Exploring Collaborative Fluency in CEFR-Aligned ESL Group Oral Discussions

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how ESL learners engage in group oral discussions, with particular attention to their ability to pick up, build on, and extend their peers' ideas during collaborative speaking tasks. Drawing on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), especially descriptors at the B2–C1 levels, communicative competence is conceptualised not merely as individual fluency but as the ability to sustain interaction through elaboration, responsiveness, and discourse management. The study was conducted in a Malaysian tertiary institution and involved thirty ESL learners across five groups participating in assessed group oral discussions. The interactions were audio-visually recorded, transcribed, and analysed thematically to explore how learners responded to peer input and co-constructed meaning through talk. Findings indicate that higher-proficiency learners (upper B2–C1) demonstrated a greater capacity to develop the discussion based on their peers' contributions. These learners employed interactional strategies such as clarification, elaboration, reformulation, and topical linkage, which align closely with CEFR indicators of sustained interaction. In contrast, B1-level learners tended to initiate topics or provide shorter, self-contained responses and often relied on peer support to maintain the flow of interaction. The study highlights the pedagogical value of incorporating CEFR-aligned interactional objectives into group oral assessments and underscores the importance of training learners to extend turns and respond meaningfully to others as part of real-world communicative competence.

Keywords: Interactional competence, CEFR, collaborative fluency, group oral discussion, ESL learners, discourse extension

INTRODUCTION

Oral communication skills are among the central outcomes of English language education in higher learning institutions, particularly in contexts where English language functions as a second language. Beyond grammatical accuracy and lexical range, effective communication increasingly requires learners to engage collaboratively, respond to others, and co-construct meaning in interaction. These language abilities are especially salient in group oral discussions, which mirror authentic communicative practices in academic and professional settings. In Malaysia, developing strong interactional competence is crucial for undergraduates to succeed in a growing economy which demand proficient communication skills (Krishnasamy, 2016). This necessity is further underscored by the challenges educators face in fostering English proficiency, often due to limited exposure outside the classroom and a reliance on local languages, particularly in regions like the East Coast of Malaysia (Ngah et al., n.d.).

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) conceptualises interaction as a central dimension of communicative competence. At proficiency levels B2 to C1, learners are expected not only to demonstrate fluency in spoken productions, but also to sustain interaction, build upon interlocutors' contributions, and manage discourse in a flexible and responsive manner (Soproni, 2020). Nevertheless, in many English as a Second Language (ESL) contexts, oral assessment practices continue to emphasise individual performance rather than collaborative interaction, thereby potentially under-representing learners' interactional competencies.

Within Malaysian tertiary education, group oral discussions are widely employed as tools for summative and formative assessment. Although such tasks afford opportunities for collaborative discourse, learners often differ markedly in their capacity to extend and deepen discussion by actively engaging with their peers' ideas. This

study aims to investigate collaborative fluency in CEFR-aligned group oral discussions by analysing how ESL learners respond to, elaborate upon, and co-construct their peers' ideas during assessed interactive speaking tasks.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Interactional Competence and Collaborative Fluency

Interactional competence is commonly defined as the capacity to participate effectively in social interaction through the co-construction of meaning with others (Young, 2011). It comprises skills such as turn-taking management, topic initiation and development, responsiveness to interlocutors, and the ability to align one's contributions with those of other participants in the interaction (He & Young, 1998; May et al., 2019). Within this conceptual framework, collaborative fluency can be understood as the smooth, sustained progression of discourse that emerges from reciprocal engagement among interlocutors, rather than from uninterrupted monologic speech by a single speaker.

Empirical research in second language interaction has demonstrated that learners develop interactional competence through collaborative talk, in which language use functions simultaneously as a cognitive and social process (Swain, 2000). Learners who actively attend and respond to peers' ideas tend to exhibit higher levels of engagement and greater communicative effectiveness. This collaborative orientation is particularly salient for enhancing English language proficiency among students from rural regions in Malaysia, for whom the development of interactional competence is crucial to achieving internationally comprehensible communication (Kashinathan & Aziz, 2021).

