

Original Paper

Differentiated Scaffolding for Mixed-Ability Young EFL Learners: A Reflective Classroom Account

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Abstract

This article reflects on the design and classroom use of five speaking activities with 12 Chinese EFL learners aged 9 to 11 in a private after-school program. The activities were Mingle/Question Hunting, Restaurant Role-Play, Storybook Theater, Poster Making, and an English Fair. The account draws on the teacher's original lesson materials and later reflection on what happened during regular weekly lessons. Particular attention is given to the practical choices made for a mixed-ability group: when learners needed models or written prompts, how roles were allocated, when support could be reduced, and how stronger learners were prevented from taking over. The reflection suggests that successful participation depended not only on an engaging activity format but also on clear procedures, manageable starting points, differentiated expectations, and timely feedback. Several difficulties recurred, including reliance on scripts, uneven participation, rushing during competitive tasks, classroom movement, and limited time for correction. The article does not evaluate gains in proficiency. Instead, it offers a grounded account of how familiar speaking activities were adjusted in response to learners' different levels of readiness and participation.

Keywords

young EFL learners, speaking activities, scaffolding, differentiated instruction, mixed-ability classrooms

1. Introduction

Developing spoken English can be challenging for young learners in foreign language classrooms. Learners may possess basic vocabulary and sentence patterns but still hesitate when they are required to respond spontaneously, sustain an exchange, or speak before a group. These difficulties may become more visible in mixed-ability classes, where learners differ in linguistic readiness, confidence, processing

speed, and willingness to participate. More confident learners may take greater control of classroom interaction, while others may depend on memorized expressions, wait for teacher assistance, or contribute only short responses. Providing an opportunity to speak, therefore, does not necessarily ensure meaningful or balanced participation.

Interactive activities are commonly used to expand opportunities for spoken language use. Interviews, role-plays, performances, collaborative presentations, and classroom games can give learners recognizable purposes for communicating and allow them to repeat or adapt language in different situations. Nevertheless, an activity does not become pedagogically productive simply because it is interactive or enjoyable. Tasks involving movement, competition, group work, or rewards may also produce unequal participation, excessive attention to speed, dependence on more proficient peers, and difficulties involving noise, time, and feedback. The value of an activity consequently depends on how participation is structured and how learners are supported before and during the task.

Scaffolding offers a useful framework for examining such support. The concept originally referred to temporary assistance that enables a learner to complete a task that cannot yet be managed independently [1]. In second-language speaking instruction, scaffolding may include teacher modeling, planning time, language resources, task repetition, and support for organizing spoken production. Such assistance is intended to make demanding speaking processes more manageable while gradually transferring greater responsibility to learners [2].

The need for flexible support is especially relevant in mixed-ability classrooms. Differentiated instruction recognizes that learners do not necessarily require identical materials, levels of assistance, processes, or expectations at the same moment. Teachers may adjust the complexity of a task, the support available, the way learners participate, or the expected form of the outcome. Differentiation should remain flexible and responsive rather than becoming a permanent classification of learners into fixed ability categories [3].

In speaking activities, scaffolding and differentiation frequently overlap. One learner may use keywords, sentence frames, visual prompts, a script, additional preparation time, or peer support. Another learner completing the same general activity may be asked to extend an exchange, respond without a template, justify an answer, or manage a less predictable situation. The central instructional issue is therefore not whether all learners complete an identical task in an identical manner, but whether they receive sufficient access to participate while continuing to encounter an appropriate degree of challenge.

The classroom environment also affects speaking participation. Research in Chinese EFL classrooms has connected willingness to communicate with communication confidence, motivation, learner beliefs, and perceptions of the classroom environment [4]. Teachers must therefore attend not only to vocabulary and grammar but also to the interpersonal conditions surrounding language use. Rehearsal, low-risk starting points, supportive peer interaction, and positive responses to genuine attempts may make participation more accessible, although these practices should not be treated as proof that willingness to communicate has increased.

Teachers must also decide how to respond to inaccurate language. Oral corrective feedback research distinguishes among reformulations, prompts, and more explicit forms of correction, while emphasizing that feedback choices depend on the learner, the activity, and the instructional purpose [5]. During interactive tasks, a teacher may provide a keyword or gesture, invite self-correction, allow peer assistance, reformulate an utterance, or postpone discussion of recurring problems until the activity has ended. The issue is not simply whether correction occurs, but how feedback can address accuracy without unnecessarily reducing participation and communicative flow.

Although scaffolding, differentiation, speaking participation, and corrective feedback have substantial research foundations, teachers rarely apply them as isolated techniques. During ordinary lessons, they combine language support, task instructions, grouping arrangements, visual resources, encouragement, feedback, role allocation, and classroom-management procedures. The form and intensity of support may also change as learners rehearse, encounter difficulty, or become ready for greater independence. A practice-oriented account can therefore complement broader theoretical and empirical work by showing how these principles are interpreted and adjusted in a specific classroom context.

This article presents a retrospective account of five interactive speaking activities conducted with one mixed-ability class of 12 young EFL learners aged 9 to 11 in a private after-school English program in China. The activities were integrated into regular teaching over five consecutive weeks and included Mingle/Question Hunting, Restaurant Role-Play, Storybook Theater, Poster Making, and an English Fair. They were not conducted as a formal intervention study. The article does not use pre- and post-tests, student interviews, recordings, identifiable student information, or retained student work to evaluate outcomes. Instead, it draws on the teacher's original instructional materials and retrospective reflection to examine how the activities were structured and adjusted.

