Addressing Adult ELL Reticence in Speaking English

by

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Abstract

Adult English language learners (ELLs) may be reluctant to speak English due to anxiety, limited confidence, linguistic challenges, or cultural factors. Research suggests pedagogical practices such as scaffolding and collaborative conversation activities within a supportive environment to address reticence (Basco et al., 2019; Carter & Henrichsen, 2015; Gülveren, 2023; LaSpisa, 2015; Ngamkaiwan, 2018; Ueno, 2019). This action research project investigated whether mixed-proficiency level partnerships could increase adult ELLs' willingness to communicate and comfort speaking English in a community-based adult education program in the Midwestern United States. Using a mixed-methods approach, the study involved 39 adult ELLs across two research cycles during the spring and summer of 2026. Data were collected through pre- and post-surveys, weekly participant responses, and teacher-researcher observation notes. While quantitative findings indicate that the learners' own proficiency level was the sole significant predictor of increased comfort speaking English, qualitative findings highlight the benefits of peer interaction. Moreover, familiarity between partners supported more positive interactions, though proficiency gaps of two or more levels between partners reduced comfort. Conversation support strategies, such as translanguaging and scaffolding, also helped learners navigate linguistic challenges and participate in conversations. These findings suggest that mixed-proficiency conversation activities can support adult ELLs when partnerships are thoughtfully structured, proficiency gaps are no greater than one level, and learners receive appropriate linguistic and affective support. Building familiarity, fostering a culturally-responsive, supportive classroom community, and providing meaningful, low-pressure opportunities for communication may reduce speaking reticence and strengthen learners' willingness to communicate in English.

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Introduction

Adult English Language Learners (ELLs) may be hesitant to speak in the target language (L2) due to cognitive, social, cultural, emotional, and contextual factors. In the classroom, reticence may appear as silence, limited participation, or anxiety when speaking English (Norton, 2008; Wu et al., 2025; Zhang, 2022). Reticence can significantly limit learning opportunities and language outcomes for adult ELLs (Carter & Henrichsen, 2015; Guo & Feng, 2024; Saville-Troike, 2012; Wan, 2021). Research identifies linguistic challenges such as vocabulary and pronunciation, alongside psychological factors (anxiety, shyness, and low self-confidence) as major barriers to oral communication (Basco et al., 2019; Gülveren, 2023; LaSpisa, 2015; Riadil, 2020; Ueno, 2019). Individual differences, including personality, motivation, learning strategies, and cultural norms, also influence willingness to communicate (WTC), while classroom context and learner identity can further contribute to reticence (Dörnyei, 2006; Hofstede, 2011; Lopez-Garrido, 2023; Rocha, 2024; Yue, 2025). This project examines these issues in a different context than what is prominently represented in existing research: university, EFL, and K-12 settings. Community-based English as a Second Language (ESL) classrooms are characterized by their focus on language for immediate survival needs, high learner diversity, and non-academic barriers to attendance such as caregiving, full-time employment, and lack of transportation. By understanding the cognitive, social, cultural, emotional, and contextual factors that influence language learner reticence and motivation to participate in English speaking activities, educators can better design and select appropriate materials and instruction techniques that are authentic, relevant, and responsive to their learners' needs, enhancing their willingness to communicate (Bayona, 2023; Carter & Henrichsen, 2015; Dörnyei & Scott, 1997; Ngamkaiwan, 2018; Smith et al., 2005; Tecedor, 2024).

Review of the Literature

Language acquisition is facilitated by frequent input, environmental feedback, meaningful activities, and communicative interaction (Saville-Troike, 2012). Krashen's Input Hypothesis (1986), Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD; 1978), and Long's Interaction Hypothesis (Saville-Troike, 2012) emphasize that learners develop language through comprehensible input and interaction just above their current abilities. According to Saville-Troike, negotiation of meaning is "collaborative effort during interaction that helps prevent or repair breakdown of communication" and achieve mutual understanding (2012, p. 202). During interaction, learners negotiate meaning and adjust their input and output until communication becomes comprehensible (Saville-Troike, 2012). Conversation with other ELLs provides opportunities to produce and negotiate comprehensible input and output, which are essential to language acquisition (Carter & Henrichsen, 2015; Saville-Troike, 2012; Ueno, 2019).

Vygotsky (1978) laid the foundation for modern sociocultural theory, which further emphasizes that language learning occurs through interaction and collaboration with others and with ourselves (Saville-Troike, 2012). Within a sociocultural framework, regulation describes the developmental progression of higher mental functions—such as attention, memory, and behavioral or emotional control—from external social interactions to internal individual mastery (Hadwin et al., 2018; Vygotsky, 1978). Rather than developing in isolation, this capacity unfolds across three interconnected stages, beginning with *other-regulation*, in which a learner relies on a "More Knowledgeable Other" (such as a teacher or capable peer) for direct guidance, rules, and structured scaffolding (Vygotsky, 1978). The process then transitions to *co-regulation*, where control is temporarily shared between the learner and the more experienced partner as they collaborate to solve problems, navigate emotions, and manage behavior on the path toward

autonomy (Hadwin et al., 2018). Ultimately, learners achieve *self-regulation*, wherein external tools, prompts, and social norms are fully internalized, enabling the individual to independently direct their own thoughts, actions, and feelings.

Other-regulation transitions to co-regulation in a classroom in the ZPD as "learners outperform their current competence through interaction with more expert speakers" (Ueno, 2019, p. 4; Vygotsky, 1978). More proficient learners can serve as "More Knowledgeable Other" by providing temporary support (scaffolding), modeling attainable language skills, and providing encouragement (Basco et al., 2019; Hadwin et al., 2018; LaSpisa, 2015; Vygotsky, 1978). Saville-Troike (2012) defines scaffolding as the verbal guidance and assistance that an expert or more proficient speaker provides to help a learner perform a task or produce language beyond their independent level. Bi-directional scaffolding expands the concept of co-regulation by recognizing that the roles of "expert" and "novice" can shift between learners depending on the linguistic task, such as a novice student having expert cultural knowledge relevant to the conversational topic, allowing students to build one another's capacity rather than relying on a one-way transfer of knowledge (Bayona, 2023). L2 speakers may also draw on their own experiences as language learners to make their input more comprehensible, something native speakers cannot offer (Basco et al., 2019). Authentic, meaningful communication can further support acquisition by exposing learners to idioms, nonverbal cues, cultural conventions, conversational pacing, and strategies for negotiating and repairing misunderstandings (Gülveren, 2023; LaSpisa, 2015; Saville-Troike, 2012).

Cultural Dimensions

Sociocultural theory emphasizes the role of culture in shaping a learner's identity, classroom behavior, and willingness to participate (Saville-Troike, 2012). Culture shapes what

self-regulation looks like. Research on collectivist cultures finds they are more likely to suppress disruptive emotions, while individualistic cultures encourage self-expression (Hofstede, 2011; Rocha, 2024). Hofstede's (2011) cultural dimensions inform understanding of how students navigate language classrooms. Research suggests that the cultural dimensions of power distance, uncertainty avoidance, and individualism/collectivism may be particularly relevant to personality characteristics, learning behaviors, and motivation (Rocha, 2024).

Power Distance

The Power Distance Index (PDI) refers to the extent to which individuals and institutions accept and expect unequal distributions of power (Hofstede, 2011). High-PDI cultures expect hierarchical communication, where silence or reticence signals respect and deference (Hofstede, 2011; Wan, 2021; Wu et al., 2025). They view the teacher's role as an authoritative guide and provider of corrective feedback (Yzquierdo, 2020). Conversely, low-PDI societies like the United States (U.S.) traditionally value collaboration and spontaneous feedback, and often misinterpret learner silence as apathy or lack of confidence (Hofstede, 2011; Rocha, 2024; Yzquierdo, 2020).

Uncertainty Avoidance

The Uncertainty Avoidance Index (UAI) measures how comfortable societies are with ambiguity and unstructured situations (Hofstede, 2011). High-UAI cultures rely heavily on structure, rules, and predictability, making these learners less comfortable with spontaneous, unstructured speaking activities common in U.S. classrooms (Carter & Henrichsen, 2015; Lopez-Garrido, 2023; Rocha, 2024; Smith et al., 2005).

Individualism vs. Collectivism

Individualistic cultures such as the U.S. value assertiveness, independence, and self-expression—traits associated with extroversion (Hofstede, 2011; Rocha, 2024). In contrast, collectivist societies prioritize group harmony and shared success, meaning students from these backgrounds are more likely to be agreeable, deferential, and conform to group expectations (Hofstede, 2011; Rocha, 2024). Collectivist cultures often involve strong, cohesive in-groups that provide protection and support (Hofstede, 2011).

Correlations between cultural dimensions and personality traits are generalizations and do not apply to every individual within a culture (Hofstede, 2011; Rocha, 2024). There can be significant overgeneralizations when trying to describe the cultural dimensions of an entire country, particularly with larger countries, like the U.S., Brazil, and China. Additionally, scholars note that globalization, economic shifts, and generational changes have significantly evolved cultural landscapes since Hofstede's initial survey (Tung & Verbeke, 2010). Therefore, cultural dimensions may inform classroom behavior, but individual personality, experiences, and context should always be considered.

Affective Factors

Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis identifies motivation, confidence, and anxiety as important factors influencing language acquisition (1986). Lower language proficiency may contribute to negative identity, heightening learners' fear of interacting with English speakers and limiting opportunities to acquire the target language through natural communication (Guo & Feng, 2024; Yue, 2025). Some students are more extroverted than others, which can influence their WTC; they may be from high uncertainty avoidance cultures and feel anxious during less predictable situations (Hofstede, 2011; Rocha, 2024). High levels of anxiety, fear, or

embarrassment can interfere with learners' ability to process input, whereas safe, supportive environments can lower the affective filter and facilitate acquisition (LaSpisa, 2015; Lopez-Garrido, 2023; Ueno, 2019). Pairing and grouping can reduce affective barriers when students "feel the support of each other" (Basco et al., 2019, p. 17). Tecedor (2024) found that culturally responsive instruction that incorporates local communities can enhance student motivation.

Motivation and anxiety represent opposing affective states, but are not mutually exclusive: a highly motivated student may feel reticent about speaking for a variety of reasons. Motivation is a dynamic individual difference that influences language achievement and WTC (Dörnyei, 2006; Gülveren, 2023; Yue, 2025). Self-Determination Theory (SDT) identifies autonomy, competence, and relatedness as psychological needs that support motivation and well-being (Lopez-Garrido, 2023; Neufeld, 2025). Providing learners with meaningful choices and opportunities to draw on their cultural backgrounds and personal experiences can strengthen autonomy and engagement (Casasanto, 2016; LaSpisa, 2015; Ueno, 2019; Wan, 2021). Similarly, feeling competent and capable can encourage participation (LaSpisa, 2015; Lopez-Garrido, 2023). Relatedness and belonging are also important because students who feel valued, respected, and connected to others are more likely to participate and persist in learning (Lopez-Garrido, 2023; Norton, 2008). Ueno (2019) found that learners became more comfortable, spontaneous, and motivated to communicate in English after interacting with more proficient partners.

