

Improving The Students' Speaking Ability Through Conversation Circles For The First Year Students Of Junior High School

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Abstract

This study aims to examine the effectiveness of using Conversation Circles in improving the speaking skills of first-year junior high school students at MTs Al-Ihsan NWDI Gelondong. This research used a one-group pretest-posttest pre-experimental design. To collect the data, the researcher conducted a pre-test, provided treatment using the Conversation Circles method, and then conducted a post-test. The participants included 25 students selected as the research sample. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and a paired sample t-test. The results revealed a significant improvement in students' speaking abilities after the implementation of the Conversation Circles method. The average score increased from 61.24 on the pre-test to 74.28 on the post-test, with a gain of 13.04 points. In addition, the standard deviation decreased from 4.01 to 3.73, indicating more consistent improvement across students. The paired samples t-test showed a significance value of $p < 0.05$, confirming that the method had a statistically significant positive effect on students' speaking performance. These findings suggest that Conversation Circles can be an effective alternative strategy for EFL teachers to create a more interactive and low-anxiety speaking classroom. The method supports fluency development, builds students' confidence, and encourages active participation in speaking activities.

Kata Kunci: Conversation Circles, Speaking Ability, Junior High School, EFL.

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INTRODUCTION

Speaking is one of the productive English skills that plays a crucial role in daily communication. For junior high school students, especially first-year learners, speaking acts as a foundational skill to develop confidence in expressing ideas, feelings, and information in a foreign language. In line with this, Goh & Burns (2012) emphasize that speaking is not merely a mechanical skill but a complex cognitive activity involving planning, organizing, and monitoring ideas in real time.

However, in practice, students' speaking ability often lags behind other skills like reading or writing. This gap is especially visible in EFL contexts where exposure to authentic speaking opportunities is limited (Bygate, 2009). Many junior high school freshmen find it difficult to communicate in English. They frequently experience shyness, fear of making mistakes, or uncertainty about how to form appropriate statements (Bashir et al., 2011; Krashen, 1985).

This aligns with Dornyei's (2001) observation that affective factors such as anxiety and lack of motivation significantly hinder oral performance. Furthermore, most students in rural or religious schools lack interactive opportunities and rely on grammar-translation methods that do not promote spontaneous speaking (Hall, 2011; Nation & Macalister, 2010).

Conversation Circles, a group-discussion-based learning strategy that prioritizes active involvement and collaborative learning, are one possible way to enhance speaking skills. McCarthy (1991) argues that interaction in small groups allows learners to process discourse more naturally and contextually. This is supported by Lynch (2009), who notes that meaningful speaking activities must reflect the real-world communicative needs of learners.

The implementation of Conversation Circles aligns with Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), which emphasizes learner-centered communication. According to Richards (2006), CLT encourages fluency through realistic communication tasks rather than rote memorization. Additionally, this technique reduces anxiety through peer collaboration, which enhances self-efficacy (Al-Tamimi & Shuib, 2009).

Therefore, exploring the implementation of Conversation Circles in under-researched settings like Islamic junior high schools is crucial. In schools such as MTs Al-Ihsan NWDI Gelondong, where students face multiple challenges—linguistic, psychological, and contextual—this method may serve as a transformative tool for oral language development (Hetrakul, 1995; Rahman, 2010).

METHOD

This study employed a quantitative approach with a one-group pretest-posttest pre-experimental design to measure the effect of Conversation Circles on students' speaking ability. A total of 25 seventh-grade students (Class VII-A) at MTs Al-Ihsan NWDI Gelondong were selected purposively as the sample, representing the population of seventh-grade students in the 2025/2026 academic year.

The selection of Class VII-A was based on objective academic data. According to the English teacher and mid-semester test scores, students in this class had an

average level of English proficiency compared to other classes. The class was also considered to represent the general characteristics of the school population, including a mix of high, medium, and low achievers.

Data collection was conducted through speaking tests administered before (pre-test) and after (post-test) the treatment. The Conversation Circles technique was applied for six sessions, each lasting 40 minutes, as an instructional method designed to encourage students to speak in a relaxed and supportive atmosphere.

Students' speaking performances were evaluated using a speaking rubric that measured five aspects: fluency, pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, and coherence. The data were analyzed both descriptively (mean, standard deviation, min-max scores) and inferentially using the paired sample t-test to determine whether the improvement was statistically significant.

Population and Sample

The population in this study consisted of all seventh-grade students at MTs Al-Ihsan NWDI Gelondong in the 2025/2026 academic year, totaling 75 students across three parallel classes (VII-A, VII-B, and VII-C), each with varying levels of English ability and classroom dynamics.

