

# An interactive role-based strategy to enhance EFL learners' speaking performance

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## Abstract

This qualitative case study explores educators' competencies, group activities, roles group division, and students' perceptions of roles-based engagement in interactive online discussions to enhance English as a Foreign Language (EFL) speaking skills. The study employs semi-structured interviews with 28 students and one educator, complemented by online observations of focus group discussions, field notes, and a review of relevant literature to collect data. The findings reveal that the educator demonstrated three core interaction competencies, which facilitated effective group activities. These activities supported speaking skills through peer grammar repetition and pronunciation correction, cognitive development through critical analysis and opinion confirmation, and social interaction through praising group accomplishments and problem-solving. The participants' ability to recall and coordinate roles and responsibilities also enhanced their interactive skills. The results highlight that roles-based group division fosters a supportive and collaborative environment, encouraging active participation and improving EFL speaking performance. This study concludes by emphasizing the importance of structured group roles in promoting interactive discussions and recommends further research on role-based strategies, technology-assisted learning, and fluency-oriented speaking tasks in EFL settings.

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interactive learning;  
online discussion;  
speaking EFL

## Introduction

The use of interactive learning strategies in the teaching and learning of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) has been extensively studied. For instance, Babiker (2018) and Butarbutar et al., 2023 emphasized that educator preparation programs should incorporate interactive methods to ensure effective teaching and practice. González-Lloret (2020) concluded that course design and teamwork are essential components of interactive learning. Similarly, Ebru (2018) investigated how encouraging group activities positively affects students' ability to work collaboratively. Parallel to this, Fatimah (2019) employed the mantle of the expert strategy, involving students in group projects to reduce their anxiety while practicing EFL speaking in class. Moreover, Chen et al. (2021) and Le et al. (2018) argued that creating virtual reality contexts enhances active participation, interaction, and self-efficacy, which are critical for improving speaking skills.

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Empirical data demonstrate that educators have adopted various strategies to enhance students' speaking skills, transitioning from traditional face-to-face classroom interactions (Wang & Chen, 2012) to blended learning models that incorporate synchronous and asynchronous formats. Studies by Al-Samarraie & Saeed (2018), Butarbutar et al., (2023), Çakiroğlu & Erdemir (2019), Coll, Rochera, & De Gispert (2014), Magen-Nagar & Shonfeld (2018), Molinillo et al. (2018), Sun & Yuan (2018) highlight the benefits of small-group online interaction supported by educator feedback. These studies emphasize that interactive learning strategies, including feedback on assignments, social interaction, and learning content, can serve as a substitute for evaluation to improve students' linguistic, social, and academic performance (Macdonald, 2003; Daradoumis, Martínez-Monés, & Xhafa, 2006; Redmond & Lock, 2006; Hossain et al., 2022). While promoting active student participation is essential, educator feedback and support also play a critical role (Willis & Willis, 2007). Educators often select group discussion topics to foster student collaboration and raise awareness of the importance of teamwork (Wu & Wang, 2023). Occasionally, students are given the freedom to choose their own topics, which can appeal to their prior knowledge and experiences. This approach aligns with Vygotsky's (1978) constructivist learning theory, which posits that learners engage more effectively when they connect new information with their background knowledge and experiences (Chen & Hwang, 2022; Manabe, Hwang, & Chuang, 2021).

Effective collaboration in online discussion forums requires group members to actively participate, ensuring that discussions flow smoothly and productively (Sadeghi & Kardan, 2016). Roles within group discussions can help structure interactions and raise participants' awareness of their responsibilities (Martin & Rose, 2003). Benne and Sheats (2020) introduced the concept of growth and productivity of a group, emphasizing the importance of functional roles to create and sustain effective group activities. They categorized these roles into three types: group task roles, group maintenance roles, and individual functional roles. This framework aligns with task-based learning methodologies proposed by Willis & Willis (2007), which assign specific roles and tasks to students. Simultaneously, Butarbutar (2021) noted that while task-based approaches are effective for teaching EFL speaking, they also present unique challenges. To gain a deeper understanding, the current study adapts the group task roles outlined by Benne and Sheats (2020) for use in interactive online discussions. In this modified framework, group members assume specific roles to address discussion topics collaboratively: (1) Starter/Contributor—initiates group activities and facilitates problem-solving; (2) Information Seeker—gathers and clarifies information on discussion topics; (3) Opinion Seeker/Giver—offers suggestions and insights; (4) Feedback Provider—evaluates group performance and provides constructive criticism; (5) Decision-Maker—synthesizes ideas and draws conclusions; (6) Uploader—shares group outputs via platforms like YouTube, WhatsApp, or Zoom; and (7) Speaker/Narrator—presents or narrates the group's outcomes during discussions.

