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Assessing Peer Perceptions of Communication Strategies Used by Students with ADHD in Collaborative ESL Tasks

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Abstract

This study examines, from a peer perspective, the communication strategies that students with Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) employ during collaborative ESL tasks. The research focuses on ESL learners' perceptions of topic-shifting behavior, social rapport, and communicative clarity during group activities with ADHD learners. A quantitative survey design was utilized, with data collected via a close-ended, 5-point Likert scale questionnaire administered through Google Forms. Purposive sampling was used to select a sample of university-level BS English students. The data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, including percentages and frequency distributions. The results indicated that a majority of the participants held positive perceptions of the communication strategies used by ADHD students in collaborative learning environments. Most respondents agreed that while topic-shifting occasionally impacts task flow, students with ADHD participate actively in discussions and maintain meaningful social interactions. Ultimately, this study highlights a growing awareness of and willingness among ESL learners to work with neurodivergent peers in the ESL classroom, thereby fostering inclusive educational practices.

Keywords: ADHD, Collaborative Learning, ESL Classrooms, ESL Tasks, Neurodiversity, Peer Perceptions, Social Rapport

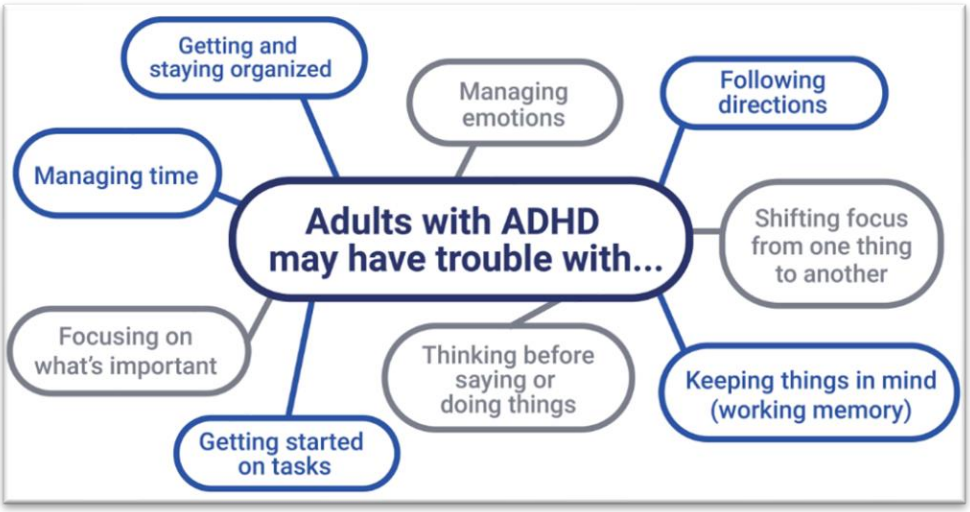
Introduction

Collaborative learning has become a mainstream concept in communicative pedagogy literature regarding modern language teaching and learning (Long, 2014). Group tasks in an English as a Second Language (ESL) environment aim to increase learner interaction, reduce the affective filter, and develop cooperative problem-solving skills (Dörnyei & Murphey, 2003). However, traditional collaborative frameworks typically rely on a shared, neurotypical base level of communication and interaction among peers. In contrast, modern language classrooms feature complex micro-environments that include neurodivergent learners, such as those with Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) (Kormos, 2017). Although the drive toward educational inclusion is increasing, a significant empirical void remains in the literature regarding how neurotypical peers perceive and interact with the specific conversational styles of ADHD partners during collaborative language tasks. The discourse of individuals with ADHD often differs from neurotypical norms; they tend to shift topics rapidly and interrupt conversations spontaneously

(Barkley, 2015). In a fast-paced ESL group activity, these behaviorally driven discourse strategies may be misinterpreted as evidence of poor language proficiency or an insensitivity to task parameters (Kormos, 2017). This misunderstanding often creates covert social conflict and task dissatisfaction among students (Dörnyei & Murphey, 2003). For instance, an ADHD learner who rapidly introduces a side-topic may be perceived by neurotypical peers as an impediment to completing the group task efficiently and on time. This disrupts the technical workflow of the activity, creating tension between the communication style of the neurodivergent student and that of their peers (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

Common Executive Functioning and Behavioral Challenges Experienced by Adults with ADHD



