whereas there were not many lessons employing *Read-Pair-Share* and *Write-Pair-Share*. No *Search-Pair-Share* activities were applied during the whole course due to the unavailability of an Internet connection in the classroom. This could cause boredom among the students. Consequently, the types of cooperative techniques should be taken into consideration. This study builds upon earlier research by Phan & Do (2021) which mentioned *"group-generated conflict"* and limited time in the Think phase as difficulties of TPS employment in English-speaking lessons. It also contributes to the current understanding of Renandya et al. (2023) of difficulties encountered by teachers when choosing the tasks and deciding work arrangements in cooperative learning-implemented lessons.

5.2. Limitations and recommendations for future research

Due to the time and curriculum limitations, the study only focused on two types of speaking tasks which were answering questions about familiar topics and discussing and making decisions in daily situations. Therefore, this study could be extended by employing other cooperative techniques in teaching and learning other speaking tasks so that there could be a more well-rounded generalization.

The findings could have been more comprehensive if the study could employ more data collection tools. To be more specific, only recordings and interview responses from the stratified sample's students were used to analyze the data due to the time restriction and statistics' load. Thus, another study could collect data by using the questionnaire among all participants apart from the two tests and interviews. This would provide the audience with a deeper understanding of the student's attitudes toward the use of cooperative learning techniques in English-speaking classes.

What is more, only students' attitudes were explored in the research, so further researchers could also investigate teachers' attitudes towards this intervention so that the results could be more comprehensible.

6. Conclusions and recommendations

Cooperative learning is one of the teaching methods, and it has been proven to be beneficial to learners in learning different subjects, including English. Understanding the essence of cooperative learning and the urge to find ways to improve students' English-speaking performance,

the author decided to conduct this study to investigate the extent to which cooperative learning techniques could improve first-year students' English-speaking performance and their attitudes toward this intervention.

The study was an action research project. 31 English-major first-year students participated in the study. The quantitative data from the tests and the qualitative data from the interview revealed several significant findings.

First and foremost, cooperative learning techniques helped improve first-year students' English-speaking performance. Depending on the student's language proficiency levels and types of tasks, these techniques had influence to various extents. The participants, moreover, had positive attitudes towards the use of cooperative learning techniques in teaching and learning English speaking skills. Most of them expressed positive feelings about the intervention and perceived positive beliefs about the techniques' advantages and ease of use.

The results of this study suggest that cooperative learning techniques could be employed in teaching English-speaking skills to students. English learners can learn from their partner's such things as vocabulary, grammar, and especially idea organization. They can also gain more confidence in speaking English. However, not all students can understand the techniques clearly and easily do the activities, so thorough instructions prior to the tasks are necessary. Furthermore, English language learners themselves can also use cooperative learning techniques to practice speaking English. They can cooperate with their classmates or with other English learners to promote cooperation in English learning.

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