Reticence does not necessarily indicate a lack of competence, motivation, or proficiency; rather, it may result from low confidence or anxiety about speaking (Carter & Henrichsen, 2015; Riadil, 2020; Wan, 2021). Learners may feel particular anxiety when they must publicly produce a language that challenges their identity, or positive self-concept, potentially leading to reticence

and self-consciousness (Carter & Henrichsen, 2015; Guo & Feng, 2024; Norton, 2008; Wan, 2021). Speaking anxiety is associated with greater reluctance to communicate, particularly during the early stages of L2 acquisition (Gülveren, 2023; Zhang, 2022). Krashen argues that effective instruction should "supply comprehensible input in low anxiety situations" (1986, p. 7). Positive peer interactions can reduce anxiety because "Interactions within the group lessen the fear of speaking in a foreign language" (Basco et al., 2019, p. 17). LaSpisa (2015) similarly found that small talk activities reduced speaking anxiety and increased participation among adult English learners, while Gülveren (2023) found that translanguaging, or allowing learners to draw on their full linguistic repertoires, reduced anxiety and increased motivation and participation. Translanguaging in the classroom can look like learners "using one language to reinforce the other in order to increase understanding and…activity in both languages" (Garcia & Lin, 2016, p. 3). In the ESL classroom, this could look like a Spanish-speaking student requesting clarification from a Spanish-speaking peer or a French-speaking student being prompted by a French-speaking teacher. Translanguaging honors students' identities and languages as part of the learning process as opposed to target-language-only classroom policies.

Avoidance may reflect strategic attempts to manage linguistic and emotional challenges rather than simple disengagement. Zhang explains, "Avoidance and risk-taking are indications of both affective and cognitive engagement in that they involve careful planning and monitoring of a communicative task and regulation of emotional reactions" (2022, p. 10). Learners may avoid communication when they lack the vocabulary or linguistic resources to express themselves, or they may abandon a message when they cannot complete it (Awadh & Alawi, 2016; Dörnyei, 2006; Riadil, 2020). Avoidance may also reflect culturally shaped expectations regarding teacher and student roles. As Carter and Henrichsen note, "Some behavior is more indicative of students'

perceptions of the appropriate, distinctive roles of learners and teachers, and these perceptions are often culturally driven" (2015, p. 2). A peer may therefore represent less of a perceived threat than a teacher, particularly for learners accustomed to teacher-directed classrooms (Carter & Henrichsen, 2015; LaSpisa, 2015; Wan, 2021).

Manifestations of Affect in the Classroom

Affect is manifested in classroom participation, communication behaviors, and responses to instructional practices. Reticence may be primarily situational rather than an enduring personality trait (Carter & Henrichsen, 2015). Friendly, relaxed, and supportive classroom environments can reduce speaking anxiety and encourage participation (Basco et al., 2019; Gülveren, 2023; Ngamkaiwan, 2018; Smith et al., 2005). Students who feel valued, respected, and included are more likely to have a lower affective filter and engage in learning (Carter & Henrichsen, 2015; Lopez-Garrido, 2023; Norton, 2008). Cultural expectations may also influence how students interpret participation. For example, students from collectivist cultures may be more likely to wait for others to speak rather than assert themselves (Hofstede, 2011; Rocha, 2024). Thus, reticence should be interpreted within learners' cultural, social, and educational contexts rather than assumed to reflect a lack of motivation or ability.

Learners use a range of verbal and nonverbal communication strategies to manage linguistic limitations and prevent communication breakdowns. These include paraphrasing, gestures, requests for clarification, translanguaging, drawing, referring to notes or vocabulary resources, and using cue cards, question cards, sentence frames, question stems, and verbal or physical prompts (Awadh & Alawi, 2016; Basco et al., 2019; Dörnyei & Scott, 1997; Gülveren, 2023; LaSpisa, 2015). Translanguaging can provide linguistic and psychological support by increasing confidence and WTC (Gülveren, 2023). However, some learners report that excessive

reliance on the L1 may reduce exposure to English and limit opportunities to develop speaking proficiency (Gülveren, 2023). Silence and avoidance may also function as communication strategies, especially when learners need additional time to process input, build confidence, or manage uncertainty (Zhang, 2022; Carter & Henrichsen, 2015; Wu et al., 2025).

Instructional practices can reduce affective barriers by increasing opportunities for meaningful, low-pressure interaction (LaSpisa, 2015; Neufeld, 2025; Tecedor, 2024). Recommended strategies include extended wait time, peer support, small group work, and building positive teacher-student relationships (Carter & Henrichsen, 2015; Smith et al., 2005). Collaborative activities, including two-way tasks and information-gap activities, can increase participation, communication strategy use, motivation, and opportunities for lower-proficiency students to speak (Ngamkaiwan, 2018). Games can similarly reduce pressure while providing opportunities to practice vocabulary and sentence structures (Ngamkaiwan, 2018). Instruction can also incorporate familiar topics, learner choice, and personal experiences to strengthen autonomy and engagement (Casasanto, 2016; Gülveren, 2023; LaSpisa, 2015; Neufeld, 2025). Because students who remain silent in larger groups may participate more readily in pairs, purposeful pairing with supportive or more proficient peers can provide a lower-pressure context for communication (Carter & Henrichsen, 2015; Ueno, 2019). Overall, methodological practices that promote peer support, meaningful communication, learner autonomy, and a safe environment can reduce anxiety and reticence while increasing opportunities for L2 use.

Addressing ELL Reticence in Community ESL Classes

The literature suggests that adult ELL reticence is multidimensional rather than attributable to a single cause. A learner's silence may reflect anxiety, limited proficiency, or a

strategic response to competing cultural expectations or an unfamiliar classroom environment. Therefore, reducing reticence requires more than simply encouraging students to speak.

Cognitive factors inform learners' need for comprehensible input, interaction, and opportunities to produce language. Social and cultural factors shape expectations regarding classroom participation and risk-taking. Identity and self-perception influence learners' confidence and WTC, while emotional factors such as anxiety and motivation affect engagement. Finally, contextual and experiential factors—including educational background, access to education, exposure to English, classroom structure, instructional practices, and communication strategies—can either support or constrain participation.

Effective instruction employs culturally responsive practices to provide comprehensible input and meaningful, low-anxiety opportunities for interaction. Strategic use of bi-directional scaffolding, translanguaging, peer collaboration, small group interaction, and low-pressure speaking activities may help learners build confidence, autonomy, and greater WTC.

Current research on the WTC of adult ELL students in community-based ESL classroom settings remains limited, with research largely focusing on K-12 education, university students, or EFL settings. These settings often have more homogeneous groups of students, especially in terms of proficiency levels. Community-based adult ESL classrooms are often very diverse in age, ethnicity, nationality, education level, exposure to the target language, and students' goals for learning English. ESL students often work full-time and have other adult responsibilities such as caregiving, homemaking, and providing financially for extended family. At times, a sense of relatedness can be difficult, because these factors create differences. There may be a single student in the classroom who feels "othered" (i.e., one student who speaks Vietnamese while everyone else speaks Spanish). A common aspect of adult ESL classes is students with different

proficiency levels in a single class. Ueno (2019) studied the effect of conversation exchange between an L2 learner and a native English speaker and found that these interactions made L2 learners more positive about language learning. The current project aims to explore whether a conversation partnership between an adult L2 learner and another more proficient L2 learner, rather than a native English speaker, could reduce speaking reticence. Thus, the following research questions were posited:

Q1: Does mixed-proficiency-level conversation encourage adult ELL students to speak English?

Q2: Does a more proficient ELL partner boost the less proficient speaker's comfort?

Methodology

This action research project investigated adult ELLs' WTC in a community-based ESL classroom. It examined which factors (culture, personality, familiarity) affect students' comfort and enjoyment while participating in mixed-proficiency-level conversation, as well as the learners' competence, interaction, and need for support. This project used a mixed-method approach incorporating both quantitative and qualitative methodologies. The study materials and procedures detailed in the following subsections were reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB-13705).

Action Research

Action research is a practical approach in which practitioners examine their work to address real-world problems while improving their professional practices (Banegas & Consoli, 2019). In classrooms, this allows teachers to serve as researchers while teaching. Teacher-researchers identify a problem in their classroom, consider actions that might address it, take action, evaluate the consequences, identify general findings, and apply their learning to continue the cycle with the goal of improvement. This approach allows teachers to quickly identify problems and adjust immediately. The teacher-researcher noticed that many of the adult ELL students were hesitant to speak English in the classroom, even with peers in the class, so action research was selected to investigate and address reticence.

This action research project was modeled on Basco et al.'s (2019) action research on scaffolding strategies, implemented LaSpisa's (2015) recommendation to compare different communication activities rather than two groups of participants, and incorporated two-way tasks recommended by Ngamkaiwan (2018). Ueno (2019) studied conversations between native

English speakers and L2 learners, but native English speakers are not easily accessible in ESL classrooms, so the teacher-researcher decided to investigate mixed-proficiency-level pairings.

Teacher-Researcher Positionality

Positionality statements should focus on the specific aspects of the researcher's identity that relate directly to the study and explain how those traits influence the research process (King, 2024). The teacher-researcher for this project was a white, lower-middle-class, educated American woman who is a Spanish language learner and has experienced living in another country as a foreigner, indicating that she can relate to some aspects of the students' experiences and must be careful of biases in others. The teacher-researcher is strongly oriented to social justice, which affects classroom norms, activities, and procedures. This action research project was selected to help students feel more confident and comfortable speaking English in the community and workplace, greatly in part to reduce any negative effects they experience due to their lack of proficiency. The teacher-researcher was the primary instructor for most of the students at some point, which generally indicated a close, positive relationship with them.

Research Context and Participants

The participants were thirty-nine adult ELL students enrolled in different ESL classes in a Midwestern United States community-based adult education program offered by Manhattan Area Technical College (MATC). Participants selected their preferred name or pseudonym for the project, acknowledging "participants' agency in participating" (Wang et al., 2023, p. 9). The teacher-researcher was the instructor for the Beginning ESL class, which was held at the same time as the Intermediate ESL class during the spring semester of 2026.