Moreover, interactive and collaboration-oriented pedagogical strategies are supported by empirical findings that document their beneficial effects on learners' academic development and oral proficiency, especially when implemented in conversational tasks characterized by clearly defined participant roles and systematically structured communicative sequences (Kaharuddin et al., 2025). Nonetheless, the assessment of interactional competence entails distinct methodological challenges. It necessitates a shift away from conventional evaluative criteria focused primarily on grammatical accuracy and temporal fluency measures, toward frameworks that capture how learners dynamically adjust, negotiate, and reformulate their output in the unfolding course of interaction (Crosthwaite & Raquel, 2019; Narke, 2021).

CEFR and Sustained Interaction

The CEFR Companion Volume (Council of Europe, 2020) provides elaborated descriptors for spoken interaction, at B2 level, learners are expected to "build on others' ideas and help develop the discussion," whereas at the C1 level, they are expected to "contribute spontaneously and flexibly, linking contributions skilfully to those of other speakers." These descriptors emphasise discourse extension and interactional responsiveness as central indicators of speakers' communicative proficiency.

CEFR-aligned research has underscored the necessity of assessment tasks that capture these interactional dimensions, rather than concentrating exclusively on linguistic accuracy or on fluency treated as an individual, decontextualised construct (Galaczi& Taylor, 2018). Nonetheless, there remains a substantial gap in the extent to which such interactional abilities particularly the more fine-grained aspects of collaborative fluency are systematically incorporated into, and operationalised within, standardized English proficiency tests (May et al., 2019).

This gap is especially evident in the assessment of how test-takers engage in practices such as collaborative completions and other-repetitions, which are essential for demonstrating interactional competence which goes beyond isolated individual turns (Peltonen, 2018; Ngah et al., 2022). Consequently, there is a clear need for assessment frameworks which are capable of capturing the dynamic, co-constructed nature of interactional ability, moving beyond the evaluation of discrete linguistic components alone (Batenburg et al., 2016).

Group Oral Discussion in ESL Contexts

Group oral discussions offer a rich environment for collaborative meaning-making. Studies have shown that such tasks may encourage negotiation of meaning, peer scaffolding, and shared responsibility for interaction (Sato & Ballinger; Gan, 2010). However, learners at lower proficiency levels often struggle to move beyond topic initiation or brief responses, limiting the depth of interaction (Dobao& Blum, 2013). This indicates a need for assessment frameworks to consider how participants contribute to the co-construction of interaction, including elements like fast-paced turn-taking and mutual topic development (Peltonen, 2018). This is especially significant in light of research indicating that the unpredictable dynamics of group interactions, including paralinguistic features and willingness to contribute, significantly influence the overall communicative outcome (Gan, 2008).

Understanding how learners of different proficiency levels contribute to collaborative fluency can inform both pedagogical practice and assessment design. Specifically, researchers should investigate how various interactional strategies, such as responsive elaborations and facilitative questioning, are deployed by learners across different CEFR levels in group oral discussions (Fan & Yan, 2020). This nuanced understanding can lead to the development of more effective rubrics that accurately capture the complexities of interactional competence in diverse ESL contexts (Gao et al., 2024).

While existing studies demonstrate the relevance of interactional competence for ESL speaking assessment, current research remains limited in two key areas. First, CEFR-aligned studies tend to prioritise individual fluency or accuracy rather than the collaborative nature of spoken interaction (Galaczi & Taylor, 2018; Peltonen, 2018). Second, few empirical investigations have examined how CEFR proficiency bands (B1–C1) manifest in group oral discussions within Malaysian tertiary education, despite the widespread use of such tasks in assessment. These gaps restrict the operationalisation of CEFR interactional descriptors in real classroom practice. Addressing this gap, the present study investigates how ESL learners across CEFR levels co-construct meaning, extend peers' ideas, and sustain interactional flow during group discussions in an assessed academic setting.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design, using discourse-oriented thematic analysis to examine collaborative fluency in group oral discussions conducted as part of a summative assessment. This approach facilitated an in-depth exploration of interactional patterns and linguistic features evident in the communicative exchanges (Peltonen, 2018). The methodology focused on analyzing how participants co-constructed meaning and extended turns within the group discussion context, moving beyond individual contributions to assess shared interactional performance (Gan, 2008). The study specifically focused on assessing group discussions, a common method for evaluating speaking ability among English as a Foreign Language or English as a Second Language test-takers, often involving three or four examinees (Yalçın-Çolakoğlu & Selcuk, 2019).