Importantly, this interactional friction highlights a dynamic dichotomy between conversational mechanisms and interpersonal connections—specifically, between social rapport and communicative clarity. A peer with ADHD may exhibit certain interactional weaknesses, such as an inability to deliver information in an organized, linear sequence, which can lower their perceived communicative clarity. Conversely, they may also possess distinct strengths, such as empathy, enthusiasm, and warmth, which can foster a positive group atmosphere (Barkley, 2015). Previous studies have shown that a high level of social rapport can significantly mitigate the negative effects of structural confusion within cooperative environments (Dörnyei & Murphey, 2003). However, limited empirical data exists to indicate how ESL students weigh these two competing elements when evaluating an ADHD peer, or how this balance ultimately impacts their ongoing commitment to inclusive group work. Moreover, peer attitudes regarding potential future collaborations are heavily conditioned by their foundational knowledge of neurodiversity and diverse learning needs (Kormos, 2017). When a class understands that unconventional communication styles stem from cognitive differences rather than a lack of academic effort, peers tend to be more patient and accommodating. Conversely, a lack of awareness can cause inadvertent marginalization, thereby decreasing the likelihood that peers will select or recommend a neurodivergent classmate for future high-stakes projects. To bridge the gap between presumed neurotypical norms and neurodivergent realities, it is essential to determine the precise distribution of peer attitudes. This study aims to investigate these dynamics through a structured quantitative approach, thereby building the descriptive foundation necessary to achieve true social inclusion and optimal task-based peer interaction in the ESL classroom.

Problem Statement

When collaborative, task-based learning is implemented across ESL classrooms, pedagogical frameworks often assume that all students share a uniform baseline of neurotypical communication strategies. However, when learners with ADHD engage in these activities, their natural conversational styles—characterized by rapid topic-shifting—frequently clash with the procedural expectations of their peers. Because these cognitive differences are often misinterpreted as a lack of academic interest or motivation rather than a natural variation in discourse processing, serious interactional difficulties arise. Consequently, there is an urgent need for empirical data to investigate precisely how neurotypical peers perceive topic-shifting as an explicit obstacle to task completion. Furthermore, it remains unknown how peers balance the presence of social rapport against a lack of communicative clarity, or how their foundational level of neurodiversity awareness affects their willingness to collaborate with neurodivergent peers in the future. To address these critical gaps and systematically map peer interaction dynamics within the classroom, this study investigates the following descriptive research questions:

Research Questions

1. To what extent do neurotypical ESL peers perceive the frequent topic-shifting of students with ADHD as a structural hindrance to collaborative task completion?
2. To what extent do neurotypical ESL peers affirm the capacity of positive social rapport to mitigate localized breakdowns in communicative clarity when collaborating with ADHD partners?
3. What is the descriptive statistical distribution of neurotypical peers' willingness to engage in future academic collaborations with neurodivergent students?

Significance of the Study

Although contemporary research recognizes the value of collaborative spaces, a distinct lack of understanding persists regarding how to navigate neurodevelopmental differences during active group work. Existing literature typically focuses on teacher-driven frameworks, evaluates advanced peer-teaching broadly without an ADHD focus, or analyzes ADHD communication strictly through an isolated "deficit lens" in young children. The present research aims to address this gap by shifting the analytical focus from the individual neurodivergent learner to the neurotypical peer's interpretive framework. By utilizing a structured quantitative survey of university-level BS English students within task-based ESL interactions, this research offers significant implications for second language acquisition (SLA) pedagogy, classroom group dynamics, and institutional inclusion policies.

Additionally, this study translates the theoretical debate surrounding cognitive diversity into actionable insights by documenting the exact frequencies and percentages of peer perceptions. The value of this approach lies in its capacity to systematically examine the "Rapport versus Clarity" paradox—specifically, whether peer-perceived interpersonal warmth successfully mitigates localized breakdowns in communicative clarity. These empirical findings provide a blueprint for language educators to design supportive evaluation rubrics and structured group roles that actively prevent the inadvertent marginalization of neurodivergent students. Ultimately, this study addresses a critical oversight in Applied Linguistics, laying the groundwork to shift classroom culture from mere physical integration to genuine social and instructional inclusion for neurodivergent learners.

