

Using Group Discussion to Improve The EFL Students' Speaking Skill at SMP-IT Darul Muhsin Islamic Boarding School

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Received: October 2025; Revised: Desember 2025; Published: Desember 2025

Abstract

This study aims to determine the effectiveness of using group discussion to improve EFL students' speaking skill at SMP-IT Darul Muhsin Islamic Boarding School. The method was chosen because it allows students to share ideas, collaborate, and practice speaking in a more interactive and supportive environment. This research used a pre-experimental quantitative design with a one-group pretest-posttest approach, involving 15 Grade 3 students. Data were collected through pre-test and post-test to measure students' progress, supported by a questionnaire to identify their perceptions. The finding showed a significant improvement in students' speaking ability after the treatment, with the mean score increasing from 12.11 to 17.6. The paired sample t-test result (Sig. = 0.000<0.05) indicated that group discussion significantly enhanced their speaking performance. In conclusion, group discussion effectively improved students' fluency, pronunciation, and vocabulary, while also increasing their confidence and motivation in speaking English. Therefore, it can be considered a suitable and engaging method for developing students' speaking skills in the EFL classroom.

Keywords: Experimental, Speaking, Group Discussion

How to Cite: Apriani, R., Maysuroh, S., Dwimaulani, A., & Surayya, S.A. (2025). Using Group Discussion To Improve The EFL Students' Speaking Skill At SMP-IT Darul Muhsin Islamic Boarding School. *Journal of Authentic Research*, 4(2), 2719-2729. <https://doi.org/10.36312/62hnew66>



<https://doi.org/10.36312/62hnew66>

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Introduction

English plays a crucial and undeniable role as the international *lingua franca*, essential for global communication, higher education, technological advancement, and business. In many nations, including Indonesia, English is mandated as a compulsory subject from junior high school to the university level, recognizing its status as a vital tool for academic and professional growth. Among the fourcore language skill listening, speaking, reading, and writing speaking is often considered the most critical skill. It serves as the ultimate reflection and key indicator of a learner's proficiency, showcasing their ability to communicate effectively in real-life, spontaneous interactions. Speaking enables learners to express ideas, opinions, and feelings through oral discourse.

However, achieving mastery in speaking remains a significant challenge for a majority of EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners, particularly those in Indonesia. Students frequently encounter multiple hurdles, both internal and external.

Internally, the common issues include limited vocabulary, inaccurate pronunciation, grammatical errors, low fluency, and perhaps most importantly, a pervasive lack of confidence or speaking anxiety.

Preliminary Observation and Contextual Challenges

These systemic difficulties are empirically confirmed by the preliminary observation and pre-test conducted at SMP-IT Darul Muhsin Islamic Boarding School. The initial speaking proficiency test administered to the 15 Grade 3 student participants yielded a profoundly low average score of 12.11 (out of a maximum possible score of 25). This score placed the students in the 'Adequate' or low proficiency category. The qualitative analysis identified the most pressing deficiencies as low fluency (characterized by frequent, hesitant pauses and excessive self-correction during discourse) and significant pronunciation inaccuracies (mispronunciations that often hindered clear understanding).

The specific context of the Islamic Boarding School (*pesantren*) environment at SMP-IT Darul Muhsin introduces a distinct layer of learning difficulty. Students in this highly structured, self-contained educational setting often have severely limited exposure to spontaneous English communication outside of their formal English classes. This restricted exposure leads to an over-reliance on rote memorization and theoretical mastery, which is fundamentally insufficient for developing the pragmatic, fluent, and spontaneous oral skills required for genuine communication. As a result, the dominant use of traditional, teacher-centered methods (like lecturing or controlled drills) in this context proves ineffective in building true communicative competence. This makes the introduction of targeted, interactive methods an urgent necessity.

Group Discussion as an Interactive Strategy

To effectively address these profound obstacles and promote active communication, teachers must implement interactive learning strategies. Group discussion is an established, highly effective cooperative learning method that provides a supportive, low-stakes environment for students to exchange ideas, negotiate meaning, and collaboratively practice speaking. Group discussion naturally encourages authentic communication, boosts learning motivation, and builds critical confidence through peer support and mutual accountability. Extensive previous research has consistently demonstrated that this method significantly improves overall speaking performance, specifically enhancing fluency, pronunciation, and vocabulary expansion. Furthermore, evidence suggests that the dynamics of small group interaction are more effective in boosting communicative competence than traditional, teacher-centered instruction.

