

The Students' Perspectives of Small Group Discussion for Enhancing Their Speaking Abilities

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Abstract

This study aimed to explore students' perspectives on small group discussions in the context of teaching and learning speaking skills. A descriptive qualitative research approach was employed, involving 26 participants enrolled in the Basic English course during their first semester in the Horticulture Plantation Study Program at Politeknik Negeri Jember. Data collection utilized questionnaires, specifically a Google Form poll with multiple-choice question types, and interview questions. The questionnaires and interviews sought to understand the participants' perceptions of the effectiveness of small group discussions in developing their speaking abilities. The findings of the study revealed positive aspects of students' perceptions regarding small group discussions and their impact on enhancing speaking skills. The majority of participants expressed that engaging in small group discussions significantly contributed to their speaking development. Moreover, the research identified a correlation between students who demonstrated a keen interest in refining their speaking abilities and the benefits derived from participating in small group conversations. The results underscored that student perceived small group discussions as instrumental in their speaking skill development, highlighting the motivational aspect of these interactions. Additionally, the lecturer played a pivotal role in aiding students in overcoming obstacles encountered during the learning process.

Keywords: *Students' Perspective, Small Group Discussion, Teaching Speaking, Speaking Ability*

1. Introduction

In the field of language teaching and learning, the familiar terms “language skills” encompass the four language abilities: speaking, writing, listening, and reading. Speaking and writing fall under the category of productive skills, while listening and reading are typically classified as receptive skills (Harmer, 2007). Others such as grammar or structure, vocabulary, and pronunciation, which includes emphasis, rhythm, and intonation, constitute “language components”. Among these, speaking holds a pivotal role in the language learning process, intertwined with the integration of other language skills. It is considered a fundamental skill alongside writing, listening, and reading (Madrid et al., 2006). Proficiency in speaking is

crucial for effective communication, enabling learners to express themselves clearly and fluently.

The significance of speaking goes beyond mere verbal communication; it involves the immediate articulation of messages utilizing proper linguistic elements (Harmer, 2007). Mastery of this skill empowers students to communicate fluently in English, enhancing their overall language proficiency and facilitating improved interaction with others. Particularly for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) and English as a Second Language (ESL) learners, developing strong speaking skills is instrumental in advancing their careers in various fields (Brown et al., 2004).

Hadfield (1999) emphasizes the role of speaking in bridging the gap between the classroom setting and the broader societal context. To facilitate this connection, speaking exercises should incorporate relevant scenarios, intentional communication, and various speaking opportunities. Hadfield also highlights the importance of considering appropriate speech patterns and academic proficiency, urging teachers to plan spoken settings, practicality in speaking practice, and feedback sessions.

Despite the critical role of speaking in language learning, many students are hesitant to engage in spoken English, influenced by both internal and external factors. Internal factors include students' reluctance to share opinions, anxiety about making mistakes, low motivation, limited vocabulary, and grammatical errors (Brown, 2014). External factors, shaped by the classroom environment, social contacts, and teaching techniques, also contribute to students' apprehension in speaking situations.

In addressing these challenges, small group discussions emerge as a valuable method for teaching speaking. Fauzi (2017) defines small group discussions as dynamic gatherings of a limited number of students sharing ideas to solve problems or discuss issues. Small groups provide an environment that supports active student participation, encouraging clarity, assistance, and engagement in speaking activities. The teacher's role involves guiding students, fostering interaction, and facilitating discussions, allowing students to share thoughts, examples, and solutions within the group setting.

The effectiveness of small group discussions in teaching speaking has been explored in various studies. Harmer (2007) notes that, for certain instructional activities, pair work may be insufficient, making small group arrangements preferable. Ur (2000) supports this by highlighting that group work enhances conversational fluency, improves learning and comprehension through increased interaction, and offers social, emotional, and intellectual benefits. Research studies by Fauzi (2017) and Bohari (2019), provide empirical evidence supporting the positive impact of small group discussions on students' speaking skills. These studies demonstrate that small group discussions contribute to increased proficiency, active participation, development of autonomous learning, relaxation in learning, and enhanced speaking skills.

This research distinguishes itself by focusing on students' perspectives regarding small group discussions and their impact on speaking ability during a basic English course. While

applying the small group discussion technique, the study acknowledges students' difficulties in applying this method, particularly in dealing with group dynamics and understanding materials. The research seeks to gain insights into students' perceptions, considering perspective as an individual's unique viewpoint shaped by beliefs and experiences. The primary objective is to determine whether students perceive small group discussions as enhancing their speaking skills.

