

E-ISSN: 3026-569X; P-ISSN: 3026-734X





Blended Snowballing Discussion Technique and Collaborative Learning Pedagogy in EFL Speaking

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords: Active Learning; Blended Snowballing Discussion; Collaborative Pedagogy; Speaking

Received: 25 Mar 2024 Revised: 29 Apr 2024 Accepted: 17 May 2024

ABSTRACT

The objective of this qualitative case study is to investigate BSD issues, solutions, and collaborative learning approaches in EFL courses. As part of a case study, researchers examined the design and gathered information through open-ended interviews, documents, digital recorders, forum group discussions (FGD), and pertinent literature. All the gathered data were examined through exploration. Accordingly, the FGD forum was used to its fullest potential during the data analysis process for cross-checking, validation, verification, and confirmation. Teachers used pre-teaching (planning), cooperation (observing, supporting, consolidating), reflection, and evaluations to achieve their goals. In this way, teachers encounter issues such as (1) choosing topics based on what students already know, (2) lack of group cohesion, (3) distinction between group and individual assessment, (4) lack of constructive interdependence, (5) variety of learning styles, and (6) inactivity. More research will be required in the future, as the study only examined a limited sample of people. There are recommendations for future experimental language lab classes. Blended EFL classes typically require the construction of an EFL curriculum through collaboration and technology, based on spontaneous speech activities, to ensure students' preparation before and after their participation.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Teachers face difficulties in teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in the classroom (Alenezi et al., 2023; Badrkhani, 2021; Foncha et al., 2015). Both teachers and students partly contributed to this issue. In this case, students perceived the difficulties of the course book, proficiency level, and diversity of interests (Thang et al., 2012), English simple past (Chan, 2018), and sociocultural factors such as learning communicative motivation, bad grammar, and verb tense (Isma et al., 2023; Shin, 2008), in contrast to teachers' perspectives on the lack of teacher experience in online teaching (Taghizadeh & Basirat, 2022), linguistic factors, and supportive resources as socio-ecological factors (Shestunova, 2022).

The fact that it is expected to be taught EFL in an Indonesian setting, despite the difficulties teachers experience as stated in the preceding paragraph, underlies at least four factors. Firstly, it is a required course to be taught to secondary students up to the higher education level because it is a part of the national curriculum. Secondly, professional Indonesian lecturers must be accredited. Thirdly, obtaining a postgraduate degree and international scholarships is the last and most difficult step. Another factor to consider is that students who are open to participating in exchange programs for international students are expected to apply for this to be proficient (Ardyningtyas et al., 2023).



E-ISSN: 3026-569X; **P-ISSN:** 3026-734X





Therefore, the current study presents something novel and distinctive. That is the teachers' method of engaging and attracting speaking students interactively in the classroom through blended snowballing discussion (BSD). This is done by considering the significance of teaching EFL to students face-to-face in the classroom and online (Butarbutar, 2019; Handayani et al., 2023; Isma, Basri, et al., 2024; Isma, Sudewi, et al., 2024). To address the issues mentioned in the previous section, teachers' strategies (Jarvis et al., 2022; Lestari & Isma, 2019), techniques (Chien, 2019), approaches (Mak & Chik, 2011), and methods (Sam, 2016) have been modified. In addition, the effectiveness of small-group discussions in enhancing students' speaking and communication abilities has been empirically demonstrated in numerous studies (Jiang & Dewaele, 2019; Tan et al., 2020). Silvana et al. (2018) examined the efficacy of snowball discussions in the classroom.

However, no empirically supported components or study literature on the blended-snowballing discussion (BSD) technique for EFL speaking have been discovered and well documented. The current work is desperately needed to close this gap and address the difficulties faced by dimensional teachers (Scherzinger & Brahm, 2023; Taghizadeh & Basirat, 2022). The current study responds to the following research questions by addressing teachers' strategies, collaborative learning pedagogy, factors influencing promotion, and hurdles to BSD in EFL-speaking course terms: (1) How do EFL instructors apply BSD to speaking courses? (2) What is the collaborative learning pedagogy of BSD? (3) What difficulties do EFL teachers face when applying for the BSD?