Despite advancements in Computer-Supported Collaborative Learning (CSCL), the role of interactive, role-based discussions in enhancing EFL speaking skills remains underexplored. While CSCL has been widely used to develop other language competencies, its potential for improving speaking abilities has received limited attention. This study aims to address this knowledge gap by investigating the effectiveness of role-based interactions in promoting EFL speaking skills during online discussions. Additionally, this research aligns with the need for innovative strategies that combine task-based learning with technology-supported methods,

responding to calls for further studies in this area. Therefore, to facilitate our understanding, the following research questions were addressed in this study.

1. How can educators use interactive role-based competencies to promote EFL speaking?
2. How effectively can online interactive role-based learning foster EFL speaking? (Performance and nervousness can be seen.)
3. What exactly do participants in role-based online discussions do in groups?
4. How does role-based online discussion appear to students?

This study contributes to the existing body of knowledge on interactive learning by providing insight into how role-based online discussions can foster EFL learners' speaking skills. The findings are expected to benefit educators by offering practical strategies to implement role-based tasks that enhance student participation and collaboration. Additionally, this study addresses a critical gap in the research on the use of CSCL to improve speaking abilities, providing a foundation for future work on technology-assisted interactive learning in EFL contexts.

## Method

### Research Design

This study employed a qualitative case study approach that was both exploratory and aligned with the research objectives. As defined by Yin (2009), a case study aims to address research questions through an in-depth examination of specific instances or phenomena in real-life contexts. The boundaries of this case study were clearly determined at the outset, focusing on classroom behavior and role-based online interaction in an EFL learning environment. The current study represents the initial phase of an investigation designed to uncover fresh insights into EFL students' participation and interactions using technology. It is labelled as a case study because the participants' characteristics and academic setting are unique and not generalizable to other contexts.

The study was conducted using WhatsApp Group (WAG), which serves as the primary online learning platform for speaking practice. WAG was integrated with Zoom for video conferencing and Google Docs for collaborative tasks, aligned with the research questions and objectives outlined earlier. Ethical considerations were fully addressed as participants voluntarily joined the study without compensation. The Dean of Musamus University provided ethics approval for this research with number of references: Number: /0680/UN52.6/TU/2023.

### Participants

The study involved 29 participants, consisting of 28 undergraduate EFL students and 1 educator. The participants were purposefully selected based on their active engagement with WAG as a medium for speaking practice and the educator's frequent use of the platform to facilitate the instructional tasks. The purposive sampling technique ensured that the participants met specific criteria relevant to the study, enhancing the depth and richness of the collected data. The students were divided into four role-based groups to facilitate online discussions and maximize their interactions. The groups are structured as follows: information seekers and givers, opinion seekers and givers, evaluators and feedback providers, decision

makers/conclusion uploaders. The educator assigned specific roles to each group during the first meeting, and tasks were completed via WAG, YouTube uploads, and Zoom presentations. Each group consisted of seven participants and their collaboration was closely monitored to identify patterns of interaction and speaking performance.

Instruments

Multiple data-collection instruments were used to ensure the reliability and depth of the findings. (1) Semi-structured Interviews: Interviews were conducted with both the educator and students to gather insights into their experiences with role-based interactions during online discussions. This allowed flexibility in exploring the emerging themes. (2) Observation: Online classroom interactions were observed within the WAG, Zoom, and Google Docs platforms to capture real-time participation, communication patterns, and students’ responses to assigned roles. (3) Focus Group Discussions (FGD): An online FGD was conducted with selected participants to encourage in-depth discussions on role-based learning experiences and speaking performance. (4) Field Notes: Observations and reflections were recorded during online sessions to document behavioral patterns and interactions. (5) Document Analysis: The educator’s daily and monthly reports, along with students’ progress control cards, were reviewed to support the findings from interviews and observations.

Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using interactive data analysis models (Miles et al., 2018). The analysis involved three main steps: (1) Data Reduction: simplifying and organizing raw data by identifying key themes and subthemes. (2) Data Display: Presenting the findings in visual or narrative forms to highlight critical insights. (3) Conclusion: Drawing and Verification: Finalizing the interpretations by verifying the results through triangulation and member checking as can be seen in Figure 1.

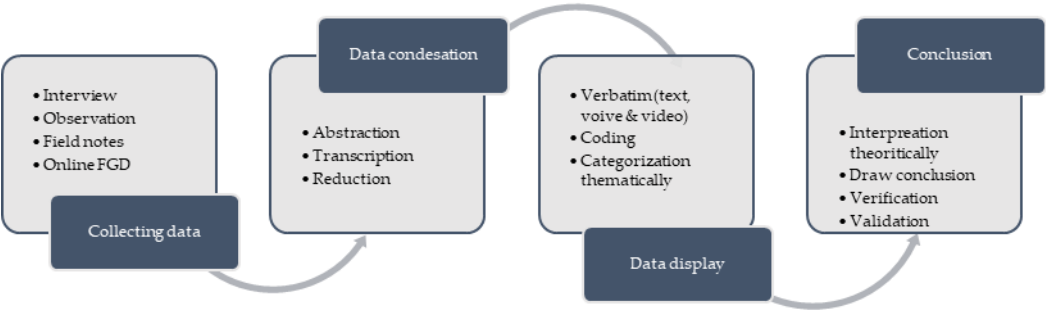


Figure 1. Data analysis technique

To ensure the validity and reliability of the findings, the following measures were undertaken: Triangulation: Data from multiple sources, including interviews, observations, FGDs, and document analyses, were triangulated to provide a comprehensive understanding of the phenomena under study (Miles et al., 2018). (1) Thematic Analysis: The collected data were analyzed thematically following Braun et al. (2023), identifying patterns (themes and sub-

themes) related to role-based speaking performance and interaction. (2) Member Checking: To confirm the accuracy and validity of the findings, participants were provided with preliminary conclusions and given the opportunity to offer feedback. This process ensured that the interpretations accurately reflected the participants' experiences. (3) Peer Review: The educator's feedback was solicited to further validate the findings. Although limited feedback was obtained, the educator highlighted that role-based discussions are most effective when centered on real-world issues relevant to students' prior knowledge (Wallwork, 1997). By combining these instruments and rigorous validity measures, this study ensured a robust and systematic approach to explore the potential of role-based online interaction in enhancing EFL students' participation and speaking performance.

### Results or Findings

In light of the first research question, "What are educator' competencies in implementing interactive roles-based strategies to promote EFL speaking?" The study found that educator applied three base-educator' interaction competencies (ECC) during online discussion. Those competencies are designer, facilitator, monitor, and evaluator. Those competencies and expected students' outcomes during online discussion implementation are seen thematically in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Educator interactive competencies

Base-ECC	Core-competencies	Sub-core competencies	Student outcomes
<b>Designer</b>	Designing learning objectives	Organizing students' learning styles with course materials	Students understood learning objectives
	Interaction instructional	Defining interactive learning	Student's interactive awareness
	Roles-based group division	Each student is divided pertinent with each roles	Student recognizes her/his role
	Chosen topics for weekly group performances	Real-world problem, students prior both bad and good experiences, procedural text-based dialogue, up to date trending news,	Speak up more accurately, confidently, reduce anxiety due to have any prior experience to be shared in group
<b>Facilitator</b>	Explaining learning objectives	Giving clear instruction for online discussion	Learning objectives student's understanding
	Supporting	Providing challenging questions	Student's readiness and engagement
		Maximizing virtual venue for discussion forum such as WAG, chat room feature, Zoom Meet Application, free YouTube channel & Google Classroom	Students' engagement in online discussion venue
		Encourage student to be engaged in all chosen topics discussion	
		Recorded video performances	Students' speaking improvement
<b>Monitor &amp; Evaluator (MONEV)</b>	Self-monitor	Direct observation	Students knowing speaking performances category
		Observation check lists	
		Students diary	