2. Method

In this research the writer applied descriptive qualitative research approach. The goal of this research is to gather participant perspective. Qualitative research involves gathering data through words from a limited number of people to understand their perspectives, then interpreting the information to create descriptive summaries (Creswell, 2017). This study was a good fit for qualitative research since the writer attempted to examine the phenomenon from the perspective of the participants. The goal of this strategy is to gather participant perspective.

This activity is offered in a Basic English class. The writer used a questionnaire list as an instrument to collect data from participants and conduct an interview as well as in a speaking class. The subject of this research is 26 students of Horticulture Plantation Study Program at Politeknik Negeri Jember. They are the first semester students in the Academic year of 2023-2024. The writer took all the students, as the subject of this research.

3. Findings

In this study, the writer focused on Students' perspective of small group discussion in learning speaking skill. The writer discussed the results of the research that has been done by using questionnaire and interview.

3.1. The Result of Questionnaire

This research employs a qualitative research design method, involving the collection of data through questions posed to 26 students enrolled in the Horticulture Plantation Study Program at Politeknik Negeri Jember. The aim of utilizing a Google Form poll with multiple-choice questions is to elicit responses from students regarding their perspectives on the small group discussion method and its potential impact on enhancing their speaking abilities. The questionnaire consists of 5 multiple-choice questions, each addressing a specific aspect. These questions are as follows:

1. What do you think about small group discussion?
2. Do you think small group discussion can help you improve your speaking skill?
3. Does small group discussion motivate you to speak?
4. Does small group discussion help you speak confidently?
5. Does small group discussion encourage your critical thinking?

The results for each question are presented in the subsequent tables. Starting with the findings for question number 1, "What do you think about small group discussion?" In the table, it is evident that 92% of students find small group discussions enjoyable, while 8% perceive them as boring.

Table 1. The Result of Questionnaire Number 1

Students' Answers	Amount	Percentage
It is fun	24	92%
It is boring	2	8%
Total	26	100%

Moving on to question number 2: "Do you think small group discussion can help you improve your speaking skill?" According to the obtained data, 84% of students agreed that small group discussions can enhance their speaking skills, 16% responded with "so-so," and 0% answered "No."

Table 2. The Result of Questionnaire Number 2

Students' Answers	Amount	Percentage
Yes	22	84%
So so	4	16%
No	0	0%
Total	26	100%

The answer for question number 3: "Does the small group discussion motivate you to speak?", according to the table, it is evident that 84% of students responded affirmatively, stating that small group discussions motivated them to speak, while 16% expressed a neutral stance ("so-so"), and 0% indicated a negative response.

Table 3. The Result of Questionnaire Number 3

Students' Answers	Amount	Percentage
Yes	22	84%
So so	4	16%
No	0	0%
Total	26	100%

In answer to the question number 4: "Does the small group discussion help you to speak confidently?". As presented in Table 4, 92% of students indicated that small group discussions help them speak confidently, whereas 8% responded with "so-so," and there were no responses indicating otherwise.

Table 4. The Result of Questionnaire Number 4

Students' Answers	Amount	Percentage
Yes	24	92%
So so	2	8%

No	0	0%
Total	26	100%

Now, turning to question number 5: "Does small group discussion encourage your critical thinking?" According to the table, it is evident that 92% of students agreed that small group discussions encouraged their critical thinking, 8% responded with "so-so," and 0% indicated a negative response.

Table 5. The Result of Questionnaire Number 5

Students' Answers	Amount	Percentage
Yes	24	92%
So so	2	8%
No	0	0%
Total	26	100%

3.2. The Result of Interview

The writer conducted an analysis of the research's data collection through interviews. In this phase, 5 questions were given to the 26 students, and they provided direct responses. The questions posed were as follows: 1. Do you think small group discussions are a good way to learn how to speak? Why or why not? 2. Do you think participating in a small group discussion program may improve your speaking abilities? Why or why not? 3. Do you think that the small-group discussion program is a motivational way to learn how to speak? Why, and why not? 4. What challenges do you have while learning how to speak through a small-group discussion program? and 5. Does your ability to speak better impact how the lecturer conducts the small-group discussion activity? The writer extracted 5 answers for each question as samples, which are presented in the following tables.