1.1 An Overview of Links Between BSD and CL Pedagogy

The blended snowball discussion (BSD) describes itself as a way to improve students' speaking skills by participating in active verbal snowball idea exchanges at the same time and at different times. Bond (2001) pointed out that discourse creates and shows a deeper meaning to get students more interested in learning.

Theoretically, BSD techniques underpin constructivism and the active learning environment theory. According to constructivism, knowledge cannot be passed on from one person to another. Constructivism further asserts that cognitive processes react to environmental stimuli to create knowledge, which then results in a learner's model representation as a result of experience. Even if this outcome is not ideal, sustainability education is still necessary (Michael & Modell, 2003). Similarly, Michael & Modell (2003) defined active learning as a student's participation in the development, evaluation, and repair of representational mental models. In conclusion, both theories contend that when students actively participate in classroom activities, their cognitive ability develops. As a result, each student has their own experiences, which are referred to as outcomes learning.

Furthermore, constructivist educational theory emphasizes active learning in both traditional and online learning environments. In this sense, turning a class into a small-group discussion is one of the best ways to implement active learning. Students can collaborate and have discussions in groups to purposefully solve this challenge as well as any others. The idea behind constructivism, active learning, and cognitive development learning theory (Vygotsky, 1978, 1987) is that knowledge is improved and can be gained through group discussions that build on each other. By sharing information with another group member and the entire group, this strategy fosters learning autonomy. It is crucial to remember that BSD involves small-group principles such as processes, roles, leadership, and cohesion (Orlich et al., 2010).

In light of collaborative pedagogy, Peterson & Barron (2007) claimed that there is snowballing potential for ideas to be stimulated from a single person to larger groups up to the entire classroom. By considering BSD's core as a questioning approach that assists students in learning to know, do, and live together, it is assumed for a better understanding: (1) Originality of thought (2) personal accountability, (3) teamwork skills, (4) learning readiness, (5) seeking for help, (6) speaking up, (7) stimulus and response, (8) active learners, and (9) engagement in addition, constructivism, engagement theory, and active learning in philosophy are built on top of BSD.



E-ISSN: 3026-569X; P-ISSN: 3026-734X



Similarly, students' complexity and uniqueness influence how they come into contact with, produce, and utilize knowledge (Wertsch, 1997). BSD is a student-centered method that places great emphasis on learning how to do things and what to do. Engagement is the key to student activities in BSD. Parallel to this, Kearsley & Shneiderman (1998) asserted that the BSD process results from the construction of cognitive processes, such as creation, problem-solving, reasoning, decision-making, and evaluation by students when they participate in learning activities. In addition, when students are given more opportunities to work in teams, they are more motivated to be attentive and collaborative. The longer, the bigger. As in the snowball design in Figure 1, teachers provide questions for solo responses, then two, three, four, or five group members, and finally the entire class.

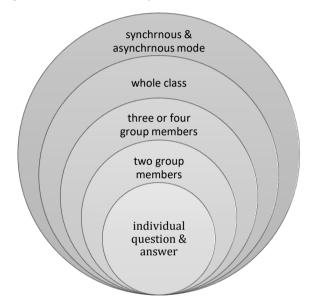


Figure 1. Blended Snowballing Discussion Technique

2. **METHODS**

This study focused on the integration of snowball discussions and collaborative learning approaches in EFL classrooms. It was designed as a narrative case study involving ten professional EFL teachers' best experiences and narrations. This study considers the diversity of student backgrounds and learning styles, such as passive students remaining passive and dynamic students growing increasingly active. Discussions took place over four weeks, both in the classroom and via Zoom.

This study used an open-ended interview guide to explore BSD and its effectiveness. Real-time WhatsApp group discussion (WAG) was used to facilitate the sharing of sensitive experiences and ideas from diverse backgrounds. A literature review was conducted using Google Scholar, Taylor & Francis, and the ERIC journal database to identify relevant sources and references. Field notes were used to gather data relevant to the study context.

A digital recorder was used to preserve and save important data from students, who were also the subjects of the study. Empirical materials such as handouts, teacher evaluation lists, journal reflections, student answer sheets, lesson plans, portfolios, personal philosophy statements, and motivation lists were used to support the development of students' speaking skills during collaborative learning.