	Peer evaluation	Guided-book peer evaluation	Students' speaking achievement Students' speaking progress
		Oral peer evaluation	
	Formative and summative evaluation	Evaluation did in the middle and end of semester	
	Reflecting	Comparing intended learning goal and students behavior Reflective daily reports	
	Feedback provider	Informing alternative strategy for speaking fluency e.g. web-based speaking tools	
	Oral feedback	Praising, encouraging agreeing or disagreeing,	
	Written or digital feedback	"Thanks for submitting your assignment"	

Table 1 implies that educator competencies played a significant role in interaction success through interactive student engagement. The study noted that speaking performances had increased significantly due to educator intervention to guide and control each student. Otherwise, students who have an active attitude are more active, while students with a passive attitude are more passive. In this vein, educator competencies are essential fuel for interaction. Apparently, in response to the second question, the current study was role-based in order to make student participation more interactive in an online discussion. Its frame is drawn in Figure 2 as well.

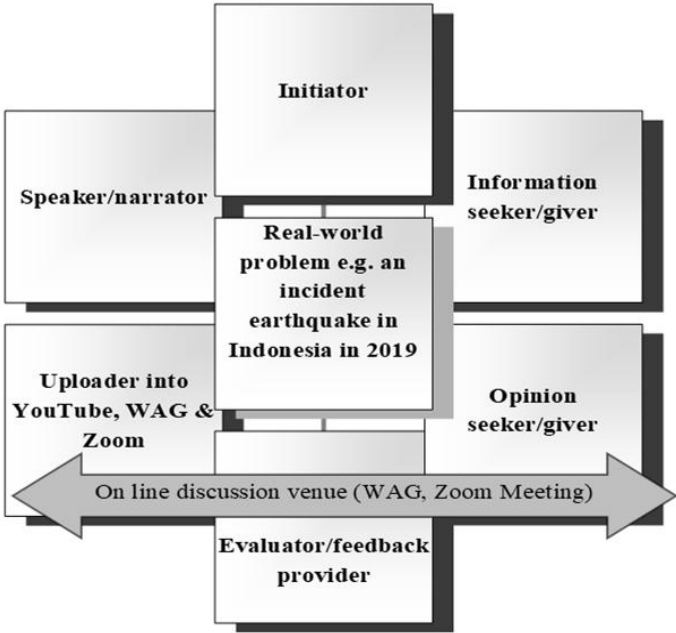
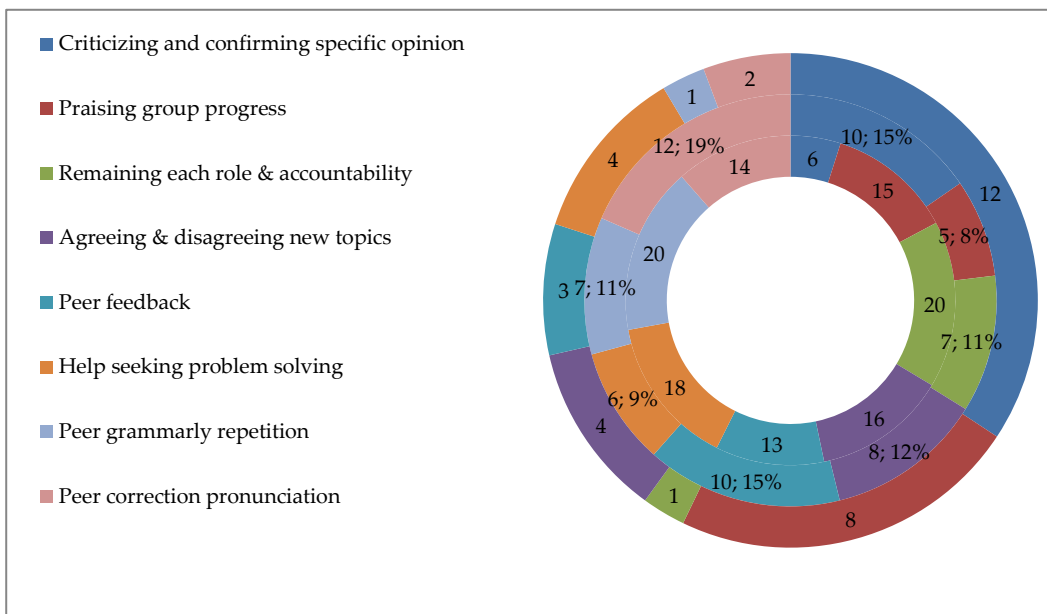