The article addresses two questions: (1) How were interactive speaking activities designed and scaffolded for mixed-ability young EFL learners? and (2) What challenges emerged during implementation, and how did the teacher adapt the activities in response? By focusing on instructional decisions rather than measurable learning gains, the article aims to offer a practice-oriented account of differentiated scaffolding. Its contribution is not a new teaching method or evidence of causal effectiveness, but an illustration of how familiar speaking activities can provide accessible entry points, flexible support, opportunities for increased challenge, and clearer individual responsibility.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Speaking Participation in Young EFL Classrooms

Young learners' spoken participation is shaped by more than their knowledge of vocabulary and grammar. Speaking requires learners to understand a situation, retrieve relevant language, organize an utterance, monitor what they say, and respond within limited time. For children whose linguistic resources are still developing, these demands can make even a familiar task difficult to perform independently. Reviews of young learner English education in East Asia emphasize that teaching and learning are strongly shaped

by local classroom conditions, policy expectations, and age-related characteristics [6]. Task design also needs to reflect children's developmental profiles and use age-appropriate formats rather than simplified versions of adult tasks [7] [8].

Meaningful contexts can make oral language more accessible. Familiar actions, stories, images, roles, and classroom situations give young learners a recognizable purpose for speaking. Interviews, role-plays, story performances, and collaborative presentations can create opportunities to use language while completing an understandable action or producing a visible outcome. Structured creative speaking does not require unsupported spontaneity from the beginning; learners can first draw on vocabulary, expressions, models, and rehearsal before making more independent choices [9].

However, the presence of interaction does not ensure balanced participation. Whole-class questioning may repeatedly attract the same confident learners, while pair or group work may allow one learner to control the task or speak on behalf of others. Mixed-ability differences in vocabulary, fluency, pronunciation, processing speed, confidence, and willingness to take risks can intensify these patterns. A single speaking requirement may be inaccessible to some learners and insufficiently challenging for others.

Participation is also influenced by the social conditions surrounding language use. A learner may know how to respond but remain silent when the task feels unpredictable, public, or socially risky. In the Chinese EFL context, willingness to communicate has been associated with communication confidence, motivation, learner beliefs, and perceptions of the classroom environment [4]. This does not mean that enjoyable activities automatically produce participation. It does suggest that teachers need to consider how task structure, peer relationships, preparation, and feedback affect the perceived risk of speaking. Interactive activities are therefore best understood as designed participation frameworks rather than as entertainment added to a lesson. Teachers need to decide how learners enter a task, what language and procedural support they can access, how speaking responsibility is distributed, and how the task allows movement from supported production toward greater independence. These concerns lead directly to the concept of scaffolding.

2.2 Scaffolding for Spoken Language Production

Scaffolding refers to temporary assistance that enables learners to complete tasks they cannot yet manage independently [1]. The concept connects support with learner development: assistance should respond to the demands of the task and the learner's current capacity while creating conditions for greater independence. Scaffolding is therefore not the same as simplifying every task, supplying complete answers, or permanently reducing expectations.

In language education, support can be planned into materials and task sequences or provided responsively during interaction. Gibbons [10] emphasizes that language scaffolding is created through classroom contexts, teacher-learner interaction, and the integration of language development with meaningful activity. For speaking, Goh [2] highlights preparation, planning, task repetition, strategy support, and reflection. These practices treat speaking as a process that can be supported rather than as an ability

expected to appear automatically once vocabulary and grammar have been taught.

Linguistic scaffolding includes keywords, sentence frames, model dialogues, useful expressions, question prompts, and partially completed utterances. Such resources reduce the burden of retrieving and organizing language during real-time production. Their value depends on how they are used. A model or script can provide initial access, but a task remains limited if learners only reproduce fixed language. A scaffolded sequence may move from teacher modeling to controlled practice, content substitution, reduced prompts, and less predictable interaction.

Procedural and task support clarifies what learners are expected to do and how an activity will proceed. Teacher demonstration, visible instructions, role cards, turn-taking routines, time limits, and clearly divided stages can reduce uncertainty. This is particularly important in activities involving movement, group work, or multiple roles, where learners may understand the language but still be unsure about sequence, responsibility, or task completion.

Visual and material support can make communicative situations more concrete. Pictures, menus, props, posters, gestures, and physical objects may support comprehension, vocabulary retrieval, and the organization of speech without replacing oral production. Interactional support may also come from peers who provide a brief cue, help recall a word, or maintain an exchange. However, peer assistance requires clear roles and teacher monitoring because a more proficient learner may otherwise complete the task for others.

Effective scaffolding is contingent: the type and amount of help should depend on what the learner can currently do and what is preventing further progress. A hesitant learner may need only additional wait time or a gesture, whereas another may need a keyword, the beginning of a sentence, peer assistance, or a brief return to a model. Providing the same support to all learners can be inefficient because too little assistance prevents participation while too much removes the need to make linguistic decisions.

Scaffolding also involves fading, or reducing support as learners become more capable. Fading may mean moving from a complete script to keywords, from teacher-led modeling to peer rehearsal, or from predictable questions to spontaneous follow-up questions. It does not require identical withdrawal for every learner at the same time. In a mixed-ability class, one learner may speak without notes while another still relies on a frame, even though both work toward the same communicative purpose.

The presence of scaffolding should not be treated as evidence that a task caused improvement. Prompts, modeling, visual resources, or peer assistance show how access to participation was designed; they do not establish measurable gains in speaking proficiency. In a reflective account, the analysis should focus on the rationale, implementation, and adjustment of support while remaining cautious about outcomes.

