AN ACTION RESEARCH ON IMPROVING ENGLISH SPEAKING SKILLS THROUGH COOPERATIVE LEARNING APPROACHES FOR MINING CORPORATION EMPLOYEES

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this action research was to improve mining corporation employees’ English-speaking skills. Participants included 10 employees (referred to as learners) who work at Erdenet Mining Corporation in Mongolia, with various educational backgrounds. They had high scores in English written tests, but lacked English speaking practice and confidence. Data was collected via learners’ written feedback and researcher’s logs. After 6 meetings with the learners, results show that: learners are able to introduce themselves, Erdenet Mining Corporation and Mongolia in English; learners show more confidence in speaking English; and learners are able to distinguish simple past tense and ‘used to+verb’ structure.

Keywords: *Action research, speaking ability, cooperative learning, mining employees*

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Motivation

The researcher is an English teacher who taught at Erdenet Mining Corporation under the Talk Talk English Language center program in September and October, 2025. There were 4 groups of 40 people, and the researcher taught 2 groups of 20 people. During this time, some learners expressed a desire for extra speaking lessons, leading to the formation of a study group of 10 learners who wanted English speaking practice for their future careers and travel.

The main Talk Talk English language center course was held in the morning from 8-10 a.m. The study group met every Wednesday evening from 6-7 p.m., from September 10 to October 15, 2025. The researcher’s role was to communicate in English with the learners, encourage them to speak, provide suggestions, and conduct classroom activities.

At the first meeting, the learners’ English-speaking ability was observed to be reasonably good, but they needed more practice and confidence to speak in English. They had also passed an English assessment test to join the main course.

1.2 Research Purpose

Based on the research motivation described above, the purpose of this study was to improve learners’ English-speaking ability through cooperative learning approaches.

1.3 Research Questions

Four research questions emerged based on the research purpose:

- What is the process of developing this 6-week program?
- What are the effects of using cooperative learning approaches on the learners’ speaking skills?
- What were the difficulties encountered and solutions during the study period?
- What were the reflections and personal growth of the researcher?

1.4 Definitions of Terms

As Johnson and Johnson (2008) described cooperative learning is a great way of learning and a rich field of research. It encourages learners to work in groups or teams toward a specific task. Groups may be created at the beginning of a semester, for a specific activity, or for any collaborative purpose. In this approach, learners learn much more than they typically would in conventional modes.

According to Johnson, Johnson, Stanne and Geribaldi (1990), cooperative learning is a generic term referring to numerous methods for organizing and conducting classroom instruction. The following are some cooperative learning activities:

- **Jigsaw:** A group of five is set up and each member learns different material (original group). Members then join an expert group with others who studied the same material. After discussing with the expert group, each member returns to the original group to teach what they have learned.
- **Think-Pair-Share:** The teacher gives learners questions and lets them think, then share their ideas with a partner. Finally, pairs share their responses with other pairs.
- **Three-Step Interview:** Learners interview each other in pairs, then switch roles. The final step involves members sharing their partner's response with the team, building competence in speaking, listening, and summarizing.

- **Team-Pair-Solo:** Learners solve a problem first as a team, then with a partner, and finally on their own — motivating learners to tackle challenges beyond their current ability.
- **Numbered Heads Together:** A team of four is formed and members are numbered 1–4. Questions are posed to the group; teams work together so all members can answer verbally. The teacher calls a number and that member gives the answer.

In this study, two cooperative learning strategies were used: pair work and jigsaw. Pair work was used in half of the classes (3 sessions), group work was used twice, and individual work used once.

Literature review

A growing body of empirical research confirms that cooperative learning approaches are effective for developing English-speaking skills across diverse learner populations. Nguyen and Tran (2023) found that structured cooperative activities significantly improved both speaking performance scores and self-reported confidence among EFL university students in Vietnam. Similarly, Al-Sohbani (2024) reported gains in oral fluency and interactional competence among Yemeni EFL learners following a cooperative action research intervention, emphasizing that structured group roles enhanced accountability and participation.

