# THE EFFECT OF ONLINE GROUP DISCUSSION ON STUDENTS' SPEAKING PROFICIENCY AMONG SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS

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## Abstract

This research aims to investigate the effect of online group discussion on students' speaking proficiency among secondary school students and to determine their perceptions towards the method. The design of this research is quasi-experimental, consisting of 43 Form 1 Capella students from an all-boys school, SM La Salle, Kota Kinabalu, Sabah. Pre-test and post-test, and questionnaire were used to collect data for this research. The intervention was executed with a structured online group activity for several weeks. The data were analysed using paired sample t-tests and descriptive statistics. The overall findings showed significant improvement in students' speaking skills, specifically in fluency, pronunciation and vocabulary. Grammar and accuracy improved a bit. Through the questionnaire, it was reported that students have a positive view towards this method in helping them improve, mainly on their confidence, motivation and engagement. The findings are aligned with Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, which emphasises that peer interaction and scaffolding help learners in language learning. This research implies that the online group discussion method is an effective and student-centred structured method that can help improve speaking performance in an ESL class.

**Keyword(s):** *Online Group Discussion, Speaking Proficiency, Intervention, Students' Perception, Digital Learning*

## INTRODUCTION

In this era of globalisation, career fields demand fluency in the English language as part of the criteria, especially in speaking. Speaking is one of the main skills in acquiring and mastering a language, especially in the Malaysian educational system, where English serves as a second language in all schools. Speaking is an essential tool in communication as it reflects a person's ability to hold a conversation, fluency, confidence and their ability to function in real-world settings (Hashim et al.,2020). However, even though speaking holds many importances skills, it is also one of the most challenging skills for many to master due to limited exposure to the targeted language. Not only that, but many people are also struggling with low self-esteem and fear of making mistakes (Kana and Hashim, 2023). In many of Malaysia's ESL classrooms, teacher-centred lesson still dominates the class and neglect the needs for students'

interaction and participation. This gap has pushed students to be reluctant to participate in speaking English.

One of the reasons why this is happening is because of the dependence on the traditional method, exam-oriented, which focuses more on grammar and writing skills. This led students to comprehend English passively but having a hard time to use it actively (Serena, 2016). The need for student-centred lesson implementation is growing rapidly as it promotes interaction and engagement and real-life communication in classroom contexts.

Fortunately, these concerns are heard by those who spend their effort actively seeking solutions to handle such challenges, and the group discussion method emerged as a promising method to address such gap. According to Bohari (2019), this method provides a space for students to practice their speaking skills, express opinions without fearing being judged and collaborate with their peers. It allows learners to interact with each other comfortably and develop critical thinking (Kusumawangtias, 2017). Kaharuddin and Rahmadana (2020) mentioned that, after conducting their study, they found that group discussion helped students with their communicative competence. This method is deeply rooted in Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory which emphasises that learning occurs though social interaction as students build knowledge collaboratively within their Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). However, with the rapid development of technology, online group discussions became one of the most meaningful alternatives, especially during the pandemic. Digital platforms such as Google Meet, Zoom, and Microsoft Teams allow students to communicate and interact through virtual breakout rooms, voice chats and calls while offering a flexible space to improve their speaking.

Despite several studies having been conducted on the use of online group discussions, yet there is a limited study that focuses on secondary students, especially the lower form. This study served the purpose of filling that gap by assessing not only the effect of the method but also the perceptions of students towards it. Therefore, this study addressed the research questions below:

1. Does online group discussion have any significant effect on students' speaking skills before and after the intervention?

2. How do students perceive the use of online group discussion in learning their speaking proficiency?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Speaking Proficiency in ESL Context

Speaking is one of the main cores in language competence, especially for learners in ESL class settings in like Malaysia. It is common to know that speaking consists of both verbal expressions and non-verbal cues that carry meaning in real-time, and it is crucial for daily interaction, performance in academic and employment (Hashim et al.,2020). However, according to Kana and Hashim (2023), many students struggle in speaking due to limited vocabulary and insufficient opportunities to practice. This is due to the teacher-centred methods that emphasise writing skills and grammar over oral practice. This led to students becoming passive learners with a concerning level of proficiency in speaking (Serena, 2016).

## Online Group Discussions as a Pedagogical Tool.

Group discussion is a strategy that involves collaborative learning between students. it allows students to share ideas and interact with their peers to negotiate meaning in a comfortable and non-pressure environment. When it is taken into an online platform, the method extends to a virtual platform where students are allowed to engage with each other in the breakout rooms, chat functions and more. It was noted by Kusumawangtias (2017) that it helps students develop their speaking proficiency and critical thinking skills. Students are allowed to share opinions, clear misunderstandings, and support each other through online group discussions. Bohari (2019) noted that a well-structured group task can enhance pronunciation, fluency, and communicative competence. Furthermore, Kaharuddin and Rahmadana (2020) and Valentine (2023) discovered that this method helps enhance speaking ability, particularly in vocational school contexts.