The result of question number 1 focuses on the effectiveness of small group discussion in learning speaking skills. The aim of this question is to gauge students' perceptions of the effectiveness of small group discussion activities for learning speaking skills. All students provided positive responses to the question, and the writer extracted 5 answers as samples, which can be seen in Table 6.

Table 6. Students' Perception on Small Group Discussion

No	Question	Answers
1	Do you think small group discussions are a good way to learn how to speak? Why or why not?	Student1 : I think yes, because we have a chance to practice and speak among the group based on the topic . Student 2: Yes, we can speak more and we can enlarge our vocabulary and checking grammar also Student 3: Yes, we are motivated to speak to share our opinion or ideas based on the topic given Student 4 : Yes, we are forced to think and speak, so I have learn much vocabulary, grammar and also pronunciation.

Student 5: Yes, we have to participate in discussion so we force ourselves to learn more, to speak, to ask some questions and share our opinion

The results of question number 2 in Table 7 pertain to the development of speaking skills. In this section, the writer analyzed the responses to interview question number 2, which explores students' perceptions of whether small group discussions can improve their speaking skills. Twenty-six students were interviewed to address this particular question, aiming to understand how students perceive the development of their speaking skills through the use of small group discussion activities. All the students provided positive answers to the question, and the writer selected five responses as samples, as shown in Table 7.

Table 7. Students' Perception on Speaking Skill Development

No	Question	Answers
2	Do you think participating in a small group discussion program may improve your speaking abilities? Why or why not?	<p>Student1: Yes of course, because we have to share our opinion and speak much, and I enjoy very much the in the process of discussion and give argumentation to friends' opinion and sometimes I also can support my team ideas.</p> <p>Student 2: Certainly, I can listen, read and have to be able to speak what comes up in my mind and try to be more brave to speak and answer the questions and also give some more examples.</p> <p>Student 3: Yes, because we have to learn how to share our ideas, we are forced to speak more and answer the other group's questions. Sometimes we have to be able to hold on our opinion or argumentation when discussing in the group or the other group.</p> <p>Student 4 : Yes, we have to talk more and more based on the topic given by giving argumentation and examples or delivering some questions to other group's discussion, and sometime we have to support our group's opinion by adding some clarifications, examples or others.</p> <p>Student 5: Yes, because we are forced to think and enlarge our vocabularies, and also use the right grammar rules and good pronunciation so it will make us more confident in speaking in front of the class.</p>

The results of question number 3, focusing on the impact of small group discussion on students' motivation, are examined in this section. The writer analyzed the responses to question number 3 to understand the students' perception of whether small group discussions motivate them to speak. A total of 26 students were interviewed to address this question, seeking insights into how students perceive the development of their speaking skills through

small group discussion activities. All students provided positive responses to the question, and the writer selected five answers as samples, which are presented in Table 8.

Table 8. *Students' Perception on Their Motivation*

No	Question	Answers
3	Do you think that the small-group discussion program is a motivational way to learn how to speak? Why, and why not?	<p>Student 1 : Yes, because we have to share our knowledge and information about the topic, so we have to speak well, answering the question well and giving questions to other group discussion.</p> <p>Student 2: Yes, it motivated me, when I see my friends can speak well, when we enrolled in the topic discussion, I force my self to speak well and confidently.</p> <p>Student 3: Yes, we have to understand the topic, take a part in the discussion and we have to share our opinion and talk clearly</p> <p>Student 4 : Yes, it motivated me to learn more and more in enlarging my vocabularies, grammar, pronunciation and the way I speak</p> <p>Student 5: Yes, because sometimes we have to argue our friends' opinion, so it makes me have motivation to speak well and confidently</p>

The results of question number 4 pertain to the challenges faced in small group discussions for the development of speaking skills. In this section, the writer analyzed the responses to interview question number 4, which focused on the challenges students encounter in developing their speaking skills through small group discussions. A total of 26 students were interviewed to address this particular question, aiming to understand the challenges they face in enhancing their speaking skills through small group discussion activities. All students provided positive responses to the question, and the writer extracted five answers to serve as samples, as presented in Table 9.