Within the specific context of action research methodology, Khan and Rahman (2025) demonstrated that integrating cooperative learning into a flipped classroom environment led to measurable improvements in oral communication, noting that the iterative reflection-revision cycle inherent to action research was critical to sustaining learner engagement. Zhang and Wang (2023) further documented those cooperative structures reduced speaking anxiety by creating low-stakes, peer-supported practice environments, an effect particularly relevant for adult learners who report inhibition in foreign language contexts.

At the institutional and classroom management level, key findings of Sari (2014) research were that cooperative learning enhances learner accountability and reduces disruptive behavior, as learners internalize shared responsibility for group success. Garcia and Santos (2024) extended these findings to hybrid learning environments, demonstrating that cooperative learning retained its effectiveness for speaking skill development even in partially online delivery formats.

Within the Mongolian context, Oyun-Erdene and Munkhtsetseg (2023) reported positive outcomes from implementing cooperative learning in higher education English practice courses, with participants demonstrating improved fluency and reduced reticence. Ariunjargal (2024) further confirmed that action research-based intervention effectively addressed speaking anxiety among Mongolian university students, recommending cooperative task structures as a core pedagogical tool. Tuya and Enkhtur (2025) extended these findings to adult learner populations, demonstrating that cooperative group work positively influenced oral language competence in non-academic professional development settings. This finding is directly relevant to the present study’s context.

These findings support the pedagogical rationale for the present study and provides a foundation for interpreting its findings within a broader international and domestic research context.

Methodology

3.1 research design

In this study, action research was the methodology for improving learners’ English-speaking skills. Qualitative data were gathered primarily from participants’ feedback, the researcher’s logs, and learners’ classroom performance.

According to the Open University’s action research framework (open.edu, 2014), the action research cycle consists of three main stages:

- Identifying the issue or understanding what really happens in practice. Without this, any change might be unnecessary or wrongly focused.
- Making a change to practice-altering how individual learners are supported, or making changes at module or program level.
- Evaluating the change to see whether it has had an effect.

3.2 Instruments

The study was conducted at Erdenet Institute of Technology (EiT) in Erdenet city, Mongolia. The instruments used were: Learners’ written feedback, the researcher’s logs, and learners’ classroom performance.

Table 3.1

Data Analysis Concerning Research Questions

Research Question	Instruments
1. What is the process of developing this 6-week program?	- Researcher’s logs - Learners’ classroom performance
2. What are the effects of using cooperative learning approaches on the learners’ speaking skills?	- Learners’ written feedback - Learners’ classroom performance
3. What were the difficulties encountered and solutions during the study period?	- Researcher’s logs - Learners’ classroom performance
4. What were the reflections and personal growth of the researcher?	- Researcher’s logs - Learners’ classroom performance

3.2.1 Learners’ Written Feedback

Learners’ written feedback was collected twice - at the first and last meetings. Feedback 1 asked: “Which activities did you like and what activities need improvement?” from the first meeting on “About Mongolia” using pair work. Nine learners completed this feedback.

Written Feedback 2 was administered after the 6th meeting, containing 6 questions answered anonymously. Seven learners responded. All 7 reported having studied English for more than 10 years. The results (excluding a factual information question outside the scope of this study) are presented in Table 4.3.

3.2.2 Researcher’s Logs

Before and after each class, the researcher filled out logs recording class preparation details and the class procedure.

3.2.3 Learners’ Classroom Performance

Learners’ classroom performance was compared between the beginning of the course and the last session to observe development in speaking ability.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

4.1 Procedures

There were 6 meetings of 60 minutes each, held on Wednesday evenings from 6-7 p.m. The timetable is presented in Table 4.1 below.

