

Developing Speech and Communication Competence in Primary School Learners Through Pirls-Oriented Activities

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Abstract

This article examines the development of speech and communication competence in primary school learners through activities aligned with the framework of Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS). The study analyzes how PIRLS-oriented reading tasks contribute to learners' oral expression, vocabulary enrichment, comprehension, interpretive skills, and communication strategies. The research draws on international assessment reports, literacy pedagogy studies, and classroom-based evidence. Findings indicate that structured reading comprehension tasks, dialogic teaching, inferential questioning, and collaborative text discussions significantly improve learners' speech fluency, reasoning ability, and communicative confidence. The article also identifies pedagogical mechanisms that support effective implementation in primary classrooms.

Keywords: Primary education, speech competence, communication skills, reading literacy, PIRLS, oral interaction, dialogic learning, inferential comprehension.

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1. Introduction

The development of speech and communication competence in primary school learners is a key objective of contemporary education systems. Oral communication is not only a foundational literacy skill but also an essential tool for academic success, social interaction, and cognitive growth [1, pp. 14–17]. International educational research consistently demonstrates that reading and speaking skills are interdependent: learners who engage deeply with texts tend to develop stronger vocabulary, clearer reasoning, and more coherent oral expression [2, pp. 22–25].

The Progress in International Reading Literacy Study

(PIRLS), coordinated by International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement, assesses fourth-grade learners' reading literacy and emphasizes two major purposes of reading: literary experience and acquiring information [3, pp. 37–41]. PIRLS tasks require learners to retrieve information, make straightforward inferences, interpret ideas, and evaluate textual content [3, pp. 42–45]. These processes directly contribute to speech and communication development because learners must verbalize understanding, justify interpretations, and discuss ideas.

In primary education, PIRLS-oriented activities create opportunities for meaningful classroom interaction. When learners participate in text-based discussions,

retelling exercises, role-playing, and peer dialogue, they actively construct meaning and strengthen communicative competence [4, pp. 56–59]. Therefore, integrating PIRLS-based strategies into classroom practice offers a practical approach to improving learners' speech development.

2. Methodology

This study used a qualitative analytical approach based on the review of international reports, peer-reviewed literacy studies, and pedagogical research on reading and oral communication development.

The methodological framework included:

- analysis of PIRLS 2021 assessment framework and learner performance descriptors;
- comparative review of primary literacy teaching methods;
- synthesis of research findings on dialogic teaching and oral language development;
- examination of evidence-based classroom strategies.

The research focused on the following indicators:

- vocabulary development;
- speech coherence;
- inferential speaking ability;
- dialogic interaction;
- communicative confidence.

Sources were selected based on relevance to literacy pedagogy, reliability of empirical findings, and applicability to primary school settings.

3. Results

The analysis shows that PIRLS-oriented activities positively influence learners' speech and communication competence in several measurable ways.

Vocabulary enrichment and expressive speech

Reading comprehension tasks expand learners' vocabulary and improve their ability to use contextually appropriate language. According to Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development research, vocabulary breadth is strongly associated with oral

expression and academic performance [5, pp. 48–50]. PIRLS tasks encourage learners to identify key words, infer meaning from context, and explain concepts, which strengthens expressive speech.

Development of coherent oral responses

PIRLS-style questioning improves learners' ability to construct logical and coherent responses. Open-ended questions require students to organize ideas, sequence information, and justify opinions [3, pp. 74–79]. This process supports speech structure and verbal reasoning.

Improvement of inferential and critical speaking skills

PIRLS tasks frequently require learners to interpret characters' motives, compare information, and evaluate evidence. Such activities promote analytical speech and reflective dialogue [6, pp. 91–94].

Increased classroom interaction

Dialogic classroom environments based on reading discussions significantly improve learners' participation and communicative confidence. Studies show that peer discussions and guided conversations increase speaking frequency and reduce communication anxiety [7, pp. 102–106].

4. Discussion

The development of speech and communication competence in primary school learners through PIRLS-oriented activities should be understood as a multidimensional pedagogical process in which reading literacy serves as both a cognitive and communicative foundation. The PIRLS framework does not treat reading as simple decoding; rather, it conceptualizes reading literacy as the ability to understand, use, reflect on, and engage with written texts for different purposes [3, pp. 37–45]. This understanding is directly connected to oral communication because speech competence in childhood develops most effectively when learners are involved in meaningful language tasks that require comprehension, interpretation, and social interaction.