Literature Review

Related Studies

A review of the literature on English language education, neurodevelopmental disorders, and inclusive classroom dynamics reveals that pedagogical framing has evolved substantially over the past two decades. Early research focused primarily on basic input-output adjustments for beginner learners. However, this research has expanded into a comprehensive exploration of adult learners, inclusive peer-mediated instruction, and the intricate pragmatic nuances of discourse management in both English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) setting. Initially, foundational frameworks for teaching English to neurodivergent learners focused heavily on addressing basic speech processing deficits and motivational variables. Turketi (2010) initiated this debate by investigating the impact of Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) on children's second language (L2) learning processes, focusing specifically on input-output speech processing, learning preferences, and diminished motivation. This foundational work argued that unique neurobiological needs must be explicitly addressed through targeted ESL methodologies, utilizing purposeful, specially designed classroom activities that benefit both ADHD learners and their neurotypical peers. Building upon this paradigm, Kormos (2017) synthesized the broader implications of the cognitive processes associated with Specific Learning Difficulties (SLDs) on multilingual development across both instructed classrooms and diverse L2 contexts. This seminal work critically detailed how distinct cognitive factors interact with literacy development and language acquisition, while offering strategic diagnostic parameters for identifying these varying cognitive profiles within diverse instructional environments.

As the field evolved, researchers increasingly focused on specialized modes of instruction and systemic institutional realities. Cambo Martínez et al. (2023) emphasized that despite the widespread availability of digital platforms for accelerated language acquisition, children with ADHD continue to struggle with L2 comprehension and production, as deficiencies in self-regulation directly impede task completion. Through an extensive literature review, they demonstrated that students with this neurobiological condition are frequently denied opportunities to develop essential cognitive skills due to inappropriate methodologies, a lack of initial cognitive evaluations, or unsupportive academic environments. Simultaneously, Kearns (2023) expanded the scope of inquiry to adult ESL/EFL learners by applying Critical Disability Theory to analyze the cognitive and behavioral profiles of adult language learners with SLDs, including dyslexia, autism, and ADHD. Because adult training frameworks rarely account for neurodivergent profiles, Kearns developed an instructional guidebook detailing legal requirements, screening tool limitations, and research-based, adaptive strategies that optimize the learning environment for all students. Subsequent empirical research shifted toward capturing the lived experiences of frontline educators and evaluating multifaceted instructional adaptations. Pérez-Cabello et al. (2024) surveyed language educators to explore how practitioners perceive and implement L2 modifications for neurodivergent students, finding that teachers proactively adapted their methods and demonstrated a strong willingness to utilize specialized strategies to support L2 skill acquisition. Alongside these field observations, Mani and Kristensson (2024) examined the pedagogical adaptations deployed to address rising neurophysiological diagnoses within the ESL context. This study advocated for technology-enriched environments, motivational goal-setting, and arts-based modalities (such as drama and drawing), which demonstrated a significant positive impact on vocabulary acquisition, behavioral regulation, academic functioning, and sustained attention spans. Contemporary literature maintains a nuanced dual focus: evaluating institutional inclusive support systems on one hand, and dissecting the real-time discourse and pragmatic management of neurodivergent learners on the other. Al Yatim (2025) conducted a comprehensive review of studies managing neurodevelopmental disorders (NDDs) in the EFL classroom, uncovering a pervasive sense of instructional uncertainty among language teachers regarding

