

Enhancing EFL speaking competence through literature-based instructional materials: evidence from a quasi-experimental study with Chinese undergraduates

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the effectiveness of literature-based instructional materials in improving English as a foreign language (EFL) learners' speaking fluency and accuracy. Using a quasi-experimental design, 160 first-year Chinese non-English majors were assigned to an experimental group (literature-based tasks) or a control group (conventional textbook instruction) for 16 weeks. Results showed that while both groups improved, the experimental group made significantly greater gains in fluency and accuracy with large effect sizes. Questionnaire responses also revealed higher levels of interest, engagement, perceived usefulness, and speaking confidence among experimental group learners. These findings suggest that integrating literary texts with task-based speaking activities within a structured input-interaction-output framework can effectively enhance both linguistic and affective aspects of speaking development.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Literary texts have long been regarded as valuable pedagogical resources in language education due to their linguistic richness, cultural depth, and affective potential [1], [2]. A substantial body of research has demonstrated that integrating literature into language instruction can enhance learners' reading comprehension, writing proficiency, language awareness, and critical thinking skills [3], [4]. The authentic and contextually embedded nature of literary language provides meaningful input that goes beyond the simplified discourse typically found in conventional textbooks [2], [5]. In addition, the thematic complexity and emotional resonance of literary texts can foster learner engagement and intrinsic motivation, which are essential for sustained language development [5], [6].

Despite these well-documented benefits, existing research has predominantly focused on receptive and written skills, with relatively limited attention to the role of literary texts in developing speaking competence [7], [8]. Few studies that have addressed this issue tend to employ literary materials in a peripheral or unsystematic manner, such as using short excerpts as prompts for discussion or role-play activities [9], [10]. While such practices may enrich classroom interaction, they often lack a coherent instructional framework and are rarely grounded in systematic pedagogical design. Overall, existing studies are limited by small-scale designs, short-term interventions, lack of control groups, and insufficient standardization of measurement procedures, which restrict the generalizability of findings and reduce methodological rigor in applied linguistics research [11].

To address these gaps, the present study draws on literature-based instructional materials systematically developed to support speaking instruction. The materials were designed to integrate literary input with communicative speaking tasks, encouraging learners to engage in interpretation, discussion, and meaning negotiation [9], [10]. Guided by the analysis, design, development, implementation, and evaluation (ADDIE) instructional design framework [10], the materials were organized into thematic units that embed literary texts within a structured pedagogical sequence, combining input exposure with guided interaction and output practice. Prior to implementation, the materials underwent expert review to ensure their pedagogical validity and alignment with speaking instructional objectives [11]. Rather than focusing on the development process itself, the current study examines the effectiveness of these materials when applied in an authentic classroom context.

In doing so, the study aims to provide empirically grounded evidence for the role of literature in speaking instruction. Grounded in established theories of second language acquisition, literature-based instruction in this study is conceptualized as operating through three complementary mechanisms. First, literary texts provide rich and meaningful input, aligning with input-based perspectives, as learners are exposed to authentic language in coherent and emotionally engaging contexts. Second, interpretive discussion and collaborative tasks create opportunities for interaction and negotiation of meaning, which are essential for language development. Third, output-oriented activities such as role-play, retelling, and storytelling promote pushed output, encouraging learners to produce extended speech and thereby facilitating the development of speaking competence. Taken together, these three mechanisms suggest that literature-based instruction functions as an integrated pedagogical system in which input, interaction, and output are sequentially and dynamically connected to facilitate speaking development [1]–[3], [12].

Based on this rationale, the present study aims to examine whether literature-based instructional materials can more effectively enhance English as a foreign language (EFL) learners' speaking competence than conventional teaching materials. Specifically, the study addresses the following research question: To what extent do literature-based instructional materials enhance EFL learners' speaking fluency and accuracy compared to conventional instructional approaches? The novelty of the present study lies in its integration of literature-based instructional materials with structured communicative speaking tasks. This integration is embedded in a coherent pedagogical framework that combines input, interaction, and output. In addition, the study adopts a quasi-experimental design. It provides empirical evidence for the effectiveness of literature-based instruction. This instruction enhances both speaking fluency and accuracy in authentic EFL classroom settings.

