



Learners' Perceptions of Small Group Discussions: A Qualitative Study in an ESL Context

Nor Afifa Nordin^{1*}, Nursyafiqah Zabidin² and Sumayyah Shaidin³

^{1,2,3} Academy of Language Studies, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Melaka, Malaysia
afifanordin@uitm.edu.my

Abstract. Group discussion is frequently employed as an assessment method for evaluating English-speaking proficiency among second language learners. Despite the introduction of various instructional approaches to develop learners' techniques, roles, and language use in discussions, many continue to face challenges in performing such tasks effectively. This study examines the effectiveness of small group discussion activities in enhancing learners' speaking performance. A qualitative action research design was adopted, involving ESL learners. A 15–20-minute group discussion was conducted once across three weeks, after which structured interviews were carried out among eight participants. The collected data were analysed thematically to identify recurring patterns and insights. The findings indicate that learners perceived small group discussions positively and expressed a preference for them over pair work due to clarity of roles and autonomy, group size and frequency of practice. The study underscores the pedagogical value of small group discussions as classroom practice. By addressing learners' specific difficulties, instructors can design more effective speaking activities that foster both improved classroom performance and the transfer of discussion skills to authentic communicative contexts.

Keywords: Group Discussion, ESL Learners, Speaking Proficiency

1 Introduction

One key objective of second language learning and language pedagogy has been the development of oral proficiency for the purpose of effective communication [13]. A pedagogical tool which provides opportunities for authentic and interactive language learning for learners is through small-group discussion. Such collaborative dialogue allow learners to practice negotiation for meaning, meaning construction and refinement of linguistic forms, which are required for effective discourse competence [6].

Nevertheless, research indicates these positive outcomes are dependent upon the design, structure and implementation of the group discussions in language lessons [4]. To enable learners to participate and use communicative strategies, teachers' roles are critical in giving instructions, guidance and scaffolding prior to the group discussion activity. Supported by Mai, Hien and Phuong [8], learners may have difficulties in discussions without clear instruction or support from teachers; subsequently, this would cause learners to have limited interactional practices and lack of opportunities to

practice and internalise discourse strategies. Lim [7] further added empirical studies support that even though the application of small-group discussions are frequent, the implementations are focused on the polished output or performance than the natural exchange of discussion or interaction and are without proper scaffolding and guidance.

Theoretically, sociocultural theory highlights the importance of social interactions in learning, where Vygotsky [12] stated learning development is mediated by the more knowledgeable others via support, modelling and feedback. Small-group discussion, in relation to this perspective, suggested that learners require structured instructional support to develop learners from performing with assistance to being autonomous learners in communication. Self-determination theory also similarly believed the importance of autonomy, structured guidance, and a balanced of clarity, definite roles and learners' choice to increase motivation and engagement in learning [10].

This study addresses a gap in the literature by examining learners' perceptions of teachers' instructions in small-group discussion activities in ESL classrooms. By exploring learners' interpretation and response towards instructional practices, the study aims to highlight factors which facilitate or hinder meaningful interaction, communicative competence and engagement. By understanding learners' perceptions, it is essential in refining pedagogical strategies in developing both linguistic and cognitive development to function optimally in small-group discussions.

Research objectives of the study include:

1. exploring learners' perspectives on the design, delivery, and instructional approaches used in earlier group discussion activities implemented by teachers.
2. assessing students' perceptions of the effectiveness and impact of newly implemented instructional strategies in group discussion activities.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Perspectives

Small-group discussion presents learning opportunities for authentic usage of language, negotiation and collaborative meaning-making, which makes it one of the most applied pedagogical strategy in language classrooms [3]. Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, the zone of proximal development (ZPD), stresses that to support learners' development, mediated interaction is required [12]. In other words, to ensure learners could perform beyond their current abilities and master communication strategies, guided participation, modelling and scaffolding is crucial. [1] further mentioned scaffolding in repetition could reinforce the ability to automatically communicate competently and flexibly apply linguistic forms in discussions and interactions.