2.3 Differentiated Support in Mixed-ability Classrooms

Mixed-ability is a normal feature of language classrooms. Learners in the same group may differ in vocabulary, grammatical control, pronunciation, processing speed, confidence, previous learning experience, and willingness to take risks. These differences are especially visible during speaking because oral interaction requires rapid retrieval and organization of language. A task that is manageable

for one learner may be inaccessible to another, while a highly supported task may offer little challenge to a more proficient learner.

Differentiated instruction provides a framework for responding to such variation. Tomlinson [3] describes differentiation as a proactive approach in which teachers adjust content, process, product, and the learning environment according to learner readiness, interests, and needs. Recent EFL research has likewise examined differentiation across learning environment, content, process, product, and assessment, while noting the additional time and teacher commitment required in heterogeneous classrooms [11]. Differentiation does not require a completely separate lesson for every learner, nor does it simply mean assigning easier work to some and harder work to others. It involves different routes into a shared learning purpose.

In speaking instruction, differentiation may involve the amount of linguistic support, the complexity of the expected response, the predictability of the exchange, the preparation available, or the responsibility assigned. Some learners may use prompts to produce short complete sentences, while others may extend answers, ask follow-up questions, justify choices, or speak with less reliance on written language. The communicative context can remain shared even when the degree of support and challenge varies.

A useful principle is to provide an achievable entry point together with room for extension. Learners who require support should be able to begin the activity without being excluded by excessive language demands. Learners who complete the initial requirement should have opportunities to produce longer responses, reduce dependence on prompts, take on more demanding roles, or respond to less predictable situations. This creates a relatively low threshold for participation and a higher ceiling for challenge.

Flexible grouping can support differentiation, but it also carries risks. Mixed-readiness pairing may allow a more confident learner to model language or maintain an exchange, yet the same learner may dominate or speak for a partner. Grouping therefore needs role rotation, separate speaking responsibilities, and teacher intervention when participation becomes uneven. Individual accountability is particularly important in collaborative tasks because group completion does not necessarily mean that every learner has spoken meaningfully.

Differentiation should remain temporary and responsive rather than becoming a fixed ability label. A learner may need support in spontaneous speaking while performing well in reading, memory, pronunciation, or creative work. Descriptions such as learners requiring more support for a particular task, learners working at the expected level, and learners ready for additional challenge are therefore more appropriate than permanent deficit labels.

Fairness does not necessarily mean identical treatment. A learner who needs a script, additional rehearsal, or a teacher cue may require more assistance to access the same communicative opportunity. At the same time, support should not become a permanent ceiling. Learners need some route toward greater responsibility, such as moving from a full prompt to keywords or from a basic task to a more demanding version.

Differentiation also creates practical demands. Preparing multiple levels of support, monitoring groups,

managing movement, and giving appropriate feedback can increase planning and classroom-management pressure. For ordinary teaching, small adjustments may be more sustainable than parallel lesson plans: optional prompts, extension questions, varied preparation time, role rotation, selective script use, and a basic completion requirement with an optional challenge.

2.4 Supportive Oral Feedback and Willingness to Communicate

The availability of speaking opportunities does not mean that learners will use them. Willingness to communicate concerns readiness to enter communication at a particular moment rather than linguistic ability alone. Learners may possess enough language to respond but remain silent because they feel uncertain, exposed, or concerned about mistakes. In EFL settings, confidence, anxiety, task demands, classroom relationships, and previous interactional experiences may all affect participation.

Peng and Woodrow's [4] study of the Chinese EFL classroom is particularly relevant because it links willingness to communicate with communication confidence, motivation, learner beliefs, and perceptions of the classroom environment. The study does not show that any single activity increases willingness to communicate. It does support attention to the conditions under which speaking feels more or less accessible. Modeling, familiar topics, preparation time, predictable routines, and limited prompts may reduce uncertainty, while supportive responses may help learners continue after hesitation.

A supportive classroom should not be equated with praise without guidance. Learners need both psychological access and pedagogical purpose. Positive responses can acknowledge genuine effort, persistence, self-correction, or willingness to accept a more demanding role, but learners also need feedback that helps them produce clearer and more independent language.

Oral corrective feedback refers to responses to spoken language containing an error or other problematic form. Lyster et al. [5] distinguish broadly between reformulations, which provide a more target-like version, and prompts, which encourage learners to retrieve or construct a correction. Reformulation may be useful when a learner lacks the form or when interaction needs to continue quickly. A prompt may be more appropriate when the learner appears able to self-correct with limited assistance.

The timing of feedback should reflect the purpose of the activity. More immediate intervention may be appropriate in short accuracy-focused practice, whereas frequent public correction during a role-play or performance may interrupt interaction and increase exposure. Delayed feedback allows teachers to note recurring problems and address representative examples after the task. It can shift attention from an individual mistake to a shared language issue, although immediate support remains necessary when an error prevents understanding or task completion.

Peer assistance can also help sustain interaction, but it should remain a cue rather than a substitution. A partner may supply a keyword, initial sound, gesture, or brief reminder before allowing the original speaker another opportunity to continue. Teachers can similarly move from less explicit to more explicit support: a pause or gesture, repetition of the relevant part, a keyword, peer assistance, and finally reformulation when necessary.

Feedback should remain selective. In interactive speaking tasks, teachers may notice grammar,

pronunciation, vocabulary, intelligibility, turn-taking, coherence, and volume, but attempting to correct every issue can overload young learners and transform communication into continuous evaluation. Priority can be given to problems that obstruct meaning, relate directly to the lesson focus, recur across learners, or are within learners' current capacity to modify.