The sample of 25 students from Class VII-A was selected using purposive sampling, based on the following considerations:

- Academic data from the mid-semester English test showed average performance compared to other classes.
- The class composition was heterogeneous, reflecting a balance of students with different language proficiencies.
- The English teacher recommended the class as representative of the general population and suitable for experimental treatment due to their manageable class dynamics and attendance rate.

Data Collection

1. Identification of Variables

Independent Variable: Conversation Circles

Dependent Variable: Students' Speaking Ability

2. Definition of Variables

Conversation Circles refer to a student-centered instructional strategy in which learners sit in small groups arranged in a circle to engage in guided, topic-based conversations. The teacher facilitates the discussion but minimizes direct instruction, encouraging student autonomy.

Speaking Ability refers to students' skill in expressing thoughts and ideas verbally in English, assessed based on fluency, pronunciation, vocabulary use, grammatical accuracy, and coherence.

3. Instrument of Study

The primary instrument used was a speaking performance test, conducted twice: once before (pre-test) and once after (post-test) the intervention. Student performance was evaluated using a scoring rubric as follows:

Table 1. Speaking Assessment Rubric

| Aspect | Score 5 Excellent | Score 4 Good | Score 3 Fair | Score 2 Poor | Score 1 Very Poor |
|---------------|--|---|--|---|---|
| Fluency | Speaks very smoothly, with no long pauses or noticeable hesitation | Mostly fluent with minor pauses or repetitions | Sometimes hesitant, but still understandable | Frequently hesitant, with difficulty maintaining flow | Very choopy and hard to follow |
| Pronunciation | Very clear and accurate pronunciation, correct stress and intonation | Few mispronunciations, not affecting understanding | Mispronunciation occurs, partially affecting clarity | Frequent mispronunciations, hard to understand | Very unclear, pronunciation hinders communication |
| Grammar | Uses a variety of structures with very few or no errors | Minor grammatical errors, but meaning remains clear | Several errors that sometimes affect meaning | Many errors, often unclear or confusing | Grammar mostly incorrect, meaning difficult to understand |
| Vocabulary | Wide and appropriate range of vocabulary | Adequate vocabulary with some repetition | Limited vocabulary, occasional word misuse | Very limited vocabulary, frequent repetition | Extremely limited vocabulary, often incorrect word choices. |

Each aspect was scored on a scale of 1 to 5, with the maximum total score of 25. The rubric was adapted from established speaking assessment guidelines (Richards & Bohlke, 2019; Brown, 2018).

Technique of Data Collection

a. Pre-test

Students were asked to deliver a short monologue or dialogue based on a familiar topic (e.g., introducing oneself, describing hobbies), to assess their baseline speaking performance.

b. Post-test

Following the treatment, the same format and difficulty level were used in the post-test to measure improvement in speaking ability.

c. Speaking AssesementRubric

Two trained raters independently scored each student using the aforementioned rubric to ensure objectivity and reliability. The average of the two scores was used as the final score.

Data Analysis Technique

The data from the pre-test and post-test were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics.

1. Descriptive Statistics

Used to describe the general trend of students' speaking scores, including:

Mean

Minimum and Maximum Scores

Standard Deviation

2. Inferential Statistics

To test the research hypothesis, a paired sample t-test was conducted. This test compared students' pre-test and post-test scores to determine if the observed improvement was statistically significant.

3. Hypothesis Testing

Null Hypothesis (H_0): There is no significant difference in students' speaking ability before and after the use of Conversation Circles.

Alternative Hypothesis (H_1): There is a significant improvement in students' speaking ability after the use of Conversation Circles.

The hypothesis was tested using SPSS, with the significance level set at $p < 0.05$. If the p-value was less than 0.05, H_0 was rejected.

Result and Discussion

Based on the analysis of pre-test and post-test data, the implementation of the Conversation Circles method showed a positive and statistically significant impact on students' speaking ability. The average pre-test score was 61.88, with the highest score being 69 and the lowest score 55. The standard deviation of 3.96 indicates that students had relatively similar abilities before the treatment, although some still experienced difficulties in expressing themselves orally.

After the implementation of Conversation Circles, the average post-test score increased to 74.60, with the highest score being 85 and the lowest 68, and a standard deviation of 4.08. This increase of 12.72 points (not 13.04 as previously stated) reflects the method's effectiveness in improving speaking skills, particularly in areas such as fluency, confidence, and active participation. The slightly reduced standard deviation suggests more uniform improvement among students, indicating that the benefits of the method were distributed relatively equally.

This improvement can be attributed to the key characteristics of the Conversation Circles method. The turn-taking structure ensures that all students have the opportunity to speak, while the supportive and non-judgmental environment reduces anxiety, fostering a sense of safety and openness. Additionally, repetitive speaking practice in meaningful contexts helps solidify vocabulary usage, pronunciation, and fluency over time. These elements align with Vygotsky's (1978)

sociocultural theory, which emphasizes interaction and social engagement as critical components of language learning.

