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GENDER AND INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGY EFFECTS ON ENGLISH SPEAKING ACHIEVEMENT AMONG SENIOR SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS IN EBONYI STATE, NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

This study examined gender and instructional strategy effects on senior secondary school students' achievement in English speaking skills in Ebonyi State, Nigeria. Using a quasi-experimental pretest–posttest non-equivalent control group design, the study involved 128 Senior Secondary School II students drawn from four public secondary schools. Students were assigned to either a Small-Group Interaction Strategy (SGIS) group or a conventional instruction group. Data were collected using the English-Speaking Achievement Test (ESAT), validated by experts and yielding a reliability coefficient of 0.88. Mean, standard deviation, and Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) were used for data analysis at the 0.05 level of significance. Findings revealed no significant gender difference in students' achievement in English speaking skills. Additionally, the interaction effect of instructional strategy and gender was not significant, indicating that SGIS is equally effective for both male and female students. The study concludes that small-group interaction promotes equitable learning outcomes and should be adopted to enhance speaking achievement without gender bias in secondary school English classrooms.

Keywords: Gender, instructional strategy, small-group interaction, speaking skills, ESL

Introduction

English speaking proficiency is central to communicative competence and academic success in English as a Second Language contexts (Richards, 2008). Despite sustained exposure to English instruction, many secondary school students continue to demonstrate weak speaking skills, reflected in poor pronunciation, limited vocabulary,

grammatical inaccuracies, and low confidence (Afolayan, 2015; Ewulo, 2015).

In Nigeria, English serves as both a core subject and the medium of instruction at the secondary school level. However, classroom observations and West African Examinations Council Chief Examiner's Reports consistently indicate poor performance in oral English. These weaknesses are commonly attributed to limited opportunities for oral practice and the predominance of teacher-centred instructional approaches (WAEC, 2022).

Gender has also been identified as a possible factor influencing language learning outcomes. While some studies report female advantages in language tasks, others find no significant gender differences under supportive instructional conditions (Hyde, 2014; Li, 2017). This suggests that gender effects may be shaped more by classroom practices than by inherent ability.

Traditional English language teaching in Nigerian secondary schools remains largely teacher-centred, limiting student interaction and active participation (Harmer, 2007). In contrast, learner-centred approaches such as Small-Group Interaction Strategy emphasize collaboration, peer interaction, and active engagement. Research indicates that small-group interaction enhances speaking achievement by increasing practice opportunities, reducing anxiety, and promoting learner confidence (Gillies, 2016; Johnson & Johnson, 2009).

From a gender perspective, collaborative learning environments encourage balanced participation and reduce dominance patterns, thereby promoting equity in learning outcomes (Johnson, Johnson, & Holubec, 2014; Chen, 2015). However, limited empirical studies have examined how instructional strategy interacts with gender to influence speaking achievement at the senior secondary school level in Nigeria. This study therefore examined the effects of gender and instructional strategy on English speaking achievement among senior secondary school students in Ebonyi State, Nigeria.

Literature Review

Recent research suggests that instructional context plays a more significant role than biological sex in shaping second language learning outcomes. Gender differences in language achievement are often mediated by classroom interaction patterns, task design, and instructional strategies (Hyde, 2021; Alrabai, 2022).

Empirical findings in ESL contexts remain inconsistent. While Oyetunde and Muodumogu (2021) reported slight female advantages in oral English performance, Aboh (2022) found no significant gender differences when interactive instructional strategies were employed. Meta-analytic evidence further supports the gender similarities hypothesis, which holds that males and females perform similarly on language tasks under comparable instructional conditions (Hyde, 2021).

In Nigeria, recent studies indicate that teacher-centred instruction tends to widen participation gaps, whereas learner-centred approaches promote gender equity in achievement (Joshua, Malle, & Obi, 2021; Amoniyan & Obasi, 2025). Interactive instructional strategies, particularly small-group learning, provide structured opportunities for participation and reduce dominance patterns associated with whole-class instruction (Gillies & Nichols, 2022).

Studies have shown that small-group speaking tasks improve fluency, pronunciation, and overall speaking achievement, with minimal or no gender-based differences (Li & Xu, 2022; Afolayan & Eruchalu, 2021). Speaking skill development requires meaningful communicative practice and learner interaction, which traditional teacher-centred approaches often fail to provide (Richards & Reppen, 2022; Ewulo, 2021).