Participant Proficiency and Cycle

English Proficiency (EFL)	Cycle 1		ESL Class (Spring)	Cycle 2	
	Male	Female		Male	Female
Beginning ESL Literacy	N/A	N/A	Basic	N/A	6
Beginning ESL	2	11	Beginning	1	1
Intermediate ESL	1	9	Intermediate	N/A	2
Advanced ESL	2	6	Intermediate	N/A	3

Table 1 EFL, gender, ESL class, and Cycle of participants

Participants ranged in Educational Functioning Level (EFL) from Beginning ESL Literacy to Advanced ESL (Center for Applied Linguistics, 2010).

Cycle 1 occurred during the spring semester. At that time, thirteen students were enrolled in the Beginning class, and eighteen students were enrolled in the Intermediate class, for a total of thirty-one participants in Cycle 1.

Cycle 2 had thirteen participants and occurred during the summer; all ELL students were combined into one mixed-level class, so students from the Basic class joined the project. Two other students also joined ELL classes for the summer: one male in the Beginning class and one female in Intermediate. Five students participated in Cycles 1 and 2.

Participant Culture

Asian = 3	Asian/White = 8	Black (African) = 2	Hispanic = 21	Latino = 5
Highly Collectivist Low UAI: **China** Moderate UAI: **Thailand**	Collectivist Moderate UAI **Afghanistan** **Iran** **Iraq**	Collectivist Low UAI **Cameroon** **Chad**	Highly/Strongly Collectivist High UAI: **Bolivia** **Mexico** **Nicaragua** **Venezuela** Moderate UAI: **Ecuador**	Collectivist High UAI **Brazil**
Mandarin, Thai	Arabic, Dari, Farsi, Hazaragi, Pashto	French	Spanish	Portuguese
Conformity, hierarchy, predictability, restraint (Rocha, 2024)	Agreeableness,group harmony, loyalty, shared responsibility (Rocha, 2024)	Agreeableness, flexibility, openness, risk-taking (Rocha, 2024)	Group cohesion, hierarchy, predictability, risk-averse (Rocha, 2024)	Agreeableness, assertiveness, expressiveness, solidarity, warmth (Rocha, 2024)

Table 2: Ethnicity/race, nationality, language, and culture of participants

Participants self-identified as one of five different ethnicity/race categories: Asian, Asian/White, Black, Hispanic, or Latino. The teacher-researcher grouped the identity categories in this way because these cultures are similar in terms of collectivism and uncertainty avoidance. All participants are from collectivist cultures. Uncertainty Avoidance (UAI) is strong, as 72% of participants are from moderate- to highly-avoidant cultures. Only the students from Cameroon, Chad, and China are from low-avoidance cultures. The Power Distance Index (PDI) for three countries is notable: Brazil, Iran, and Thailand are moderate PDI cultures, while all of the other countries have high PDI cultures.

Materials

The project materials include data collection tools (demographics, pre-survey, weekly response, and post-survey), teacher-researcher observation notes, and session activities. All participant responses were collected using Google Forms to use the auto-translation feature and facilitate communication between the participants and the teacher-researcher.

Pre-Survey

The pre-survey includes 12 items inspired by Ngamkaiwan (2018) that collect participants' self-assessment of their English-speaking ability, their opportunities to speak English in class, how often they participate in English-speaking activities in class, and their preferred speaking activities (Appendix A). The participants' preferences were considered when selecting activities for the project.

The survey assesses participants' comfort speaking English in different groupings (with a partner, small group, whole class, or teacher) and contexts (at home, in the community, or at work) using a four-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = Not at all to 4 = Very, with a Not Applicable option for contextual questions. The survey concludes with an open-ended item asking what would help participants feel more comfortable speaking English, so their feedback could inform strategies to reduce the affective filter (Krashen, 1986; LaSpisa, 2015).

Weekly Response

The weekly response was designed to be short to encourage completion and manage the amount of data for analysis while focusing on the main research questions (Appendix B). Each week, participants responded to short reflection prompts with two Likert-scale questions about their comfort speaking English and their enjoyment of the activity, plus three open-ended items

asking them what went well, what was difficult, and soliciting any additional reflections or comments (Basco et al., 2019).

Post-Survey

The post-survey intentionally duplicates items from the pre-survey to measure changes over the course of the project, except for the final question inspired by Basco et al. (2019): 'In your opinion, did the conversation activities in class help you feel more comfortable speaking in English?' (Appendix C).

Observation Notes

The teacher-researcher observed participants during the conversation activities. Notes were collected about the following items, informed by SDT (Lopez-Garrido, 2023; Ueno, 2019):

Individual Mood

- Student statements/demeanor regarding attitude towards participation
- Student statements/demeanor regarding the activity
- Student demeanor/mood when engaging in conversation

Partner Relationship

- Partner level of familiarity
- Partner demeanor/mood when interacting
- Demeanor/attitude of students when navigating miscommunication

Need for Support

- Items for which the students request clarification
- Partner willingness to support each other
- How much are students relying on personal devices to translate

Engagement

- Level of engagement with each other
- Level of engagement with the given activity
- Level of engagement in their L1 and in English

Activities

The teacher-researcher selected conversation activities after participants completed the pre-survey. The first activity was selected before the pre-survey was completed, as it was implemented on the same day as the pre-survey. The teacher-researcher selected activities focused on partnered speaking tasks with familiar content (see Appendix D for detailed descriptions of each activity).

Cycle 1

Activity 1 - March 26: Structured Interview

Activity 2 - April 2: Small Talk Board Game

Activity 3 - April 16: Small Talk Dice Game

Activity 4 - April 23: Small Talk Conversation Cards

Cycle 2

Activity 5 - June 24: Two-way Task (Q & A Interview)

Activity 6 - June 25: Small Group Discussion

Activity 7 - July 1: Missing Information (Partner A/B)

Activity 8 - July 16: Dialogue/Role Play

Procedures

This project focused on pairing mixed-proficiency-level learners during classroom speaking activities, with 30-minute sessions repeated once weekly for four sessions during Cycle 1 and another four sessions during Cycle 2. Before the first session, the teacher-researcher allocated an additional fifteen minutes to inform students about the action research project's purpose and to distribute and collect student consent forms. At the beginning of the first session, the teacher-researcher explained the study's rationale and answered student questions about the

project. The teacher-researcher then shared the pre-survey, demonstrated how to use Google to translate the form into their L1, and provided support as needed. Not all participants were present at the first session, so when students first attended a conversation activity, the teacher-researcher provided an individual explanation, obtained consent, and gave the pre-survey.

Before each session's conversation activity, the teacher-researcher noted attendance and aimed to pair students in mixed-proficiency, mixed-language partnerships or groups so they would not rely on their L1 as the primary means of communication, mirroring the composition of different-proficiency-level conversation partners presented in Ueno (2019).

Data Collection

While students were engaged in speaking activities, the teacher-researcher walked around, offered support or clarification when needed, attended to administrative matters, observed students' interactions, and took notes. At the end of each speaking activity, the teacher-researcher sent the weekly response link to the session participants. After noticing that comments were relatively generic and limited following the first two sessions, the teacher-researcher provided a prompt for the comment field to encourage more self-reflection from the students. Students used Google's translation capabilities to show the form in their L1. They were encouraged to respond to the open-ended comment in their L1 to reduce their affective filter related to providing feedback (LaSpisa, 2015). Additionally, students were permitted to translanguage during the activities when necessary, to clarify their thinking and convey their meaning (Gülveren, 2023).

Findings

Data were analyzed with the support of Abraham Arbelaez in the Kansas State University Statistics Consulting Lab. The main model used for statistical analysis was a cumulative link mixed model (Arbelaez, 2026).

Overall Response

Ratings were high overall, as 90% of responses rated their comfort speaking English for the sessions as "Mostly" or "Very." Enjoyment of the activity was even higher (Arbelaez, 2026). These are the collective weekly responses grouped by comfort and enjoyment:

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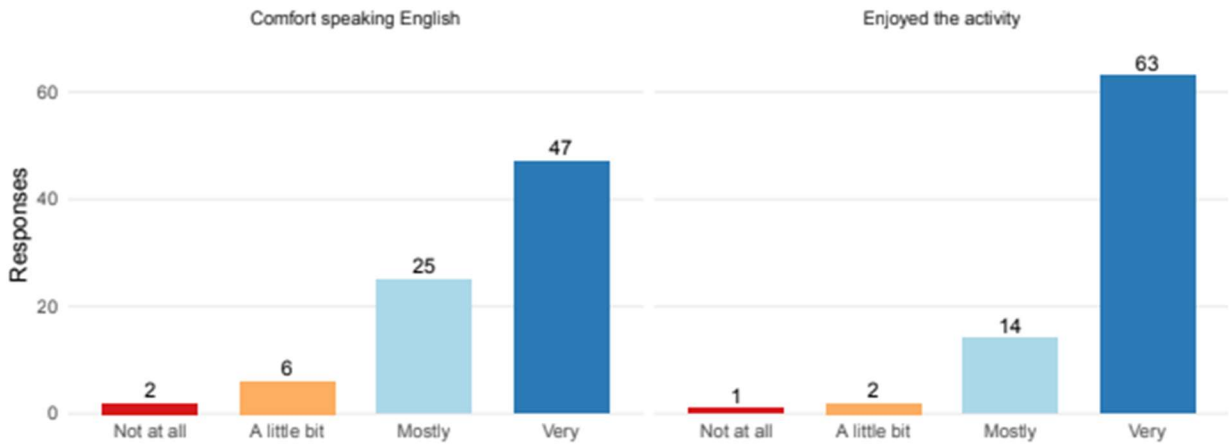

Figure 1: Distribution of the two weekly ratings across all responses (Arbelaez)

Each session showed a similar response pattern for comfort and enjoyment, except for session seven, during Activity 7 (Missing Information; see Appendix D) in Cycle 2, for which all responses of "Not at all" and "A little bit" for enjoyment were recorded. These lower ratings are likely the result of the challenging nature of the missing information task, in which students receive different versions of a scene and are not allowed to look at each other's papers.

Proficiency

A positive feeling of competence, or a learner's awareness of their proficiency, is associated with greater L2 confidence (Lopez-Garrido, 2023; Neufeld, 2025). A learner's belief that they can eventually become proficient can influence confidence and willingness to participate (Carter & Henrichsen, 2015; Gülveren, 2023; Lopez-Garrido, 2023).

Participants

The composition of participants for each Cycle differed significantly. As noted above, Basic-level students joined the project for Cycle 2. They composed half of the participants for Cycle 2.