Participants

Thirty ESL undergraduates (aged 21–24) from a Malaysian public university participated in the study. The participants were divided into five groups and represented a range of proficiency levels from B1 to C1, as determined by institutional placement and course performance. The selection of participants aimed to capture a diverse range of interactional strategies and collaborative behaviors across different proficiency bands within the Malaysian educational context (Ngah, Radzuan& Fauzi, n.d.). Notably, all participants were ESL speakers from similar cultural backgrounds, ensuring a degree of homogeneity in cultural communication norms that could influence interactional dynamics (Gao et al., 2025). This homogeneity allowed for a focused examination of linguistic and interactional differences rather than culturally divergent communicative styles.

Task and Data Collection

The participants engaged in CEFR-aligned group oral discussion tasks as part of a compulsory English course assessment. Each discussion lasted approximately 15–20 minutes and was conducted in an assessment setting. All interactions were audio-visually recorded with informed consent. The researchers were present to record

dialogues but did not participate in the interactions, ensuring naturalistic conversation among participants (Peltonen, 2018). Prior to the interviews, all participants provided consent through a printed consent form, ensuring their anonymity and confirming that their involvement would not impact their academic standing (Zahari et al., 2023).

Data Analysis

The recordings were transcribed verbatim and analysed based on thematic analysis focusing on the frequency and nature of collaborative completions which include how learners responded to peer contributions, strategies adopted to extend or develop the discussion, evidence of collaborative fluency and peer support in maintaining the dynamic of group oral discussion. The use of other-repetitions, and any strategic use of discourse markers to facilitate turn-taking and topic development were also noted in the discourse. This analytical framework allowed for a detailed examination of how participants co-constructed meaning and managed conversational flow within the group discussion context, moving beyond isolated linguistic features to assess interactional competence.

Further analysis explored how these interactional elements contributed to overall communicative effectiveness and the negotiation of shared understanding within the group setting. Additionally, the analysis also considered the impact of varied language proficiencies on these interactional patterns, noting how learners with different CEFR levels adapted their collaborative strategies (Lin et al., 2023). This approach provided a comprehensive view of how collaborative fluency manifests in diverse learner groups, offering insights into effective teaching and assessment practices in ESL contexts (Lam, 2018). More specifically, the data were coded for the type, extent, and location of collaborative completions, as well as the interplay between interactional and individual fluency (Peltonen, 2018). This allowed for a nuanced understanding of how group dynamics and individual linguistic capabilities collectively shape the overall communicative outcome. The analytical procedures for the data used in this research are further described in the following Figure 3.1.
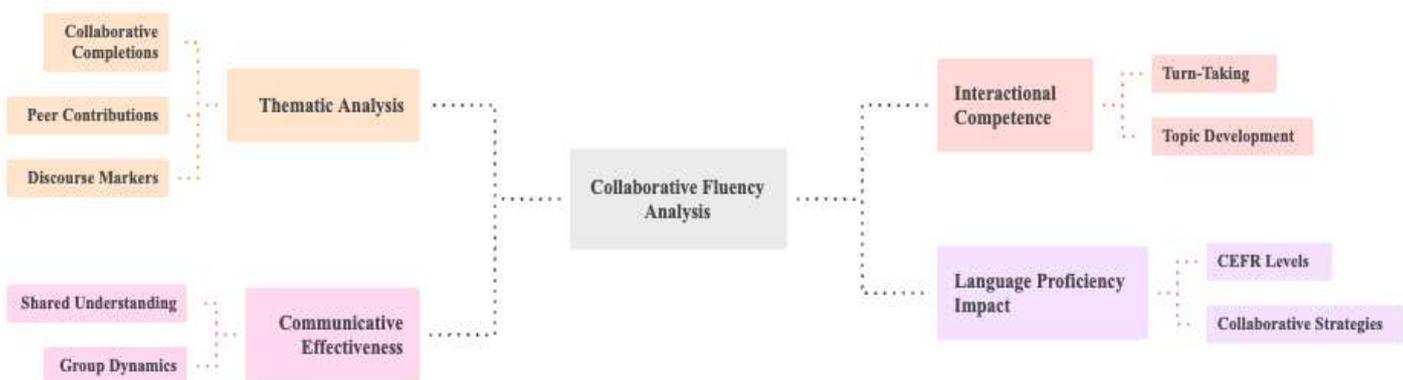