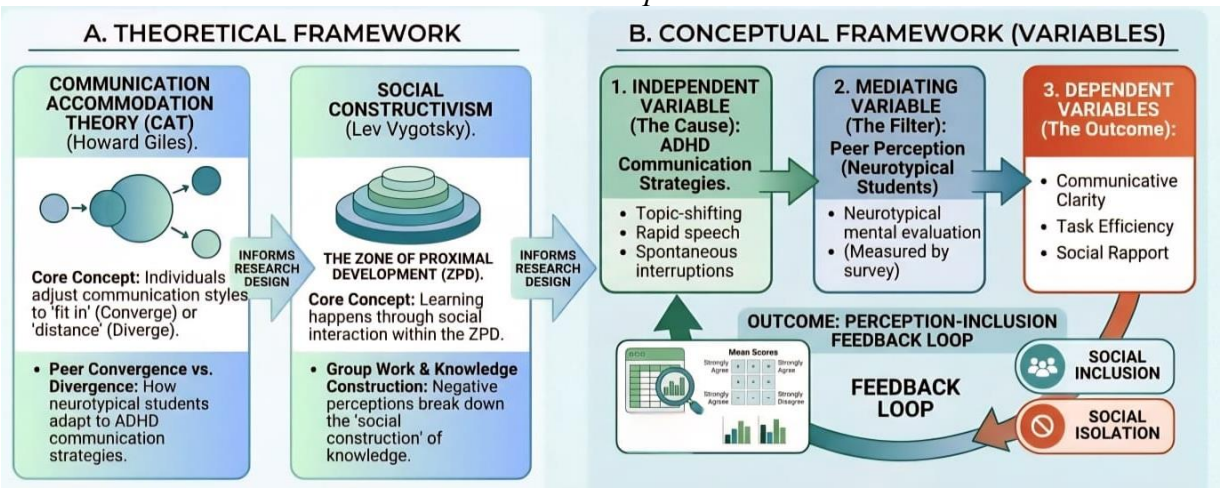
inclusive practices. This finding underscores the urgent need for operational guidance and empirical investigations into how academic stigma shapes parental advocacy and student classroom experiences. To address these practical classroom challenges, Bilgiç (2025) proposed an integrated instructional framework combining Total Physical Response (TPR) with Multiple Intelligences Theory. This movement-based approach leverages music, physical action, and peer interaction to reduce cognitive load, thereby enhancing classroom participation, language retention, confidence, and social integration for learners with ADHD. Crucially, peer-mediated learning models are increasingly utilized to sustain these inclusive environments. Mohd Noor (2025) investigated the creative dynamics of peer teaching, revealing that variables such as students' background, age, and social context greatly facilitate learning and collaboration when instruction is facilitated by advanced student-teachers. However, the specific conversational processes of neurodivergent learners present unique interactional challenges, even within inclusive instructional designs. Samniya et al. (2025) examined the structural and pragmatic language use of children with ADHD during active social discourse. Their findings revealed that individuals with ADHD produced significantly more structural language errors—such as morphosyntactic inaccuracies and word repetitions—alongside more unrelated conversational utterances and less successful conversational repair strategies. Crucially, adult interlocutors rated neurotypical children as more likable and less effortful to engage with, suggesting that conversational skills must be actively monitored and targeted as a primary area of educational intervention. To address these evolving contemporary perspectives, the present study focuses specifically on university-level BS English students to provide a targeted, descriptive quantitative analysis. This research moves beyond the traditional lens of evaluating the neurodivergent learner in isolation; instead, it investigates how neurotypical peers perceive the communication strategies and interactional patterns of students with ADHD during collaborative ESL activities.

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

The present study draws upon a dual theoretical lens to investigate peer classroom dynamics, which are systematically illustrated in Figure 2. Giles et al.'s Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) (1991) serves as the primary framework for analyzing peer convergence and divergence. CAT provides a robust mechanism for observing how neurotypical students structurally adapt to, or distance themselves from, atypical conversational cues. This framework is synthesized with Lev Vygotsky's Social Constructivism (1978)—specifically the concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)—which posits that effective language learning is inherently social, and that negative peer perceptions can fundamentally impede the collaborative construction of knowledge. Both theories directly inform the operational variables of this study. In the conceptual model, the independent variables (the predictor) comprise ADHD-driven communication strategies, specifically spontaneous topic-shifting, rapid speech, and conversational interruptions. The neurotypical peer's cognitive evaluation—measured via the quantitative survey instrument—functions as a mediating variable, bridging these baseline behaviors directly to the study's core dependent variables (the criterion): communicative clarity, task efficiency, and social rapport. Crucially, these dependent variables directly operationalize the study's three empirical constructs, corresponding precisely to Topic-Shifting and Task Completion (RQ1), Social Rapport versus Communicative Clarity (RQ2), and Neurodiversity Awareness and Future Collaboration (RQ3). Collectively, these elements form an operational "Perception-Inclusion Feedback Loop" that determines whether a collaborative environment results in social inclusion or social isolation. By analyzing these data points through descriptive statistical methods—primarily mean scores and percentages—this integrated approach effectively shifts the academic discourse away from a deficit-based medical model toward a strategy-based classroom diversity paradigm.

Figure 2

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework



Methodology

Phase 1: Participant Pool, Screening, and Group Architecture

In Phase 1, the participant pool, screening protocols, and group architecture were established. The initial sampling stage commenced with an overall cohort of 53 ESL learners enrolled in a BS English program. To precisely identify the interactional dynamics required for this study, a standardized screening instrument was administered to formally evaluate the entire student pool for ADHD characteristics. The screening process successfully identified 7 students exhibiting behaviorally explicit ADHD traits, ranging from mild to severe, while the remaining students were classified as neurotypical (NT).