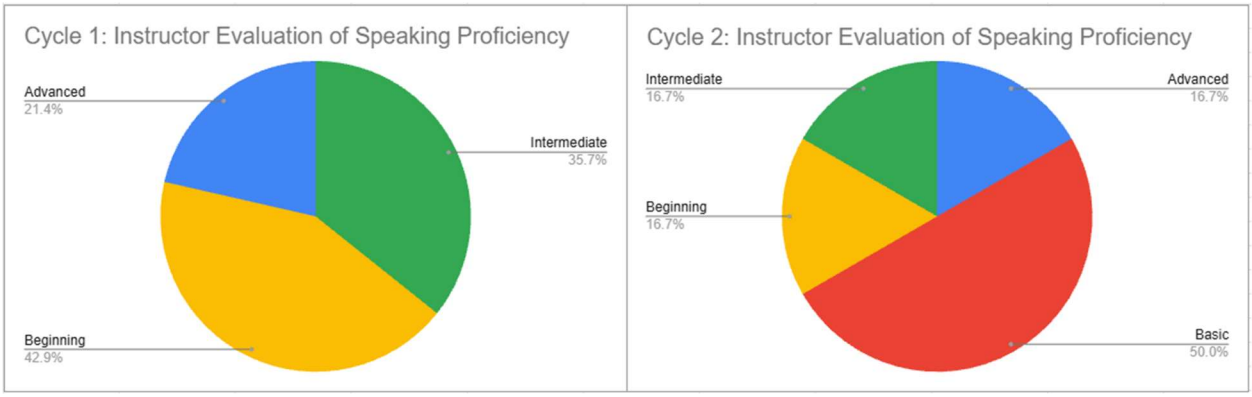

Figure 2: Proficiency of participants by Cycle

The participant composition of Cycle 1 allowed the teacher-researcher to make mixed-level pairings within one level up or down of each participant. Most pairings crossed proficiency levels. In only 10% of pairings (8 out of 80) were participants working with a partner at their same proficiency level (Arbelaez, 2026), reflecting the intent of the teacher-researcher to pair participants with another participant one level above or below. The nature of irregular attendance in community ESL classes means that participants for each session are unpredictable. The preponderance of Basic- level participants for Cycle 2 resulted in pairings with more than one level of proficiency difference between them.

A Basic-level student from Mexico enrolled in June for her first exposure to ESL classes. She participated in the conversation activity on June 25 and rated her level of comfort with speaking as “Not at all.” She commented, *“Que casi no entiendo y no se responder”* (I barely understand and I don't know how to answer). She “Mostly” enjoyed the class that day, as rated on the weekly response survey, and commented "*Que tengo muchas ganas de aprender*” (I’m really eager to learn). As the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL, 2024) proficiency guidelines outline, conversation is beyond the capabilities of novice, or Basic, learners. Still, exposure to these activities generally resulted in enjoyment and familiarized them with the kinds of conversation activities they can expect in the future (Ngamkaiwan, 2018).

Comfort and Familiarity

Familiarity with a partner was defined as low (first or second time meeting), medium (have met occasionally or in the same class for less than three months), or high (in the same class for longer than three months).

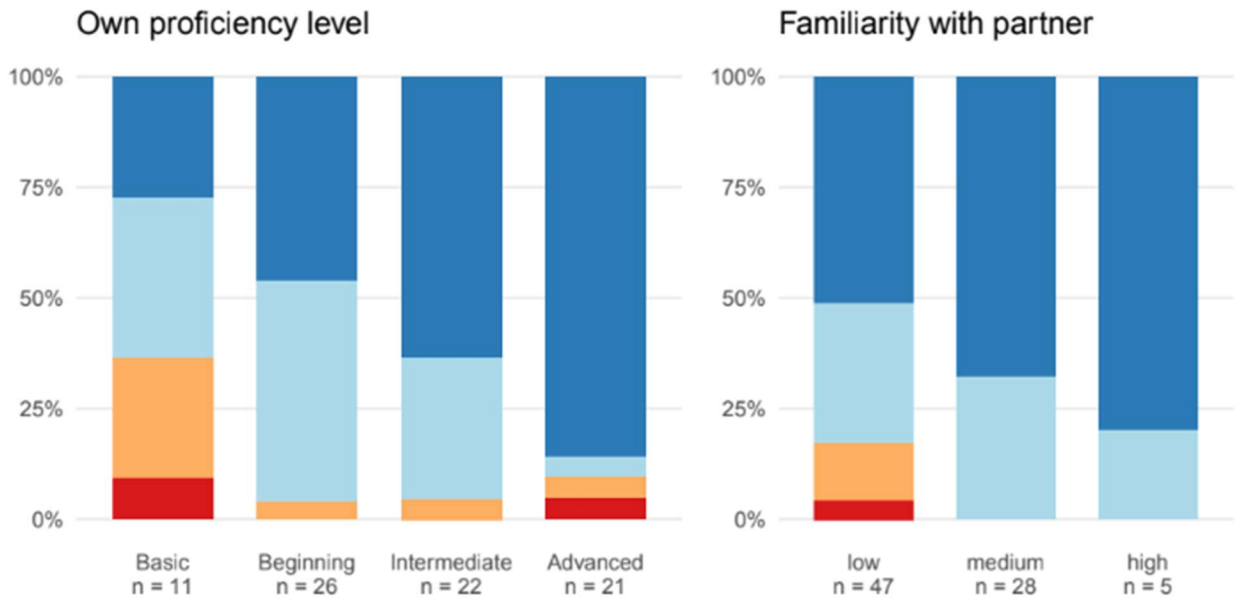

Figure 3: Share of comfort ratings by the respondent’s level (left) and familiarity with the partner (right) n = responses (Arbelaez)

Results indicate a correlation between participants' self-assessed proficiency level and their comfort with speaking in class. Participants report greater comfort in speaking when they are more familiar with their partner (Arbelaez, 2026).

Attendance and Cycle

Attendance is a significant factor in language acquisition because class provides exposure to the language and opportunities to interact with other L2 speakers. Regular attendance also increases familiarity with other students, which is hypothetically linked to greater comfort.

One Session	Two Sessions	Three Sessions	Four Sessions	Five Sessions	Six Sessions
8	19	8	3	N/A	1

Table 3: Count of participant session attendance

Overall, participants attended an average of 2.25 sessions. Attendance was lower in Cycle 2, and low comfort ratings were more common there (Arbelaez, 2026). The teacher-researcher randomized the day of the week for the Cycle 2 conversation activities, but summer sessions typically have lower attendance.

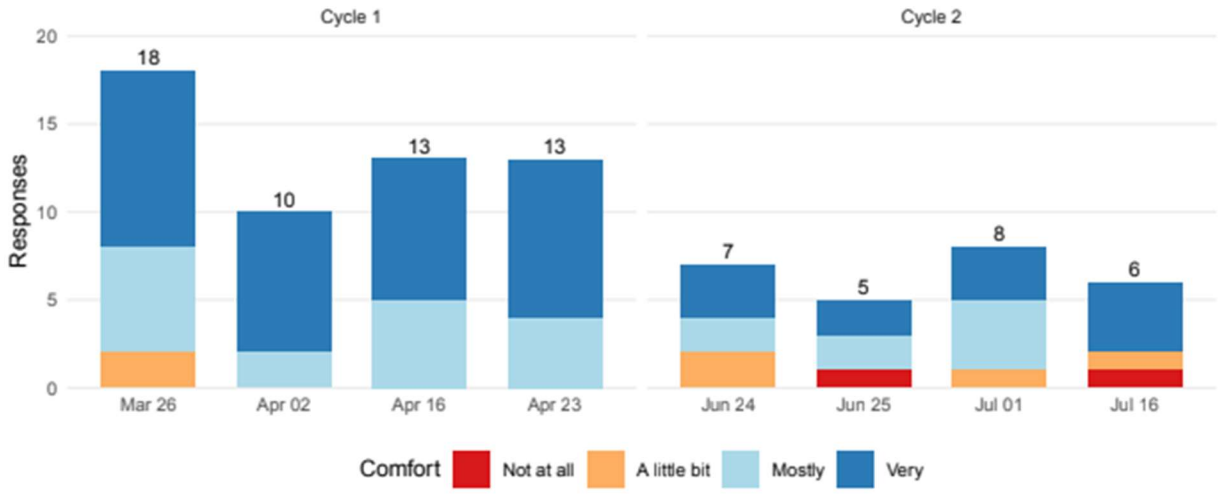

Figure 4: Comfort ratings by session

Numbers above the bars = attendance/responses that day (Arbelaez)

Statistical Findings to Research Questions

The research questions were provided to Abraham Arbalaez for consideration. They are reproduced here for convenience, with his response after conducting the statistical analysis.

Q1: Does mixed–proficiency-level conversation encourage adult ELL students to speak English?

No clear effect. Students were about as comfortable in mixed-level conversations as in same-level ones, and the difference was not significant. Most students did well: 30 of the 36 students in mixed-level conversations never rated their comfort below "Mostly." Basic-level students were the exception (Arbelaez, 2026).

Q2: Does a more proficient partner boost the less proficient speaker's comfort?

Possibly, for small gaps, but the effect is not significant. All seven students who had conversations both with and without a more proficient partner rated equal or higher comfort with the stronger partner. Pooled across students, comfort was slightly lower with a more proficient partner, because the large-gap pairings involved Basic-level students (Arbelaez, 2026).

There are a few caveats and limitations to consider when interpreting this data. The relatively small sample of 80 responses from 37 participants gives little statistical power to detect an effect. Coding proficiency as a number portrays the steps between levels as equal, and asking about comfort measures students' self-confidence, not how much English students actually spoke. Finally, the ceiling effect: 59% of responses were the top rating ("Very"), which leaves little room to show improvement (Arbelaez, 2026).

Qualitative Analysis

Using a qualitative research approach, descriptive coding was applied to the surveys' open-ended items to identify themes, and interpretive coding was applied to observation notes and to evaluate the results (Saldaña, 2021). The following themes emerged from interpretive coding of the observation notes:

Areas of Interest	Major Themes	Subthemes
Language Acquisition	Interaction	(8) Culture (6) Personality
	Linguistic Challenges	(5) Accent/Pronunciation (8) Vocabulary
	Zone of Proximal Development	(4) Not Challenging **(12) Proficiency Gap**
Affective Factors	Anxiety	(5) Avoidance (5) Reticence
	Motivation	(5) Competence (5) Enjoyment **(9) Familiarity/Relatedness**
Manifestations in the Classroom	Willingness to Communicate	(3) Attitude (3) Effort
	Communication Strategies	(5) Gestures/Writing (9) Scaffolding **(11) Translanguaging**
	Need for Support	(9) Peer Support Clarification Modeling Rate of Speech Repetition (9) Teacher Support Activity Procedure Clarification Re-direction (3) Use of Devices to Translate

Table 4: Observation note themes

(#) = number of observation notes interpreted as the subtheme

The proficiency gap between learners was the most frequent observation, with the teacher-researcher noting avoidance, nervous laughter, and less conversation between participants in wider-gap pairings. Translanguaging was also frequently noted, as students who typically avoided speaking during regular classroom instruction were often observed communicating with their partners and using their L1 with peers and teachers to support their understanding during the conversation activities.