Figure 2. Interactive online discussion tool

Relevant to the third research question, “What exactly do participants in role-based online discussions do in groups?” The study’s empirical evidence is clear: some activities have already been carried out, including chat rooms, discussion forums, search, speak, and share (3S). To sum up, the group activities that students participated in may be broken down into four categories, as shown in Chart 1: cognitive enhancement, social interaction, speaking abilities, and interaction skills.

The following categorization is made: (1) speaking skills involve peer grammar repetition and peer pronunciation correction; (2) cognitive boosting involves criticizing and confirming specific opinions; (3) social interaction entails praising group accomplishments and help-seeking problem solving; speaking skills involve peer grammar repetition and peer pronunciation correction; and (4) interactive skills involve remembering other group members’ roles and responsibilities.



**Figure 3.** Evidence group activities

This issue is related to the fourth research question: how do students respond to role-based online discussion? This opportunity allowed us to categorize people’s perceptions based on (a) language use and performance, such as: [I was at ease in my job, I was encouraged to expand my vocabulary, I was encouraged to speak more fluently but with less precision, and my role had an impact on my performance.] (b) Affective and motivating elements were present [I was content to be a part of this particular group division; I felt secure since I had studied; and I found the session to be boring]. (c) peer tutoring accommodation: [The roles of my peers allowed for my participation; I relished the challenge of my role]. Chart 2 depicts the majority of their perceptions and experiences.