Although evidence supports the effectiveness of Small-Group Interaction Strategy, limited studies have examined its interaction with gender at the senior secondary school level in Nigeria. This gap justifies the focus of the present study.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on socio-cultural theory and constructivist learning principles, interpreted within a gender-inclusive pedagogical framework. Socio-cultural theory emphasizes that learning is socially mediated and dependent on interaction, scaffolding, and participation structures rather than learner characteristics such as gender (Vygotsky, 1978). In small-group settings, learners collaboratively construct meaning and support one another's language development, enabling both male and female students to function within their Zone of Proximal Development.

Constructivist learning theory views learning as an active process in which knowledge is constructed through engagement and collaboration (Piaget, 1972). Gender-inclusive pedagogy extends this perspective by promoting equitable participation and shared responsibility. Cooperative learning structures distribute roles and reduce participation gaps, ensuring that achievement outcomes are shaped primarily by instructional quality rather than gender (Alrabai, 2022; Amoniyan & Obasi, 2025). By integrating socio-cultural and constructivist perspectives, this study conceptualizes Small-Group Interaction Strategy as a gender-neutral instructional approach capable of promoting equitable achievement in English speaking skills among senior secondary school students.

Methodology

The study adopted a quasi-experimental pretest–posttest non-equivalent control group design. Intact classes were used because random assignment of individual students was not feasible. The design allowed examination of the main effects of instructional strategy and gender, as well as their interaction effect on English speaking achievement, while controlling for initial group differences using pretest scores (Creswell & Guetterman, 2021). The study was conducted in public senior secondary

schools in Ebonyi State, Nigeria, where English functions as both a core subject and the medium of instruction. The ESL and multilingual nature of the setting provided an appropriate context for examining strategies aimed at improving speaking achievement.

The population consisted of 9,300 Senior Secondary School II students in public secondary schools in the state. A sample of 128 students was selected through multi-stage sampling. Four public secondary schools were randomly chosen and assigned to experimental and control groups. Two schools constituted the experimental group (68 students) and two formed the control group (60 students). Intact classes were retained, and both male and female students participated.

Data were collected using the English-Speaking Achievement Test, which assessed vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, and fluency through structured oral tasks aligned with the senior secondary English curriculum and communicative language teaching standards (Richards & Reppen, 2022). Responses were scored using a standardized rating scale. The instrument was validated by experts in English Language Education, Measurement and Evaluation, and Educational Psychology. Reliability was established using the split-half method, yielding a coefficient of 0.88, indicating high reliability (Taber, 2021).

The experiment involved three phases: pretest, treatment, and posttest. The English-Speaking Achievement Test was administered as a pretest to both groups. The experimental group received instruction using Small-Group Interaction Strategy, while the control group was taught using the conventional method. After the treatment period, the instrument was re-administered as a posttest. Mean and standard deviation were used to answer the research questions, while Analysis of Covariance was employed to test the hypotheses at the 0.05 level of significance. Pretest scores were used as covariates to determine the main effects of instructional strategy and gender, as well as their interaction effect.

Results

The results are presented in line with the research questions and hypotheses guiding the study. Mean and standard deviation were used to answer the research questions, while Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) was used to test the hypotheses at the 0.05 level of significance, with pretest scores as covariates.

Research Question 1: What difference exists between male and female students' achievement in English speaking skills when taught using Small-Group Interaction Strategy and the conventional method?

Table 1: Mean and Standard Deviation of Male and Female Students' Posttest Achievement Scores in English Speaking Skills by Teaching Strategy

Teaching Strategy	Gender	N	Mean	SD
Small-Group Interaction Strategy	Male	34	77.89	5.97
Small-Group Interaction Strategy	Female	34	78.76	6.20
Conventional Method	Male	30	63.12	6.05
Conventional Method	Female	30	63.81	5.92

Interpretation:

Table 1 shows that under the Small-Group Interaction Strategy, female students recorded a slightly higher mean achievement score (M = 78.76) than male students (M = 77.89). Similarly, under the conventional teaching method, female students (M = 63.81) marginally outperformed male students (M = 63.12). However, the differences in mean scores between male and female students across both instructional strategies are minimal, suggesting that gender differences in English speaking achievement are negligible when students are exposed to the same instructional conditions.

Research Question 2: Is there a significant interaction effect of instructional strategy and gender on students' English-speaking achievement?