Table 4.1

Timetable of the Course

#	Date (Wed)	Topic	Method	Number of Learners
1	Sep 10	About Mongolia	Pair work	9
2	Sep 17	Self-introduction	Individual work	9
3	Sep 24	Erdenet Mining Corporation	Pair work	10
4	Oct 1	Mining in Mongolia	Pair work	9
5	Oct 8	Mining in other countries	Group work	8
6	Oct 15	Useful English phrases for travelers	Group work	10

This action research included a four-stage cycle: planning stage, acting and observing stage, and reflecting stage. The study was completed in three cycles.

4.1.1 Planning Stage (1st Cycle)

Before conducting the course, the researcher selected 6 topics: About Mongolia, Self-Introduction, About Erdenet Mining Corporation, Mining in Mongolia, Mining in other countries, and Useful English phrases for travelers. The researcher planned to use pair work, with each learner preparing answers to one of five sub-questions under a general topic per week. The researcher’s role was to conduct the 60-minute class and serve as an English speaker and listener, providing suggestions to the learners.

4.1.2 Acting and Observing Stage (1st Cycle)

In the first week, the topic was “About Mongolia”. Each learner prepared to speak about Mongolia according to five general questions, with detailed sub-questions provided. After each pair answered their question, another team asked follow-up questions directly. The detailed, unprepared questions were designed to simulate real-life conversations.

The second topic, “Self-introduction”, followed a similar format but required individual speaking. Each learner asked one question to another and answered directly in class. Speaking time was limited to 2-3 minutes per learner based on feedback comments from the first session. Grammar mistakes were corrected and verbally explained after each speech.

Table 4.2

Learners’ Written Feedback 1 (After Topic One: About Mongolia)

Positive	To be improved
- We like your positive encouragement and specific suggestions - I have learned what is important to mention and what is not - Teaching method is suitable for us	- Detailed questions should be provided as homework, we can practice in advance - More brainstorm activities - It is better if we know the length of the speech for each learner before we start

Learners’ suggestion about providing detailed questions as homework was not implemented; instead, the researcher encouraged more direct, inquiry-based speaking to better simulate real, direct, natural conversations.

4.1.3 Reflecting Stage (1st Cycle)

In the reflecting stage, the researcher found it necessary to explain grammar points those learners made in class, which caused classes to run late. This led to refinement of further lesson plans.

4.1.4 Re-planning Stage (2nd Cycle)

The researcher planned a similar format with small adjustments based on the first reflection. Learners were asked to email their answers (300-400 words) to the researcher in advance for grammar checking. Based on common grammar mistakes, particularly confusion between “simple past tense” and “used to+verb”, the researcher provided a 10-15 minute mini grammar course in the 4th meeting, followed by a mini quiz with 11 questions.

Questions for Topic 3: Erdenet Mining Corporation (EMC):

- Please tell us about the history of EMC.
- Please describe the EMC site.
- Please share your experiences working at EMC.
- What activities are done for social responsibilities?
- What do you suggest to EMC to become a better corporation?

Questions for Topic 4: Mining in Mongolia:

- What is the most important mining resource in Mongolia?
- How does mining help people in Mongolia?
- Please share information about Oyu Tolgoi.
- How does mining help the economy of Mongolia?
- What are some environmental problems caused by mining in Mongolia?

4.1.5 Reflecting Stage (2nd Cycle)

The researcher observed that learners were speaking passively during the second cycle due to having prepared answers at home that had been checked in advance. Some learners also reflected this in Written Feedback 2. As a result, the researcher rethought and refined the lesson plans for the third cycle, deciding to change from pair work to a Jigsaw approach and to incorporate topics beyond Mongolia.

4.1.6 Re-planning Stage (3rd Cycle)

For the 3rd cycle, the researcher changed the topics to “Mining in other countries” and “Useful English phrases for travelers.” The Jigsaw approach was planned for the mining topic to promote reading, speaking, and knowledge-sharing simultaneously. Group work with YouTube videos was planned for the travelers’ phrases session.