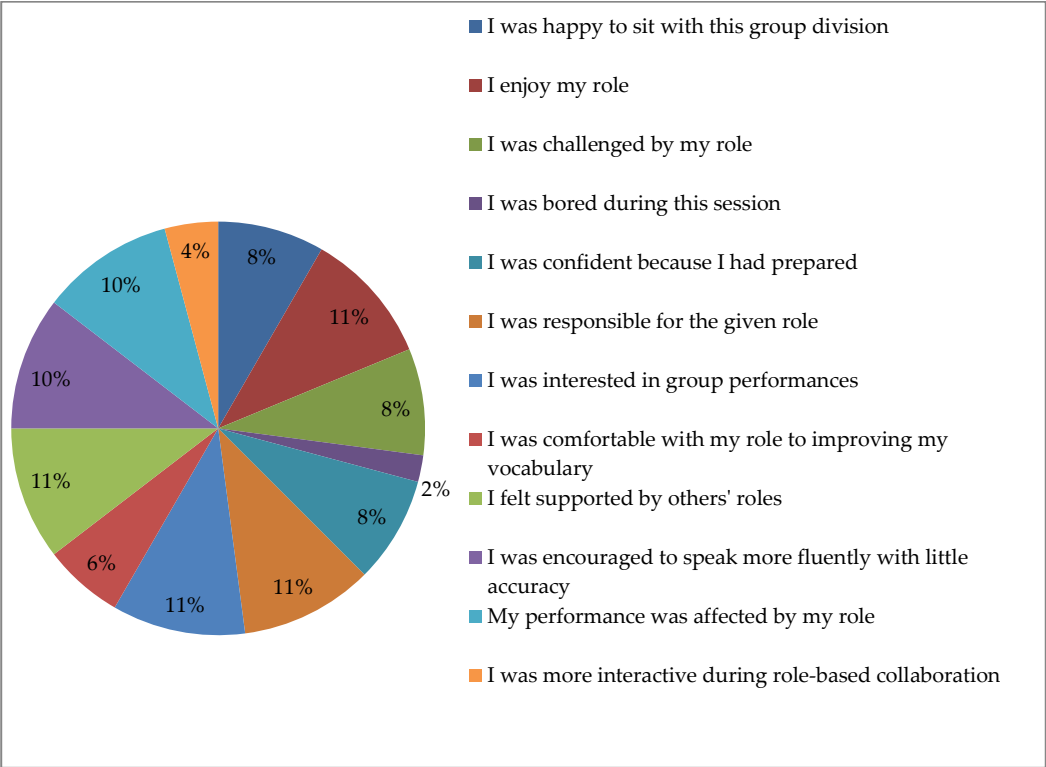


Figure 4. Students’ response of roles-based interaction

Discussion

The goal of this study was to investigate the following questions: (1) How can instructors encourage EFL speaking through cooperative role-based competencies? (2) How well does interactive online role-based learning support speaking English as a Foreign Language? Performance and anxiety were observed. (3) What group members perform in role-based online conversations? (4) How do students perceive role-based online discussion? According to the results of the FGD and interviews, the educator used three fundamental ECCs when participating in online discussions. However, they also serve the capacities of designers, facilitators, monitors, and evaluators (Butarbutar et al., 2023; Butarbutar et al., 2019). The study discovered that learning objectives were created by instructors and designers in accordance with the English language education foundation and core competencies of University Musamus Merauke. Lecturing students are required to have speaking proficiency at the end of the speaking course, according to the university’s curriculum. Educators must first define interactive learning knowledge, describe interactive instruction, and establish their awareness of working interactively to fulfill this goal. After the design phase was completed, the teachers divided the 28 students into four groups based on their roles. In this scenario, each group started working together on the tasks that the educator had given them, including initiating, gathering information or providing it, soliciting or providing opinions, evaluating, recording or uploading, and speaking or narrating.



During this phase, educators monitored their pupils' involvement in the partnership. When an educator observes a passive student behaving in this manner (Thornbury & Slade 2006), they will intervene and instruct the student to participate and contribute to the duration of the discussion. Additionally, the study revealed that when educators supported students in these group activities for promotion, which included topics for weekly group performances, real-world issues, students' prior experiences (both positive and negative), procedural text-based dialogue, current trending news, and, of course, acting on group activities, their speaking EFL was more promoted, they spoke up more accurately and confidently, and they reduced anxiety due to having any prior experience to share. Kaendler et al. (2015) noted the cognitive, interactive, and metacognitive forms of student involvement during monitoring. Educators examined pupils' cognitive abilities by focusing on the questions and explanations they asked and provided. Students' emotional, behavioral, and intellectual engagement effectively demonstrate interactive skills. The planning and comprehension of group members' assigned roles revealed their metacognitive skills. During the monitoring phase, each of the three dimensions was specified.

Baker et al. (2007) used internal and external tasks to test interactions, such as managing interpersonal connections and social interactions. Internal processes such as task management, opinion expression, discussion, and brooding continue throughout this process. According to Gillies & Boyle (2010), these crucial elements have been included to make the adoption of interactive learning more successful. For instance, educators in interactive classrooms must reflect on academic achievement, accountability, group projects, interpersonal skills, interaction abilities, and socializing. According to Abrami et al. (2004), knowledge differentiation between user and non-user interactions pushes educators to better grasp interaction implementation methodologies. Accordingly, Uslu & Durak (2022) claimed that planning, monitoring, and self-regulating procedures could predict learner autonomy. As a result, they emphasize the importance of group engagement in making interactive activities relevant, as Thornbury & Slade (2006) wrote in their book that teachers play a role in arranging students' interactions in conversation.