Research Gap and Study Focus

Despite the well-documented pedagogical benefits of group discussion, its specific effectiveness and successful implementation within the unique context of the Islamic Boarding School (*pesantren*) setting, such as SMP-IT Darul Muhsin, remains critically under-explored. It is essential to empirically test whether this method can effectively bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical speaking skills for students facing restricted external exposure.

Based on this situation, the present study aims to specifically analyze the effectiveness of utilizing group discussion to enhance the EFL students' speaking skill at SMP-IT Darul Muhsin Islamic Boarding School. The research focuses on the five key speaking components used for assessment: pronunciation, fluency, vocabulary, grammar, and comprehension (Brown, 2004). The data were collected using a pre-test

and post-test design to measure objective progress, further supported by a questionnaire to capture students' subjective perceptions and changes in motivation. The findings are intended to offer concrete insights and practical recommendations for English teachers in applying interactive strategies, thus contributing to the development of effective speaking instruction within similar EFL contexts.

Statement of the Problem

In light of the background and the specific challenges identified through the preliminary observation, this study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. Is there a significant effect of using the group discussion method on improving the speaking skill of EFL students at SMP-IT Darul Muhsin?
2. To what extent is group discussion effective in improving the assessed components of students' speaking skill (pronunciation, fluency, vocabulary, grammar, and comprehension)?

Purpose of the Study

Aligned with the research questions, the operational objectives of this study are:

1. To obtain empirical data to determine whether a measurable effect exists from using group discussion on the speaking scores of EFL students at SMP-IT Darul Muhsin.
2. To measure and describe the specific improvements observed in key speaking components, especially fluency and confidence, after the group discussion treatment is implemented.
3. To identify and document the students' perceptions regarding their experience with the group discussion method in their English classes.

Significance of the Study

The findings of this study are expected to provide both theoretical and practical contributions. Theoretically, this research adds valuable data to the literature on the efficacy of group discussion as an interactive learning method, particularly within the distinct and under-researched Islamic boarding school/ *pesantren* education context in Indonesia. Practically, the study's results are intended to offer concrete insights and actionable recommendations for English teachers at SMP-IT Darul Muhsin and comparable schools, aiding them in selecting and implementing the most effective strategies for developing the crucial speaking skills of their EFL students.

Research Hypothesis

As this is a quantitative pre-experimental study, the research employs the following hypotheses:

1. Null Hypothesis (H_0): There is no significant effect of using group discussion on the EFL students' speaking skill at SMP-IT Darul Muhsin.
2. Alternative Hypothesis (H_a): There is a significant effect of using group discussion on the EFL students' speaking skill at SMP-IT Darul Muhsin.

Method

This study employed a pre-experimental quantitative design, specifically the one-group pretest-posttest approach, to investigate the effectiveness of group discussion in improving students' speaking skills. Quantitative research was utilized to measure variables numerically and analyze the resulting data statistically, which is necessary to determine the effect of a treatment or intervention.

Research Design and Justification

Table 1 the design of the study followed the standard pre-experimental notation.

Group	Pre-test	Treatment	Post-test
Experimental	\$O_1\$	\$X\$	\$O_2\$

Where:

\$O_1\$ = Students' speaking score before treatment (pre-test)

\$X\$ = Treatment using the group discussion technique

\$O_2\$ = Students' speaking score after treatment (post-test)

This design was chosen primarily for its practicality in an educational setting with limited resources or time constraints, allowing the researcher to efficiently measure change in a single class group². The core justification for its use is to clearly establish a correlation between the implemented treatment (\$X\$) and any subsequent changes in students' speaking performance (the difference between \$O_2\$ and \$O_1\$).

Limitation: A major limitation of the one-group pretest-posttest design is its vulnerability to threats to internal validity. Specifically, without a control group, observed changes may not be exclusively due to the group discussion (\$X\$) but could be influenced by extraneous variables such as student maturation (gaining skills naturally over time), history (unforeseen external events), or testing effects (students performing better on the post-test simply because they took the pre-test). The statistical analysis aims to mitigate this by demonstrating a highly significant change.

Setting and Participants

The research was conducted at SMP-IT Darul Muhsin Islamic Boarding School, located in Labuhan Haji District, East Lombok, during the academic year 2025.