2. METHOD

2.1. Research design and participants

This study employed a quasi-experimental pre-test–post-test non-equivalent control group design to examine the effectiveness of literature-based instructional materials on EFL speaking competence [12], [13]. Due to the use of intact classroom groups, random assignment at the individual level was not feasible; instead, existing classes were assigned to experimental and control conditions. While this design limits full experimental control, it enhances ecological validity by reflecting authentic classroom settings.

The participants were 160 first-year undergraduate students from four intact classes at a university in northern China. The four classes were assigned to two experimental groups ($n=80$) and two control groups ($n=80$), respectively. All participants completed both pre-test and post-test assessments, with no attrition observed. Baseline equivalence was established through independent-samples *t*-tests, which revealed no significant differences between groups in fluency or accuracy. Institutional placement records further confirmed comparable proficiency levels.

Although baseline equivalence was established, the non-randomized design may still involve unmeasured pre-existing differences. To mitigate potential threats to internal validity, such as selection bias, maturation, and classroom variability, the study employed the same instructor, standardized instructional time, and consistent assessment procedures across groups. Nevertheless, results should be interpreted with appropriate caution.

2.2. Instructional materials and procedure

2.2.1. Experimental group materials

The experimental group received literature-based instructional materials systematically developed following the ADDIE instructional design framework [10]. The development of the materials was also informed by principles of language materials design emphasizing authenticity, learner engagement, and communicative relevance [14]. The materials comprised four thematic units, each centered on a complete literary text or excerpt selected for linguistic authenticity, thematic relevance, and cultural richness. Representative units included O. Henry's *The Gift of the Magi* (short story) and Robert Frost's *The Road Not*

Taken (poem), chosen for their accessible language, universal themes, and potential to generate meaningful oral interaction.

Each unit followed a structured nine-part pedagogical sequence designed to scaffold speaking development.

- Warm-up (10 minutes): thematic discussion questions activated prior knowledge and personal connections. For *The Gift of the Magi*, students discussed questions such as “What is the most meaningful gift you have ever received?” and “Have you ever sacrificed something for someone you love?”.
- Literary text (15 minutes): students read an abridged excerpt of the literary text, accompanied by vocabulary support with definitions and example sentences to facilitate comprehension.
- Comprehension check (10 minutes): literal comprehension questions (e.g., true/false statements, short-answer questions) ensured basic understanding before proceeding to interpretive and expressive activities.
- Language focus (15 minutes): target vocabulary and functional expressions were explicitly taught. For *The Gift of the Magi*, this included emotion vocabulary (e.g., desperate, determined, worried) and storytelling expressions (e.g., “*there was nothing to do but...*”, “*Many a happy hour she had spent...*”). For *The Road Not Taken*, this included decision-making vocabulary (e.g., *weigh options, take a risk, and follow the crowd*) and hypothetical structures (e.g., “*If I had..., I would have...*”).
- Speaking task 1, expressing opinions (10 minutes): pair-based discussion tasks prompted learners to express and exchange opinions on thematic questions, using scaffolding sentence frames to support production.
- Speaking task 2, role-play (10 minutes): structured role-play activities required learners to adopt character perspectives and enact scenarios derived from the literary text. For *The Gift of the Magi*, students role-played a conversation between Jim and Della, with defined roles and sample dialogue provided.
- Speaking task 3, creative retelling or personal storytelling (10 minutes): small-group tasks encouraged creative extension and personal connection. Options included retelling the story from a different character’s perspective, continuing the narrative, or sharing a personal story about a related theme (e.g., “a choice that made a difference”).
- Assessment (10 minutes): self-assessment checklists and peer feedback forms prompted learners to reflect on their speaking performance and provide constructive feedback to partners.
- Extension/homework: optional tasks included recording a retelling, creative writing, or reflection activities to extend learning beyond class time. Multimodal resources, including video clips of story adaptations, audio recordings of dramatic readings, and thematically related songs, were integrated to support comprehension and model oral expression.