## Students' Perception of Online Group Discussion

The success of the method greatly depends on students' perceptions towards it. Sudiro (2022) and other fellow researchers discovered and stated in their study that students viewed the method as enjoyable and confidence-building, and very effective in enhancing their speaking skills. They also stated that students felt more motivated and less anxious and could comfortably engage during an online group task. This showed how important it is to have social and emotional support during language learning, especially for younger learners, as positive views encourage future participation, which leads to better speaking performance outcomes.

## Theoretical Framework: Sociocultural Theory

This study aligned with Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory that emphasises that learning occurs effectively through social interaction and learners acquire knowledge and develop language skills effectively by interacting with others, particularly within their Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). Collaborative learning encourages students to have support and feedback to create a bridge over the gap between what they can do by themselves and what they can achieve with guidance. Online group discussions demonstrate this theory in practice. As students work together, they encourage and foster scaffolding for one another. An environment where collaboration is practised accelerates language learning. Therefore, this method is a practical classroom, and a flexible learning tool and helps promote language development.

## METHODOLOGY

### Research Design

This study utilised a quantitative approach using a quasi-experimental design with a single group to investigate the effect of online group discussion on students' speaking proficiency among secondary school students. This design was chosen to determine the effect of the intervention by comparing the performance in speaking before and after the intervention, without using a control group.

## Participants

The sample of this study consisted of 43 Form 1 students (age 13) from SM La Salle Secondary School, Kota Kinabalu, Sabah. The sample was selected using a purposive sampling technique due to the students' need for improvement and availability during the study period, and their flexible time. All participants were boys and shared a common classroom instruction. Parental and school consent were obtained before the study to conduct such research.

## Instruments

This study used two instruments: A speaking Test (Pre-test and Post-test) and a questionnaire. This speaking evaluation was created to assess five criteria which were fluency, pronunciation, grammar and accuracy, vocabulary, and interaction and coherence. The rubric of the score is adapted from the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) for consistency. The test consists of students responding to visual prompts and questions verbally and being recorded for reliability purposes, as shown in Table 1. The rubric can be seen at Appendix 1.

**Table 1:** Reliability Results of Pre-Test and Post-Test Data

| Test | Cronbach's Alpha | Number of Items | Interpretation |
|---|---|---|---|
| Pre-Test | 0.953 | 5 | Very Good |
| Post-Test | 0.972 | 5 | Very Good |

A questionnaire of a 10-item Likert Scale was distributed after the post-test to collect data from students on their perceptions of the method as a speaking activity. The questionnaire was adapted from Sudiro (2022) and was reviewed for face and content validity by two language experts and was also tested for reliability.

**Table 2:** Questionnaire on Students' Perceptions

| Items | Statement | SD (1) | D (2) | A (3) | SA (4) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Q1 | I understand the goals, rules and norms of online group discussions | | | | |
| Q2 | I can interact well through the online group structures used in discussions. | | | | |
| Q3 | I feel involved and contribute actively during online group discussions | | | | |
| Q4 | I can communicate effectively with my group members. | | | | |
| Q5 | I can achieve learning objectives through online group discussions. | | | | |
| Q6 | Online group discussions help me feel more prepared for class activities | | | | |
| Q7 | I find it easy to receive and understand feedback from teachers and peers | | | | |
| Q8 | Online group discussions improve my confidence in speaking English. | | | | |
| Q9 | I enjoy participating in online group discussions | | | | |
| Q10 | Online Group discussions help me improve my speaking skills. | | | | |

## Procedure

This research was conducted for seven weeks, where the first week was a pre-test and the second week until sixth week was online group discussion intervention. By week seven, the post-test was held, and the questionnaire was distributed. Each session consists of an online group discussion activity such as an online role-play, presentation, pair discussion, and problem-solving. Students were guided to use English while interacting and the teacher observed and offered help for those who needed through webcams and microphones.

## Data Analysis

The data collected were analysed using paired-sample t-tests to determine the significant difference in their speaking performance, and descriptive analysis was used for the questionnaire responses, and all of these were conducted using SPSS software.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### The Effect of Online Group Discussion on Students' Speaking Proficiency

The data between two test showed a clear improvement in student speaking performance. The mean for pre-test was lower than post-test indicating there is an improvement, a significant difference. The paired-sample t-test analysis showed that the difference was statistically significant, $t(42) = -7.199$, $p < .001$.