Participants' familiarity/relatedness was notable; a session 3 observation noted Ket and Carolina "*laughing, connecting, and showing each other photos on their phones.*" Both rated their comfort and enjoyment as "Very Much," and Ket commented, "*We are enjoying the conversation.*" Bárbara similarly explained, "*Me sentí muy cómoda porque nuestro nivel de inglés es similar y ya nos conocemos*" (I felt very comfortable because our level of English is similar and we already know each other). These observations illustrate how familiarity can make speaking English feel less intimidating and more enjoyable.

Relatedness

The eighty weekly responses to the item "What went well?" were categorized as follows:

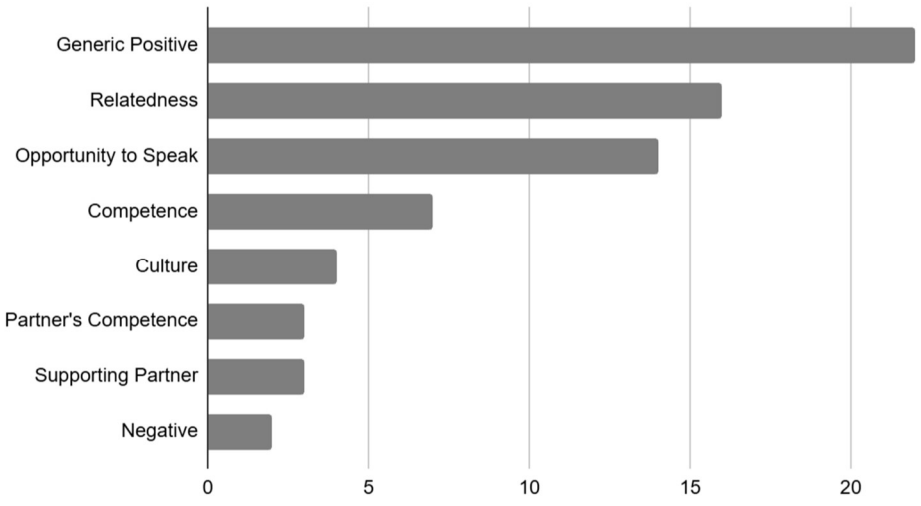

Figure 5: Weekly Response: Interpretive categorization of "What went well?"

Sixteen responses were coded specifically for relatedness. Additionally, thirty-five of the eighty responses (44%) to the weekly survey item "What went well?" referred to another participant in some way (*we, us, him, her, she, partner, classmate, friend, each other, both of us*). These comments, along with the statistical correlation between comfort level and familiarity (Figure 3) and the frequent observation of the impact of participant familiarity, highlight the significance of relatedness.

Cultural Effect on Interaction

Cultural norms manifested in the classroom in a variety of ways; differences in cultural behaviors can affect relatedness positively or negatively, as demonstrated by some of the observation notes along with comfort and enjoyment ratings.

Culture	**Norms**	**Manifestation in the Classroom**	**Selected Examples**
Asian Low-Moderate PDI Low-Moderate UAI Highly Collectivist	Avoid disagreement, maintain politeness and interpersonal harmony; hierarchy, respect, restraint, save face, academic rigor	Pause frequently, laugh nervously, use hesitant body language, decline to volunteer individual opinions or critique others; high personal expectations	Danting and Hongling occasionally gave a low rating for their individual comfort, with their partner seemingly unaware of their discomfort. Danting commented, "I won't say too much"
Asian/White High PDI Moderate UAI Collectivist	Strong respect for authority, hierarchy, need for predictability, social cohesion, teacher-centric academics	Amiability, deference, and a tendency to sit back and wait to be guided by the teacher	Iliana is trying very hard to talk with Faiza, but Faiza is kinda spacing out. Qasima is non-responsive to Tina, she just smiles and laughs.
Black (African) High PDI Low UAI Collectivist	Indirect communication, respect for authority, rely on instructors for guidance, validation, and error correction; willing to take risks and make mistakes	Laid-back, unconcerned with personal errors, did not attempt to correct or offer support for their partner's errors or hesitation when speaking	Ruphine not asking questions to partners; speaking to a teacher in French. Ella is not doing much to support her partner, Betty.

Hispanic High PDI High UAI Highly Collectivist	Kindness, nonconfrontation, strong community relationships, criticism as a reflection on character	Decline to give negative feedback to a teacher or partner; very supportive and focused on others' positive experience over their own	Vicente noted, "I like this exercise because we can help each other among classmates." Rosario responded that it went well "to share knowledge with my classmate."
Latino (Brazil) Moderate PDI High UAI Collectivist	Socialization, collaboration,and emotional expression; do not criticize publicly	Lively, energetic, talkative, frequently interrupting; avoid giving direct criticism to partner but willing to provide specific feedback on survey	Nathalia was interjecting comments with another pair of students. Karine said "Do you understand when I am speaking?" while gesturing to her partner.

Table 5: Cultural effect on classroom interaction

These findings may help explain how cultural norms influence students' classroom behaviors (Hofstede, 2011). For example, collectivist cultures foster traits such as agreeableness and passivity, while cultures characterized by high uncertainty avoidance (UAI) reflect a greater tendency toward anxiety (Rocha, 2024). Ultimately, student reticence or participation styles can be rooted in cultural expectations rather than a simple lack of motivation.

Student Challenges

The responses to the item "What was difficult?" were descriptively coded as follows:

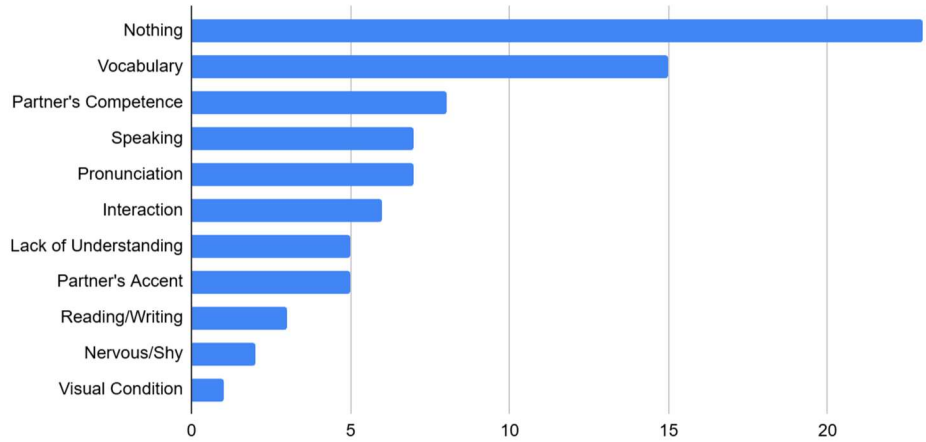

Figure 6: Weekly Response: Descriptive categorization of "What was difficult?"

The most frequently occurring response (29%) to "What was difficult?" was a variation of "Nothing." Vocabulary was the most frequently stated linguistic challenge, which reflects the regular occurrence of vocabulary as a subtheme in the observation notes (Table 4). Bi-directional scaffolding mitigated some student challenges, as less-proficient participants were observed operating as task "experts" for more proficient students who were new to the type of activity presented in the classroom, such as when Danting explained how to play the game to Karine and when Iliana helped Nathalia understand that they had different scenes for the Missing Information activity.

The categorization of participant responses was then compiled to relate to the major themes identified in the observation notes (Table 4).

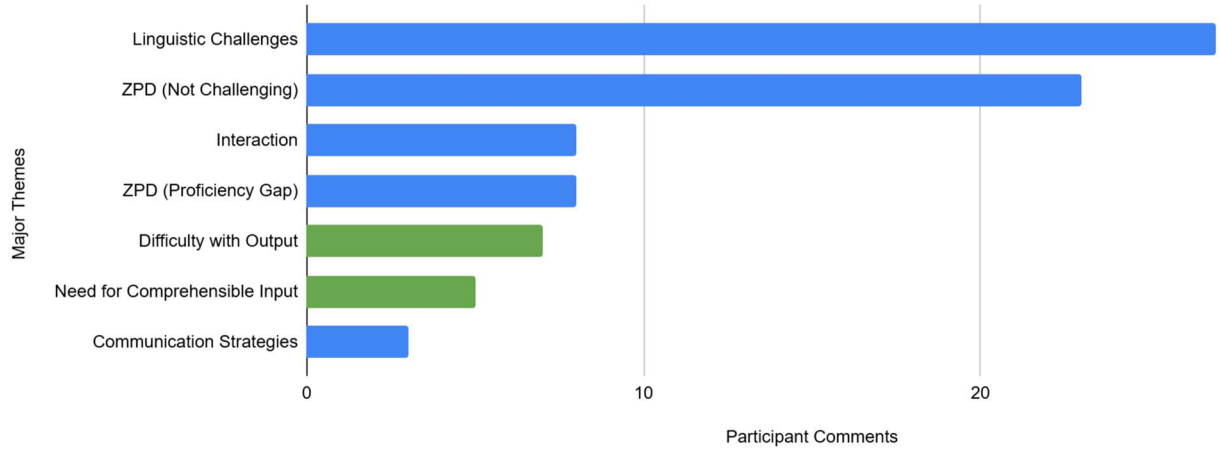

Figure 7: Challenges related to major themes

The majority of student responses about challenges relate to language acquisition, with two new categories identified as "Difficulty with Output" (Speaking) and "Need for Comprehensible Input" (Lack of Understanding).

Participant Opinion

Participants who completed the post-survey were asked, “Did the conversation activities in class help you feel more comfortable speaking in English?