Table 9. *Students' Perception on the Challenges of Small Group Discussion*

No	Question	Answers
4	What challenges do you have while learning how to speak through a small-group discussion program?	<p>Student1 : lacking of vocabularies and grammar, and my pronunciation is not good so I am shy to speak, so it makes me have low motivation to speak more</p> <p>Student 2: lacking of knowledge and I am always nervous to speak in front of my friends, but the lecture helps me to overcome this situation</p> <p>Student 3: lacking of motivation and I fear if I make some mistakes. However the lecturer and friend help me to be brave to speak and I try to do my best.</p>

Student 4 : my speaking is very bad, I am shy to speak English because of my grammar and pronunciation, however in the group discussion I am motivated to learn more and to be better.

Student 5: I have no self confident to speak in front of my friend, because lacking vocabularies, pronunciation and bad grammar, but the teacher helps me and correct me if I am wrong or make some mistakes,

The results of question number 5, which focuses on the students' perspectives toward the teacher's approach in small group discussions, were analyzed by the writer. The analysis was based on the responses to interview question number 5, aiming to understand the students' perceptions of how the lecturer's approach influences their speaking improvement. A total of 26 students were interviewed to address this fifth question, exploring whether the lecturer's methods in handling small group activities have an impact on the students' speaking improvement. All students provided positive answers to the question, and the writer selected five responses as a sample, presented in Table 10.

Table 10. *Students' Perception on the Teacher's Approach in Small Group Discussion*

No	Question	Answers
5	Does your ability to speak better impact how the lecturer conducts the small-group discussion activity?	<p>Student1 : Yes, because the lecturer plays important role in this activities, she prepares the materials, and motivates us to be brave to speak and share our opinion, so I think she gives us chance to upgrade our speaking skill.</p> <p>Student 2: Yes, because the lecturer encourages me to speak more confidently and help me to be brave to speak and motivate me to learn more</p> <p>Student 3: Yes, by the guidelines and the lecturer's strategy, we are motivated to learn and speak more and more, and we have to prepare about the material or the topics that will be discussed</p> <p>Student 4 : Yes, the lecturer helps me to overcome my anxiety to speak in front of my friends, and she motivated me to learn how to pronounce some words as well as grammar</p> <p>Student 5: Yes, the lecturers provides opportunities to the students to speak what they want, even though there are so many mistakes and the lecturer will correct it and give some feedbacks, so we can learn from our mistakes,</p>

4. Discussion

The analysis of data retrieved from the respondents' questionnaire sheds light on the effectiveness of small group discussions in enhancing students' speaking skills. In response to the question, "What do you think about small group discussion?," 92% of students found small group discussions enjoyable, while only 8% considered them boring. This overwhelming positive response indicates widespread agreement among students that small group discussions can significantly impact their speaking abilities, validating the efficacy of this method in the speaking class. This finding is supported by other studies such as in Bohari (2020).

Moving on to the question, "Do you think small group discussion can help you improve your speaking skill?," 84% of students agreed that small group discussions could enhance their speaking skills, while 16% expressed a neutral stance, and none disagreed. This suggests a consensus among students that the technique indeed contributes to the improvement of their speaking abilities (Bohari, 2020). Similarly, when asked if small group discussions motivate them to speak, 84% responded affirmatively, 16% were neutral, and none answered negatively. The majority indicating motivation signifies that small group discussions play a pivotal role in encouraging students to actively engage in speaking activities (Schmidt & Moust, 2000).

The examination of data gathered from the respondents' questionnaire provides valuable insights into the effectiveness of small group discussions in advancing students' speaking skills. In response to the questionnaire question, "What do you think about small group discussion?," a staggering 92% of students found small group discussions enjoyable, while only 8% considered them boring. This overwhelmingly positive response suggests a widespread consensus among students regarding the significant impact of small group discussions on their speaking abilities, validating the efficacy of this method in the speaking class, as supported by similar studies (Bohari, 2020).

Moving on to the questionnaire question, "Do you think small group discussion can help you improve your speaking skill?," a substantial 84% of students agreed that small group discussions could enhance their speaking skills, with 16% expressing a neutral stance, and none in disagreement. This indicates a general agreement among students that the technique indeed contributes to the improvement of their speaking abilities, aligning with previous research findings (Bohari, 2020). Similarly, when asked if small group discussions motivate them to speak, 84% responded affirmatively, 16% were neutral, and none answered negatively. The majority's indication of motivation signifies that small group discussions play a pivotal role in encouraging students to actively engage in speaking activities (Schmidt & Moust, 2000).