Data collection, analysis, and validation involved interviews with five students, ten teachers, and an offline forum group discussion (FGD). Participants provided helpful advice, including the importance of giving each position its due while forming groups, and the need to include technology in the design of collaborative learning for students in the interim classroom.



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3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Regarding the aims of the study and in response to the research questions mentioned previously. "What strategies does a teacher use for blended snowballing discussions in EFL speaking?" The following section presents the answers to this question. In light of students' and teachers' interview results, it was found that teachers employed some of the following strategies to improve students' EFL speaking during BSD technique implementation: To implement collaborative learning, teachers are essentially required to ensure students interact more with one another. This study examined the teacher competencies needed for successful implementation, including planning, monitoring, supporting, consolidating, and reflecting competence (Kaendler et al., 2015, 2016).

For further details, the interview results found that teachers applied BSD via blended learning venues, notably (1) zoom meetings, WhatsApp groups (WAG), chat room features, and electronic mail (e-mail) for online discussion, and (2) face-to-face classroom interaction.

(1) Pre-teaching (planning): Teachers carried out the following as part of their preparation: (a) learning objectives (goals). (b) student learning styles. (c) collaborative activities (syntactical learning). (d) instruction, and (e) dividing students into a limited number of groups, all of which have an impact on learning. To facilitate snowball conversation, the topic was first presented to the students individually, then to small groups of two, then to larger groups of four to five, and finally to the entire class. Students were divided into groups based on their speaking abilities so that they became familiar with BSD.

Most of the time, one group consisted of five students, each taking on a distinct duty, such as file-up loaders or documentarians, presenters, summarizers, and information seekers. They found that this strategy helped them to interact more, take more responsibility, and see things more clearly, as shown in Figure 2 (Kaendler et al., 2015, 2016).

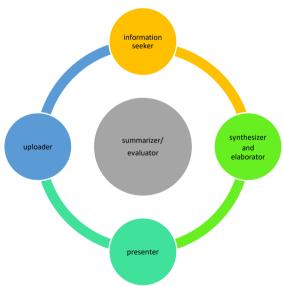


Figure 2. Role-based Group Formation

(2) Observing (while collaborating): During this stage, teachers are in charge of monitoring how well their participation, interaction, and performance in three different domains: collaborative, cognitive, and metacognitive. Posing possibilities as problem solvers, asking, and answering in-depth questions, and responding to inquiries with various justifications and viewpoints are examples of cognitive activity. Orienting, planning, comprehending, checking for errors, and evaluating all instances of metacognitive activity that occur concurrently.



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- (3) Support: Before involving students in collaborative activities, the teacher must identify any misunderstandings or errors that need to be clarified. Students receive both direct and indirect support from instructors, as they inquire about and elaborate on concerns regarding teachers' capacities to adopt collaborative learning in the classroom. They also mentioned that teachers might encourage students to give advice, make recommendations, ask thought-provoking questions, or provide instructional justifications. Help is available in the form of scaffolding from more experienced learners, support from peers, and timing help.
- (4) Consolidating is a metacognitive stimulating activity. Throughout this process, the students were required to participate in group presentations and class discussions. Therefore, they must discuss problems with specific solutions for each group. This method allows teachers to highlight each student's success in front of the entire class while fostering positive reliance. The consolidation process benefits from teachers' observations and interventions as well.
- (5) Reflection and evaluation: After the joint implementation process is completed, teachers must evaluate their performance. Teachers compare their teaching goals, actions, and students' accomplishments as a result of self- and student reflection. Reflection seeks to evaluate every aspect of collaboration and to choose a novel strategy for subsequent execution.

As a response to the second research question, this study notes collaborative learning pedagogy within three elements: social, academic, and psychological. There is scientific evidence of the benefits of collaborative learning in the following three areas: (a) Social impact: collaborative learning has a positive social impact on learners in several ways, including through the development of diverse understandings among learners, the creation of learning communities, the facilitation of collaborative modeling and practice, and the support of social systems' impact on the mind. Collaborative learning affects learning psychologically in addition to having an impact on social learning. For instance, collaborative learning can enhance self-esteem by promoting student-centered learning, reducing fear, and fostering a positive attitude among teachers. (b) Academic impact: improving students' capacity for higher-order thinking, encouraging them to engage more actively in their learning, boosting their performance, showcasing problem-solving strategies, and improving student outcomes; interpersonal skills, negotiating, social interaction skills, fluency, pronunciation, critical thinking skills, presentation skills, sociolinguistic competence, strategic communicative competence, developing discussion skills, grammatical ability, and discourse competence; (c) psychological impact: reducing students' anxiety and improving students' self-esteem, as shown in Figure 3.