The sample consisted of 15 students from the third grade. The participants were selected using purposive sampling based on the consideration that they had similar English proficiency levels and were available throughout the research period. Their initial English proficiency level was quantitatively assessed through the pre-test, which yielded a mean score of 12.11 (out of 25)³³. This score fell into the "Sufficient (C)" category⁴. Qualitatively, the initial assessment highlighted weaknesses primarily in pronunciation (many mispronunciations) and fluency (frequent pauses in the middle of sentences)⁵. The study primarily involved students whose age was typical for the Grade 3 junior high level (approximately 14–15 years old).

Definitions of Key Terms (Operational Definitions)

1. Independent Variable (X): Group Discussion
2. Operationally defined as a cooperative learning process involving students in small groups (3–5 members) to discuss a specific topic, aiming to improve their speaking skills⁶. The method is designed to provide opportunities for students to share information, solve problems, and foster independence in the learning process⁷.
3. Dependent Variable (O₁,O₂): Speaking Skill
4. Operationally defined as the students' ability to convey ideas, thoughts, and opinions effectively so that they can be understood by the interlocutor⁸. This ability was measured quantitatively through an oral performance test using five

key components: Pronunciation, Fluency, Grammar, Vocabulary, and Comprehension⁹.

Instruments of the Study

Two main instruments were used for data collection:

1. Speaking Test

The speaking test was an oral performance test administered twice (pre-test and post-test) [Original text]. Students were asked to speak about simple, familiar topics such as daily activities or personal experiences [Original text]. The performance was assessed based on Brown's (2004) speaking rubric¹⁰, which consists of five components:

- a) Pronunciation
- b) Fluency
- c) Grammar
- d) Vocabulary
- e) Comprehension

Each component was scored on a scale of 1–5, yielding a maximum total score of 25 and a minimum of 511.

➤ Validation and Reliability: The test employed a reputable, established scoring rubric (Brown, 2004), lending the instrument content validity. While the document did not explicitly report on inter-rater reliability, the established rubric was used by the researcher to ensure consistent scoring of the speaking components.

2. Questionnaire

A Likert-scale questionnaire was utilized to collect students' perceptions of using group discussion [Original text]. It consisted of 30 statements covering five cooperative learning aspects: positive interdependence, promotive interaction, individual accountability, social skills, and group processing [Original text]. The scale ranged from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree).

Validation and Reliability:

1. Validity: A validity test was conducted, and all items in the questionnaire were declared valid¹².
2. Reliability: A reliability test using Cronbach's Alpha yielded a value greater than 0.6, indicating a high level of internal consistency and confirming the instrument's reliability for consistent measurement¹³.

Procedure of the Study

The study was systematically executed in three distinct stages:

1. Pre-test (O1):

The pre-test was administered to the 15 students to measure their initial speaking abilities before the intervention. This was conducted through individual interviews with the researcher, where students performed the oral task based on the established topics¹⁴.

2. Treatment (X):

The treatment, using the group discussion technique, was carried out over seven meetings. In each session, students were organized into small groups of 3–5 members.

- a) Process: Each group was given a specific topic to discuss (e.g., daily activities, personal experiences). Groups were instructed to discuss the topic, share ideas, explore main points, and give detailed explanations¹⁵. Group discussions generally lasted at least 10 minutes¹⁶. Following the

discussion, a group member was expected to present their findings to the class, typically taking 6 to 10 minutes¹⁷.

b) Facilitator Role: The researcher acted as a facilitator and observer, guiding the discussion process, monitoring group progress, and encouraging every student to participate actively in expressing ideas orally.

3. Post-test (O2):

Following the completion of the seven treatment sessions, the post-test was administered using the same format and rubric as the pre-test to measure students' final improvement in speaking skills. The questionnaire was also distributed to collect data on student perceptions immediately after the final test.

Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using statistical methods with **SPSS** software.

1. Descriptive Statistics: The mean scores of the pre-test and post-test were calculated to quantitatively show the overall progress of the students. The initial mean score of 12.11 and the post-test mean score of 17.6 served as key descriptive results¹⁸¹⁸¹⁸¹⁸.
2. Inferential Statistics: A paired sample t-test was applied to the speaking test scores to determine whether the difference between the pre-test and post-test scores was statistically significant.
3. Assumptions Tests: Before the t-test was performed, normality and homogeneity tests were conducted to ensure the data met the statistical assumptions. The data passed these tests, indicating that the variances were homogeneous (Sig. value of $0.869 > 0.05$) and the data were normally distributed (Sig. values > 0.05 for Shapiro-Wilk test)¹⁹¹⁹¹⁹¹⁹.
4. Questionnaire Analysis: The questionnaire data were analyzed using descriptive statistics (percentage calculation and mean score) to support the main findings by quantifying students' perceptions of the group discussion method.