[7] found pre-discussion activities which act as scaffold or guide for student-led and teacher-led discussion produced more positive learning outcomes. The absence of support could turn discussions into performative presentations rather than natural discussions which then limits real practice of discussions, and feedback to improve speaking ability. This findings provides the necessity to link instructional design and communicative goals to secure learners could participate actively in speaking and develop proficiency over time [4].

2.2 Instructional Practices in ESL Classrooms

One of the factors that determines the effectiveness of small-group discussion activity is teachers' instructions. Through structured guidance, role clarification and scaffolding, learners have understanding of teachers' expectations and this reduces cognitive load and encourages students' engagement with the learning activity [8, 2, 1] added scaffolding includes modelling, providing examples, and sharing formative feedback during interaction.

Autonomy-supportive teaching is deemed important as well and noted in self-determination theory that learners are more motivated intrinsically when they are given a balance of guidance and freedom [9, 10]. [15] further demonstrated that the autonomy and supportive instructions allow learners self-regulation, engagement and confidence when speaking in English.

Nevertheless, excessively small or ambiguous group arrangements could cause some participants to disengage from participating in discussions. [11, 3] believed to sustain interactions and reduce conversational awkwardness and long silence, flexible group arrangement need to consider task complexity, proficiency and cohesion.

Meanwhile, repeated exposure to speaking activities especially small-group discussions could support the internalization of strategies in speaking interactions or discourse which enables students to build fluency, accuracy and adaptive communication competencies [1, 13]. Pair work and collaborative discussion have been shown to decrease speaking anxiety and enhance confidence and performance in ESL classrooms [11, 2].

In conclusion, although small-group discussion is viewed as a positive tool pedagogically in ESL classrooms, its effectiveness depends on teachers' instructional practices in its implementation in lesson, notably, clarity of instructions, scaffolding, role identification and a balance of structure and autonomy as well as repetition of exposure of the activity. These insights provides a foundation to study the perceptions of learners towards teachers' instructions of small-group discussion activities: understanding processes of making it effective and identifying areas which require more refinement to support learners' outcomes better.

3 Methodology

3.1 A Subsection Sample

This study adopted a qualitative action research design to address problems in context of practicing speaking in discussions among ESL learners. Action research emphasizes collaboration and reflection for continuous improvements focused on the application of a specific pedagogy: small-group discussion activity.

The first step in action research cycle is identifying the problem. In the first weeks, eight ESL participants of 19 years old were interviewed regarding their previous experience participating in small-group discussions in school or classes. Once the interview data and responses were collected, organized and analysed, action based on data or evidence were applied. Meeting once across three weeks, instructors applied clear instructions and expectations on different roles participants could apply during discussions (agree, disagree, ask questions, examples, elaboration) and provide sample

of a good group discussion. At each meeting, participants involved were required to participate in a small-group discussion of 15-20 minutes on a general topic.

Final step in action research is reflection or evaluation of the result or participants' perceptions towards the method applied to learning and practicing speaking in small-group discussion activity. This was conducted via post interview with the participants, and the collected data was analysed thematically to identify recurring patterns and insights.

4 Findings

4.1 Previous Implementation of Group Discussion Instructions

During the interviews, several participants reported their experience of discussion-based classroom activities being predominantly conducted in pairs. The following are excerpts taken from interviews with participants:

C1: *...previous sem and high school. Person A and B. the discussion...*

C2: *...We have to choose a partner. Before this for group discussion, just between 2 people, you and your friends.*

C6: *...In school, we usually worked in pairs that we chose ourselves...*

C8: *...my lecturer used the questions that were provided in the textbook and asked us to practise among ourselves in pairs...*

Although two participants noted that teachers provided explicit explanations of speaking and discussion phrases, these instructional episodes were not typically followed by opportunities to practice as reported in the following excerpt from the interview with participants:

C5: *In secondary school, I remember my English teacher teaching us 'discussion' by only explaining to us how it's done, not by having us practice*

