



EXPLORING STUDENTS' CONFIDENCE IN SPEAKING ENGLISH THROUGH GROUP DISCUSSION ACTIVITIES AT MA ASY-SYARIF SIDANG KOTO LAWEH

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ABSTRACT

This study explores how group discussion activities can improve students' confidence in speaking English at MA Asy-Syarif Sidang Koto Laweh, a pesantren-based senior high school. Many students initially struggled with anxiety, limited vocabulary, and hesitation when speaking. A descriptive qualitative method was used, involving two eleventh-grade classes. Data were collected through classroom observation, documentation, and informal interviews. The results show that group discussion significantly increased students' willingness to speak, vocabulary recall, and overall participation. Working in small groups helped students feel more comfortable expressing ideas, receiving peer support, and practicing before presenting. Although each class showed different learning dynamics, both demonstrated positive improvement. This study concludes that group discussion is an effective strategy for enhancing students' speaking confidence in EFL classrooms.

Keywords: Speaking confidence, Group discussion, EFL students.

A. INTRODUCTION

In the Indonesian EFL context, speaking skill is widely acknowledged as one of the most difficult language skills to master at the senior high school level. Despite years of formal English instruction, many students still struggle to express their ideas orally in English. This issue is not merely related to linguistic competence but is closely associated with affective factors, particularly students' confidence in speaking. Previous studies have indicated that Indonesian students often experience anxiety, fear of making grammatical mistakes, limited vocabulary, and lack of self-confidence when asked to speak English in front of others (Alrabai, 2015; Brown, 2015; Richards, 2017). These psychological barriers frequently result in



students' reluctance to participate in speaking activities, even when they possess sufficient knowledge of the topic.

At the national level, this condition reflects a broader challenge in English language teaching practices in Indonesia. Although the national curriculum emphasizes communicative competence and student-centered learning, classroom practices still tend to prioritize written exercises, grammar drills, and examination-oriented instruction. As a result, opportunities for meaningful oral communication are limited, and speaking activities are often conducted in a controlled or teacher-dominated manner. Several studies have reported that such instructional practices contribute to students' passive learning behavior and low willingness to communicate in English (Horwitz, 2001). Consequently, the gap between curriculum expectations and classroom realities continues to widen, particularly in speaking instruction.

The issue of low speaking confidence becomes more pronounced in Islamic senior high schools, especially those operating under a boarding school or pesantren system. In these institutions, students' daily activities are largely focused on religious studies, communal living, and the use of local or regional languages in everyday communication. English exposure is mostly confined to classroom instruction, which limits students' opportunities to practice speaking outside formal lessons. Several studies conducted in pesantren-based schools have shown that students often perceive English speaking tasks as intimidating and tend to avoid oral participation due to fear of negative evaluation from peers and teachers (Hartono, R., & Lestari, 2021; Putra, D., & Abdullah, 2020; Sari, E. R., & Putri, 2019). This condition highlights the need for instructional strategies that not only develop linguistic competence but also foster students' confidence and willingness to speak.

One pedagogical approach that has been widely discussed as effective in addressing students' affective barriers is group discussion. Group discussion activities allow students to interact with peers in smaller, less threatening settings, reducing anxiety and increasing opportunities for participation. Through collaborative interaction, students are encouraged to share ideas, negotiate meaning, and support each other's learning. Previous research has demonstrated that group discussion can promote students' speaking confidence, enhance peer support, and create a more engaging classroom atmosphere (Alteleh, 2022; Rahman, A., & Weda, 2019).



Moreover, collaborative learning environments have been found to facilitate two-way communication and increase students' motivation to use English actively.