A final sample of 35 participants was selected via purposive sampling to construct optimal interactional micro-environments. This sample was subsequently divided into 7 collaborative groups (n = 5 students per group). As illustrated in the Micro-Environment Composition Breakout (see Figure 3), these groups were deliberately structured to represent distinct classroom dynamics:

Severe ADHD Integration Groups: 3 groups were established, each comprising 3 NT peers and 2 students exhibiting severe ADHD characteristics

Mild ADHD Integration Groups: 4 groups were established, each comprising 4 NT peers and 1 student exhibiting mild ADHD characteristics.

Phase 2: Task Implementation and Data Collection Flow

Following group formation, each of the 7 collaborative teams received the identical collaborative presentation and written tasks. This framework required each five-member group to actively coordinate, negotiate, and develop both an oral presentation and a written project. This joint task was immediately followed by the data collection sequence (see Figure 4). Because the study specifically aims to measure the external peer evaluation of neurodiverse strategies, only the neurotypical students were sampled for data collection. Consequently, the ADHD students (n = 7) did not participate in the feedback mechanism; instead, the 28 neurotypical students across all 7 groups completed the primary data collection instrument.

Figure 3: *Group Architecture*

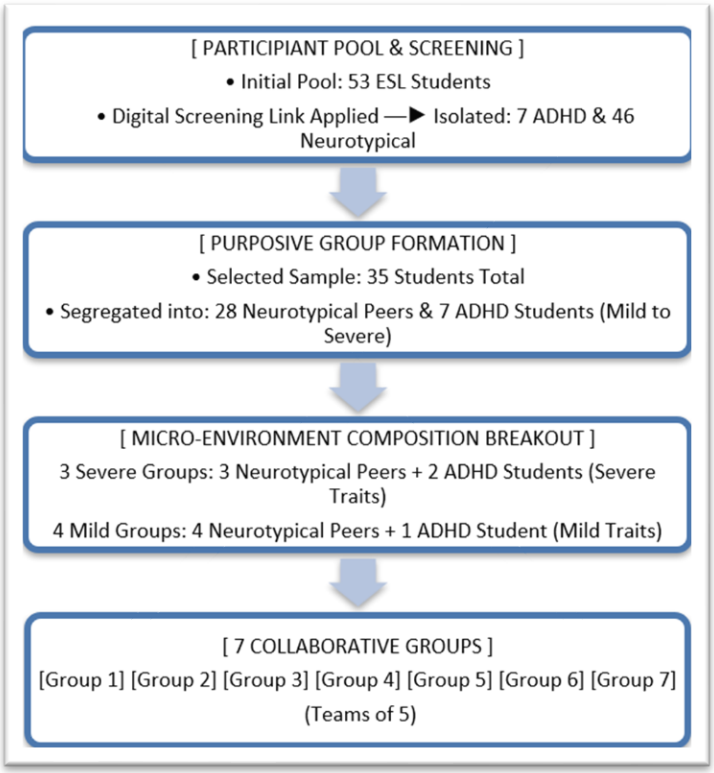
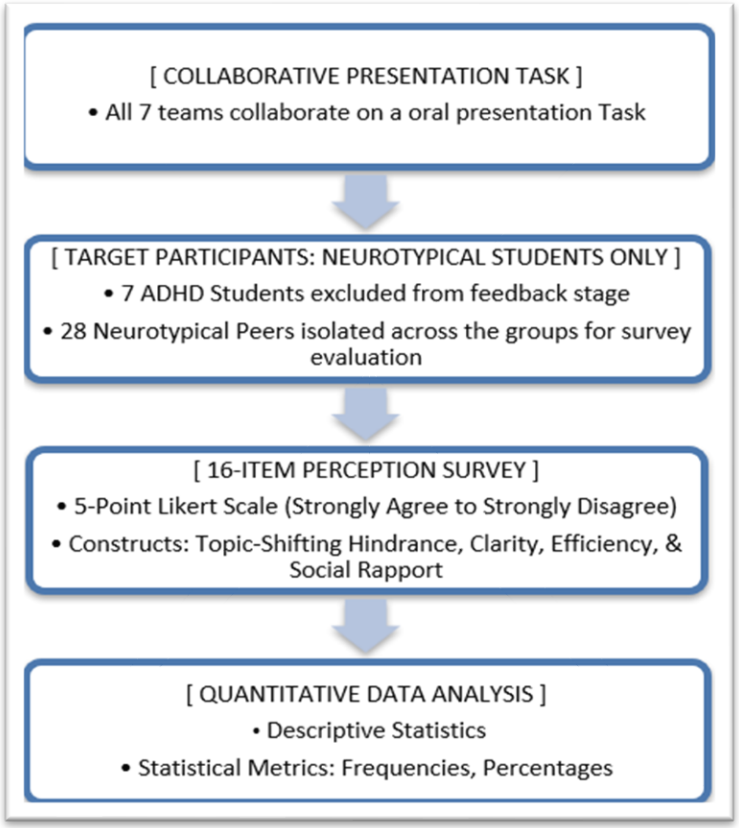