The relationship between feedback and willingness to communicate is therefore not a simple opposition between correction and encouragement. Correction does not necessarily reduce participation, and praise does not necessarily increase it. The effect of feedback depends on its form, timing, visibility, interpersonal tone, and relationship to the task. In this article, prompts, self-correction, peer cues, reformulation, delayed feedback, and collective encouragement are examined as instructional choices intended to balance participation, communicative continuity, and attention to language form. No claim is made that these practices caused measurable changes in willingness to communicate or accuracy.

3. Context and Reflective Approach

3.1 Teaching Context

This reflective account is based on regular teaching conducted in a private after-school English program in China. The class consisted of 12 Chinese EFL learners aged 9 to 11. All learners had prior experience in private English courses and were familiar with basic vocabulary, sentence patterns, and simple everyday exchanges. However, their spoken performance was uneven. Some learners responded relatively confidently in familiar situations, whereas others relied more heavily on short answers, memorized expressions, written prompts, teacher assistance, or support from more confident peers.

The class was mixed in terms of linguistic readiness, processing speed, confidence, and willingness to participate. These differences became particularly visible during interactive speaking activities. Some learners initiated exchanges quickly and volunteered for larger speaking roles, while others hesitated, waited for prompts, or avoided extended responses. The instructional aim was therefore not to divide learners into permanent ability groups, but to create shared speaking activities in which the amount of support and level of challenge could vary.

The five activities were implemented across five regular weekly lessons during a period between February and April 2024. Each lesson lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes. The activities were Mingle/Question Hunting, Restaurant Role-Play, Storybook Theater, Poster Making, and an English Fair. All five were designed and taught by the teacher as part of normal classroom instruction rather than as a formal research intervention.

3.2 Nature of the Article

This article is a reflective pedagogical practice account rather than an empirical intervention study. Reflective practice in language teaching can help teachers examine the relationship among their principles, classroom decisions, and actual practices and generate locally grounded pedagogical knowledge [12]. The purpose here is to examine the teacher's instructional decisions across the five activities, with particular attention to task design, differentiated scaffolding, participation structure,

feedback, and classroom adjustment.

The article does not attempt to measure changes in speaking proficiency, motivation, willingness to communicate, or language accuracy. No pre-test, post-test, control group, questionnaire, interview, recording, or formal observation instrument was used. The activities therefore cannot support causal claims about learning outcomes.

Instead, the article considers how the activities were structured, what forms of support were provided, what practical difficulties emerged, and how the teacher adjusted the lessons in response.

3.3 Source Materials

The account draws on original instructional materials prepared and used during the five lessons. These included lesson plans, question cards, interview templates, menus, dialogue models, visual task cards, speaking frames, role instructions, performance criteria, and English Fair materials.

These materials provide evidence of the planned procedures, prompts, role arrangements, and differentiated task requirements. They do not provide direct evidence of measurable learning gains or changes in individual student performance.

Some original materials contained images, icons, or layout elements adapted from publicly available online sources or templates. These visuals are not reproduced in the article. Any sample materials included in a later manuscript version will be redrawn in an anonymous, simplified, and copyright-safe form.

No student photographs, recordings, videos, identifiable written work, or direct quotations are included.

3.4 Retrospective Reflective Process

The reflective review was conducted after the teaching period. The teacher revisited the original instructional materials and reconstructed the implementation of the five lessons through retrospective reflection.

To organize the reflection consistently, each activity was reviewed using the same guiding questions:

- How was the speaking task structured?
- What forms of support were available?
- How were differences among learners addressed?
- What participation or management problems emerged?
- How did the teacher adjust the activity?
- What limitations became visible during implementation?

The account is not based on formal coding or independently verified classroom data. It should therefore be understood as a practitioner interpretation of classroom experience rather than as an objective record of learner behavior. The reflective process moved beyond description by connecting recurring classroom decisions and difficulties with the theoretical concepts reviewed earlier, while remaining limited by the available materials and retrospective perspective [12].

The recurring areas used to organize the reflection included task structure, forms of scaffolding, differentiated challenge, participation difficulties, feedback, role allocation, and classroom-management

adjustment. These areas served as practical organizing categories rather than as a formal coding framework or a newly proposed theoretical model.

3.5 Scope and Evidence Boundaries

The article is restricted to the teacher's instructional materials and retrospective pedagogical reflection. It does not include identifiable student data, individual scores, student quotations, photographs, recordings, or student-produced artifacts. The institution, city, campus, teachers, and learners are not named.

Descriptions of learner participation are presented cautiously as teacher recollections or perceptions rather than as contemporaneous observation data. The article does not claim that the activities caused measurable improvement in speaking proficiency, accuracy, motivation, or willingness to communicate.

3.6 Focus of the Reflection

The five activities are examined in relation to four broad areas:

1. task and participation design;
2. differentiated scaffolding;
3. supportive feedback and teacher adjustment;
4. classroom constraints involving time, unequal participation, excitement, and management.

These areas organize the activity descriptions and the later discussion.

4. Description of the Five Activities

4.1 Mingle/Question Hunting

Mingle/Question Hunting was designed to create repeated learner-to-learner speaking opportunities beyond teacher-led questioning. It was implemented in two related forms: a timed rapid-questioning activity and a structured interview followed by a short presentation.

In the timed version, each learner used question cards and moved around the classroom to ask as many different classmates as possible within a fixed period. The task was completed individually, and the number of completed exchanges provided a simple competitive element. Repeated use of similar question structures allowed learners to reuse familiar language with different partners.