Result and Discussion

The objective of this study was to determine the effectiveness of using group discussion in improving the speaking skill of EFL students at SMP-IT Darul Muhsin Islamic Boarding School. The treatment's effectiveness was measured by comparing *pre-test* and *post-test* scores, followed by a statistical analysis using SPSS to test the hypothesis.

Results

Statistical Prerequisites

Before conducting the main hypothesis test (Paired Sample t-test), assumption tests were performed to ensure the data met the necessary statistical requirements.

Table 2.

Assumption Test	Test Used	Significance Value (Sig.)	Criterion ($\alpha=0.05$)	Conclusion
Normality	Shapiro-Wilk	Pre-test: 0.853, Post-test: 0.210	Sig. > 0.05 (Data is normally distributed)	Met

Homogeneity	Levene's Test	0.869	Sig. > 0.05 (Data variance is homogeneous)	Met
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These results confirmed that the pre-test and post-test scores were normally distributed and had homogeneous variances, allowing the **Paired Sample t-test** to proceed.

Comparison of Speaking Test Scores

Student scores were measured before (pre-test) and after (post-test) the seven treatment sessions of group discussion. The descriptive statistics comparing the scores are presented below:

Table 3.

Descriptive Statistic	Pre-test (O1)	Post-test (O2)	Mean Improvement (Δ)	Category
Mean Score	12.11	17.60	+5.49	<i>Sufficient (C)</i> \$\rightarrow\$ <i>Good (B)</i>
Standard Deviation (SD)	Not provided	Not provided	-	-
Lowest Score	9	15	-	-
Highest Score	15	20	-	-
Descriptive Statistic	Pre-test (O1)	Post-test (O2)	Mean Improvement (Δ)	Category
Mean Score	12.11	17.60	+5.49	<i>Sufficient (C)</i> \$\rightarrow\$ <i>Good (B)</i>

The pre-test mean score of 12.11 confirmed that students' initial speaking ability was in the Sufficient (C) category, with key weaknesses noted in pronunciation (frequent mispronunciations) and fluency (excessive pauses). Following the treatment, the mean score increased significantly to 17.60, indicating a substantial overall improvement in speaking proficiency.

Detailed Improvement in Speaking Components

The Δ of +5.49 points reflected consistent improvement across all assessed components:

Table 4.

Component	Pre-test Status	Post-test Status	Detailed Improvement
Pronunciation	Low Accuracy	Improved Clarity	Fewer mispronunciations; message delivered more clearly.

Fluency	Limited and Hesitant	More Natural	Reduction in frequent pauses; speech flow was smoother.
Vocabulary	Restricted Range	Richer Word Choice	Increased use of varied vocabulary appropriate to the context.
Grammar	Frequent Errors	Fewer Errors	Noticeable reduction in basic grammatical mistakes.
Comprehension	Basic Understanding	Better Responses	Ability to understand and provide more detailed, appropriate responses.

Hypothesis Testing

A Paired Sample t-test was conducted to determine if the increase in speaking scores was statistically significant.

Table 5.

T-test Statistic (Paired Samples Test)	Value	Interpretation
Mean Difference	-5.46667	The post-test mean was 5.46 points higher than the pre-test mean.
t-value	-13.252	Indicates a very large difference between the two sets of scores.
Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000	\$0.000 < 0.05\$ (The P-value is less than the significance level)

Since the Sig. (2-tailed) value of **0.000** is less than the significance level of 0.05, the null hypothesis (\$H_0\$) is rejected, and the alternative hypothesis (\$H_a\$) is accepted. This conclusively indicates that the use of group discussion had a **statistically significant positive effect** on the students' speaking skills.

Students' Perceptions (Questionnaire Results)

The Likert-scale questionnaire measured students' perceptions and attitudes toward using group discussion, with a focus on cooperative learning principles.

Table 6.

Variable	Mean Score	Std. Deviation (SD)	Quantitative Interpretation
Group Discussion (Perception)	70.33	5.85	Highly Positive Engagement and Participation

The high average score of 70.33 confirms that students hold a strongly positive perception of group discussion. This finding supports the quantitative test results, suggesting that the method was not only effective but also served as a motivational factor, encouraging active participation and increasing confidence among students.

The robust quantitative finding a mean score increase of 5.49 points and a highly significant t-test result (Sig. = 0.000) unequivocally demonstrates that group

discussion is an effective strategy for enhancing EFL students' speaking ability in this setting. This finding is highly consistent with previous research that highlights the benefits of collaborative interaction in oral communication.