2.2.2. Control group materials

The control group followed the conventional university curriculum, which utilized textbook materials emphasizing situational dialogues (e.g., “*At the restaurant*”, “*Making a phone call*”), vocabulary exercises, and controlled grammar practice. Instructional activities included dialogue memorization, substitution drills, and sentence pattern practice, with limited opportunities for extended oral production or creative expression.

2.2.3. Procedure

Both groups received instruction over a 16-week period (2 hours per week) and were taught by the same instructor to control for teacher-related variability. The study was conducted over an 18-week semester, with pre-testing in week 1, the intervention from weeks 2 to 17, and post-testing in week 18. Classroom observations were conducted weekly to ensure fidelity of implementation, confirming that the instructor adhered to the respective instructional protocols for each group. To reduce potential teacher expectancy bias, the instructor received prior training to maintain neutrality across conditions and followed pre-structured lesson plans for both groups. The instructor was not informed of the specific research hypotheses regarding expected group superiority.

Fidelity of implementation was systematically monitored throughout the intervention to ensure consistency across instructional sessions. Classroom observations were conducted weekly by a trained research assistant who was not involved in the teaching process. A structured fidelity checklist was developed for this study, consisting of key indicators related to lesson structure, task sequence, time allocation, and completion of core instructional components. Each observed session was evaluated by marking whether each item on the checklist was fully implemented, partially implemented, or not implemented.

Fidelity scores were calculated as the percentage of fully implemented items out of the total number of checklist items per session. To enhance reliability, initial calibration sessions were conducted in which the observer was trained using sample lessons and benchmark criteria. Periodic cross-checking of observation

records was also carried out by the research team to ensure consistency in scoring. Across all observed sessions, fidelity levels were consistently high, exceeding 90%, indicating strong adherence to the planned instructional protocol.

2.3. Instruments

Two instruments were used for data collection: speaking tests and a post-intervention questionnaire. Speaking proficiency was assessed through pre- and post-tests, each including two tasks designed to elicit spontaneous spoken production under controlled conditions [14]. Task 1 required participants to describe a picture depicting multiple characters and actions after 1 minute of preparation, followed by a 2-minute description. Task 2 involved a 2–3-minute monologue on a familiar topic (e.g., a meaningful gift or a difficult decision). All performances were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Two experienced EFL instructors, blinded to group assignment, independently rated the recordings in terms of fluency and accuracy using a 5-point holistic scale. Although ratings were assigned holistically, raters were guided by analytic performance indicators. Specifically, fluency was evaluated with reference to speech rate, pausing behavior, and repair frequency, whereas accuracy focused on grammatical correctness and lexical appropriateness. To ensure scoring consistency, raters used a standardized rubric that incorporated these analytic descriptors into each score band. Prior to rating, they completed a calibration session using sample recordings to establish shared scoring standards. Inter-rater reliability was high, with intraclass correlation coefficient (ICC) values of 0.87 for fluency and 0.86 for accuracy. Any discrepancies greater than one point were resolved through discussion and consensus.

A post-intervention questionnaire was administered only to the experimental group to investigate learners' perceptions of the literature-based instructional materials. The 12-item Likert-scale questionnaire measured four dimensions: interest, engagement, perceived usefulness, and speaking confidence. Pilot testing with 20 comparable students confirmed clarity and reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha=0.89$). The control group was not surveyed because the questionnaire specifically targeted perceptions of the literature-based intervention. Although this design enabled focused evaluation of the experimental treatment, it limited direct comparison of affective responses between groups; therefore, findings should be interpreted cautiously, and future studies are encouraged to include both groups.

