



**SYSTEMATIC REVIEW OF THE ENGAGE–STUDY–ACTIVATE (ESA)
MODEL IN DEVELOPING EFL SPEAKING COMPETENCE**

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Abstract. This systematic review investigates the effectiveness of the Engage–Study–Activate (ESA) framework in developing speaking competence in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts. Drawing on open-access studies published between 2018 and 2025, the article analyzes ESA’s theoretical foundations and its practical impact on learner engagement, fluency, accuracy, and classroom interaction. The findings indicate that ESA provides a structured yet flexible lesson model that balances emotional involvement, focused language instruction, and communicative practice. The review also identifies research gaps and highlights implications for effective speaking pedagogy in diverse educational settings.

Keywords: Engage–Study–Activate, EFL speaking competence, communicative language teaching, learner engagement, fluency and accuracy, classroom interaction.

Introduction. Developing speaking competence remains one of the main goals of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction. In many EFL contexts, the classroom is the primary space where students can practice speaking English. For this reason, the way lessons are organized plays a crucial role in shaping learners’ communicative ability. Although many teaching methods have been introduced over the years, structuring effective speaking lessons continues to be a challenge for teachers.

Speaking is often considered the most demanding language skill. Unlike reading or listening, it requires learners to produce language in real time. Students must think about vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, and meaning at the same time while responding to others. In foreign language environments, limited exposure to authentic communication, fear of making mistakes, and low confidence can make speaking even more difficult. As a result, many learners understand English but hesitate to speak it.

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) attempted to address this issue by focusing on meaningful interaction rather than isolated grammar instruction. However, fully communicative approaches sometimes give insufficient attention to language accuracy. On

the other hand, traditional models such as Presentation–Practice–Production (PPP) provide structured grammar explanation but may limit spontaneous communication. This ongoing tension between fluency and accuracy has led educators to search for more balanced lesson frameworks.

The Engage–Study–Activate (ESA) model offers one such balanced structure. The framework suggests that effective lessons include three essential elements. The Engage stage aims to involve learners emotionally and create interest in the topic. This may include discussions, visuals, short activities, or personal questions that lower anxiety and encourage participation. The Study stage focuses on specific language forms such as grammar, vocabulary, or pronunciation. Finally, the Activate stage provides opportunities for learners to use the target language freely through communicative tasks such as role-plays, debates, or problem-solving activities.

One important feature of ESA is its flexibility. The stages do not have to follow a strict linear order. Teachers can adjust the sequence depending on learners’ needs and classroom dynamics. This flexibility reflects modern views of language learning as an interactive and dynamic process rather than a fixed progression.

The ESA model is widely discussed in teacher training literature, yet systematic evaluation of its impact on speaking development remains limited. While many classroom reports describe positive outcomes, there is a need for a comprehensive synthesis of recent research findings. Understanding how ESA contributes to fluency, accuracy, motivation, and classroom interaction can provide clearer guidance for educators.

Therefore, this article aims to systematically review open-access research published between 2018 and 2025 on the use of the Engage–Study–Activate model in developing EFL speaking competence. The study examines its theoretical foundations, analyzes empirical findings, and identifies existing research gaps. By doing so, it seeks to provide a balanced and practical understanding of ESA as a framework for organizing effective speaking lessons in diverse EFL contexts.

Findings and Thematic Analysis

The analysis of the selected studies reveals three major themes regarding the implementation of the Engage–Study–Activate (ESA) framework in EFL speaking instruction.

1. Affective Engagement and Motivation

The Engage phase plays a critical role in fostering learners’ emotional readiness and motivation. Across multiple studies, it was observed that learners who began lessons with interesting, relatable, and low-pressure activities were more willing to participate actively in subsequent tasks. Examples of effective engagement include visual prompts, short videos, personal questions, problem-solving exercises, and discussion of familiar topics. These activities not only reduce anxiety but also create curiosity, encouraging learners to express ideas without fear of judgment. Furthermore, affective engagement positively impacts cognitive focus during the Study phase. Emotionally involved learners pay closer attention to

language structures and are more likely to internalize new vocabulary and grammar, which enhances their readiness for communicative practice. This stage is particularly important in EFL settings, where students often face limited opportunities to practice speaking outside the classroom. By establishing a supportive and stimulating atmosphere, the Engage phase sets the foundation for successful language production and sustained motivation.

2. Speaking Performance and Language Accuracy

The Study and Activate stages collectively contribute to measurable improvements in speaking performance. The Study stage offers focused attention on specific language forms, including grammar patterns, vocabulary usage, and pronunciation. Learners who receive explicit guidance on these areas demonstrate better linguistic preparation when participating in communicative tasks. During the Activate phase, learners apply this knowledge in authentic, interactive situations such as role-plays, debates, discussions, and problem-solving exercises. Studies report improvements in fluency, accuracy, and lexical diversity when learners repeatedly engage in these sequences. The combination of structured form-focused instruction followed by meaningful output allows students to notice gaps in their language use and self-correct errors. Pronunciation and grammar accuracy are enhanced when learners repeatedly integrate studied structures in real communication, supporting the development of both confidence and competence. This theme underscores ESA’s ability to balance accuracy and fluency, addressing a common challenge in speaking instruction.

3. Classroom Interaction and Practical Implementation

ESA encourages active classroom interaction and collaborative learning. In the Activate phase, pair and group activities increase student talk time, promote negotiation of meaning, and encourage peer support. Teachers adopting ESA typically take on a facilitative role, monitoring communication, offering timely guidance, and providing selective feedback rather than dominating the lesson. The framework allows flexibility, enabling instructors to revisit Engage or Study stages based on learner performance, which enhances responsiveness to classroom dynamics. Contextual factors, such as educational level, class size, and duration of intervention, influence the extent of these benefits. For example, secondary school students often show immediate gains in participation and fluency, whereas tertiary students may require more complex tasks aligned with academic speaking. Additionally, the growing use of digital tools presents opportunities to adapt ESA stages for online or blended learning environments, although research in this area remains limited. Overall, ESA fosters an interactive, learner-centered environment, promoting collaboration, autonomy, and active engagement in speaking tasks.