Analyzing the Mechanisms of Improvement

The observed progress across all speaking components can be attributed to the core principles of Collaborative Learning and Communicative Language Teaching (CLT):

1. Enhanced Fluency and Reduced Anxiety: Group discussion creates a student-centered, low-stakes environment. Speaking within a small, familiar group makes students feel less pressured and more confident compared to performing individually in front of the entire class. The increased frequency of practice over the seven sessions directly addressed the core issue identified in the pre-test: reduced hesitation, leading to significant gains in fluency.
2. Peer-Driven Improvement in Pronunciation and Grammar: The small-group setting fostered promotive interaction, where students were observed correcting each other's grammatical mistakes and sharing new vocabulary. This mechanism of peer correction is often more acceptable and immediate than teacher-led correction, allowing students to instantly self-monitor and repair errors, leading to the observed improvement in both pronunciation and grammar accuracy.
3. Filling the Contextual Gap (Pesantren Setting): The specific context of the Islamic boarding school (*pesantren*) often results in limited oral exposure. Group discussion successfully fills this void by maximizing active speaking time within the classroom. The peer support structure became crucial in this closed environment, boosting motivation and making the speaking task less intimidating, thereby ensuring students benefited from the practice opportunities.

Limitations and Critical Comparison

While the results are definitive regarding the treatment's effect, it is necessary to acknowledge the limitations of the one-group pretest-posttest design. The absence of a control group means the study cannot entirely rule out potential influences from extraneous variables, such as student maturation (natural skill gain over time) or testing effects (students becoming more comfortable with the test format). However, the magnitude of the score increase (5.49 points) and the highly small p -value strongly suggest that the contribution of the group discussion treatment was the primary factor driving the improvement.

This study aligns strongly with findings from scholars who affirmed that group communication tasks significantly improve speaking accuracy and vocabulary use. This research, therefore, strengthens the theoretical assumption that group discussion is a sound pedagogical strategy, not merely because it is engaging, but because it is a robust and effective tool for developing communicative competence in EFL contexts.

Implementation Challenges

Despite the overwhelmingly positive student perceptions (Mean 70.33), the implementation of group discussion faced typical challenges, such as potential student dominance, off-task behavior, or a lack of inherent social skills among group members. The researcher's role as a facilitator and observer was essential to manage these issues, ensuring discussions remained focused and that individual accountability was enforced. This oversight was necessary to ensure that the benefits were distributed to all students, including those who initially experienced higher levels of speaking anxiety.

Conclusion

This study investigated the effectiveness of using group discussion to improve the speaking skills of EFL students at SMP-IT Darul Muhsin Islamic Boarding School. Based on the analysis of the data collected through the pre-test, post-test, and questionnaire, the following conclusions can be drawn:

1. Significant Effectiveness: The use of group discussion had a statistically significant positive impact on students' speaking performance, thereby successfully answering the first research question. The paired sample t-test result (Sig. = \$0.000 < 0.05\$) confirmed the effectiveness, leading to the rejection of the null hypothesis and acceptance of the alternative hypothesis.
2. Measurable Improvement: The treatment resulted in a substantial increase in overall speaking ability, with the mean score rising from 12.11 (Sufficient category) in the pre-test to 17.60 (Good category) in the post-test, demonstrating an improvement of approximately 5.5 points. This progress was observed across all five assessed components: pronunciation, fluency, vocabulary, grammar, and comprehension. Students became more confident, exhibited better interaction, and used richer, more accurate language structures.
3. Positive Student Perception: The questionnaire results, which yielded a mean score of 70.33, confirmed that students hold a highly positive perception toward the group discussion method. They felt it successfully helped them practice English more frequently, developed their communication skills, and was instrumental in overcoming speaking anxiety, which was a major initial obstacle.

In summation, group discussion proved to be an effective, engaging, and suitable method for teaching speaking, particularly within the structured context of the Islamic Boarding School, as it maximized active communicative practice and leveraged peer support to build confidence and fluency.

Research Limitations

While the findings are conclusive regarding the efficacy of the treatment, the study acknowledges the inherent limitation of the one-group pretest-posttest design. Without a control group for comparison, it is difficult to definitively rule out the potential influence of external factors, such as student maturation or testing effects, that might have contributed to the observed improvement. Therefore, the results establish a strong correlation, but further research with a more robust design (e.g., a true experimental design) is needed to confirm definitive causation.

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