4.1.7 Acting and Observing Stage (3rd Cycle)

Learners were provided 3 articles about mining in different countries. For the 5th meeting, 8 learners were divided into 2 groups using the Jigsaw approach as follows:

- Short lecture by the researcher on all 3 articles.
- Expert group discussion using mind maps (5 minutes, 2-3 members).
- Learning group discussion and sharing (6 minutes, 4 members, each article explained in 2 minutes).

- Quiz with 7 questions based on the 3 articles.
- Praise for the winning group.

Learners were notably more active during this session, eager to explain their topics and compete for the winning position.

At the 6th meeting, learners were divided into 2 groups of 5. Each group worked on a YouTube video about useful travel phrases. Both teams shared vocabulary and practiced making sentences with new phrases.

4.2 Difficulties and Solutions

4.2.1 Fear to Speak in English

Some learners displayed fear to speak in English at the first meeting. The researcher addressed this by providing consistent positive encouragement. Based on both feedback sessions, the course had a positive influence on learners’ confidence in speaking English.

4.2.2 Past Tense Grammar Mistakes

Some learners lacked knowledge about past tense usage, particularly the distinction between “simple past tense” and “used to+verb.” The researcher identified this through advance text checking and addressed it with a mini grammar course followed by an 11-question quiz. Most learners found this helpful. One learner preferred verbal feedback, which was also provided in the 2nd meeting.

4.2.3 Speaking Ability

During the first two cycles (pair work), some learners read from prepared notes rather than speaking naturally. In the 3rd cycle, speaking shifted from reciting to genuine expressing and sharing. Learners’ Written Feedback 2 confirmed that 3rd cycle activities were more interesting, competitive, and promoted more natural speaking. Seven learners filled the written feedback 2.

Table 4.3

Thematic Analysis of Learners’ Written Feedback 2 (One Week After Final Session, n=7)

Themes	Representative Responses	Frequency (n=7)
Increased confidence in speaking English	“This course really made me to want to speak to foreigners without fear.” “Helps me take back the feeling of speaking English abroad.”	7/7 (100%)
Value of text checking for grammar improvement	“Highlighting wrong grammar or vocabulary helps us clearly understand what we lack.” “We can check grammar mistakes before sharing and say it in the right way.”	6/7 (86%)
Preference for direct and natural speaking activities	“Maybe we could have more time to talk with each other, not only about what we had written before.” “Speaking directly is still difficult compared to written preparation.”	5/7 (71%)
Engagement with Jigsaw method	“The competitive game really inspired me. I really like the Jigsaw interaction.” “Team working discussion forces us to talk to each other.”	5/7 (71%)
Overall positive experience	“It's really a wonderful experience!” “It’s funny and interesting.”	7/7 (100%)

Note: Learners’ responses are paraphrased or directly quoted from anonymous written feedback. Frequency counts reflect the number of learners whose responses addressed each theme.

CONCLUSION

5.1 Conclusion

This action research aimed to improve learners’ English-speaking ability over 6 meetings of 60 minutes each. Although it was challenging to achieve significant improvement in such a short period, the course proved helpful for learners at multiple levels.

First, learners’ confidence in speaking English showed positive results based on their feedback. The researcher observed that some learners lacked confidence at the first meeting, but by the final group work session, every learner was able to share information from videos confidently.

Second, learners’ written feedback indicated that receiving and reviewing homework texts in advance was generally helpful for grammar improvement. However, one learner preferred verbal in-class feedback, and another preferred not to work with pre-checked written texts, arguing that real-life conversations do not allow for preparation. The researcher agrees that natural speaking practice is ultimately the most important skill.

In general, learners gave positive feedback about the course and reported improved English-speaking ability after attending the 6 meetings. One area for improvement noted by learners was the desire for more brainstorming or direct, spontaneous speaking activities.

For the researcher, this study provided an opportunity to deepen knowledge of cooperative learning methods, particularly the Jigsaw approach, and to reflect on the design of speaking courses. The researcher plans to apply the Jigsaw method in future teaching practice.

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