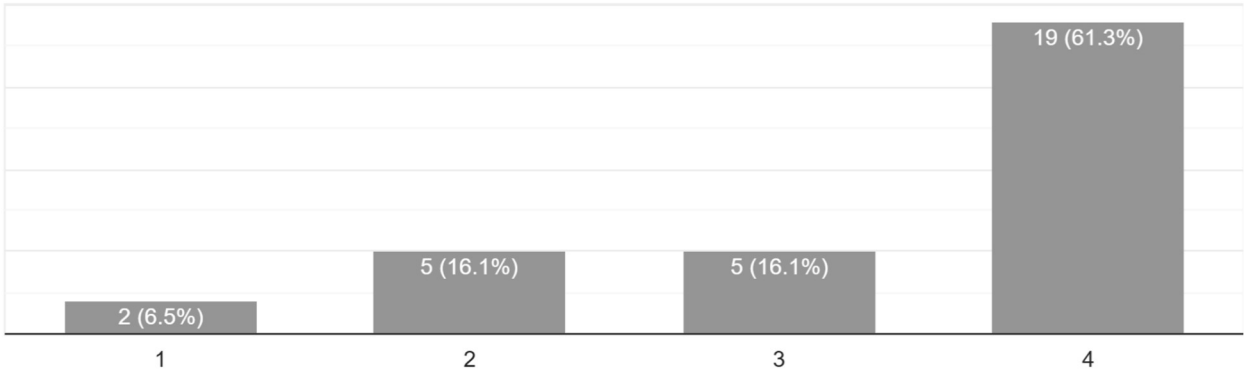

Figure 8: Post-Survey: Participant opinion regarding increased comfort
(1 = Not at all; 2 = A little; 3= Mostly; 4 = Very)

Most participants (93.5%) felt that the conversation activities made them more comfortable speaking English (rating of 2, 3, or 4). One of the two participants who responded “Not at all” was a newly enrolled Basic-level student for the summer session. The other participant who rated this item as “Not at all” also commented on the post-survey, *“My English has improved since I took this class,”* which is in direct opposition to the rating; it is possible the participant did not understand the rating of the item as 1 being the lowest. She only attended one session, so she did not have much exposure to completing surveys. Her first language is Dari, which is read right-to-left, possibly impacting how she interpreted the scale.

Discussion

Neither mixed-proficiency conversations nor interaction with a more proficient partner significantly affected students' reported comfort speaking English on the weekly surveys. Students' own proficiency was the only significant predictor of comfort, with higher-proficiency students reporting greater comfort. Pairing students with a partner approximately one proficiency level higher appeared beneficial, whereas gaps of two or more levels reduced comfort, particularly among Basic-level students. However, when considered alongside the qualitative findings, the results suggest that conversation activities offered meaningful social and affective benefits, particularly through relatedness, even when statistically significant changes in comfort were not demonstrated. Students' self-evaluations of their growth in comfort, reflected in the post-survey results (Figure 8), illustrate the importance of considering participants' perceptions alongside the statistical analysis.

One of the clearest findings was that supportive interpersonal relationships encouraged students to participate, even when they were typically reluctant to speak during regular classroom instruction. Consistent with LaSpisa's study, this project "confirmed the value of communicative pair and group activities in oral language development" (2015, p. 100). Many students who usually remained silent during whole-class instruction attempted to communicate with their partners, reflecting findings that lower-pressure contexts and supportive partners can increase willingness to communicate (WTC) and that bi-directional scaffolding can allow any student to assume the role of expert (Bayona, 2023; Carter & Henrichsen, 2015; Dörnyei & Scott, 1997; Smith et al., 2005; Ueno, 2019). Only Basic-level students in Cycle 2 avoided speaking entirely; these participants need more time to develop their productive language abilities (ACTFL, 2024; Saville-Troike, 2012).

The qualitative findings also suggest that comfort and enjoyment were important conditions for participation. Ueno (2019) found that interaction with more proficient partners could increase learners' motivation to communicate in English, and this project explored that possibility by aiming to pair students with partners approximately one proficiency level apart. Jesse explained that her supportive partner, Ket, gave her "*Confianza de hablar*" (confidence to speak), while Ket commented, "*Game is fun*." Similarly, Ruphine stated, "*J'aime beaucoup pratiquer comme ça*" (I really like practicing this way). These comments reflect research that suggests that students are more willing to communicate when they feel supported and enjoy the interaction (LaSpisa, 2015; Ngamkaiwan, 2018; Norton, 2008; Riadil, 2020; Ueno, 2019).

Familiarity between partners appeared to strengthen these benefits. Knowing one another helped mitigate potential barriers related to proficiency, personality, and cultural differences, consistent with research linking familiarity with increased comfort and confidence (Casasanto, 2016; Lopez-Garrido, 2023; Norton, 2008; Tecedor, 2024). Many participants began the project with high levels of familiarity and comfort, reflecting a distinctive feature of community-based ESL classes: students often enter established social environments in which classmates have studied together across multiple semesters. This continuity can support a positive language learner identity and sense of belonging (Norton, 2008; Yue, 2025). However, it also presents a challenge when newcomers must establish connections with continuing students. This was particularly evident during Session 8, when observation notes indicated that "*Most people seemed a little uncomfortable with each other today; they don't really know each other or have much in common with their partner.*" This contrast reinforces the importance of relatedness as a psychological need that supports motivation (Lopez-Garrido, 2023). Students' willingness to communicate appeared to depend not only on their English proficiency but also on whether they

felt socially connected to their partners, as noted in research by Dörnyei (2006) and Wu et al. (2025).

Although mixed-proficiency pairings created opportunities for learning, the findings suggest that their effectiveness depended on the size of the proficiency gap. Conversation activities appeared most productive when partners could communicate meaningfully while still providing one another with opportunities for growth. This finding aligns with Vygotsky's (1978) Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which emphasizes that learning happens through interaction with others who can provide appropriate support. When proficiency differences became too wide, however, the activities appeared less comfortable and enjoyable for both participants. These observations are consistent with research suggesting that substantial differences in peer ability can produce unequal emotional experiences: less proficient learners may feel anxious or overwhelmed, while more advanced learners may experience boredom or frustration (Guo & Feng, 2024; Topping, 2005). Although participant feedback was overwhelmingly supportive of the activities, some comments revealed difficulties associated with large proficiency gaps: "*He don't know many words*" and "*My difficult was understand my partner because [her] English is very basic.*" These comments reflect research suggesting that learners' comfort can decline when they struggle to sustain a conversation at an appropriate level of linguistic complexity (Lopez-Garrido, 2023; Wan, 2021; Wu et al., 2025).

The original plan was to pair students whose proficiency levels differed by no more than one level. However, continuing Cycle 2 during the summer resulted in some wider proficiency gaps. For less proficient students, difficulty understanding or producing language may have undermined their sense of competence, increasing their affective filter and contributing to reticence. This interpretation is consistent with Self-Determination Theory (SDT), which

identifies competence as a basic psychological need (Lopez-Garrido, 2023). At the same time, even when students were not yet able to produce much English independently, conversations provided opportunities to receive comprehensible input from more knowledgeable partners (Saville-Troike, 2012; Ueno, 2019). Thus, limited verbal output should not necessarily be interpreted as an absence of learning, although it may indicate that additional scaffolding and time are needed before learners feel comfortable participating (Basco et al., 2019).

Translanguaging emerged as a strategy that supported students' willingness to communicate. Consistent with Gülveren's (2023) findings, observations suggested that allowing students to draw on their shared languages reduced anxiety and supported participation. For learners with limited English proficiency, using a familiar language appeared to provide a bridge to understanding and participation. One Basic-level participant described how a partner helped her "*Poder entender el idioma algunas palabras*" (to be able to understand some words of the language).

The findings also reflected Gülveren's (2023) caution that excessive reliance on a shared first language can exclude learners who do not speak it. During one session, observation notes indicated, *"Zainab had a positive attitude. Still, everyone else in the session today speaks Spanish, so she was a bit less engaged with all the Spanish-speaking going on around her."* Although Spanish supported communication for some participants, its use also appeared to limit another student's opportunities to engage. Translanguaging therefore functioned most effectively when it served as a scaffold for comprehension and participation without unintentionally marginalizing students who did not share the same language.

Although the statistical analysis did not demonstrate a significant increase in motivation to speak English attributable to the intervention, qualitative observations documented instances

of students participating more than usual, expressing enjoyment, and requesting additional conversation activities. These responses were particularly evident in the post-survey comments. Jesse wrote, "*Que se REPITA LA ACTIVIDAD*" (Let the activity be repeated); May stated, "We need more activities for practice speaking"; Shazia recommended, "Keep doing this project"; and Ella suggested, "Maybe make 1h class and 30mn conversation every day." Such comments do not establish a statistically significant change in motivation, but they provide evidence that many students valued the activities and wanted further opportunities to practice speaking English.

Taken together, the findings suggest that willingness to communicate was shaped by the interaction of proficiency, perceived competence, familiarity, relatedness, and access to linguistic support. Students appeared more comfortable when they had an encouraging partner, shared interests or an existing relationship, and could communicate at a manageable level of difficulty. Conversely, unfamiliar partnerships, substantial proficiency gaps, difficulty understanding a partner, and reliance on a language not shared by everyone could undermine comfort and enjoyment. These factors indicate that mixed-proficiency conversation activities are not uniformly beneficial; their effectiveness depends on how well the pairing and instructional conditions support individual learners' needs.

The teacher-researcher's familiarity with the participants provided additional context for interpreting these findings. At the time of the study, approximately half of the students had been in the program for a year or more, and I had served as a primary instructor for most participants at some point. My observations of their behavior during the project aligned with my previous experiences with them as students, allowing me to interpret changes in participation in the context of established relationships and classroom behaviors. Students' familiarity with me could have influenced the high ratings on surveys; they might have inflated their responses to appease

me, or they could have felt more positively than they might have with a less-familiar researcher. My positionality also influenced my expectations, preparation, and interactions with participants. When developing activities, it is difficult to disconnect from biases that might emerge. Even with the best intentions, an activity built around a teacher's familiar cultural norms can unintentionally create friction, anxiety, or unequal participation for adult learners from diverse backgrounds. Being from the U.S., I identify assertiveness and opinion-sharing as confidence and engagement. I had to actively be aware of that bias, because I believe that all students are capable of success and deserve equitable access to opportunities, including the opportunity to live safe and productive lives free from persecution based on ethnicity, race, gender, religion, or citizenship status. This commitment informed my efforts to create an inclusive environment in which students could learn from and support one another.

A central argument that emerges is that students were most willing to communicate when they felt socially connected, supported, and linguistically capable of participating. This is consistent with findings that effective language learning is facilitated by immersing learners in real-life, culturally responsive L2 contexts aligned with personal goals and interests (Hofstede, 2011; Rocha, 2024; Tecedor, 2024; Zhang, 2022). Anxiety and avoidance increased when the interaction exceeded their linguistic resources or left them feeling excluded or uncomfortable, similarly to findings by Wan (2021) and Zhang (2022).