Figure 3.1 Analysis of Collaborative Fluency in Group Discussions

The recordings were transcribed verbatim and analysed using **thematic coding** informed by Peltonen's (2018) interactional fluency framework and CEFR (Council of Europe, 2020) descriptors for spoken interaction. The analytical process comprised three stages:

1. **Initial Coding:** Two researchers independently coded instances of collaborative completions, responsive elaborations, reformulations, and topic linkage to generate preliminary categories.

2. **Axial Coding:** Codes were synthesised to identify recurring interactional patterns (e.g., scaffolding, contribution chaining, topic re-initiation) and their distribution across CEFR levels.

3. **Validation:** Inter-coder comparison reached an agreement rate of **87%**, and discrepancies were resolved through negotiated consensus to enhance interpretive reliability.

This process ensured **methodological transparency and analytical rigour**, enabling systematic comparison of interactional patterns across proficiency bands in alignment with CEFR descriptors.

FINDINGS

The findings expose sharp, proficiency-driven differences in how learners co-constructed their discourse. These differences go beyond language alone: they are fundamentally interactional, spotlighting the collaborative core of CEFR-defined fluency. Three powerful patterns stand out which are

- collaborative fluency among higher-proficiency learners;
- interactional patterns of B1-level learners; and
- peer support and co-construction of meaning.

Collaborative Fluency among Higher-Proficiency Learners

Learners at the upper B2–C1 levels demonstrated a strong ability to sustain interaction collaboratively. These group of learners displayed forms of "interactional leadership" by producing extended turns, initiating clarification sequences, and explicitly linking their own contributions to preceding utterances. These practices correspond to the C1 CEFR descriptors of "flexible contribution" and the B2 descriptors of "helping to develop the discussion" (CEFR, 2020). They exhibited high levels of mutual engagement and equality in participation, when they linked their contributions explicitly to earlier turns. These strategies resulted in coherent and progressively developed discussions (Haan et al., 2021)

Interactional Patterns of B1-Level Learners

In contrast, B1-level learners exhibited episodic patterns of fluency, characterised by frequent topic re-initiation and brief monologic turns. This performance profile suggests only partial attainment of CEFR B1 descriptors, such as the ability to "respond to direct questions," and reveals limited capacity for sustained discourse development and extension. B1-level learners tended to: i) initiate new topics rather than building on existing ones; ii) produce shorter, self-contained responses and iii) depend on peers' prompts to continue interaction in the group. This pattern suggests a potential area for targeted instructional intervention to develop more sustained and collaborative interaction strategies within this proficiency band (Jia &Stapa, 2024). This highlights the necessity for pedagogical approaches that explicitly teach cohesive discourse strategies and encourage the iterative development of ideas among lower-proficiency learners, moving beyond simple question-and-answer formats (Chen et al., 2022).