2.4. Data analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS (version 26.0). Descriptive statistics, including means and standard deviations, were calculated for all measures. Independent-samples t-tests were conducted to compare group differences at both pre-test and post-test stages. To examine within-group and between-group differences over time, a repeated-measures analysis of variance (ANOVA) was performed with time (pre-test vs. post-test) as the within-subjects factor and group (experimental vs. control) as the between-subjects factor [12]. Effect sizes were reported using Cohen's d for between-group comparisons and partial eta squared (η^2) for interaction effects to assess the magnitude of observed effects [15], [16].

Statistical significance was set at $p<0.05$. Prior to analysis, assumptions of normality (assessed using Shapiro-Wilk tests) and homogeneity of variance (assessed using Levene's tests) were examined and found to be satisfactorily met. In addition to significance testing, 95% confidence intervals (CIs) were calculated for key comparisons to provide a more precise estimate of effect magnitude. Furthermore, gain scores (post-test minus pre-test) were computed for fluency and accuracy to facilitate clearer interpretation of improvement across groups.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Results

3.1.1. Pre-test and post-test comparisons

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics for speaking fluency and accuracy across the experimental and control groups at both pre-test and post-test stages. Prior to the intervention, independent-samples t-tests revealed no significant differences between the experimental and control groups in fluency ($t(158)=0.418$, $p=0.677$) or accuracy ($t(158)=0.526$, $p=0.600$), confirming baseline equivalence.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for speaking performance

Measure	Group	Pre-test M (SD)	Post-test M (SD)
Fluency	Experimental	2.69 (0.48)	3.87 (0.45)
	Control	2.70 (0.47)	3.14 (0.50)
Accuracy	Experimental	2.60 (0.51)	3.80 (0.47)
	Control	2.62 (0.50)	3.00 (0.52)

Following the 16-week intervention, both groups demonstrated improvement; however, gains in the experimental group were substantially greater. To further examine these differences, a repeated-measures ANOVA was conducted, as presented in Table 2. The results indicate a significant main effect of time for both fluency and accuracy, suggesting that overall speaking performance improved across the semester. More importantly, the significant interaction effects (group×time) demonstrate that the experimental group improved at a significantly greater rate than the control group.

Table 2. Results of repeated-measures ANOVA

Measure	Effect	F	p	η^2
Fluency	Time	312.56	<0.001	0.66
	Group×time	68.23	<0.001	0.30
Accuracy	Time	287.41	<0.001	0.64
	Group×time	61.57	<0.001	0.28

To further explore between-group differences at post-test, independent-samples t-tests were conducted, with results summarized in Table 3. The results show that the experimental group significantly outperformed the control group in both fluency and accuracy at the post-test stage. The large effect sizes ($d > 0.80$) suggest that the observed differences are substantial and educationally meaningful.

Table 3. Post-test group comparisons

Measure	t	p	Cohen's d
Fluency	9.26	<0.001	1.48
Accuracy	8.87	<0.001	1.39

To provide a clearer interpretation of improvement, gain scores (post-test minus pre-test) were calculated for both groups, and 95% CIs were computed to estimate the precision of these gains. As shown in Table 4, the experimental group demonstrated substantially larger gains in both fluency ($M=1.18$, 95% CI [1.04, 1.32]) and accuracy ($M=1.20$, 95% CI [1.05, 1.35]) compared to the control group (fluency: $M=0.44$, 95% CI [0.29, 0.59]; accuracy: $M=0.38$, 95% CI [0.22, 0.54]). These results provide additional evidence for the magnitude and stability of the observed improvements.