To answer this question, ANCOVA was conducted to determine the main effects of instructional strategy and gender, as well as their interaction effect, on students' posttest achievement scores in English speaking skills.

Table 2: ANCOVA Summary of Effects of Instructional Strategy and Gender on English Speaking Achievement

Source	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Pretest (Covariate)	1018.42	1	1018.42	35.87	.000
Instructional Strategy	2196.58	1	2196.58	77.44	.000
Gender	9.63	1	9.63	0.34	.562
Strategy × Gender	12.45	1	12.45	0.44	.508
Error	3543.12	123	28.81		
Total	6778.64	127			

Hypothesis 1: There is no significant difference between male and female students' mean achievement scores in English speaking skills.

Decision:
As shown in Table 2, the main effect of gender on students' achievement in English speaking skills is not significant ($F = 0.34$, $p > .05$). Therefore, the null hypothesis is not rejected.

Interpretation:
This result indicates that male and female students did not differ significantly in their achievement in English speaking skills when taught using either instructional strategy.

Hypothesis 2: There is no significant interaction effect of instructional strategy and gender on students' English-speaking achievement.

Decision:
The interaction effect of instructional strategy and gender is not statistically significant ($F = 0.44$, $p > .05$). Consequently, the null hypothesis is not rejected.

Interpretation:
The non-significant interaction effect suggests that the effectiveness of the Small-Group Interaction Strategy on students' English-speaking achievement does not depend on gender. In other words, both male and female students benefited equally from the instructional strategy.

Results and Discussion
Male and female students taught using Small-Group Interaction Strategy (SGIS) achieved comparable mean scores in English speaking skills, with no significant gender difference. Instructional strategy had a significant effect on achievement, whereas gender did not. The interaction between instructional strategy and gender was also non-significant, indicating that SGIS is effective and equitable across genders.

These findings align with the gender similarities hypothesis, which posits that males and females perform similarly in cognitive and academic tasks under equitable instructional conditions (Hyde, 2021). Prior studies corroborate this result; interactive instructional strategies reduce gender gaps in oral English achievement (Aboh, 2022; Li & Xu, 2022; Joshua, Malle, & Obi, 2021; Amoniyan & Obasi, 2025). Traditional teacher-centred methods may have previously amplified gender differences, but small-group, participatory approaches mitigate such disparities (Harmer, 2007; Ewulo, 2021).

ANCOVA results confirmed that students exposed to SGIS outperformed those taught via conventional methods, regardless of gender. This finding supports evidence that collaborative learning structures increase participation, reduce dominance patterns, and foster confidence in oral communication (Gillies & Nichols, 2022; Zhang & Ardasheva, 2023). SGIS creates a supportive environment in which all learners can practice speaking, negotiate meaning, and receive feedback, ensuring equitable outcomes. From a theoretical perspective, the findings are consistent with socio-cultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978) and constructivist principles (Piaget, 1972). Peer interactions in small groups allow learners to scaffold one

another and construct knowledge actively, reducing gender-based disparities. Structured collaboration ensures learning outcomes are determined by interaction quality rather than gender.

Practical and Pedagogical Implications

The study offers several practical recommendations:

1. **Instructional Practice:** Teachers should integrate SGIS into speaking lessons to enhance participation, fluency, and confidence for all students.
2. **Teacher Education:** Professional development should emphasize interactive, collaborative strategies and structured group tasks.
3. **Curriculum Design:** The secondary school English curriculum should include speaking tasks that encourage peer collaboration and communicative competence.
4. **Assessment Practices:** Oral assessments should complement traditional exams, reflecting authentic communicative performance.

Limitations and Future Research

The study was conducted in a single educational zone (Ebonyi State), limiting generalizability. It focused solely on speaking skills, suggesting future studies should examine listening, reading, and writing. Longitudinal research could explore whether gender effects emerge over time. Further studies could also investigate affective variables, such as anxiety and self-efficacy, in relation to gender and instructional strategy.

Conclusion

Small-Group Interaction Strategy significantly improved senior secondary school students' English-speaking achievement. Gender did not significantly influence performance, nor did it interact with instructional strategy, confirming that SGIS is a gender-neutral and equitable instructional approach. When students engage in collaborative, learner-centred activities, participation is balanced, speaking anxiety is reduced, and peer scaffolding enhances oral performance. These findings emphasize that instructional design and classroom interaction patterns have a greater impact on speaking achievement than gender differences, validating socio-cultural and constructivist learning principles in ESL contexts.

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