Figure 4: *Data Collection Flow*



Research Instrument and Statistical Analysis

The primary data collection tool was a structured, 16-item perception survey designed to quantitatively measure how neurotypical classmates evaluated their collaborative experiences. The instrument evaluated specific experiential clusters: the perceived conversational hindrance of frequent topic-shifting, the maintenance of operational task efficiency, the overall level of communicative clarity, interpersonal social rapport, and neurodiversity awareness regarding future collaboration. Quantitative data analysis was conducted using descriptive statistics—specifically frequencies and percentages—to accurately map the distribution of peer perceptions and evaluate the overall operation of the classroom "Perception-Inclusion Loop".

Pilot Testing

Prior to formal data collection, the 16-item survey questionnaire was pilot-tested with 10 BS English students from the same department to verify item comprehensibility and response logistics. The pilot participants indicated that the item wording was clear and unambiguous, and that the contextual scenarios accurately depicted the collaborative dynamics of ESL groups. Consequently, the questionnaire was deployed without further modification.

Reliability of the Instrument

Empirical validation of the internal consistency of the survey instrument was established using Cronbach's alpha (α), a standard measure for the reliability of Likert-scale questionnaires. The overall Cronbach's alpha coefficient was $\alpha = 0.86$. This falls well within the range of excellent reliability ($\alpha \geq 0.80$), indicating high internal consistency among the items and confirming that the instrument yields stable, reliable data for the sampled population.

Data Analysis

The quantitative descriptive analysis of the survey instrument administered to the neurotypical peer cohort (N = 28) immediately following the collaborative presentation and written task reveals clear distributions across the three primary research constructs. Descriptive statistics indicate that for Construct 1 (Perceived Conversational Impact of Topic-Shifting), a clear majority of 65.04% of participants expressed agreement or a positive inclination toward integrating the communication patterns observed during the task (see Figure 5). Conversely, 13.56% of the cohort expressed disagreement or a negative inclination (see Figure 6), while 22.86% remained neutral, indicating neither a positive nor negative inclination (see Figure 7). When evaluating the interactional balance in Construct 2 (Social Rapport vs. Communicative Clarity), 61.91% of the peer cohort agreed that positive social dynamics successfully complemented conversational clarity (see Figure 5). In contrast, only 11.30% disagreed (see Figure 6), and 26.80% remained neutral (see Figure 7). Finally, for Construct 3 (Neurodiversity Awareness and Future Collaboration), a strong majority (64.98%) affirmed their willingness to collaborate with ADHD classmates on future academic tasks (see Figure 5), whereas14.28% disagreed (see Figure 6), and 20.72% did not take a definitive stance (see Figure 7).