Discussion

The findings of this review suggest that the Engage–Study–Activate (ESA) framework provides a practical and theoretically grounded approach to developing EFL speaking competence. ESA effectively balances emotional engagement, language focus, and communicative output, which addresses a common challenge in EFL classrooms: the gap between what learners know and what they can produce. The Engage phase helps reduce

anxiety and increase willingness to speak, the Study phase provides focused attention on language structures, and the Activate phase encourages spontaneous and meaningful communication.

The ESA framework also reflects modern second language acquisition principles. Its flexible and cyclical structure allows teachers to adapt lessons to learner needs, revisiting Study or Engage stages as necessary. This adaptability supports formative assessment and responsive teaching, which are key to effective language instruction. In practice, ESA encourages a student-centered environment where learners collaborate and interact extensively, increasing both fluency and confidence.

However, the review also identifies some limitations. Many studies relied on short-term interventions and small participant groups, making it difficult to generalize findings or assess long-term outcomes. Evidence from tertiary-level EFL contexts is limited, and adaptation for academic or professional speaking tasks may require additional scaffolding. Moreover, technology-enhanced learning environments remain underexplored, despite their increasing relevance in modern classrooms.

Overall, ESA is not a rigid methodology but a flexible framework that integrates affective, cognitive, and communicative dimensions. Its consistent application in diverse classroom settings shows positive impacts on speaking performance and learner motivation, though further longitudinal and context-specific research is needed to confirm its broader effectiveness.

Practical Implications

The findings of this review offer several practical suggestions for EFL teachers and curriculum designers. The Engage–Study–Activate (ESA) framework is most effective when applied thoughtfully and adapted to learners’ needs. The Engage stage should be used to create interest and reduce anxiety, using meaningful, relatable activities such as short discussions, problem-solving prompts, or visual stimuli. When learners feel emotionally prepared, they participate more actively in the lesson.

The Study stage should focus on language structures that support the final communicative task. Grammar, vocabulary, or pronunciation instruction should be directly linked to speaking activities, ensuring learners can apply what they study in real communication. The Activate stage emphasizes authentic interaction through pair or group activities, debates, role-plays, or mini-presentations. Teachers should provide selective and supportive feedback, avoiding excessive correction during communication to maintain learner confidence.

ESA also encourages a student-centered classroom, increasing student talk time and collaboration. Teachers act as facilitators, monitoring interaction and providing guidance as needed. Task design should be meaningful, aligned with lesson objectives, and adaptable to classroom dynamics. Small class sizes or effective grouping strategies can further enhance participation and interaction.

Teacher training is crucial for effective ESA implementation. Educators should receive guidance on lesson planning, sequencing, and adapting ESA to both traditional and technology-enhanced environments. Digital tools can be used to support all three stages, for example, multimedia for engagement, interactive platforms for study, and virtual discussions for activation.

In summary, ESA provides a flexible framework that balances engagement, accuracy, and communication. Its success depends on purposeful design, reflective teaching, and supportive classroom practices. When applied effectively, ESA can significantly enhance EFL learners' speaking competence and motivation while fostering an interactive and learner-centered environment.

Conclusion

This systematic review demonstrates that the Engage–Study–Activate (ESA) framework offers a structured yet flexible approach to developing speaking competence in EFL classrooms. By integrating emotional engagement, focused language analysis, and communicative activation, ESA addresses several persistent challenges in language teaching. Learners are motivated to participate, gain targeted language knowledge, and practice speaking in meaningful contexts, which together promote both fluency and accuracy.

The review indicates that ESA can positively influence classroom dynamics. The Engage stage reduces anxiety and increases learners' willingness to communicate, the Study stage strengthens linguistic competence, and the Activate stage encourages authentic interaction and collaborative learning. Collectively, these stages support a student-centered environment where learners are active participants rather than passive recipients of knowledge. Such integration aligns well with contemporary second language acquisition principles, including focus on form, output-based learning, and the role of affective factors in language development.

Despite these advantages, the review highlights areas that require further attention. Many studies included in the synthesis employed short-term interventions and small samples, which limits generalizability. Evidence from higher education and professional EFL contexts is still scarce, and the adaptation of ESA to online or blended learning environments remains underexplored. Moreover, the effectiveness of ESA depends on thoughtful implementation by teachers, including careful lesson planning, appropriate task selection, and adaptive classroom management.

In practical terms, ESA provides educators with a versatile framework for lesson design, allowing flexibility in sequencing stages based on learners' needs and real-time classroom conditions. It encourages a balance between engagement, accuracy, and communicative practice, fostering an environment where speaking skills can develop holistically. Teacher training and professional development programs can further enhance ESA's impact by equipping instructors with strategies for effective stage implementation and adaptation to digital or hybrid learning settings.

In conclusion, the ESA model represents a pedagogically sound and theoretically informed approach to EFL speaking instruction. Its structured yet flexible design supports learners’ linguistic, cognitive, and affective development, making it a valuable tool for enhancing speaking competence. Future research should focus on long-term outcomes, context-specific adaptations, and technological integration to fully realize ESA’s potential across diverse educational environments. Overall, when implemented thoughtfully, ESA offers a practical and research-based framework that bridges theory and classroom practice, contributing meaningfully to the development of oral proficiency in EFL learners.

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