One of the central strengths of PIRLS-oriented activities lies in their integration of receptive and productive language processes. In traditional classroom practice, speech development is sometimes approached through isolated exercises such as memorization, repetition, or mechanical retelling. However, educational psychology research shows that language develops more sustainably

when learners are placed in authentic communicative situations where speech has a purpose [8, pp. 67–70]. PIRLS-based tasks create precisely such situations because learners are expected to read texts, identify explicit and implicit meanings, formulate opinions, and explain reasoning. These processes naturally stimulate active speech production.

A major pedagogical advantage of PIRLS-oriented activities is that they support vocabulary expansion in context. Vocabulary is one of the most important predictors of oral fluency and communication confidence in primary school learners. Research in literacy studies confirms that children with stronger vocabulary knowledge are better able to express ideas clearly, ask questions, and participate in classroom dialogue [5, pp. 48–50]. PIRLS tasks expose learners to literary and informational texts that contain varied lexical structures, thematic concepts, and contextual language patterns. When teachers organize discussions around key words, figurative expressions, and textual meanings, learners begin to use richer vocabulary in oral speech.

This vocabulary development is particularly significant because speech competence in primary education is not limited to pronunciation or sentence formation; it also includes the ability to select precise words, structure explanations, and adapt language to communicative situations. For example, when learners discuss the motives of a story character or explain the main idea of an informational text, they practice both lexical retrieval and semantic organization. Such repeated practice improves communicative accuracy and fluency.

Another important aspect of PIRLS-oriented activities is their contribution to coherent speech production. Coherence in speech refers to the ability to present ideas logically, maintain topic continuity, and connect statements meaningfully. Primary school learners often struggle with fragmented or incomplete oral responses because they lack experience in organizing thoughts systematically. PIRLS tasks help address this challenge because many comprehension activities require sequencing events, identifying cause-and-effect relationships, and summarizing information [3, pp. 74–79].

When learners answer open-ended questions such as “Why did the character make this decision?” or “What evidence supports this idea?”, they must structure their responses in a way that makes sense to listeners. Over time, this develops discourse competence, which is a

core component of communication skills. The value of this process is especially high in primary school because early speech habits often influence later academic communication. Learners who develop coherent oral expression in the early grades are more likely to succeed in writing, presentations, and collaborative learning in later stages.

Dialogic reading is one of the most effective PIRLS-oriented strategies for improving speech competence. Dialogic reading is an interactive approach in which the teacher actively engages learners in discussing a text rather than simply reading it aloud. According to Catherine Snow, children’s oral language develops more effectively when they participate in meaningful conversations about texts and ideas [9, pp. 33–37]. This finding is highly relevant to PIRLS-oriented instruction because PIRLS emphasizes active comprehension rather than passive reception.

In dialogic reading, teachers ask open-ended questions, encourage predictions, prompt learners to explain their thinking, and invite personal responses. Such interaction creates a rich language environment where learners practice descriptive speech, explanatory language, and argumentation. Importantly, dialogic reading also supports listening competence, since learners must attend to peers’ responses and respond appropriately. Communication competence is not only about speaking but also about listening, turn-taking, and collaborative meaning-making.

Furthermore, dialogic reading strengthens learners’ confidence. In many primary classrooms, some learners hesitate to speak because they fear making mistakes or being judged. PIRLS-based dialogic tasks can reduce this anxiety because the emphasis is placed on exploration, interpretation, and discussion rather than on single correct answers. This creates a psychologically supportive environment that encourages participation.

Inferential questioning is another powerful mechanism through which PIRLS-oriented activities enhance communication competence. Inferential questions require learners to move beyond literal information and engage in deeper thinking. They may be asked to predict outcomes, explain hidden meanings, compare perspectives, or evaluate actions. Such questions stimulate higher-order thinking and verbal reasoning [10, pp. 51–56].

From a speech development perspective, inferential

questioning is valuable because it requires learners to formulate extended responses rather than short factual answers. For example, when a learner explains why a character acted in a certain way, they must connect evidence, interpret motives, and present a reasoned explanation. This supports not only language production but also critical thinking.