The results of the open-ended educator interviews showed that role-based strategies in online discussions could help advance speaking EFL. This approach encourages students to take a more active, responsible, and involved role in each group's performance. They were forced to speak up more than usual because they played the role of their classmates. Students were encouraged to speak with confidence while also showing respect for their roles and positions (Park & Seo, 2013). In contrast, the findings of the educator interviews show that in group projects without role-based separation, only one or two interested students approve of the performance. This is consistent with Chase et al. (2020), who stated that instructors should assign speaking assignments to help students participate in pair and group talks. They believed that the main objective of this technique was to boost self-assurance when aiding companions. Similarly, Cetto et al. (2018) claimed that role-based systems, including message providers, takers, and matchers, are crucial for knowledge management.

According to the findings of the students' interviews, the topics selected were relevant to their prior knowledge and experiences, which encouraged them to be more talkative (Nur & Butarbutar, 2022). For instance, because each group member had personal experience with the Indonesian earthquake disaster in 2019, the initiator students' roles did not have significant difficulty setting the tone for the group's conversation. According to Stokols et al. (2008), prior

knowledge, distribution power, and control affect the interaction results. Similarly, educator design group assignments affect the implementation of interactive learning (Gillies & Boyle, 2010). Vigotsky's (1978) learning constructivism theory contends that students' past knowledge, experience, beliefs, and insights form the foundation of learning and provide substantial support for our position in this situation. In addition, empirical evidence has shown that students actively discuss their earlier experiences (Butarbutar et al., 2023; Sauhenda & Butarbutar, 2023). As a result, it is easy for students to speak up in the speaker or narrator role when presenting the evaluator's work. Speaker roleholders can build up a large vocabulary starting in the initiation stage. Speaking with confidence is frequently encouraged through role-based cycle repetition, vocabulary size, fluency, and correctness. According to Bailey & Nunan (2005) and Bailey & Savage (1994), students' fluency and confidence increase when they simultaneously work and engage with pairs and groups of people at the same time. It was also demonstrated that when they worked together, their fluency ratings increased while evaluating their list scores.

It's crucial to keep in mind that assigning students to groups based on their roles motivates them to take responsibility for their roles (Chan et al., 2019), which pushes them to speak up more and more, as the excerpt below shows. [Student\_1: "I like my role as speaker or narrator in this group because my role pushed me to speak up more than I could before due to my responsibility"]. According to Benne and Sheats (2020), functional roles are necessary for groups to develop, be productive, harmonize, and strengthen. Here, we concur with Martin (2000) and Martin & Rose (2003), who claimed that affect, evaluation, engagement, and judgment negotiate emotions when engaging in interpersonal interactions. On the other hand, it is referred to as interdependence or group solidarity rather than rivalry (Johnson, 2003; Johnson & Johnson, 1989). In addition, the group of students recommended by Wang & Xu (2023) will work more collaboratively if they have similar topics, ages, and social relationships. The evidence of our study also clearly attests to the fact that speaking as a productive skill has been promoted in role-based online discussions, including interrupting while other roles are speaking, agreeing or disagreeing with another group's viewpoint, and even when group members are understood. In light of the data, we wholeheartedly embrace what Hughes & Reed (2016, p. 6) wrote in their book "How to Interrupt politely," according to which interrupting is a sociolinguistic skill that is inextricably linked to speaking as a useful skill.

In summary, this situation requires competent educators to make interactive work more comfortable for educators and class group members. In addition, certain interactive learning assignments are chosen while considering what students already know and believe (Palincsar & Herrenkohl, 2002). In addition, the most recent data come from Ardiningtyas et al. (2023), who claim that scaffolding behaviors such as instructors, consultants, modeling, contingent, and evaluators from more knowledgeable others (MKO) can help novice learners enhance their speaking skills when working collaboratively online. In this case, we claim that role-based and scaffolding are used interchangeably to promote EFL speaking. Thus, this study's findings confirm that speaking abilities are more confidently encouraged when one or a small number of peers acknowledge group growth.