Table 4. Gain scores and 95% CIs for speaking performance

Measure	Group	Gain (M)	SD	95% CI
Fluency	Experimental	1.18	0.66	[1.04, 1.32]
	Control	0.44	0.69	[0.29, 0.59]
Accuracy	Experimental	1.20	0.69	[1.05, 1.35]
	Control	0.38	0.72	[0.22, 0.54]

3.1.2. Questionnaire results

The questionnaire results reflecting learners' perceptions of the literature-based instructional materials are summarized in Table 5. All mean scores were significantly higher than the neutral midpoint (3.00), indicating that students held positive perceptions of the literature-based materials. In particular, perceived usefulness and interest received the highest ratings, suggesting that learners recognized both the pedagogical value and the engaging nature of the materials.

Table 5. Questionnaire results (experimental group)

Dimension	Mean	SD	t	p
Interest	4.14	0.65	15.68	<0.001
Engagement	4.07	0.69	14.02	<0.001
Usefulness	4.20	0.62	17.29	<0.001
Confidence	3.94	0.71	11.86	<0.001

Note: t-values represent one-sample t-tests comparing mean scores to the neutral midpoint (3.00), $df=79$.

3.2. Discussion

The present study examined whether literature-based instructional materials could enhance EFL learners' speaking competence more effectively than conventional instructional materials. The findings indicate that the experimental group demonstrated significantly greater improvement in both fluency and accuracy after the intervention, suggesting that literature-based instruction can support oral language development in meaningful ways. One possible explanation for these improvements lies in the integration of input, interaction, and output within the instructional design. Literary texts exposed learners to authentic and contextually embedded language, including narrative structures, emotional expressions, and descriptive language patterns that are less common in conventional textbook dialogues [5], [6]. At the same time, speaking activities such as interpretive discussion, role-play, and storytelling created opportunities for collaborative interaction and extended oral production [16]. These findings are broadly consistent with research emphasizing the importance of comprehensible input, negotiation of meaning, and pushed output in second language development [1]–[3], [12].

Beyond the contribution of input, interaction, and output opportunities, the effectiveness of the intervention may also be attributed to the pedagogical sequencing embedded in the instructional materials. In the present study, literary texts were integrated into a sequence of scaffolded activities progressing from comprehension and language focus to guided interaction and communicative production. This structure may have helped learners gradually internalize vocabulary and language patterns before using them in extended speaking tasks. The findings therefore suggest that literature-based instruction is most effective when literary materials are systematically embedded within communicative and interaction-oriented pedagogical designs rather than used as isolated supplementary resources [17].

An important finding of the study is the simultaneous improvement in both fluency and accuracy. This finding is particularly noteworthy because previous research has frequently reported trade-offs between fluency and accuracy during communicative speaking activities [18]. In the present study, however, learners in the experimental group improved in both dimensions. One possible explanation is that explicit language focus activities were incorporated before communicative speaking tasks, allowing learners to rehearse relevant vocabulary and structures prior to meaning-focused interaction. Repeated opportunities for speaking practice across tasks may also have contributed to greater automaticity and more accurate language use during oral production [19]. Furthermore, the large effect sizes observed for both fluency ($d=1.48$) and accuracy ($d=1.39$) indicate that the instructional effects were not only statistically significant but also educationally meaningful [20]. These findings provide additional empirical support for the pedagogical value of literature-based language instruction, particularly in speaking-focused EFL classrooms.

The questionnaire results also offer insight into learners' affective responses to the instructional approach. Participants reported relatively high levels of interest, engagement, perceived usefulness, and speaking confidence. The thematic content of the literary texts appeared to encourage personal connection and emotional involvement, making classroom interaction more meaningful for learners. In addition, the use of scaffolded speaking tasks, peer interaction, and supportive classroom activities may have reduced anxiety associated with oral communication [21], [22]. Increased confidence may therefore have contributed to learners' willingness to participate more actively in speaking tasks throughout the intervention.