Considering the questionnaire question, "Does small group discussion help you to speak confidently?," an overwhelming 92% of students asserted that it does, with 8% responding neutrally and none disagreeing. This further underscores the positive impact of small group discussions on students' confidence in speaking, consistent with findings in other studies

(Liang & Fung, 2021; Schmidt & Moust, 2000). Exploring the questionnaire question, "Does small group discussion encourage your critical thinking?," 92% of students acknowledged that it does, 8% responded neutrally, and none disagreed. This highlights the significant role of small group discussions in fostering critical thinking skills among students (Liang & Fung, 2021; DeWaelche, 2015; Szabo & Schwartz, 2011).

Beyond quantitative data, qualitative insights from interviews were obtained to delve deeper into students' perspectives. Interview Question 1 focused on students' opinions on the effectiveness of the small group discussion program for the speaking learning process. The analysis revealed that students perceived small group discussions as effective in improving their speaking skills, enhancing motivation, and stimulating critical thinking (Schmidt & Moust, 2000; Liang & Fung, 2021; DeWaelche, 2015; Szabo & Schwartz, 2011; Bohari, 2020). Students appreciated the opportunity to practice speaking, share opinions, and boost their self-confidence through this activity.

Interview Question 2 inquired about the impact of small-group discussion strategies on speaking skills. All interviewed students affirmed that small-group discussions positively influenced their speaking abilities, providing them with ample time to articulate thoughts, add arguments, and consider word choices, grammar rules, and pronunciation (Chou, 2011; Bohari, 2020).

Interview Question 3 explored whether small group discussions motivated students to speak. The unanimous response from all interviewed students indicated that small group discussions served as a motivational factor, offering guidance and understanding that alleviated concerns about poor speaking skills. This encouragement facilitated increased participation and engagement in discussions. Interview Question 4 revealed the difficulties students faced during small group discussions. Most students cited challenges such as a lack of knowledge, motivation, self-confidence, vocabulary limitations, pronunciation issues, and grammatical difficulties. These difficulties contributed to feelings of shyness and hindered active participation (Liang & Fung, 2021; Schmidt & Moust, 2000).

Finally, Interview Question 5 evaluated the role of the lecturer in handling small group discussion activities and its impact on students' speaking improvement. Students acknowledged the lecturer's crucial role, emphasizing her assistance, motivation, and encouragement for students to speak confidently. The lecturer's provision of opportunities for students to express themselves, correction of mistakes, and constructive feedback were highlighted as valuable contributions to the learning process.

Both quantitative and qualitative analyses indicate a positive reception and impact of small group discussions on students' speaking skills. The high percentage of agreement among students, coupled with qualitative insights from interviews, underscores the effectiveness of small group discussions in enhancing motivation, critical thinking, and overall speaking proficiency. The findings suggest that incorporating small group discussions into the speaking learning process can be a beneficial pedagogical strategy.

5. Conclusion

The comprehensive analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data in this study indicates the notable impact of small group discussions on students' speaking skills. The overwhelmingly positive responses from the questionnaire, supported by qualitative insights from interviews, affirm the effectiveness of small group discussions in fostering motivation, critical thinking, and overall speaking proficiency among students.

Despite the benefits, students also shared the difficulties faced during small group discussions, including knowledge gaps, motivation issues, and language-related challenges. Recognizing these obstacles is crucial for educators to tailor interventions that address individual needs, thereby optimizing the effectiveness of small group discussions in overcoming speaking proficiency barriers. The crucial role of lecturers in facilitating small group discussions was underscored by students, emphasizing their assistance, motivation, and constructive feedback. This acknowledgment highlights the importance of lecturer training programs to equip educators with effective strategies for maximizing the impact of small group discussions on students' speaking abilities.

In conclusion, the findings suggest that incorporating small group discussions into the speaking learning process is a beneficial pedagogical strategy. Educators are encouraged to leverage the positive outcomes, address student difficulties, and adapt to diverse learning styles. The implications for future practice emphasize the need for ongoing research, targeted interventions, and tailored approaches to ensure the continual improvement of students' speaking proficiency in language learning contexts. By implementing these insights, educators can actively contribute to creating a dynamic and engaging language learning environment that caters to the unique needs of a diverse student body.

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