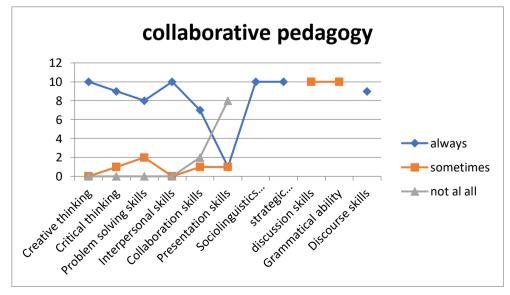


Figure 3. Collaborative Learning Pedagogy



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Parallel to the third research question, regarding BSD implementation, teachers faced such challenges when implementing collaborative learning. Concerning the results of the open-ended interview and field notes noted during the FGD session, explored during collaborative learning activities, teachers highlighted a few challenges, such as (1) activating topics chosen with students' prior knowledge, (2) a lack of group sense of belonging, (3) differentiation between group and individual assessment, (4) a lack of positive interdependence, (5) learning style diversity, and (6) inactivity.

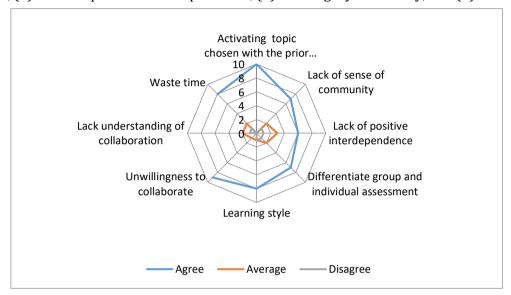


Figure 4. Teacher's Challenges During BSD Implementation

Pertinent to the interview results, the first student in line receives a question, followed by a small group of two or three students, and finally the entire class. Therefore, this has become a topic of discussion. One student tried to answer as many questions or topics as she could when she was given a question or topic discussion without repeating others' responses because this strategy showed that students should think more critically and creatively. Others would then be challenged to see beyond themselves to respond differently. With the help of their opinions, this method forced the students to talk in-depth about certain topics of discussion. Each student tried to share something unique or different from what the previous student shared previously. As a result of their involvement in each response to the questions posed, students became more engaged and active. This growth is in line with the goal that teachers set for prior learning during the pre-teaching phase. Teachers in this phase hope that by the end of the BSD session, their students' academic skills will improve.

These results are consistent with Micari & Pazos's (2021) hypothesis that small-group learning, particularly in higher education, might assist students in enhancing their academic performance beyond grades. Additionally, by fostering social cognition rather than just a habit, collaborative learning may help students feel more confident about their performance in class (Abdullah et al., 2023; Nur & Butarbutar, 2022). This relates to the research of Anderson et al. (2001), who claimed that the snowball-asking approach distributes ideas among a group's talking and thinking. Talking and thinking are therefore successful in EFL speaking. When students participate in collaborative learning, they must listen to different points of view and explain and defend their beliefs. This can be difficult for their social and emotional lives (Nur & Butarbutar, 2022). Thus, students started to build their unique conceptual frameworks instead of simply using an expert's framework. People can talk to each other while learning in a group, present and defend their ideas, trade different viewpoints, look at topics from different angles, and participate.



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Because each student is responsible for their personality and the group's success, they all become more involved and less passive. This is consistent with the constructivism theory, which Vygotsky popularized in 1978 and focused on students creating their knowledge. Uniquely, when snowballing questions make people think about what they already know and have done, their knowledge helps them develop ideas, opinions, or even answers simultaneously. The distinctiveness and diversity of group members' learning styles also helped, and they can be designed in the pre-teaching phase (Harding, 2023).