In the second version, learners used a fixed interview template to record whom they interviewed, what they asked, and how the other learner responded. They later reorganized this information into a short whole-class presentation. Learners were allowed to hold the worksheet during the presentation, although reduced reliance on notes received additional recognition. This created a progression from supported questioning and note-taking to more extended individual output.

The teacher modeled the questioning procedure and presentation structure before the activity. Question cards reduced the need to generate questions spontaneously, while the interview template supported note-taking and organization. Learners who required more support could refer directly to written questions and notes. More confident learners were encouraged to ask follow-up questions, give fuller answers, or present with less dependence on the worksheet.

Procedural support was also necessary. Learners were told how long they had, how to change partners, what counted as a completed exchange, and how the final comparison or presentation would be organized. The teacher monitored movement, encouraged learners to approach different classmates, and redirected those who focused mainly on speed.

In the teacher's recollection, the timed version generated considerable enthusiasm but also made differences in confidence more visible. Some learners approached classmates quickly, while others hesitated or relied heavily on the written cards. The competitive element sometimes encouraged rapid questioning, incomplete responses, or attention to quantity rather than clarity.

The interview-and-presentation version created a different challenge. Although the worksheet helped learners organize information, some depended on it closely during the final presentation. Quieter learners also appeared more exposed when speaking before the whole class. The teacher responded by allowing continued use of notes, giving additional wait time, and providing brief prompts when learners lost the sequence. Complete memorization was not required.

Feedback depended on the purpose of the task and the time available. Keyword prompts, gestures, peer cues, and teacher reformulation were used selectively when a learner could not continue. When time permitted, brief whole-class feedback followed the activity. When time was limited, the teacher noted recurring problems and selected representative examples for collective reformulation rather than interrupting every exchange or publicly correcting individuals.

The two versions placed different demands on learners. The timed activity emphasized initiation, repetition, and rapid response, whereas the interview version required listening, note-taking, reorganization, and short public presentation. The activity was designed to provide an accessible entry point through question cards, repetition, visible templates, and optional note use, while follow-up questions, fuller responses, and reduced dependence on notes offered additional challenge. Its main limitation was that a high number of exchanges did not necessarily indicate balanced participation or high-quality language use.

4.2 Restaurant Role-play

Restaurant Role-Play was designed to provide a familiar communicative context in which learners could practice asking for information, making choices, responding politely, and managing a short exchange. Learners usually worked in pairs, with one acting as the customer and the other as the server. Roles were exchanged after each round so that both learners practiced different speaking responsibilities.

The task began with teacher modeling. The teacher demonstrated the basic sequence of the interaction, including greeting, asking for an order, responding to questions, confirming choices, discussing quantity or price, and closing the exchange. Learners first practiced with a model dialogue before replacing details such as food, drinks, quantities, prices, and preferences.

The menu and dialogue model provided the main support. The menu offered visible vocabulary and prices, while the model gave learners a clear interactional structure. Learners who required more support could refer directly to both resources. More confident learners were encouraged to use different

combinations, add polite expressions, ask follow-up questions, or speak with less reliance on the written dialogue.

The activity developed through horizontal and vertical expansion. Horizontal expansion involved changing content within the same restaurant situation, such as food, drink, quantity, price, preference, and polite expressions. Vertical expansion made the interaction less predictable through scenarios such as identifying an incorrect total, asking about ingredients, clarifying an order, or sustaining a longer exchange.

Preparation time was provided because the task involved role allocation, longer turns, and content choices. Pairing was sometimes arranged to balance confidence and support. The teacher monitored whether one partner was controlling the exchange and reminded learners to exchange roles and speaking turns.

In the teacher's recollection, the restaurant context was engaging because it connected language with a recognizable situation and concrete materials. At the same time, some learners depended closely on the dialogue model and reproduced it without adapting the language. More confident learners sometimes supplied answers or moved the exchange forward before their partners had completed a turn.

The teacher responded by reducing support gradually. Learners could first use the complete model, then work from selected phrases or keywords, and later attempt a freer exchange. When a learner hesitated, the teacher used gestures, keywords, or a brief prompt before providing a fuller reformulation. During early model-based practice, key expressions could be corrected more directly; during freer role-play, minor errors were sometimes left temporarily so that the exchange could continue.

Restaurant Role-Play therefore provided a shared communicative context with varied levels of challenge. Its main tension concerned support and independence: the dialogue model made the task accessible, but excessive reliance could turn the exchange into reading, while removing support too early could prevent some learners from continuing.

4.3 Storybook Theater

Storybook Theater was designed to extend spoken production through a familiar narrative context. The teacher offered a limited number of well-known stories, including Alice's Adventures in Wonderland and Cinderella, and each group selected one. Keeping the choice limited helped ensure that the plot, language demands, and number of roles remained manageable.

Role allocation began with group discussion. Learners first negotiated who would take each part, and the teacher intervened when disagreements or obvious imbalances emerged. The narrator role was offered to volunteers. If no learner volunteered, the role was assigned by drawing lots. When a less confident learner was selected as narrator, the learner was allowed to refer to the script and received additional guided reading and rehearsal with the teacher.

The performances generally followed the original plot, although learners could paraphrase lines when necessary. Early rehearsals were completed with access to the script, while the final performance encouraged reduced reliance on it. Full memorization was not compulsory. Groups usually rehearsed two or three times in class.

During rehearsal, the teacher supported pronunciation, intonation, facial expression, gesture, turn-taking, and group coordination. If a learner forgot a line, support could include a keyword or gesture from the teacher, a cue from a peer, or a brief return to the script. The choice depended on the learner and the situation.