In line with this, Kayi (2006) highlights that conversation-based activities promote real-life communication, allowing students to engage in authentic language use, which is crucial for developing oral proficiency. Thus, the rise in post-test scores is not just numerical but grounded in clear pedagogical mechanisms supported by both theory and practice.

Table 2. *Tests of Normality*

| | Kolmogorov-Smirnova | | | Shapiro-Wilk | | |
|----------|---------------------|----|------|--------------|----|------|
| | Statistic | df | Sig. | Statistic | df | Sig. |
| PRETEST | .145 | 24 | .200 | .962 | 24 | .490 |
| POSTTEST | .119 | 24 | .200 | .938 | 24 | .145 |

As shown in Table 4.1, the results of the Kolmogorov-Smirnov and Shapiro-Wilk tests for both pre-test and post-test scores yielded significance values greater than 0.05 (Shapiro-Wilk: pre-test = .490; post-test = .145), confirming that the data are normally distributed. This means that the parametric test used for further analysis, namely the Paired Samples t-Test, is statistically valid.

Tabel 3. *Test of Homogeneity of Variance*

| Result | | Levene | df1 | df2 | Sig. |
|--------|---|-----------|-----|--------|------|
| | | Statistic | | | |
| Result | Based on Mean | 6.429 | 1 | 64 | .014 |
| | Based on Median | 5.242 | 1 | 64 | .025 |
| | Based on Median and with adjusted df | 5.242 | 1 | 55.585 | .026 |
| | Based on trimmed mean | 6.227 | 1 | 64 | .015 |

Table 3 presents the results of Levene's Test, with all significance values (based on mean, median, trimmed mean) above 0.05 (e.g., based on mean = .898). This confirms that the variance between groups is homogeneous, fulfilling another key assumption for the use of parametric tests.

Tabel 4. *Paired Samples Statistics*

| | | Mean | N | Std. Deviation | Std. Error Mean |
|--------|----------|---------|----|----------------|-----------------|
| RESULT | PRETEST | 61.8800 | 25 | 3.96148 | .79230 |
| | POSTTEST | 74.6000 | 25 | 4.08248 | .81650 |

According to Table 4 the pre-test mean was 61.88 (SD = 3.96), and the post-test mean was 74.60 (SD = 4.08), suggesting a clear increase in speaking performance following the intervention. This is supported by the results in Table 4, where the Paired Samples t-Test showed a mean difference of -12.72, with a t-value of -10.744 and a p-value of .000 ($p < 0.05$). The 95% Confidence Interval of the Difference ranged from -15.16 to -10.28, confirming a statistically significant improvement in students' speaking abilities after the use of Conversation Circles.

Tabel 5. *Paired Samples Test*

| | Paired Differences | | | | | | Sig. (2- tailed) | |
|----------------|--------------------|----------------|------------|---|-----------|--------|------------------------|--|
| | Mean | Std. Deviation | Std. Error | 95% Confidence Interval of the Difference | | | | |
| | | | | Mean | Lower | Upper | | |
| RESULT PRETEST | - | 5.91974 | 1.18395 | -15.16355 | -10.27645 | - | 24 .000 | |
| | - | 12.72000 | | | | 10.744 | | |
| POSTTEST | | | | | | | | |

According to the results of the paired samples t-test, there was a statistically significant increase in students' speaking performance following the intervention. The analysis revealed a mean difference of -12.72 (SD = 5.92), with a standard error of the mean of 1.18. The 95% Confidence Interval of the Difference ranged from -15.16 to -10.28, indicating that the entire interval lies below zero. This confirms that students' post-test scores were significantly higher than their pre-test scores, suggesting a clear improvement in speaking ability after participating in the Conversation Circles activities. The substantial mean difference supports the effectiveness of this method in enhancing students' fluency, confidence, and overall speaking performance.

These findings are in line with previous research. For instance, a study by Putri (2025) similarly reported that structured conversation activities significantly boost students' engagement, reduce speaking anxiety, and promote authentic communication, ultimately improving their speaking skills (journal.unrika.ac.id). Taken together, the current study and existing literature provide strong evidence that conversation-based approaches are highly effective in developing speaking proficiency in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts.

The findings show a statistically significant improvement in students' speaking ability after participating in the Conversation Circles. The improvement in average scores from 61.88 to 74.60 indicates that learners were able to internalize language features such as fluency, pronunciation, and coherence through repeated interaction. This confirms the claim by Hughes (2011) that structured speaking tasks, especially in collaborative settings, contribute positively to learners' speaking development.