C7: *...some of my previous lecturers hadn't really gotten us to do discussion activities in class...*

Additionally, one explained that teachers tended to focus on issuing procedural instructions regarding what students were expected to do, rather than providing detailed guidance on how to conduct discussions. According to this participant, this practice was justified by the assumption that students had already been introduced to discussion tasks during their earlier schooling. This participant reported the following:

C2: *Teacher give instructions but we learn a lot of time... Do the same thing since high school... Lecturer know we have learned this already... No example. Today need to do discussion... Just do your own.*

Another participant also indicated that even when class time was allocated for discussion practice, students were generally required to conduct the activity independently, without further scaffolding or support from the teacher. Following these

independent practice sessions, only selected students were chosen and asked to perform their discussions in front of the class.

C8: ... we just practised at first, then if we are lucky to be picked, we will have to perform it in front of others.

Furthermore, one other participant added that although preparation time was provided prior to these performances, students were expected to present their discussions rather than engage in spontaneous interaction. These accounts suggest that classroom practices tended to prioritise the final performance of discussion tasks over the development of interactive discussion skills through guided practice.

C6: ...we were given some time to prepare together... Then, each pair had to present their discussion in front of the class. Most of the time, we just memorized or rehearsed our lines, so it didn't feel like a real, natural discussion. It was more about performing than actually thinking and responding to each other's opinions.

These findings suggest that classroom discussion activities were predominantly structured as pair work and frequently lacked systematic pedagogical support, with instructional practices focusing more on procedural guidance and final presentations than on fostering students' interactive discussion competence.

4.2 Perceptions on Recent Implementation of Teacher's Instruction

The following subtopic reports the participants' perceptions after action, the small-group discussion activity' was conducted to solve issues or problem these participants encounter prior to the action.

Most participants expressed agreement that the implementation of small in-class group discussion activities, when accompanied by pre-instruction, demonstration and feedback, was effective in enhancing their learning experience. Several participants attributed the perceived effectiveness of the activity to the increased clarity and understanding of discussion roles, as well as the autonomy they had in selecting these roles according to their preferences and comfort levels. One participant further elaborated that such clarity contributed to greater confidence in participating, as they were more aware of their responsibilities within the discussion process.

C3: ...this activity is good for everyone because students can choose any role that they find suitable for themselves...

C4: I like this activity because we can choose our own role and we can choose what we think is good for the role. It's kinda easy because we choose what we know to elaborate and gain some confidence if we know what to do.

C5: This activity was the most effective one because I was able to answer or voice out my opinions freely

C6: I think this activity was more interesting and felt like a real discussion. It was effective because we were free to use all the roles, so the conversation flowed more naturally. I had more chances to speak and respond.

C8: *...this is the best technique. It is effective because I can freely give points and constantly think of new ones, it lets my ideas flow more. It is also much easier because it feels more natural by mimicking real-life discussions where people can agree, question, and give examples*

Additionally, an observation mentioned by one participant that with repeated practice, noticeable improvements in speaking performance among peers became evident.

C7: *...I've noticed the improvement in their speaking...not all, but some*

Nonetheless, not all participants reported wholly positive experiences. One participant (C1) acknowledged that although the activity itself was not inherently difficult, she continued to experience anxiety when speaking in front of peers of the opposite gender, as she felt they might be judging her performance. However, one participant (C2) raised concerns regarding the group size, suggesting that the number of members was too limited. This participant elaborated that the small size sometimes resulted in prolonged waiting periods for responses, leading to disengagement, particularly when other group members lacked ideas or were unable to contribute meaningfully to the topic under discussion.

C1: *...Not that hard 'cause there's no fixed role. But being in front of the guys? Kinda scary. Feels like everyone's judging."*

C2: *Small group not a lot of people. Sometimes boring when they don't know what they should talk. We have to wait.*

Despite such concerns, participants maintained a positive overall perception of the group discussion activity, emphasizing that the smaller group size facilitated participation and made engagement in discussions more manageable. Moreover, C6 suggested that the activity should be conducted more frequently, arguing that regular practice would enhance idea generation and improve their ability to think and respond spontaneously during discussions.