The teacher prepared simple props, and learners could create additional items at home for their own roles. These learner-made props were optional and did not affect evaluation. Their purpose was to support role involvement and contextual understanding rather than artistic production.

Performance criteria were displayed in English before the activity and included pronunciation, fluency, facial expression and gesture, cooperation, and independence from the script. The teacher explained each criterion and gave brief examples. After each performance, learners took part in peer evaluation or voting using the same criteria, followed by selective teacher feedback.

In the teacher's recollection, the familiar story context, assigned roles, rehearsal, and visible criteria made the performance more manageable for some learners. Difficulties remained, however: language load was uneven across roles, narrators carried more responsibility, some learners relied heavily on scripts, and forgotten lines could interrupt group flow. The teacher responded with additional rehearsal, flexible script use, and peer cues that supported rather than replaced the speaker.

Storybook Theater combined group support with individual speaking responsibility. Its main challenge was balancing structure with independence: too much reliance on the script could reduce performance to reading, while removing support too early could prevent some learners from completing their roles.

4.4 Poster Making

Poster Making was designed to combine content learning, collaborative planning, visual organization, and oral presentation. The teacher provided several topics, and each group selected one from a limited set. Examples included how rain forms and conditions for seed germination. Limiting the options kept the content manageable while still allowing some learner choice.

Before group work, the teacher introduced core concepts, key vocabulary, and the basic sequence related to each topic. Learners then received printed English materials prepared by the teacher. Some texts had been simplified or adapted, while others were used more directly when the language was accessible. The teacher guided learners to circle keywords, underline important information, and identify difficult sentences that required explanation.

The input stage provided both content and language support. Learners were expected to select relevant information, organize it visually, and explain it orally rather than copy complete passages. Optional speaking frames such as First, Then, Finally, and This part shows... supported sequencing without becoming mandatory scripts.

Each learner was assigned responsibility for a specific part of the poster or presentation. Roles could be allocated through volunteering, drawing lots, a short competition, or group voting. One learner usually acted as the main presenter, introducing the topic and managing the overall sequence, while other members explained the sections for which they were responsible.

The teacher monitored both language and participation during preparation, attending to grammar, pronunciation, vocabulary, coherence, role fulfillment, and whether speaking responsibility was distributed evenly. These areas were not recorded through a formal observation instrument but guided classroom decisions and later reflection.

In the teacher's recollection, the activity created a useful connection among reading, visual organization, and oral explanation. It also placed several demands on limited lesson time because groups needed to read, select information, make decisions, produce the poster, rehearse, and present. As a result, final feedback was sometimes shortened.

Unequal participation was another concern. More confident learners could take control of content decisions, writing, or presentation, while less confident learners contributed mainly through drawing or other non-speaking tasks. The teacher responded by assigning each learner a clearly defined responsibility and requiring every group member to speak about one section. When time was limited, recurring language problems were addressed through representative whole-class examples rather than extended feedback for every group.

The activity also showed that visual production can compete with oral goals. Learners sometimes focused heavily on decoration and left insufficient time for rehearsal. The teacher therefore needed to remind groups that the poster was a support for speaking rather than the final purpose of the task.

4.5 English Fair

The English Fair was designed as a multi-station speaking activity in which learners completed a series of individual oral tasks. It included a Q&A Booth, a Picture Talking Booth, and a Sentence Game Booth. Each booth focused on a different form of spoken production, while all provided short opportunities to respond, describe, and produce language.

Learners completed the fair individually and could choose the order in which they visited the booths. Before the activity, the teacher explained how each booth operated, what counted as completion, how stamps were awarded, and how learners should move when a booth became crowded. Clear procedures were necessary because the activity involved free movement, multiple roles, and simultaneous interactions.

Each booth contained three levels of task difficulty. Learners requiring more support could respond with words, short phrases, Yes/No answers, or prompted responses. Learners working at the expected level produced complete simple sentences or managed a short exchange. Learners ready for greater challenge were encouraged to give two or three connected sentences, extend an answer, or respond more spontaneously.

The teacher assigned each learner a starting level based on prior classroom knowledge. Learners generally completed the same level across the three booths so that the overall demand remained manageable. The level was treated as temporary rather than fixed. After completing the assigned task, learners could attempt a more demanding level when time allowed.

Each booth was hosted by one or at most two learners. Host roles were offered to volunteers first and

then distributed through rotation. All hosts received a whole-class explanation of the procedures and used booth-specific language cards. Q&A hosts received support for asking, responding, confirming, and following up; Picture Talking hosts used description prompts; Sentence Game hosts used language for reading, completing, and producing sentences.

Stamps were awarded for task completion rather than language quality. Student hosts confirmed whether the visitor had completed the task, while the teacher remained responsible for monitoring language performance and feedback. Additional recognition could be given for fuller expression, voluntary challenge, or active participation, but the teacher made the final decision.

Classroom movement required active management. The teacher limited the number of learners waiting at each booth, redirected learners when queues became too long, monitored language use, supported hosts, and intervened when task responsibilities became uneven. In the teacher's recollection, the fair generated considerable enthusiasm but also increased noise, excitement, and management pressure. Some learners appeared to rush, prefer the easiest booth, or focus more on collecting stamps than on the quality of speaking.

The teacher responded by separating completion from language evaluation, clarifying host responsibilities, limiting waiting numbers, and offering optional higher-level challenges. After the fair, the class took part in a brief oral reflection about favorite booths, difficult tasks, and possible future challenges. These responses were not collected as formal data but informed later teaching decisions.