Figure 5: *Overall Agreed Results*

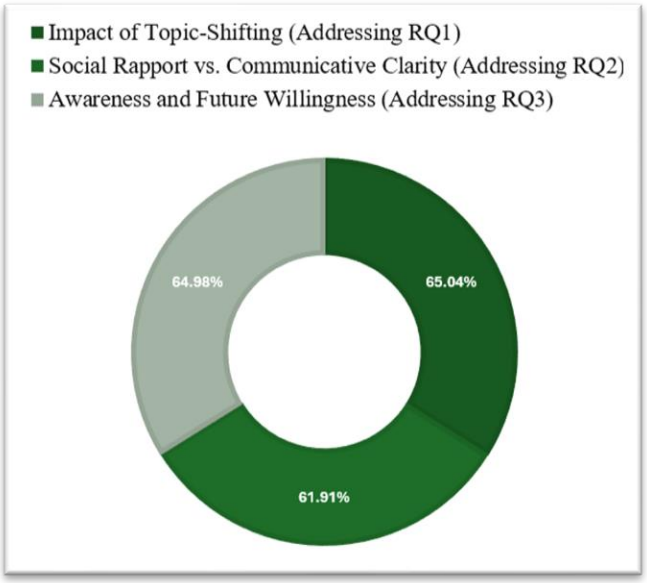


Figure 6: *Overall Disagreed Results*

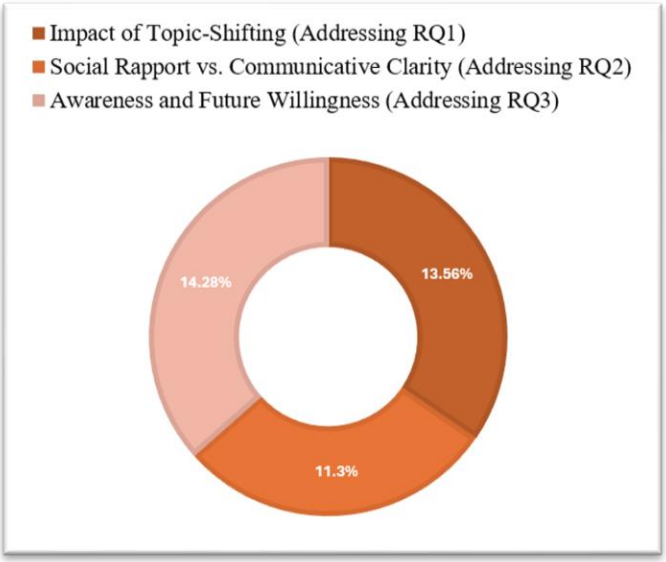
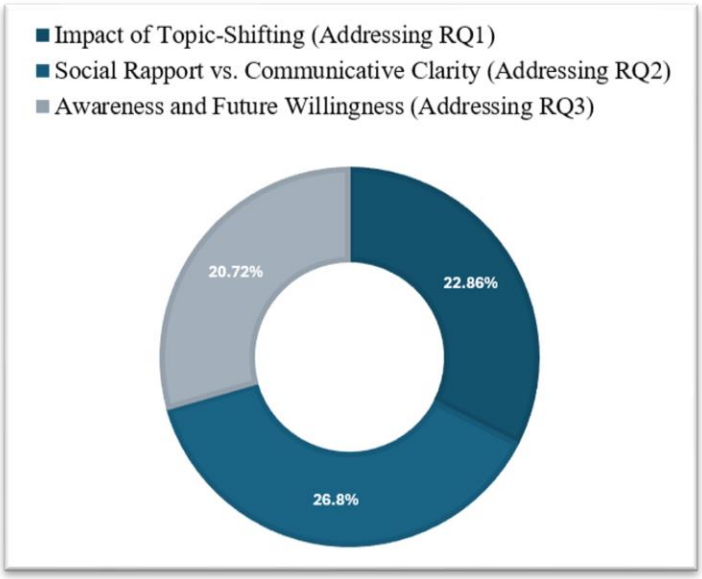


Figure 7: *Overall Neutral Results*



Discussion of Findings

The descriptive statistical findings of this study offer vital insights into peer classroom dynamics, confirming that neurotypical ESL learners generally maintain highly positive perceptions of the communication strategies utilized by their classmates with ADHD.

Topic-Shifting and Task Completion (RQ1)

The finding that 65.04% of peers viewed the conversational impact of topic-shifting positively aligns with contemporary pedagogical frameworks in recent literature. Specifically, this high level of peer acceptance corroborates the findings of Bilgiç (2025), who argued that active, diverse group dynamics render collaborative language learning environments highly effective, engaging, and contextually rich. Similarly, this positive peer alignment supports Kearns's (2023) inclusive observation that when a diverse toolkit of communication strategies is readily identified and accepted within adult ESL/EFL classrooms, the learning environment benefits comprehensively. Conversely, the descriptive results of the present study stand in sharp contrast to traditional, deficit-based research paradigms concerning neurodevelopmental disorders in language education. The high positive perception rate and low peer disagreement rate (13.56%) diverge from the foundational perspectives of Turketi (2010), who characterized ADHD symptoms primarily through input-output speech processing deficits and heightened learning difficulties. Furthermore, these results contradict the assertions of Cambo Martínez et al. (2023), who emphasized that self-regulation difficulties in children with ADHD consistently impede task execution and classroom activity completion. While earlier research, such as Kormos (2017), stressed that the structural limitations of specific learning difficulties heavily impact cognitive language processing, the quantitative data gathered in this study indicates that neurotypical university-level students do not consider these behavioral variations a major obstacle to achieving group objectives.