The findings contribute to the existing literature in several ways. While previous research has largely emphasized the role of literature in reading and writing development, the present study demonstrates that literary texts can also serve as effective resources for speaking instruction when integrated into structured communicative activities [7]–[9], [11]. By employing a quasi-experimental design, systematically developed instructional materials, and standardized assessment procedures, the study provides more methodologically grounded evidence for the effectiveness of literature-based speaking instruction in EFL settings, consistent with current recommendations for methodological rigor in applied linguistics research [23]. The findings further support the view that literature-based instruction can facilitate speaking development through the combined effects of meaningful input, interaction, and output within a coherent pedagogical framework.

Despite these contributions, several limitations should be acknowledged. The use of intact classes limits the extent to which full randomization can be achieved, and thus causal interpretations should be made with caution [24]. In addition, the study was conducted within a single institutional context with a relatively homogeneous sample of first-year non-English majors in northern China, which may restrict the generalizability of the findings to other learner populations or educational settings [25]. Finally, the duration of the intervention was limited to one academic semester. Future research is therefore needed to examine the long-term sustainability of the observed improvements and to investigate whether gains in speaking competence can be maintained over time across diverse educational contexts and learner populations.

4. CONCLUSION

This study investigated the effectiveness of literature-based instructional materials in enhancing EFL learners' speaking competence. The findings revealed that learners who received literature-based instruction achieved significantly greater gains in both speaking fluency and accuracy than those who received conventional instruction. In addition, participants reported positive perceptions of the instructional materials, indicating high levels of interest, engagement, perceived usefulness, and speaking confidence. The findings suggest that literature-based instruction can effectively support speaking development when literary texts are integrated into a structured pedagogical framework that combines comprehension, language focus, interaction, and communicative production. By engaging learners in interpretive discussion, role-play, storytelling, and other communicative tasks, literary texts served not only as sources of authentic linguistic input but also as meaningful catalysts for interaction and oral language use.

The study contributes to the growing body of research on literature in language education by extending its application beyond reading and writing to the domain of speaking instruction. The novelty of the study lies in the systematic integration of literary texts with scaffolded communicative speaking activities within an empirically validated instructional framework. The results provide evidence that literature-based instruction can function as an effective pedagogical approach for promoting both linguistic development and learner engagement in EFL classrooms. Overall, the findings highlight the pedagogical value of literature as a resource for speaking instruction and support its incorporation into communicative language teaching practices. The instructional model presented in this study may offer useful guidance for language teachers, materials developers, and curriculum designers seeking to create more meaningful, engaging, and interaction-oriented learning experiences for EFL learners.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS STATEMENT

This journal uses the Contributor Roles Taxonomy (CRediT) to recognize individual author contributions, reduce authorship disputes, and facilitate collaboration.

Name of Author	C	M	So	Va	Fo	I	R	D	O	E	Vi	Su	P	Fu
Xue Cao	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓			✓	
Putu Kerti Nitiasih		✓				✓			✓	✓	✓	✓		
Ni Nyoman Padmadewi	✓		✓	✓			✓			✓	✓		✓	✓
Ni Wayan Surya Mahayanti					✓		✓			✓		✓		✓

C : Conceptualization

M : Methodology

So : Software

Va : Validation

Fo : Formal analysis

I : Investigation

R : Resources

D : Data Curation

O : Writing - Original Draft

E : Writing - Review & Editing

Vi : Visualization

Su : Supervision

P : Project administration

Fu : Funding acquisition

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

Authors state no conflict of interest.

INFORMED CONSENT

We obtained informed consent from all participants before data collection.

ETHICAL APPROVAL

The study involving human participants complied with relevant national regulations and institutional policies and adhered to the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki. Although the study was conducted within a regular instructional setting, it involved a structured pedagogical intervention and data collection. According to institutional guidelines, the study was classified as minimal-risk educational research and was formally reviewed and granted ethics exemption status by the institution's academic review body. All participants provided informed consent prior to participation, and all data were anonymized.

DATA AVAILABILITY

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, [XC], upon reasonable request.

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