Peer Support and Co-construction of Meaning

Higher-proficiency learners frequently provided interactional support by inviting responses, rephrasing questions, and clarifying ideas. This peer scaffolding facilitated inclusive participation and supported the overall flow of discussion. This dynamic demonstrated an expert/novice interaction pattern, where more proficient students aided less proficient ones in solving linguistic problems and developing ideas, mirroring findings from studies on peer feedback and collaborative learning (Chen et al., 2022; Kuyyogsuy, 2019). However, the assignment of specific task roles can also influence these dynamics, with higher-proficiency learners demonstrating greater mutuality when assuming the role of information receiver, compelling them to elicit information from lower-proficiency peers (Dao & McDonough, 2017). These findings are consistent with research indicating that collaborative patterns vary significantly based on proficiency levels, with high-proficiency non-native speakers often exhibiting more collaborative interactions, particularly in certain task structures (Pladevall-Ballester, 2021). Additionally, interaction patterns in lower proficiency groups often display less sustained topic development and more frequent topic shifts, indicating a need for strategies to foster deeper engagement with a single subject over multiple turns (Manoïlov, 2017). This suggests that pedagogical interventions should focus on explicit strategies for topic maintenance and elaboration for B1-level learners, fostering a more sustained and cohesive communicative exchange (Al-Buraiki, 2025). Furthermore, such interventions should integrate techniques for turn-taking and responsive elaborations, as observed in higher-proficiency groups, to enhance the collaborative fluency of B1-level learners (Alomari, 2023).

DISCUSSION

The findings suggest that collaborative fluency is closely linked to learners' ability to extend discourse through responsiveness and elaboration. Learners operating at higher CEFR levels were better able to co-construct meaning and sustain interaction, aligning with CEFR descriptors for spoken interaction. Specifically, the ability of more proficient learners to employ sophisticated turn-taking strategies and mutual engagement fostered a more fluid and cohesive discussion, which is indicative of advanced interactional competence.This contrasts with B1-level learners, who frequently initiated new topics and produced shorter responses, suggesting a need for targeted pedagogical interventions to develop their sustained collaborative strategies (Dao & McDonough, 2017).

This observation underscores the importance of explicit instruction in conversational management techniques, such as responsive elaborations and facilitative questioning, to bridge the gap in interactional competencies between proficiency levels. Moreover, the observed differences in interactional patterns between higher and lower proficiency learners highlight the necessity for educators to design tasks that specifically encourage the co-construction of meaning and sustained collaborative engagement among B1-level students (Mukhrib, 2020). These results reinforce the importance of viewing fluency as a collaborative phenomenon rather than an individual attribute. Group oral discussions, when aligned with CEFR interactional goals, can serve as effective platforms for developing and assessing real-world communicative competence.

Pedagogical Implications

The study offers several implications for ESL teaching and assessment. Firstly, educators should design tasks that explicitly promote the co-construction of meaning and sustained collaborative engagement, particularly for B1-level learners, by incorporating structured opportunities for responsive elaborations and facilitative questioning. Oral tasks too should prioritise interactional responsiveness and discourse extension. Secondly, instructors can integrate activities like role-plays, debates, and storytelling to develop fluency and encourage spontaneous speech, alongside exposure to authentic spoken English through media to familiarise learners with natural speech patterns (Yenkimaleki&Heuven, 2023). Instructions for oral tasks and assessments should also be refined to better evaluate interactional competence, including aspects like listener support and turn-taking management, which are crucial for effective communication (Galaczi, 2013). Refining the oral task instructions should explicitly train learners in strategies such as elaboration, clarification, and topic linkage. Mixed-proficiency grouping during oral tasks can help promote peer scaffolding and collaborative fluency.

CONCLUSION

This study pushes CEFR-aligned oral assessment forward on three fronts. First, it shows that collaborative fluency clearly differentiates proficiency: B2–C1 learners far more reliably to sustain talk through discourse extension, contribution chaining, and responsive elaboration. Second, it demonstrates that interactional competence can be directly observed and meaningfully rated in group oral tasks when these are tied to CEFR descriptors making such tasks powerful tools for classroom-based assessment. Third, it highlights concrete participation patterns such as B1 learners' repeated topic re-initiations that signal where focused instructional intervention is needed.

Taken together, these findings show that CEFR-aligned group discussions are a powerful, practical way to assess real-world communicative competence in Malaysian tertiary education especially when rubrics spotlight interactional behaviours rather than just individual language production.

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