Social Rapport versus Communicative Clarity (RQ2)

The finding that 61.91% of peers perceive a positive, complementary interaction between social rapport and communicative clarity strongly validates contemporary models of classroom inclusion. These positive evaluations are consistent with the peer-mediated approaches to learning examined by Mohd Noor (2025), where shared academic backgrounds, age, and social contexts facilitate the interactive nature of language acquisition, improve instructional delivery, and create

a harmonized collaborative environment during task completion. These results also lend weight to the findings of Mani and Kristensson (2024), who identified socially adaptive and multi-sensory strategies as critical mechanisms for reducing behavioral friction, enhancing learning outcomes, and sustaining collective engagement. This outcome, however, diverges from the empirical patterns documented by Samniya et al. (2025). In their investigation, Samniya et al. (2025) noted that participants with ADHD produce significantly more morphosyntactic errors, exhibit poorer conversational skills, and utilize less effective conversational repair techniques—factors that theoretically strain interaction. The data from the present study indicates that within the context of university-level BS English students, the presence of strong interpersonal rapport effectively mitigates localized clarity issues, thereby preventing structural conversational breakdowns. Interestingly, this aligns with an alternative nuance noted by Samniya et al. (2025), which suggests that strong rapport between conversational interlocutors can ultimately help pairs overcome localized intelligibility barriers.

Neurodiversity Awareness and Future Collaboration (RQ3)

Finally, regarding neurodiversity awareness and future collaborative intent, the data directly reflects the structural transformations and advocacy models currently emerging in the literature. The strong willingness to collaborate identified in this cohort supports the structural assertions of Al Yatim (2025), who noted that operationalizing inclusive practices requires robust instructional guidance alongside the systemic deconstruction of educational stigma. This study confirms that baseline peer acceptance can successfully sustain inclusive educational spaces, as evidenced by a notably low future resistance rate of 14.28%. These findings demonstrate that a positive neurotypical interpretive framework directly facilitates conversational convergence and a cooperative willingness. Ultimately, these insights contribute to an essential paradigm shift within applied linguistics: moving away from the individual deficit models proposed in earlier literature (e.g., Cambo Martínez et al., 2023; Turketi, 2010) toward an inclusive, strategy-based framework that embraces academic diversity and recognizes variations in how students process, interact, and learn.

Conclusion

The findings of this study indicate that neurotypical peer perceptions of the communication strategies utilized by students with ADHD during collaborative ESL tasks are overwhelmingly positive. While localized communication friction may occasionally arise from behaviorally driven discourse strategies—such as frequent topic-shifting—peers do not perceive these variations as a significant impediment to successful task completion. Instead, participants actively recognized both the social and academic contributions of ADHD learners, demonstrating highly supportive attitudes toward neurodiverse collaboration. Consequently, this study underscores the critical need for inclusive classroom frameworks that validate and accommodate diverse interactional styles. Furthermore, it posits that fostering a deeper foundational understanding of neurodiversity can significantly enhance peer relationships, mutual communicative intelligibility, and collaborative learning outcomes within ESL environments. However, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, because the quantitative insights generated by this study rely on a small, non-probability sample of BS English students within a single institutional environment, the generalizability of these findings to broader educational contexts remains limited. Second, the scope of data collection was restricted to a 16-item survey instrument mapping a single synchronous, multi-modal oral and written task, thereby excluding alternative modes of interaction such as asynchronous digital collaboration. To address these empirical boundaries, future research should pursue three strategic paths. First, implementing longitudinal experimental designs would allow researchers to track changes in peer perceptions across multiple semesters of sustained collaborative exposure. Second,

adopting a mixed-methods approach—combining descriptive surveys with qualitative, semi-structured interviews—would capture a more nuanced understanding of the specific behavioral adjustments required to navigate these collaborative micro-environments. Finally, broadening the participant pool to encompass diverse regional contexts and varying levels of target language proficiency will be essential to establishing a more comprehensive, generalizable framework for neuroinclusive language pedagogy.

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