The second strategy teacher use is to form groups based on their functions. Each student played a role in supporting the BSD, and they were expected to collaborate. The important components of collaborative learning were effectively implemented by dividing and assigning responsibilities for gathering information to start topic discussions, summarizing and elaborating, uploading to YouTube or Google Classroom, and distributing resumes through email groups. In the BSD case, function-based roles and snowballing are both very important and mutually helpful ways to foster positive face-to-face student interactions. This is the core concept of collaboration (Johnson & Johnson, 2018).

Additionally, this research on the BSD process completely supports Michael and Modell's (2003) contention that for active learning to be meaningful, students must create information rather than transmit it, which is one of the responsibilities of teachers. Importantly, teachers' roles and responsibilities as facilitators also include adopting certain paradigms and mindsets to manage students' learning processes. This includes reflecting on what has been done to increase student participation (Butarbutar, Ruing, et al., 2023; Butarbutar, Weda, et al., 2023; Butarbutar & Leba, 2023) in speaking activities. In this vein, BSD's findings have been empirically supported.

The use of mixed BSD face-to-face interaction in the classroom and synchronously by teachers is another empirical technique. For this reason, teachers chose Zoom Meetings over online chat groups on WhatsApp and discussion boards (WAG). Because speaking online in a group can lessen students' fear in a different way than speaking up individually, it is more effective and efficient to use this method for EFL speaking. There have been instances where a face-to-face conversation in class felt awkward because someone focused on you through eye contact (Butarbutar, 2018). Students would rather engage in this discussion online. This proof supports Brookfield's (2011) assertion that online discussions might teach students to think critically and pay closer attention to others. Online discussions teach students to think critically and pay closer attention to others. Moreover, technology has the potential to encourage students' idea sharing and construction using tools such as online chat discussions on WAG (Klemm, 2005).

Participants believed that BSD's collaborative learning pedagogy has social, academic, and psychological effects on how well a second study topic is developed. One advantage of collaborative learning from student group contact, one-to-one and in front of the full group, is the enhancement of social and collaborative skills. To reach the group's goal, it may be important to work with people who come from different places, have different genders, and learn differently. Therefore, developing collaborative skills is important. Some of the things that are discussed are taking charge, managing time and conflicts, taking ownership or responsibility, interacting with others, acting as a peer scaffold (Ardiningtiyas et al. 2023), working together to make the group successful, negotiating, and developing group dynamics. Vygotsky came up with the social cognitive learning hypothesis in 1978, which talks about how a student's cognitive development affects how he or she interacts with other people and their surroundings. Thus, students can build their knowledge when they actively respond to a given snowball inquiry. Although they acknowledged that only a few students were involved, the results of the teacher interviews and online discussions showed that every student was more active than in past collaborations, even though active students were more active and passive students were more passive.

Concerning collaborative pedagogy, BSD improves students' academic results and EFL speaking abilities. In this way, students' academic success demonstrates their capacity for higher order (HOTs),



E-ISSN: 3026-569X; **P-ISSN:** 3026-734X





creativity, and critical thinking. When the material is related to the student's circumstances and real-world issues, it has a greater impact. For instance, "How is your perspective in terms of education in Papua?" was the focus of this study. A teacher handed the first student a snowball and hurriedly tried to respond to her own experiences as well as what she knew, felt, and thought about education in Papua New Guinea. The next snowball was tossed to the following collaborator after she had finished discussing her exploration-related experiences to elicit a more detailed explanation. Group members and the classroom were retained as the snowball continued to be tossed until it reached its final destination. Each student reacts to pre-formatted roles both individually and in groups. Similarly, Hughes (2002) claims that language output can be influenced by subjects, behaviors, and fresh or outdated knowledge during discussions in a real-time setting. It can also be applied to clarify misunderstood spoken texts.

Surprisingly, a partner or more experienced member can offer support to a student who lacks an opinion but wants to examine an issue. By doing this, we concur with the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) theory proposed by Vygotsky in 1978. This method closely resembled that of Ardiningtiyas et al. (2023) and Wentzel & Watkins (2002), who investigated reciprocal inquiry as a teaching strategy to enhance the academic context through peer interactions and more knowledgeable others.