**Table 5:** Paired Samples T-Test Results for Pre-Test and Post-Test Scores

| Test | Mean | SD | N | Mean Difference | t | df | Sig.(2-tailed) |
|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| Pre-test | 11.98 | 3.71 | 43 | | | | <.001 |
| Post-test | 13.07 | 4.17 | 43 | 1.093 | -7.199 | 42 | |

### Overall Results

Based on the overall results obtained from the research, the pre-test and post-test scores for speaking based on forty-three students based on five criteria, which were fluency, pronunciation, grammar and accuracy, vocabulary and interaction and coherence, have significant differences. Each criterion carries four marks with a maximum score of twenty marks for each student. For the pre-test, most students scored between 10 and 15, with the highest score being 17 and the lowest being 5, suggesting a moderate level of speaking proficiency overall. The highest average was fluency (2.7), and the lowest was interaction and coherence (2.0), indicating that students were more confident expressing ideas than maintaining an interaction flow.

The total score for the overall mean was 11.9, hinting at an overall moderate speaking ability before the intervention. For the post-test, the average total score increased to 13.0,

compared to 11.9 in the pre-test, indicating an improvement in speaking proficiency. The highest was 19, and the lowest was still 5. Fluency scored the highest mean (3.0), followed by pronunciation (2.7), and interaction and coherence remain the lowest at 2.2. Based on these results, a positive effect can be seen on students' speaking skills after the intervention.

## Students' Perceptions of Group Discussion

The data collected from the questionnaire illustrated that students held a positive view towards the method. The mean scores above ranged from 3.05 to 3.23, with the highest being *"I can achieve learning objectives through online group discussions",* followed by "*I find it easy to receive and understand feedback from teachers and peers".* These data showed that online group discussion managed to create a safe, motivating and enjoyable learning environment, judging by how high the mean for the rest of the statement.

## Limitations and Future Research

Despite the promising results and findings, there are a few limitations that need to be addressed. This study only used a small group as a sample from one school which in this case limits generalisation. Other than that, there was no control group used. Therefore, it is recommended that future studies should use larger and diverse samples and make sure to include control groups. It is also suggested that future studies adopt mixed approaches, such as classroom observations or interviews, for more insights. Furthermore, internet connections also became a problem for certain students and limited devices. It is suggested that future studies need to assess more carefully on students' availability before conducting the research.

## CONCLUSION

Overall, we can conclude that this study aims to investigate the effect of online group discussion on students' speaking proficiency and to determine their perceptions towards the method. Based on the data presentation, it was clear that online group discussions indeed have a significant effect on students' speaking skills, especially in terms of fluency, pronunciation, and grammar. Although some of the criteria improved slightly, the overall results supported that the use of online group discussion in improving communicative competence was effective. It was also reported that students held positive views towards the method itself, emphasizing the improvement in confidence, motivation and their understanding towards lesson objectives, which supported Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory highlights in learning through social interaction and peer scaffolding. This study supplies a precious insight into the benefits of implementing collaborative tasks in speaking lessons and foster more meaningful language through interaction and moves beyond the traditional, teacher-centred method.

**Co-Author Contribution**
The authors declare no conflict of interest. The author conducted fieldwork, prepared the literature review, methodology, data entry, performed statistical analysis and interpreted results, wrote, reviewed and edited.

**Ethics Statement**

The research followed all applicable ethical standards. Participation was voluntary, and confidentiality was ensured.

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## Appendix 1

### Assessment Rubric for Speaking Skill

| Criteria | Fluency (4) | Pronunciation (4) | Grammar & Accuracy (4) | Vocabulary (4) | Interaction & Coherence (4) | TOTAL (20) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **A1 Beginner** | Struggles to form sentences; long pauses; heavy reliance on memorised phrases. | Difficult to understand due to incorrect pronunciation of words. | Uses very basic sentences with frequent grammatical mistakes that hinder understanding. | Uses very limited vocabulary. repeats basic words frequently. | Cannot sustain a conversation; relies on others to continue. | 0 – 4 |
| **A2 Elementary** | Can produce simple sentences but with hesitation and self correction; limited flow. | Understandable but with frequent pronunciation errors affecting clarity. | Uses simple sentence structure with some errors. struggles with tenses and complex structures. | Uses simple words and phrases; struggles to find the right words for some ideas | Can respond to simple conversation but has difficulty maintaining flow. | 5 - 10 |
| **B1 Intermediate** | Speaks at a steady pace with some hesitation but can self correct. Can handle basic conversations. | Mostly clear pronunciation with occasional mispronunciation. does not interfere with communication | Uses a variety of sentences structures with occasional mistakes; can communicate ideas effectively | Uses a sufficient range of vocabulary to discuss a familiar topic ; occasional word-choice mistake | Can participate actively in discussion, ask and answer questions, and stay on topic | 11 - 15 |
| **B2 Upper Intermediate** | Speaks with confidence and minimal hesitation; can express thoughts in detail | Clear and Natural pronunciation with occasional minor mistakes | Uses a wide range of structures accurately with minimal errors. | Uses a wide range of vocabulary with some natural expressions and idioms. | Can engage in longer conversation with natural back-and-forth interaction. | 16 - 20 |