Overall, the findings suggest that conversation activities can create meaningful opportunities for adult English learners to practice communication in a supportive social context. However, participation and enjoyment depend on more than simply pairing students with more proficient speakers. Appropriate proficiency matching, familiarity, relatedness, cultural responsiveness, and flexible linguistic scaffolding appear important in creating conditions in

which learners feel comfortable taking linguistic risks. For community-based ESL classrooms, these findings underscore the value of designing conversation activities that balance opportunities for language development with students' social and emotional needs.

Limitations

This action research project was conducted over a short period during the spring and summer class sessions. This study noted several limitations regarding sample size, data collection, student dynamics, and attendance. First, the relatively small sample size limited rigorous statistical analysis. My decision not to record sessions to prevent student apprehension limited how many notes I could take during observation. Incomplete data (missing one pre-survey, seven post-surveys, and nine weekly response surveys) occurred because I was not the primary instructor for all participants and could not easily prompt them to complete the surveys, especially once the sessions ended and students were no longer enrolled. Participants often submitted brief responses to open-ended items, which may reflect the survey format and the timing of collection at the end of class. Participant dynamics impacted engagement; drawing students from two separate classes limited peer familiarity. This intensified in Cycle 2, where a larger proficiency gap than in Cycle 1 magnified differences and may have increased student anxiety.

Attendance was inconsistent because of the nature of community-based adult ELL classes. Absent participants missed front-loaded preparation. Average participant attendance was two sessions, so there was little repeated exposure. Some students would avoid attending on Thursdays in the spring because they knew a conversation activity would occur. At the start of the second session, a Beginning-level male student said, "*My tooth hurts, I might go home.*" He is very introverted and avoids speaking in regular classroom activities, reinforcing findings that

personality can influence avoidance (Dörnyei, 2006; Zhang, 2022). The teacher-researcher encouraged him to stay because it would be good practice and he would have a nice partner. He stayed and rated his comfort level and enjoyment as "Mostly," commenting, "*Megustar practicar mas*" (I would like to practice more). However, he did not attend any future sessions, which could indicate that he is still developing competence and relatedness and could use support in those areas.

I acknowledge the simultaneous advantages and disadvantages of being the teacher-researcher for this group of participants who were mostly, but not all, familiar with me.

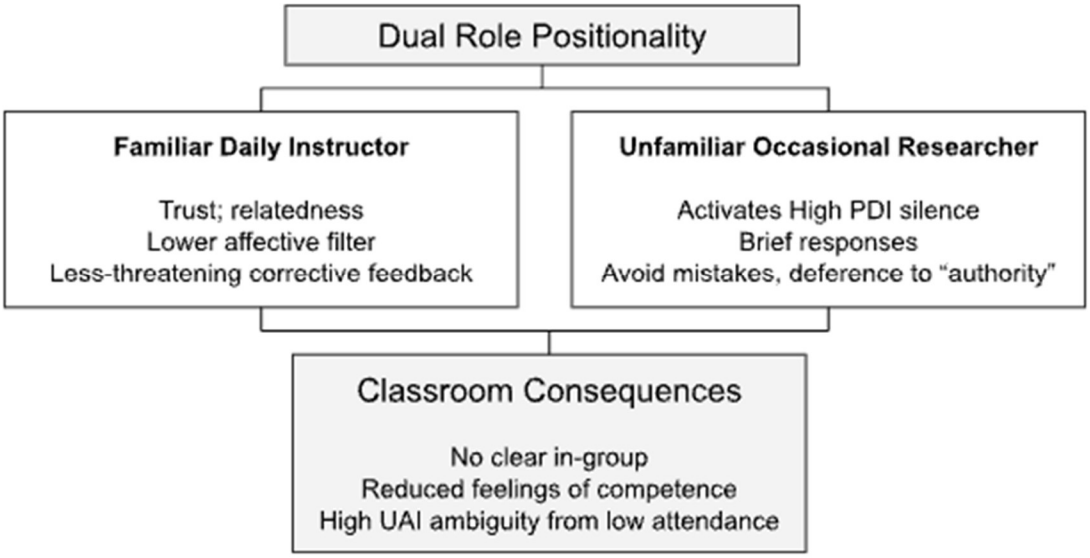

Figure 9: Dual role positionality of teacher-researcher

As a teacher-researcher for this action research project, my positionality existed in a complex, dual space: I served as the familiar, daily instructor for many students, but as an unfamiliar, outside researcher for others from separate classes. Within Sociocultural Theory, language learning and data collection are deeply mediated by the social relationships in the room (Saville-Troike, 2012). This split positioning created different classroom ecologies that directly influenced student participation, anxiety, and data interpretation.

Implications

Inconsistent attendance is a real logistical challenge for many ELL instructors, particularly for community-based ESL instructors: students who don't attend regularly miss front-loading, background knowledge, and vocabulary development activities (Basco et al., 2019). They are less familiar with the topics of conversation and less comfortable with other students. My approach is to stay positive and welcoming when they attend class so they don't avoid coming.

Cultural differences also influence classroom interactions. For example, students from moderate power distance index (PDI) cultures, including Brazil, Iran, and Thailand, were generally willing to offer constructive criticism to peers and provide feedback to me about classroom practices. In contrast, participants from higher PDI cultures did not offer similar criticism (Hofstede, 2011; Rocha, 2024).

In high-PDI cultures, communication is deeply hierarchical, teachers arbitrate feedback, and silence can signal respect and avoid losing face (Hofstede, 2011; Rocha, 2024; Yzquierdo, 2020). This dynamic became problematic during Cycle 2, where larger proficiency gaps impacted pairings. When a less-proficient learner is paired with an advanced peer, the wide gap can feel like an insurmountable hierarchy. Instead of engaging in spontaneous dialogue, the lower-proficiency student may rely on cultural patterns of deference and silence to avoid mistakes, while the advanced student becomes frustrated. This asymmetry directly explains the increased peer anxiety observed when wide proficiency gaps collided with deeply ingrained cultural communication styles.

High-UAI learners rely heavily on predictability, clear rules, and explicit structure to feel comfortable speaking. In this project, participants attended an average of only two sessions, and

irregular attendance disrupted opportunities to front-load and prepare students for conversation tasks. For a student from a high-UAI background, entering a classroom without this preparation creates an ambiguous environment. This unpredictability likely heightened their discomfort, reinforcing their tendency to stay silent or submit very brief responses on open-ended surveys at the end of class.

Collectivist societies prioritize group harmony, shared success, and the safety of a cohesive, familiar in-group over individual assertiveness (Hofstede, 2011). However, this project drew students from two entirely separate classes, so they had little initial familiarity. Without an established, trusting in-group, collectivist learners are highly unlikely to speak out, share opinions, or take spontaneous linguistic risks. Forcing unfamiliar students into active conversation activities before building social cohesion directly threatens group harmony. This social disconnect ultimately intensified participant anxiety and lowered the overall motivation to participate.

This classroom setting provides opportunities to build a strong multicultural community by emphasizing peer learning and mutual support (Carter & Henrichsen, 2015; Casasanto, 2016). I deliberately include students who may feel isolated or left out and help them build friendships with their classmates (Lopez-Garrido, 2023; Smith et al., 2005).

Students responded positively to opportunities to share their personal experiences and cultural backgrounds, reinforcing Tecedor's (2024) recommendation to incorporate local community concerns that affect students' daily lives. Integrating culturally relevant topics fosters meaningful interactions and encourages students to engage with content that matters to them (ACTFL, 2024; Rocha, 2024). Additionally, translanguaging and bi-directional scaffolding

promote culturally responsive learning by supporting language development, building competence, and increasing classroom interaction (Bayona, 2023; Gülveren, 2023).

Ideally, classrooms would be balanced, with students at the same or very similar proficiency levels. Still, in community ESL settings, instructors must manage students with different levels of schooling and exposure to the L2. This project shows how this challenge can become a strength: by building familiarity and relatedness among students, you can increase their comfort and WTC (Lopez-Garrido, 2023; Ueno, 2019). This project's class setting provided easy access to students at different proficiency levels to examine mixed-proficiency partnerships; however, not every ELL instructor has this kind of access.

Recommendations

If I were to conduct the project again, I would begin earlier in the fall or spring semester and contain my research to participants enrolled in classes within one proficiency level of each other. I would reinforce the rationale for conducting conversation activities with a mixed-level partnership more often (why we are doing this; how it helps you). I would conduct more growth mindset activities before engaging in conversation pairs so everyone understands that mistakes are acceptable and no one is expected to speak perfectly. I was pleased with the lower reliance on translation devices noted during the sessions; however, I would model communication strategies more frequently so students have a larger toolbox of strategies they are comfortable using, in addition to translanguaging. I would have students from different classes meet casually more often, perhaps for 15-30 minutes at least once a week, to build familiarity and comfort with each other. Additionally, in the pre- and post-surveys, when asking them to rate themselves, I would include an open-response item asking why they chose that rating to understand students' metacognition better. I would consider moving the open-ended comment at the end of the weekly response Google Form to a handwritten format, which may encourage students to treat it more like a journal entry and could lead to more meaningful reflection.

In summary, be transparent with students about differing proficiency levels and the need for patience and understanding; discuss growth mindset and how mistakes help our brains grow; explain how teaching something to someone else will solidify their own learning; provide regular opportunities for mixed-level students to interact; and strengthen reflection practices (Dörnyei & Scott, 1997; Saville-Troike, 2012; Smith et al., 2005).

Future Research

With more time, I would analyze the demographic data more thoroughly to investigate possible correlations between age, gender, schooling background, exposure to the target language, cultural dimensions, and personality, and how these factors affect student participation and ratings of comfort and enjoyment. Further research could explore these areas, especially with a larger sample and more consistent attendance.

Future research on students' preferred speaking activities could better assess whether students' stated preferences align with their enjoyment of the activity and shed light on which speaking activities are most effective and enjoyable.

Further studies could more explicitly examine bi-directional scaffolding, demonstrating that anyone can be a novice or an expert depending on the linguistic task at hand, increasing their competence and relatedness (Bayona, 2023).

In conclusion, a key message of this project is to create thoughtful conversation partnerships by pairing participants within one proficiency level of each other, providing appropriate scaffolding, and guiding them in using various communication strategies. In doing so, the affective filter can lower, and students' reticence to speak English can decrease.

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Appendix A - Pre-Survey

Speaking in English

Please answer honestly. Your answers will remain anonymous if you wish.

* Indicates required question

1. Name: *

2. In your opinion, what level of English-speaking ability do you have? *

Mark only one oval.

- ◯ Beginning
- ◯ Intermediate
- ◯ Advanced

3. How often do you **have opportunities** to speak English in class? *

Mark only one oval.