Therefore, it is evident that collaborative learning enhances speaking and critical thinking abilities. Understanding, defending one's point of view, applying a concept, evaluating advice, providing evidence and arguments, pondering, sorting information, drawing conclusions, and discussing the benefits and drawbacks of something are just a few of the many tasks with which critical thinking can assist (Cheng et al., 2020). The study's conclusions show that to improve their skills, students were required to think critically. Instructor interviews and a check of the data bolster this.

Speaking performance was developed in the BSD, related to the students' grammatical ability. Along with this, online discussion and document analysis posit that grammatical competence can be thought of as the ability to understand and communicate meaning. It places a lot of emphasis on assisting students in understanding the language code, which includes lexical, syntactic, semantic, phonological, and pragmatic rules so that they can use these grammatical components to express themselves and comprehend the meanings of words. Both spoken and written language depend on this level of ability. The teachers polled for this article offered two perspectives on grammar instruction, form-based and function-based, for the benefit of their students' understanding. According to Hymes (1972), the following grammatical concepts are taught to students: scenes, players, aims, acts, sequences, keys, instruments, and genres.

Most teachers agreed with Harmer's (1991) ideas on how to teach grammar. He said that there were three main steps to teaching grammar: presentation, practice, and presentation. In this case, teachers gave the students information and pushed them to pay more attention to grammatical structures, such as sentences and phrases, which were described in stages. During the practice phases, teachers gave students tasks based on a certain topic and asked them to rewrite the text to fit different situations. This was done to improve communication. The teachers then gave their students a variety of instructional materials to discuss in groups with their friends or fellow students. Its objective is to aid students' grammatical knowledge and communication abilities simultaneously (Dovey, 1998; Wyatt & Dikilitaş, 2021). The final stage is production. Communication tactics are less restrictive in practice. Instructors pushed their students to develop communication skills through current debates. The BSD findings are parallel to those of Begum & Lakshmi (2023), who sum up the ICT-based collaborative learning model as effective for enhancing English grammar and vocabulary.

For the most part, teachers' challenges during BSD implementation are paramount. The success of a collaboration depends on three factors: (a) the strategies and self-regulation skills that each participant brings to the table; (b) the mutual support that participants give to each other, which helps each participant develop their self-regulation skills (Butarbutar et al. 2019); and (c) shared or collective



E-ISSN: 3026-569X; P-ISSN: 3026-734X





regulation of learning, which includes meta-communicative awareness and successful coordination of strategies (Leba et al., 2021).

Concerning the problems we discussed earlier, the teachers' point of view was that they did these things to fix the teamwork problems that arose during the forum group discussion. These people understand the idea of collaborative learning and its advantages in the present and future. The following techniques were used: effective grouping techniques, including breaking up classes into the smallest groups possible (Betz & Nash, 2022; Yazedjian & Kolkhorst, 2007), assigning roles to group members, establishing group goals, encouraging peer tutoring and evaluation (Houston & Lazenbatt, 1996), creating groups based on learning styles (Hendry et al., 2005), allowing students to choose their topics, providing discussion starters, and allowing for peer oral correction. Similarly, Park & So (2014) mentioned that a lack of discussion skills and psychology can be challenging for teachers for professional development in collaborative learning communities.

Concerning our findings, Michael & Modell (2003), who emphasize constructivism and active learning in Piaget and Vygotsky, are right behind us. In this study, students actively participated in learning and producing words, phrases, and speech for as long as possible, by combining BSD with online and in-class engagement. Consequently, encouraging speaking is a learning goal.

4. CONCLUSION

This study aligns with Vygostky's social constructionist learning theory, emphasizing the importance of cognitive processes and growth in students' interactions with their environment. This supports Pennington's (1995) teaching method, which encourages group work and personal accountability. BSD is a discussion technique that encourages interactive learning, which leads to increased confidence and fluency. It also boosts student engagement with peers and teachers, thereby promoting active learning. This study suggests that successful EFL speaking relies on confidence in speaking ability and self-esteem. Teachers should reflect on their role in enhancing student interactions and technology integration. The BSD technique aligns with lifelong learning, 21st-century skills, and collaboration skills for a better future. However, given the small sample size, a broader examination will need to be conducted in the future. Future recommendations for experimental language lab classes are then made. Most of the time, blended EFL classrooms require the development of EFL curricula through collaboration and technology based on impromptu speech activities to ensure students' readiness before and after their participation.

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