The English Fair combined differentiated task levels, learner choice, host roles, booth-specific language support, completion stamps, optional extension, and movement management. Its main strength was the provision of multiple entry points within one shared event. Its main challenge was balancing engagement with language quality, fairness, time, and classroom control.

5. Reflective Findings and Discussion

5.1 Multiple Forms of Scaffolding

Across the five activities, support did not come from one technique. Learners used question cards, dialogue frames, keywords, scripts, and booth language cards, but these resources worked only when the task procedure was also clear. Modeling, role rotation, visible stages, time limits, and assigned responsibilities helped learners understand what they were expected to do. Pictures and physical materials gave them something concrete to refer to, while the teacher and classmates provided wait time, cues, rehearsal, or a reformulated expression when speech broke down. This combination is consistent with accounts of scaffolding as both planned task support and assistance that develops during interaction [2] [10].

The support was contingent. A brief hesitation might require only wait time or a gesture, whereas another learner needed a keyword, sentence beginning, peer cue, or renewed access to a script. Peer support was useful only when it helped the original speaker resume the turn rather than replacing that contribution. Support was also reduced gradually, for example from a full dialogue to keywords, from script-supported

rehearsal to reduced reliance, or from predictable questions to follow-up questions.

The classroom record cannot show that these supports improved speaking ability. What it does show is how the teacher tried to make participation possible at particular moments. Sometimes a gesture was enough; at other times a learner returned to a script or needed a peer cue. Scaffolding was therefore less a fixed sequence than a series of small decisions about who needed help, what kind of help was useful, and when that help could be reduced.

5.2 Achievable Entry Points and Graduated Challenge

One practical pattern appeared repeatedly: learners were given a manageable way into the task before they were asked to do more. Written questions, model dialogues, familiar stories, printed resources, and rehearsal reduced the initial burden of speaking and made the procedure easier to follow. Differentiated instruction similarly emphasizes shared purposes without assuming that every learner must begin with the same level of support or complexity [3] [11].

Challenge was then increased through longer responses, reduced written support, less predictable interaction, public performance, greater responsibility for organizing information, or more demanding roles. The English Fair used temporary starting levels with optional extension; Restaurant Role-Play moved from a model dialogue to content substitution and problem scenarios; interview notes and story scripts remained available when needed, while reduced reliance was encouraged rather than imposed uniformly.

The teacher recalled that some learners chose fuller answers or more visible roles after completing an easier version of a task. That memory cannot be treated as evidence of improved proficiency or willingness to communicate. It does, however, point to a useful design question: after a learner completes the supported version, what is the next reasonable step? Support without a next step can become a ceiling, while challenge without an entry point can leave some learners outside the activity.

5.3 Supportive Feedback and Low-risk Participation

Feedback served two immediate purposes: it addressed language problems and helped learners stay in the interaction. Rehearsal, familiar routines, wait time, and a positive response to a genuine attempt were used to make speaking less exposing. This interpretation is broadly compatible with research connecting willingness to communicate in Chinese EFL classrooms with communication confidence and perceptions of the classroom environment [4]. Willingness to communicate itself, however, was not measured here. Feedback moves varied according to the learner and task. Keywords, gestures, partial sentences, and questioning expressions encouraged self-correction when the learner appeared close to the target form; peer cues were used selectively; and teacher reformulation supplied a model when the language was not readily available. This flexible combination reflects the distinction between prompts that elicit learner-generated repair and reformulations that provide a target-like form [5].

The timing of feedback was often decided in the moment. During tightly modeled practice, the teacher could correct a form immediately. During Mingle, role-play, presentations, or performances, repeated interruption was more likely to break the exchange or draw unwanted attention to one learner. Some

recurring problems were therefore noted and addressed later with the whole class. In Storybook Theater, visible performance criteria also made expectations less surprising. These choices involved a trade-off between keeping the activity moving and drawing attention to language form; the account does not establish an effect on confidence or accuracy.

5.4 Structuring Individual Responsibility

Pair and group work increased opportunities for interaction but did not guarantee meaningful participation by every learner. More confident learners sometimes controlled exchanges, answered for partners, or assumed the most visible role. The teacher therefore built individual responsibility into the tasks through role rotation, section ownership, individual presentation turns, character roles, and host duties.

These structures were most useful when planned from the beginning. They gave quieter learners a predictable point of entry and made it harder for one learner to complete the task for others. Nevertheless, a formally assigned turn could still involve mechanical reading or minimal contribution, so monitoring needed to include preparation and decision-making as well as final speech. Role allocation combined learner choice with teacher intervention when participation became clearly uneven.

Responsibility was differentiated rather than identical. Learners were not required to produce the same amount or degree of spontaneity, but each was expected to make a meaningful and observable contribution. Peer assistance was limited to cues that enabled the original speaker to continue. This approach aligns with differentiation as flexible access to shared goals rather than identical performance requirements [3].

5.5 The Tension between Engagement and Classroom Control

The most engaging features of the lessons also created some of the hardest management problems. Movement, competition, choice, and rewards increased visible involvement, but they could also lead to noise, rushing, crowding, and uneven contribution. In timed Mingle, completing many exchanges did not necessarily mean that learners were speaking clearly or independently. At the English Fair, stamps helped sustain participation, yet some learners focused more on collecting them than on extending an exchange. For this reason, task completion and language quality could not be treated as the same thing.

Procedural scaffolding was central to managing this tension. Visible sequences, role definitions, time limits, queue limits, turn-taking expectations, and completion criteria shaped who could speak and whether interaction continued. Time was equally important: complex tasks required explanation, preparation, movement, performance, and feedback within 45 to 60 minutes. When activities overran, final review was reduced to selected recurring issues.