- ◯ Never
- ◯ Sometimes
- ◯ Usually
- ◯ Always

4. How often do you **participate** in English speaking activities in class? *

Mark only one oval.

- ◯ Never
- ◯ Sometimes
- ◯ Usually
- ◯ Always

5. Which speaking **activities** do you prefer? *Choose as many as you wish.* *

Check all that apply.

- ☐ Small talk (casual, you choose what to talk about and what to say)
- ☐ Conversation cards (pick out a card with a question)
- ☐ Interview (list of questions and answers)
- ☐ Find Someone Who...(scavenger hunt, speak to each person in class)
- ☐ Role-play (dialogue)
- ☐ Missing Information (Partner A/Partner B)
- ☐ Games (Bingo, trivia...)
- ☐ Discussion (topic, questions)
- ☐ Other: _____

Rating Scale
1 = Not at all
2 = A little bit
3 = Mostly
4 = Very

6. How comfortable are you speaking English in class with **a partner**? *



Mark only one oval.

	1	2	3	4	
Not	◯	◯	◯	◯	Very

7. How comfortable are you speaking English in class with **a small group**? *



Mark only one oval.

	1	2	3	4	
Not	◯	◯	◯	◯	Very

8. How comfortable are you speaking English in class in front of **the whole class**? *



Mark only one oval.

	1	2	3	4	
Not	◯	◯	◯	◯	Very

9. How comfortable are you speaking English **with your teacher**? *

Mark only one oval.

	1	2	3	4	
Not	◯	◯	◯	◯	Very

10. How comfortable are you speaking English **at home**? *

Mark only one oval.

- ◯ Not at all
- ◯ A little bit
- ◯ Mostly
- ◯ Very
- ◯ Not Applicable: No one else speaks English at home

11. How comfortable are you speaking English **in the community**? (with friends, doctor's office, grocery store...) *

Mark only one oval.

- ◯ Not at all
- ◯ A little bit
- ◯ Mostly
- ◯ Very
- ◯ Not Applicable: I do not need to speak English in the community

12. How comfortable are you speaking English **at work**? *

Mark only one oval.

- ◯ Not at all
- ◯ A little bit
- ◯ Mostly
- ◯ Very
- ◯ Not Applicable: I do not need to speak English at work OR I do not have a job at this time

13. In your opinion, what do you think would help you to feel **more comfortable** speaking in English? *

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Appendix B - Weekly Response

Conversation Class

Weekly Response: Please answer honestly. Your answers will remain anonymous if you wish.

* Indicates required question

1. Name: *

2. Partner(s) name(s): *

Rating Scale
1 = Not at all
2 = A little bit
3 = Mostly
4 = Very

3. How comfortable were you **speaking** English in class today? *

Mark only one oval.

	1	2	3	4	
Not	◯	◯	◯	◯	Very

4. Did you enjoy the **activity** in class today? *

Mark only one oval.

	1	2	3	4	
Not	◯	◯	◯	◯	Very much

5. What went **well**? *

6. What was **difficult**? *

7. Any other reflections or comments? *

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Appendix C - Post-Survey

Speaking in English

Please answer honestly.

* Indicates required question

1. Name: *

2. In your opinion, what level of English-speaking ability do you have? *

Mark only one oval.

- ◯ Beginning
- ◯ Intermediate
- ◯ Advanced

3. How often do you **have opportunities** to speak English in class? *

Mark only one oval.

- ◯ Never
- ◯ Sometimes
- ◯ Usually
- ◯ Always

4. How often do you **participate** in English speaking activities in class? *

Mark only one oval.

- ◯ Never
- ◯ Sometimes
- ◯ Usually
- ◯ Always

5. Which speaking **activities** do you prefer? *Choose as many as you wish.* *

Check all that apply.

- ☐ Small talk (casual, you choose what to talk about and what to say)
- ☐ Conversation cards (pick out a card with a question)
- ☐ Interview (list of questions and answers)
- ☐ Find Someone Who...(scavenger hunt, speak to each person in class)
- ☐ Role-play (dialogue)
- ☐ Missing Information (Partner A/Partner B)
- ☐ Games (Bingo, trivia...)
- ☐ Discussion (topic, questions)
- ☐ Other: _____

Rating Scale
1 = Not at all
2 = A little bit
3 = Mostly
4 = Very

6. How comfortable are you speaking English in class with **a partner**? *



Mark only one oval.

	1	2	3	4	
Not	◯	◯	◯	◯	Very

7. How comfortable are you speaking English in class with **a small group**? *



Mark only one oval.

	1	2	3	4	
Not	◯	◯	◯	◯	Very

8. How comfortable are you speaking English in class in front of **the whole class**? *



Mark only one oval.

	1	2	3	4	
Not	◯	◯	◯	◯	Very

9. How comfortable are you speaking English **with your teacher**? *

Mark only one oval.

	1	2	3	4	
Not	◯	◯	◯	◯	Very

10. How comfortable are you speaking English **at home**? *

Mark only one oval.

- ◯ Not at all
- ◯ A little bit
- ◯ Mostly
- ◯ Very
- ◯ Not Applicable: No one else speaks English at home

11. How comfortable are you speaking English **in the community**? (with friends, doctor's office, grocery store...)

Mark only one oval.

- ◯ Not at all
- ◯ A little bit
- ◯ Mostly
- ◯ Very
- ◯ Not Applicable: I do not need to speak English in the community

12. How comfortable are you speaking English **at work**? *

Mark only one oval.

- ◯ Not at all
- ◯ A little bit
- ◯ Mostly
- ◯ Very
- ◯ Not Applicable: I do not need to speak English at work OR I do not have a job at this time

13. In your opinion, did the **conversation activities** in class help you feel **more comfortable** speaking in English? *

Mark only one oval.

	1	2	3	4	
Not	◯	◯	◯	◯	Very

14. Comments?

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Appendix D - Activities

Activity 1: Structured Interview

Participants completed a "Getting Acquainted" interview with basic personal information. Prior to the activity, more proficient students unscrambled words to construct questions and prepared their answers independently, while less proficient students rehearsed the provided questions, prepared their answers with instructor support, then practiced saying their answers. The purpose of this activity was to engage in social interaction with familiar information front-loaded to reduce cognitive load and to share personal experiences to build relatedness with an unfamiliar partner (Ngamkaiwan, 2018; Ueno, 2019).

Activity 2: Small Talk Board Game

Participants engaged with a "Getting to Know You" board game with a partner, querying facts about themselves, goals, interests, and preferences. The purpose of this activity was to participate in a theoretically less stressful activity in the format of a game, to reduce cognitive load with recycled content, and to provide some autonomy with how much or how little participants chose to respond to certain questions (LaSpisa, 2015; Ngamkaiwan, 2018). The activity included readily available information on topics of interest to the participant (Carter & Henrichsen, 2015). Scaffolding was provided by allowing students to review their class notes and vocabulary flashcards (Basco et al., 2019).

Activity 3: Small Talk Dice Game

Participants conducted a Dice Game with a partner. They asked and replied to "What's your favorite…" questions. Participants could choose to share why they replied with their answer, sharing more information or not as desired. The purpose of this activity was to reduce

cognitive load with a repeated question pattern (Carter & Henrichsen, 2015; Ngamkaiwan, 2018). Scaffolding was provided with sentence frames "My favorite _____ is _____" and "I like it because _____." The activity included readily available information on topics of interest to the participant, stating a preference, and giving reasons to develop sentence complexity (Basco et al., 2019).

Activity 4: Small Talk Conversation Cards

Participants used conversation cards with a small group of three or four students. Question cards on a variety of small talk topics were provided to select randomly from a cup, with the option to "pass" on the question if participants were not interested or preferred not to answer (LaSpisa, 2015). The purpose of this activity was to reduce cognitive load with recycled content and to provide some autonomy with how much or how little participants chose to share in response or whether or not to respond at all (Ueno, 2019). Students were encouraged to use gestures or drawings if needed (Dörnyei & Scott, 1997).

Activity 5: Two-way Task: Q & A Interview

Participants completed a "Getting to Know You" interview with a partner. The purpose of this activity was to respond to more open-ended, higher-order thinking questions and to share personal experiences to build relatedness with an unfamiliar partner (Basco et al., 2019; Ueno, 2019). Scaffolding was in the form of recycled information and flexible responses–students could respond briefly with one or two words, or in more detail as they chose (Basco et al., 2019; Ngamkaiwan, 2018). This activity was also intentionally similar to Activity 1, in order to compare and contrast the results from the first session of Cycle 1 with the first session of Cycle 2.

Activity 6: Small Group Discussion

Participants engaged in a small group discussion based on a picture "At the Beach" (Basco et al., 2019; Ngamkaiwan, 2018). Their task was to think about a time they went to the beach, then talk about what they saw and what they did there. The purpose of this activity was to explore the interplay of group conversation, develop organization of thoughts, and cohesion in responding (Ueno, 2019). Scaffolding was provided with vocabulary pictures and response stems "I went to _____" and "I saw _____, _____, and _____." Question prompts were also provided: "Where was the beach?" "When did you go?" "What did you see?" "What did you do?"

Activity 7: Missing Information: Partner A/B

Participants completed an information gap activity with a partner. Each partner had a paper with a different version of the same scene at a picnic. They were only allowed to look at their own paper and needed to ask each other questions and listen to their partner's responses in order to complete their picnic scene (Ngamkaiwan, 2018). At the bottom of the paper, a small picture of each item and its name provided vocabulary support (Basco et al., 2019). The purpose of this activity was to promote active listening and use of clear, precise speaking with accurate vocabulary to complete the task (Ueno, 2019). Participants needed to ask clarifying questions to complete the scene.

Activity 8: Dialogue/Role Play

Participants engaged in an "Ice Cream Shop" Dialogue/Role Play (Ngamkaiwan, 2018). First, the teacher-researcher worked with the more novice participants to develop their vocabulary and rehearse the dialogue. A colleague worked with the more proficient participants to complete more challenging vocabulary preparation. Then, the teacher-researcher and

colleague modeled the roles of an ice cream shop customer and employee with actual ice cream and toppings from the vocabulary. Then, participants engaged in guided practice as ice cream shop customers and ordered their preferred combination of ice cream and toppings. Finally, participants engaged in the dialogue with a partner while they ate their ice cream and then completed a fill-in-the-blank version of the dialogue with their chosen preferences, which could be beyond the scope of the vocabulary for the activity if they so chose. The purpose of this activity was to mimic a real-life situation, build confidence by pretending to be a character, and develop longer conversations through a provided dialogue structure (Basco et al., 2019; Ngamkaiwan, 2018).