According to this study's data, students believe that when they start an online chat discussion session, the initiator roles of the students take the initiative regardless of whether this needs to be affirmed or critiqued by other roles. In a few weeks of meetings, these group exercises were repeated to encourage speaking skills: (1) peer grammar repetition and peer

pronunciation correction; (2) criticizing and confirming particular viewpoints; (3) praising group achievements and help-seeking problem-solving; speaking skills involve peer grammar repetition and peer pronunciation correction; and (4) remembering other group members' roles and responsibilities. I assume that group exercises are repeated to encourage speaking skills. Yes, I am happy with this educational strategy. Student\_2]. We acknowledge Veloutsou & Black's (2020) opinion that role-based members' performance can thrive and harmonize brand community engagement in light of the study's most recent findings.

The results of the student interviews revealed how they felt about taking on different responsibilities and participating in online group discussions. This opportunity allowed us to categorize people's perceptions based on (a) language use and performance; for example, I was at ease in my job, I was encouraged to expand my vocabulary, I was encouraged to speak more fluently but with less precision, and my role had an impact on my performance. (b) Affective and motivating elements were presented. I was content to be a part of this particular group division; I felt secure since I had studied, and I found the session to be boring. (c) My peers' roles accommodated me; I appreciated and grew from my role. The viewpoints of these students are in line with research by Butarbutar et al., (2023), Hasyim et al., 2024 which suggest that students are more courageous to speak up in any situation when teachers provide guidance during group work in blended interactions. Jones & Issroff (2005) evaluated students' opinions in light of the CSCL, and their findings were consistent with ours. They specifically state that the affective and social elements that support student interaction include motivation, curiosity, control, and challenge. In light of this, Hernández-Sellés et al. (2019) also affirm that educator-student interaction serves as a mediator and has an impact on group members' ability to cooperate cooperatively (Butarbutar, 2018). Another factor to consider is the student's viewpoint, which is consistent with Shek & Shek's (2013) analysis and reads as an excerpt: "I can speak up in front of my group after my peer grammar is correct." They classified students' ability to communicate as having social and emotional abilities that boosted their performance. Additionally, students should be mindful of their social conduct and emotions to encourage speaking during online discussions (Järvenoja et al., 2020; Isohätälä et al., 2018).

### Conclusion and Implications

The study's findings revealed that role-based group work has a significant impact on students' speaking performance, cognition, affect, motivation, and outcomes. These findings align with Benne & Sheats' (2020) functional role pedagogy, which emphasizes that group work is more effective when students are aware of their responsibilities. The study confirms that the more productive the students work in their designated roles, the more their speaking skills advance. Role-based discussions enhance students' awareness of their responsibilities within the groups. Students' speaking skills improved as they actively engaged in fulfilling their assigned roles. Group work fosters creativity, critical thinking, and motivation to communicate effectively. Effective teaching methods that emphasize role-based collaboration positively influence student performance and learning outcomes. Understanding and appreciating specific roles within a group improves students' cognitive and affective engagement, while motivating them to perform better.

The findings extend beyond EFL online discussions and contribute to the development of key 21st-century skills, including: interaction, critical thinking, communication, creativity, technology literacy. Understanding students' roles and responsibilities within a group fosters

creativity, encourages critical thinking, and enhances communication confidence. Therefore, the methods teachers use to engage students play a pivotal role in how effectively they fulfill their responsibilities and contribute to group outcomes. Responsibilities within groups promote speaking in EFL contexts. The more educators support speaking, the more aware students become of their group roles. Speaking promotion becomes increasingly effective when diverse student-centered instructional tactics are applied.

The study suggests further exploration of role-based group work through the following strategies. (1) Impromptu role-based discussions without prior teacher coordination. (2) Open-ended speaking diagnostic tasks. (3) Designing an online assessment and evaluation of speaking rubrics. (4) Fluency-Oriented Speaking Tasks. (5) Formation of skill-based groups for 21st-century learners. (6) Technology-assisted Peer Learning Assessment. (7) Examination of gender disparities in interactive abilities. (8) Projects involving pre- and post-group models for interaction. (9) Evaluation of student satisfaction with role-based group divisions in online discussions. These recommendations aim to provide a deeper understanding of role-based group dynamics and enhance EFL students' speaking performance, interaction, and overall learning experiences.

## Declarations

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