Research by Robin Alexander on dialogic teaching emphasizes that classroom talk is a key medium for cognitive development [10, pp. 51–56]. His work shows that when teachers encourage exploratory talk, learners become more capable of justifying ideas, questioning assumptions, and engaging respectfully in discussion. PIRLS-oriented inferential questioning aligns closely with this approach because it promotes thoughtful and purposeful speech.

Collaborative learning tasks also play a crucial role in the development of communication competence. PIRLS-oriented activities often include pair discussions, group tasks, joint text interpretation, and peer explanation. These forms of collaborative interaction create authentic contexts for speech practice [11, pp. 88–92]. Unlike teacher-centered questioning, collaborative tasks allow learners to experiment with language more freely and negotiate meaning with peers.

Group text discussions, for instance, help learners practice turn-taking, active listening, clarification, and persuasion. These are essential communication skills in both academic and social contexts. When learners work together to interpret a text or solve a comprehension task, they are required to explain ideas, respond to alternative viewpoints, and refine their own understanding through dialogue.

Pair retelling is another effective PIRLS-oriented activity. In retelling tasks, learners summarize a text orally to a partner, focusing on key events, themes, and conclusions. This strengthens memory, sequencing ability, and expressive speech. Role-play based on literary texts can also deepen communication competence by encouraging learners to adopt perspectives, use expressive language, and engage emotionally with content.

An important dimension of PIRLS-oriented speech development is inclusivity. In primary classrooms, learners differ significantly in terms of language background, confidence, literacy level, and learning pace. One of the strengths of PIRLS-oriented instruction

is that it allows for differentiated participation. Teachers can scaffold activities using visual aids, vocabulary prompts, sentence starters, graphic organizers, and guided questions [12, pp. 119–123].

Such scaffolding is especially beneficial for learners who are less confident speakers or who have limited prior language exposure. For example, sentence frames like “I think this happened because...” or “The main idea is...” help learners structure responses while gradually building independence. Visual prompts and discussion cards can also support learners in organizing thoughts before speaking.

Inclusive PIRLS-oriented activities are particularly relevant in multilingual and diverse classroom contexts. In such environments, speech competence development should not rely solely on spontaneous participation but should be intentionally supported through structured communicative opportunities. PIRLS strategies are effective in this regard because they provide clear textual anchors for discussion.

Another important issue is the role of the teacher in facilitating PIRLS-oriented communication tasks. The effectiveness of such activities depends not only on task design but also on teacher mediation. Teachers need to create a classroom culture in which learners feel safe to speak, make mistakes, and explore ideas. Effective teachers use wait time, encouraging feedback, follow-up questions, and equitable participation strategies to support learners’ speech development.

Teacher questioning quality is especially important. Closed questions that require only one-word answers do little to develop communication competence. By contrast, open-ended and reflective questions stimulate elaborated speech. Therefore, teacher professional development should include training in dialogic pedagogy, literacy-based discussion techniques, and formative oral assessment.

The long-term educational significance of PIRLS-oriented speech development should also be emphasized. Speech and communication competence are foundational skills that influence academic achievement across subjects. Learners who can explain ideas clearly, ask relevant questions, and participate in discussion are better prepared for problem-solving, collaborative learning, and lifelong education.

Moreover, communication competence has social and emotional dimensions. Children who can express

themselves effectively are more likely to develop self-confidence, build positive peer relationships, and participate actively in school life. Thus, PIRLS-oriented activities contribute not only to literacy outcomes but also to broader learner development.

At the systemic level, integrating PIRLS-oriented activities into primary education can support curriculum modernization and improve educational quality. However, successful implementation requires several conditions: access to age-appropriate texts, teacher methodological support, sufficient classroom time for discussion, and assessment practices that value oral communication alongside reading outcomes.

5. Conclusion

PIRLS-oriented activities provide an evidence-based and pedagogically effective approach to developing speech and communication competence in primary school learners. Through structured reading tasks, inferential questioning, collaborative discussion, and dialogic teaching, learners improve vocabulary, speech coherence, oral reasoning, and communicative confidence.

The findings confirm that reading literacy and oral communication are mutually reinforcing. Therefore, PIRLS-based strategies should be systematically integrated into primary education curricula to support learners' academic and social development.

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