However, most existing studies on group discussion and speaking confidence tend to focus on quantitative outcomes or experimental designs, such as measuring speaking scores or confidence levels before and after treatment. There is still a lack of qualitative research that explores students' experiences, perceptions, and behavioral changes during group discussion activities, particularly in the context of Islamic senior high schools in Indonesia. Understanding how students experience group discussion and how it influences their confidence in speaking English is crucial for providing deeper pedagogical insights (Creswell, J. W., & Poth, 2018; Miles, M. B., Huberman, A. M., & Saldaña, 2020). Therefore, a qualitative descriptive approach is considered appropriate to capture the complexity of classroom interactions and students' responses to instructional practices.

Based on the issues discussed above, this study aims to explore how group discussion activities contribute to improving students' confidence in speaking English at MA Asy-Syarif Sidang Koto Laweh. Specifically, this study seeks to describe students' responses, participation patterns, and confidence development during group discussion-based speaking activities. The findings of this study are expected to provide practical implications for English teachers, particularly in Islamic senior high school contexts, in designing speaking activities that support both linguistic development and affective growth.

B. METHOD

This study employed a descriptive qualitative research design to explore students' confidence in speaking English through group discussion activities. A qualitative approach was chosen because it allows the researcher to gain an in-depth understanding of students' experiences, perceptions, and classroom behavior in natural learning settings (Creswell, J. W., & Poth, 2018; Sugiyono, 2015).

The research was conducted at MA Asy-Syarif Sidang Koto Laweh, an Islamic senior high school, during the researcher's teaching practicum program. The participants of this study consisted of two eleventh-grade classes. These classes were selected purposively because the



researcher was directly involved in teaching English in both classes, which enabled continuous classroom interaction and systematic observation of students' learning processes. The participants shared relatively similar English proficiency levels and learning backgrounds, making them suitable for this qualitative inquiry.

Data were collected through classroom observation and semi-structured interviews. Classroom observation was conducted to examine students' speaking behavior during group discussion activities, particularly focusing on their willingness to speak, participation level, interaction with peers, and confidence in expressing ideas orally. Observation was used to capture students' natural responses and classroom dynamics during the learning process (Miles, M. B., Huberman, A. M., & Saldaña, 2020).

In addition, semi-structured interviews were conducted to obtain deeper insights into students' perceptions of speaking English and their experiences participating in group discussions. The interview consisted of six guiding questions, which explored students' feelings before and after engaging in group discussion activities, challenges they faced while speaking English, and perceived changes in their confidence. The interviews were conducted to support and triangulate the observation data (Dörnyei, 2015).

The data obtained from observations and interviews were analyzed using qualitative data analysis procedures, including data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing (Miles, M. B., Huberman, A. M., & Saldaña, 2020). To ensure data credibility, triangulation was applied by comparing findings from different data sources. The instruments used in this study, including the observation checklist and interview questions, are presented in the appendix section.

C. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

This section presents the findings of the study derived from classroom observations and semi-structured interviews. The findings focus on how group discussion activities influenced students' confidence in speaking English during classroom learning.



Based on classroom observations, it was found that students initially demonstrated low confidence in speaking English. At the beginning of the learning process, many students were hesitant to respond to questions, avoided eye contact, and preferred to remain silent when asked to speak in front of the class. These behaviors indicated that students experienced anxiety and lacked confidence, particularly during whole-class speaking activities.

However, noticeable changes were observed after the implementation of group discussion activities. When students were placed into small groups, they began to participate more actively in speaking activities. Students showed greater willingness to express ideas, respond to peers' opinions, and ask questions using simple English expressions. The smaller group setting appeared to reduce students' fear of making mistakes, as they felt more comfortable speaking among their peers.

The interview data supported the observation findings. Several students reported that speaking in small groups helped them feel more confident because they were not directly exposed to the whole class. One student (S1) stated, *"I feel more confident when speaking in a group because I am not afraid if my English is wrong."* This statement reflects students' perception that group discussion provides a safer environment for practicing speaking skills.