C3: *the audience is small so there is less pressure on them to try what works and what not for them.*

C5: *...the number of people was small, it was easier to discuss*

C6: *... I think I did okay, but I still need more practice to feel confident using all the roles. If we do this activity more often, I believe I can improve.*

5 Discussion

5.1 Perceptions on Previous Implementation of Group Discussion Instructions

This subtopic reviews relevant studies and research that align with the findings on students' perceptions of previously implemented instructional approaches in group discussion activities. The participants reported that their prior experiences with learning

and practicing group discussions were limited in terms of instructional scaffolding, procedural guidance, and opportunities beyond prepared, speech-focused tasks.

Limited Instructional Scaffolding

The findings found that for learners to practice and perform speaking in group discussions, the basic requirement is support in terms of techniques, language and instructions and even guidance. [8] supports this and identifies the discrepancy between teachers' scaffolding technique and language with learners' needs to effectively support them in interactions. Importantly this is also highlighted in [1] as crucial in enhancing learners' ability in performing communicative tasks through clear and structural approach for example modelling, giving examples, guidance and monitoring.

Procedural Instructions

Another finding was previous learning sessions on speaking in group discussion was focused on the product without ample support during the process of modelling such mentioned activity to the learners effectively. According to Vygotsky [12] optimal learning occurs with teachers' step-by-step guidance and meaningful interaction, learners consequently move through the space of being fully reliant to gradually being independent learners or Zone of Proximal Development or ZPD. Unfortunately, being goal oriented teachers focusing only on the completion of the task without gradual steps instructions, monitoring and guidance and interaction, students' mental and social processes needed to develop communicative competence will not be fulfilled or will remain incomplete.

Prepared Speech Focussed

Previously in group discussion activities, students were given time to prepare for the discussion and later present or perform it. This somehow shifted the focus from having a natural conversation to delivering a polished presentation as the final product. [7] stated by prioritising a polished performative product, learners' opportunities to practice, receive feedback and repair are threatened and reduced and later affect authentic interaction ability. [15] further supported this as students will have insufficient practice of real-time communication skills like negotiation, language adaptation, and flexible response in conversations.

5.2 Perceptions on Recent Implementation of Teacher's Instruction

Meanwhile, this subtopic reviews relevant studies and research that align with the findings on students' perceptions of the newly implemented instructional approaches in group discussion activities. The participants reported positive perceptions on their experiences with learning and practicing group discussions due to the clarity of roles and autonomy in role selection, appropriate group size and interactional dynamics also frequency of practice and spontaneous discourse development.

Clarity of Roles and Autonomy in Role Selection

Participants' responses and positive perceptions on being more motivated to learn and be more participative and active when given control or autonomy in their learning accompanied with clear guidance and ample support is aligned with the self-determination theory or SDT [10]. Autonomy in learning does not equate to absence of structure [10] added that clear expectations and flexible freedom of choice. In this study, teacher provided instructions and modelling portrayed and became both requirement in the autonomy of learning making discussion activities more effective.

Group Size and Interactional Dynamics

Small group work type activities have garnered mixed perceptions among participants. Some valued small group activities as they provide more opportunities to speak however problems could also occur as conversations can end should participants do not have the ability to continue their own turn in the discussion. Gustavsen et al. [3] believed balance in group dynamics is required for group discussion to be effective. The number of members in the group should be small enough to create a comfortable interaction atmosphere but large enough for the members to maximise and retain the conversation flow.

Frequency of Practice and Spontaneous Discourse Development

In the study, participants reported to have a request for more practices which demonstrates the need for continuous exposure to quick thinking and communication skills to perform an effective natural conversation. Grijpma et al. [4] agreed that communication skills specifically students' engagement and adaptive discourse behaviours could be improved as they actively participating in more small group discussion activity.