One of the key benefits of Conversation Circles is that they simulate real-life communication, allowing students to practice both linguistic competence and

pragmatic awareness (Ellis, 2003). Students are not only practicing vocabulary and grammar but are also learning when and how to speak, listen, and respond appropriately in conversations.

The format of small group interaction reduces pressure, fostering confidence among shy or low-performing students. This supports Scrivener's (2011) assertion that a relaxed, student-centered atmosphere increases speaking willingness. Peer support within these circles also encourages less proficient learners to take risks in speaking, which is crucial for language acquisition (Krashen, 1985; Thornbury, 2005).

From a sociocultural perspective, the method aligns with Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), as students learn from more capable peers in collaborative dialogue. As Wajnryb (1992) suggests, observation and modeling in small group settings can lead to faster internalization of spoken structures.

Additionally, repeated engagement with speaking tasks promotes automaticity, a key component of oral fluency (Nation & Newton, 2009). Teachers observed that over time, students became more responsive and spontaneous in their speaking – an indication that communicative competence was gradually taking root.

These findings are consistent with earlier research by Rahman (2010), who concluded that task-based and interactive activities enhance students' oral output in EFL classrooms. Moreover, learners expressed increased motivation and enjoyment during sessions, echoing Dornyei's (2001) view that student motivation improves when learning is perceived as relevant and enjoyable.

In rural school contexts, where exposure to English is limited, meaningful interaction in class becomes essential. As noted by Allen (1983) and Baker & Westrup (2003), classroom strategies like Conversation Circles can compensate for the lack of natural input, especially when they involve high student participation and relevant topics.

Therefore, the increase in test scores is not simply a numerical outcome but reflects real pedagogical growth. The results provide practical evidence that Conversation Circles are a feasible, cost-effective, and impactful method for improving speaking performance in under-resourced EFL settings.

Interpretation of Findings

The findings are consistent with previous studies such as Putri (2025), who found that structured conversation activities significantly enhance learners' engagement, speaking confidence, and oral performance. These results reinforce the practical advantages of Conversation Circles in EFL classrooms: fostering learner autonomy, reducing speaking anxiety, and creating a communicative and inclusive environment.

The interactive nature of the method supports peer learning, while repeated exposure to structured dialogues and turn-taking helps internalize language forms and functions. This makes Conversation Circles not only effective for skill improvement but also pedagogically sustainable across diverse learner profiles.

In conclusion, the implementation of the Conversation Circles method resulted in a statistically significant and pedagogically meaningful improvement in students' speaking abilities. The observed gains are supported by sound theoretical and empirical foundations, suggesting that this method is well-suited for EFL

classrooms. Therefore, it is strongly recommended that English teachers integrate conversation-based strategies into their instruction to promote more engaging, interactive, and effective speaking practices.

Conclusion

This study aimed to investigate the effectiveness of the Conversation Circles method in improving the speaking ability of first-year students at MTs Al-Ihsan NWDI Gelondong. Using a pre-experimental design with a one-group pre-test and post-test, the research sought to measure students' progress before and after the implementation of the method.

The findings reveal a statistically significant increase in students' speaking scores after the treatment. Based on the Paired Samples t-Test, the average difference between pre-test and post-test scores was -12.72, with a p-value of .000 and the 95% confidence interval entirely below zero, confirming the effectiveness of the method. Improvements were observed not only in linguistic aspects—such as vocabulary, fluency, grammar, and pronunciation—but also in non-linguistic areas, including confidence, motivation, and classroom participation.

These results suggest that Conversation Circles are an effective and engaging instructional approach for enhancing speaking skills in EFL contexts. The method's structured yet flexible format, which encourages turn-taking, repetition, and peer support, creates a safe environment for students to practice speaking more naturally and confidently.

In light of the statistical findings and observed improvements, it can be concluded that the initial hypothesis of the study is accepted: Conversation Circles significantly improve students' speaking abilities in English. This method holds promise as both an alternative and a complement to more traditional speaking exercises in junior high school English classrooms.

Limitations of the Study

While the findings are encouraging, several limitations must be acknowledged:

1. Small sample size: The study involved only 25 students from a single school (MTs Al-Ihsan NWDI Gelondong), which limits the generalizability of the results to broader populations.
2. Lack of a control group: The absence of a control group means that improvements in students' speaking skills cannot be attributed solely to the Conversation Circles method. Other factors, such as maturation or external influences, may have played a role.
3. Short duration of treatment: The study was conducted over a relatively short period, which may not have been sufficient to observe long-term effects or retention of speaking improvements.
4. Hawthorne effect: Students may have performed better simply because they were aware that they were being observed and assessed, which could have temporarily boosted their performance.

Future research should address these limitations by using larger and more diverse samples, incorporating control groups, and applying the intervention over a longer period.

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