Another important finding was the reduction of students' speaking anxiety through peer support. During observations, students were frequently seen helping each other by suggesting vocabulary or correcting sentences politely. This collaborative interaction contributed to a more relaxed learning atmosphere. A student (S3) mentioned, *"My friends help me when I forget vocabulary, so I feel calmer when speaking English."* This indicates that peer assistance played a significant role in increasing students' confidence.

Furthermore, the findings revealed that group discussion activities helped students improve their ability to recall vocabulary and express ideas orally. During the discussion sessions, students often asked questions about vocabulary they wanted to use. Over time, students were able to reuse previously learned words during discussions and presentations. One interview participant (S5) stated, *"After discussing with my group, I remember more vocabulary and can explain my ideas better."* This finding suggests that repeated exposure to vocabulary in meaningful interaction enhanced students' confidence in speaking.



Although the two classes involved in this study demonstrated different classroom characteristics, both showed positive development in speaking confidence. Students in Class XI.F1 tended to be quieter and more reserved, while students in Class XI.F2 were more expressive and active. Despite these differences, observations indicated that students from both classes became more engaged and confident during group discussion activities.

Overall, the findings indicate that group discussion activities created a supportive and interactive learning environment that encouraged students to speak English more confidently. The data from observations and interviews consistently show that students experienced increased participation, reduced anxiety, and improved confidence when engaging in group-based speaking activities.

Discussion

This study aimed to explore how group discussion activities influence students' confidence in speaking English in an EFL classroom. The findings indicate that group discussion provides a supportive learning environment that encourages students to participate more actively and confidently in speaking activities.

The increased willingness to speak observed in this study aligns with previous research suggesting that collaborative learning activities can reduce students' fear of making mistakes. When students interact in small groups, they tend to feel less anxious because the learning atmosphere is more informal and supportive. This finding supports the view that peer interaction plays an important role in building students' confidence in language learning (Harmer, 2007; Richards, 2017).

The reduction of speaking anxiety found in this study is also consistent with earlier studies in EFL contexts, which highlight that anxiety often emerges when students are required to perform individually in front of the whole class. Group discussion allows students to share responsibility and receive immediate support from peers, which helps lower anxiety levels and encourages oral participation (Horwitz, 2001). This condition was evident when students reported feeling calmer and more confident during group discussions.



Furthermore, the improvement in students' vocabulary recall and expression of ideas supports the notion that meaningful interaction enhances language development. Through group discussion, students are exposed to repeated use of vocabulary in authentic contexts, which facilitates retention and confidence in speaking. This finding is in line with communicative language teaching principles that emphasize interaction as a key component of language acquisition (Richards, J. C., & Rodgers, 2014).

Despite differences in classroom characteristics between the two classes involved in this study, both demonstrated positive development in speaking confidence. This suggests that group discussion activities can be effectively implemented in diverse classroom settings. The findings reinforce the idea that teaching strategies should consider students' emotional and psychological needs, particularly confidence, as an essential aspect of speaking skill development.

Overall, this study confirms that group discussion activities are an effective pedagogical approach to enhancing students' confidence in speaking English. By fostering collaboration, reducing anxiety, and encouraging active participation, group discussion contributes positively to students' speaking development in EFL classrooms.

D. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that group discussion activities play an important role in improving students' confidence in speaking English. The findings indicate that students became more willing to speak, experienced reduced anxiety, and showed increased engagement during speaking activities when learning was conducted through group discussions. The supportive atmosphere created by peer interaction helped students feel more comfortable expressing their ideas in English without fear of making mistakes.

The results of this study imply that English teachers are encouraged to implement group discussion activities as an alternative strategy to foster students' speaking confidence, particularly in EFL classrooms where students often feel anxious and lack confidence. By providing a safe and collaborative learning environment, teachers can help students develop their speaking skills more naturally and actively.



For future researchers, this study suggests the need to explore group discussion activities in different contexts, such as larger classes, different grade levels, or through a longer research duration. Further studies may also combine qualitative and quantitative approaches to gain a deeper understanding of how group discussion influences students' confidence and speaking performance.

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