6 Conclusion

Participants develop a more positive perceptions towards small group discussion activity with the fulfillment of certain needs. By providing students with clear instructions, freedom of choice, adaptive group size and regular students practices could definitely improve the involvement and participation of students in small-group discussion activity. In maintaining discussion as an on-going practice in class and include supportive and constructive feedback could further help learners to think quickly and respond meaningfully and fluently in spontaneous conversations. However, this study focused on limited number of participants which results could be generalized. Future studies need to be conducted among larger number of participants and consider various learners' backgrounds: age, interests, gender, and level of proficiency.

Disclosure of Interests. The authors declare that there are no known financial, personal, or professional competing interests that could have influenced the work reported in this article. All authors confirm that they have no conflicts of interest to disclose.

References

1. Allagui, B.: A Scaffolding Intervention to Improve Self-Efficacy in Source-Based Argumentative Writing. *Frontiers in Education*, 9, 1475048 (2024)
2. Atifnigar, H.: Teachers' and Students' Roles in Reducing Foreign Language Anxiety. *European Journal of Contemporary Education and E-Learning*, 2(3), 84–94 (2024)
3. Gustavsen, A. M., Foshaug Vennebo, K.: Group Discussions: An Active Learning Resource For School And Kindergarten Leaders?. *Educational Research*, 67(1), 41-59 (2025)
4. Grijpma, J. W., Ramdas, S., Broeksma, L., Meeter, M., Kusurkar, R. A., De La Croix, A.: Learning From The Experts: Stimulating Student Engagement In Small-Group Active Learning. *Perspectives on Medical Education*, 13(1), 229-238 (2024)
5. Jameel, A. S.: The Role Of Self-Monitoring Strategies In Developing Students' Speaking Performances Via Google Workspace. *Dirasat: Human and Social Sciences*, 50(6), 25–34 (2023)
6. Kuliahana, A., Marzuki, A. G.: Utilizing Group Discussion Technique In Developing Speaking Skill In An Efl Classroom. *English Franca: Academic Journal of English Language and Education*, 7(2), 305–316 (2024)
7. Lim, J.: Improving Learning Effects Of Student-Led And Teacher-Led Discussion Contingent On Pre-Discussion Activity. *Journal of Educational Research*, 117(4), 395–410 (2024)
8. Mai, N. B., Hien, T. H., Phuong, N. L. T.: English Teachers' Perception And Attitudes Of Scaffolding Method In Teaching Academic Writing. *Journal of Education and E-Learning Research*, 10(2), 218–225 (2023)
9. Reeve, J.: What Autonomy-Supportive Teachers Do And Why Their Students Benefit. *The Elementary School Journal*, 106(3), 225–236 (2006)
10. Reeve, J., Cheon, S. H.: Autonomy-Supportive Teaching: Its Malleability, Benefits, And Potential To Improve Educational Practice. *Educational Psychologist*, 56(1), 54–66 (2021)
11. Rianti, R., Syahid, A., Qamariah, Z.: The Effectiveness Of Pair Work Activities On Students' Speaking Anxiety And Speaking Ability. *Jurnal Educatio FKIP UNMA*, 8(4), 1471–1477 (2022)
12. Vygotsky, L. S.: *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes*. Harvard University Press (1978)
13. Wang, W., Rezaei, Y. M., Izadpanah, S.: Speaking Accuracy And Fluency Among Efl Learners: The Role Of Creative Thinking, Emotional Intelligence, And Academic Enthusiasm. *Heliyon*, 10(18) (2024)
14. Yan, R., Liu, B., Zhang, L. J.: Effects Of Pedagogical Intervention On Chinese Efl Learners' Use Of Motivational Regulation Strategies And Oral English Proficiency Improvement. *Heliyon*, 10(19) (2024)
15. Zhang, M.: Enhancing Self-Regulation And Learner Engagement In L2 Speaking: Exploring The Potential Of Intelligent Personal Assistants Within a Learning-Oriented Feedback Framework. *BMC Psychology*, 12, Article 421 (2024)

Open Access This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>), which permits any noncommercial use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.