Looking back, several adjustments seem more important than adding further activities: limit the number of rounds, prepare materials before the lesson, reduce decorative work, shorten presentation time, and reserve a few minutes for feedback. These are ordinary management decisions, but they shape who has time to speak and whether the teacher can respond to what learners produce. In this sense, classroom management was part of the scaffolding rather than a separate concern.

5.6 Synthesis

The two research questions can be answered at the level of classroom practice. The activities used written language support, demonstrations, materials, role structures, peer assistance, and teacher feedback, with easier starting points and optional extension for learners who were ready. The recurring problems were also practical: stronger learners sometimes took over, some learners relied heavily on prompts, competitive formats encouraged speed, and movement reduced the time available for feedback. The teacher responded by rotating roles, limiting peer substitution, changing task demands, delaying some correction, and making procedures more explicit. These are retrospective practitioner judgments, not measured learning outcomes.

6. Pedagogical Implications

The reflection points to several practical considerations for similar classrooms. A speaking task first needs a workable entry point. Modeling, familiar contexts, prompts, rehearsal, and optional script use can help a learner begin, but they should not automatically become permanent features of every turn.

Support and challenge also need to vary. One learner may need a sentence frame or extra preparation, while another can be asked a follow-up question, given a less predictable role, or encouraged to speak with fewer notes. The useful question is not whether support has been removed on schedule, but whether the learner can take a little more responsibility without losing access to the task.

Group work needs equally careful planning. A completed poster or performance can hide the fact that one learner did most of the speaking. Role rotation, ownership of a section, individual turns, and host duties make contributions easier to see. Peer help is valuable when it returns the floor to the original speaker, not when it replaces that speaker.

Feedback should fit the stage of the activity. Immediate intervention is necessary when communication stops or the task cannot continue. During freer interaction, a prompt, brief reformulation, peer cue, or delayed class review may be less disruptive. Encouragement is most useful when it refers to a specific attempt and is followed by guidance that helps the learner speak more clearly or independently.

Finally, engaging activities need equally deliberate management. Movement, rewards, competition, and choice work better when roles, time signals, turn-taking, and completion criteria are visible. Fairness in a mixed-ability class does not mean giving everyone identical help. It means keeping the communicative purpose shared while giving each learner a realistic way to contribute and, where possible, move beyond the first supported attempt. These are practice-based implications rather than a tested model.

7. Limitations and Conclusion

7.1 Limitations

This article is limited by its retrospective and practice-oriented design. The activities took place during routine teaching and were not planned as an intervention study. There were no pre- or post-tests, questionnaires, interviews, recordings, formal observations, or comparison group. The account therefore

cannot establish changes in proficiency, confidence, motivation, willingness to communicate, or accuracy. The discussion depends on the teacher's later reconstruction of the lessons. Original materials helped to recall task procedures, but they did not provide an independent record of learner behavior. No student quotations, recordings, photographs, or individual performance data are included. The classroom details should therefore be read as practitioner interpretations, with the possibility of selective memory.

The setting also limits transferability. The class consisted of 12 learners aged 9 to 11 in one private after-school program in China. The five activities differed in purpose and complexity, and they cannot be compared as controlled versions of the same task. Larger classes, public-school settings, and learners with different backgrounds may require different procedures and forms of support.

The theoretical reading is selective. Scaffolding and differentiated instruction organize the main analysis, while willingness to communicate and oral corrective feedback are used only where they help interpret particular classroom choices. Task-based language teaching, cooperative learning, motivation, and multimodal learning might offer other useful perspectives, but developing all of them would have moved the article away from its narrower practical purpose.

For these reasons, the article should be treated as a reflective account of teaching decisions, not as evidence that the activities were effective. A future study could build on the same classroom questions with recordings, learner interviews, student work, systematic observations, or repeated speaking tasks within an appropriate formal research design.

7.2 Conclusion

This article considered how five familiar speaking activities were adapted for one mixed-ability group of young EFL learners. Rather than asking whether the activities raised test scores, it examined the decisions made before and during Mingle/Question Hunting, Restaurant Role-Play, Storybook Theater, Poster Making, and an English Fair.

The main lesson from the reflection is straightforward: an attractive activity is not enough. Learners also need to know what to do, have language they can begin with, and hold a role that cannot easily be taken over by someone else. Question cards, dialogue frames, scripts, pictures, peer cues, rehearsal, and role rotation were useful because they addressed these immediate classroom needs.

The amount of support could not be identical for every learner. Some were ready to move away from a script quickly, whereas others still needed keywords or an additional rehearsal. The teacher's task was therefore to keep the shared activity intact while adjusting the route into it and the next step available to each learner.

The activities also exposed tensions that are easy to overlook when they are described only as motivating or communicative. Competition encouraged rushing; movement created crowding; choice sometimes reinforced unequal roles; and lengthy preparation reduced feedback time. These problems did not make the activities unsuccessful, but they required active decisions about timing, grouping, role allocation, and correction.

Differentiated scaffolding offers a useful practical way to describe those decisions. It draws attention to

temporary support, different starting points, and gradual responsibility without assuming that all learners will perform in the same way. In this classroom, its value lay in helping more learners enter a shared speaking task and making it harder for a few confident speakers to carry the whole activity.

The article makes no claim that the five activities caused measurable improvement. Its more limited contribution is to show, in concrete classroom terms, how a teacher adjusted familiar speaking tasks when learners differed in readiness, confidence, and independence.

8. Declarations

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