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Improving Speaking Performance in Early Secondary EFL Learners at SMPN 7 Palu

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ABSTRACT

Speaking ability remains a challenge for many Grade Seven EFL students, particularly in terms of fluency and comprehensibility, which are essential components of effective oral communication. This study aims to investigate whether implementing structured group discussion can improve students' speaking fluency and comprehensibility at SMPN 7 Palu. A quasi-experimental research design was employed, involving an experimental class that received five sessions of group discussion treatment and a control class that was taught through conventional instruction. Both groups were administered pre-tests and post-tests focusing on fluency and comprehensibility. The data were analyzed using paired-samples t-test procedures. The results indicate that students in the experimental class demonstrated significantly greater improvement in speaking performance than those in the control class. The findings were further supported by observational data indicating increased student participation, reduced hesitation, and clearer organization of ideas during speaking activities. These results suggest that structured group discussion provides an effective interactive learning environment that supports smoother speech and improved comprehensibility. Therefore, the regular use of group discussion is recommended as an instructional strategy to enhance junior high school students' oral communicative competence.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Speaking is a central component of communicative competence and is commonly used as an indicator of learners' ability to participate in real-time English interaction. According to Brown [1], Rachmadani [2], and Suwarno et al. [3], speaking is an interactive process in which meaning is constructed, expressed, and negotiated between interlocutors. In the Indonesian junior high school context, English instruction is expected to promote functional communication so that students can convey ideas meaningfully in everyday

situations [4], [5]. However, preliminary observations conducted by the researcher at SMPN 7 Palu, the site of the Nevertheless, preliminary observations conducted by the researcher at SMPN 7 Palu revealed that many seventh-grade learners still experienced difficulties in oral production, particularly in producing fluent and comprehensible speech. Students frequently hesitated, paused excessively, and expressed ideas unclearly, indicating low levels of fluency and comprehensibility. These classroom realities align with the challenges reported by Putri et al. [6] and suggest a gap between curriculum objectives and students' actual performance.

Speaking is cognitively demanding because it requires learners to process information rapidly while simultaneously retrieving appropriate linguistic forms [7], [8], [9]. In addition, affective factors such as anxiety may reduce students' willingness to speak and further hinder oral performance [10], [5]. These challenges are especially prominent at the early secondary level, where learners are still developing confidence and communicative control. Despite the importance of fluency and comprehensibility in spoken communication, many previous studies have examined speaking ability as a single, holistic construct, resulting in limited analytical attention to these two components. As noted by Nuraini et al. [11] effective oral communication depends not only on smooth speech delivery but also on the clarity with which ideas are conveyed and understood by listeners. This indicates the need for instructional approaches that explicitly support both fluency and comprehensibility.

An analytical scoring approach, as recommended by the New York State Education Department [12], provides a systematic framework for assessing fluency and comprehensibility as distinct yet interrelated dimensions of speaking performance. By adopting this perspective, the present study seeks to offer a more detailed evaluation of students' oral development and to identify specific areas of improvement. This approach also addresses methodological limitations in prior research by enhancing the precision and interpretability of speaking assessment.

Learning theories that emphasize interaction and social communication suggest that speaking skills develop most effectively through meaningful engagement and negotiation of meaning. Communicative classroom activities have been shown to increase student involvement and participation [13], and these principles are consistent with the Merdeka Curriculum, which prioritizes communication, collaboration, and creativity in English instruction [14]. Group discussion, the instructional technique investigated in this study, provides learners with opportunities to exchange ideas collaboratively, practice speaking in a supportive environment, and reduce performance pressure. Such conditions are expected to foster confidence and facilitate improvement in fluency and comprehensibility.

Several previous studies have reported positive effects of group discussion on students' speaking ability; however, these studies generally focused on overall speaking performance without examining fluency and comprehensibility separately or were conducted at different educational levels and contexts. Consequently, there remains a gap in understanding how structured group discussion influences specific speaking components among early secondary EFL learners, particularly within the context of SMPN 7 Palu.

To address this gap, the present study investigates the effect of structured group discussion on the speaking performance of seventh-grade students at SMPN 7 Palu, with particular emphasis on fluency and comprehensibility. A quasi-experimental design was

employed, with an experimental class receiving structured group discussion and a control class taught using conventional instruction. Students' speaking performance was measured through pre-tests and post-tests, and the data were analyzed using procedures outlined by Arikunto [15]. The detailed explanation of the theoretical framework, research methodology, and analytical procedures is presented in the following sections.

This study aims to determine whether structured group discussion can produce measurable improvement in students' fluency and comprehensibility. It is expected that the findings will contribute both theoretically and pedagogically by providing clearer insights into the role of interactive learning in developing speaking skills and by offering practical guidance for English teachers in junior high school contexts.

2. METHOD

This research employed a quantitative, quasi-experimental design, specifically the pre-test–posttest non-equivalent control group design. Since the classes at SMPN 7 Palu were already formed by the school, this design enabled the researcher to compare learning outcomes between a class receiving the treatment and another taught using the conventional method. Both groups were given a pre-test to measure their initial speaking ability and a post-test to determine whether the group discussion technique contributed to improvements in fluency and comprehensibility. The structure of the design can be illustrated as follows:

Experimental	O1	X	O2
Control	O3		O4

Where :

- O1 : Pre-test in the experimental class
- O2 : Post-test in the experimental class
- O3 : Pre-test in the control class
- O4 : Post-test in the experimental class
- X : Treatment for experimental class

After establishing the research design, the study determined its population and sample. The population consisted of all seventh-grade students at SMPN 7 Palu in the 2024/2025 academic year. From this population, two existing classes were selected as the sample using a non-random (purposive) sampling technique, given their similarity in academic characteristics and classroom conditions. Class VII G was assigned as the experimental group and received instruction through structured group discussion, while VII F served as the control group and continued with the school's conventional teaching method. Using intact classes allowed teaching and assessment to occur naturally while still supporting comparison between groups.

Data were collected through a speaking test administered twice, first as a pre-test and then as a post-test. The test measured students' speaking performance through tasks appropriate for their level. Their fluency and comprehensibility were evaluated using an

analytical scoring rubric adapted from Brown [16], Sari et al. [17], and Heaton [11], employing a five-point scale to ensure consistent assessment across groups.

Table 1. The Scoring Rubric

Score	Fluency	Comprehensibility
4	Speaks smoothly with almost no hesitation; ideas are expressed clearly and logically.	Speech is easily understood by listeners; only minor effort is required to grasp the intended meaning
3	Occasional pauses or minor repetitions, but communication remains understandable.	Speech is generally understandable, though some expressions may require listener effort or repetition for clarity.
2	Frequent pauses and repetitions; difficulty in maintaining the flow of ideas	Listeners often struggle to understand the message due to unclear pronunciation or organized structure.
1	Unable to speak fluently; frequent breakdown and failure to convey ideas effectively.	Speech is mostly unintelligible; the listener cannot comprehend the intended message without major interpretation.

The treatment in the experimental group was delivered over five instructional meetings within a two-week period, following the procedures described in the research methods. Each session lasted for 2×40 minutes and involved structured group discussion activities aimed at strengthening students' fluency and comprehension. At the beginning of each meeting, the researcher introduced the discussion topic, target expressions, and essential vocabulary to help students express their ideas orally. Students were then placed into small groups of 3–5 members to ensure balanced participation and manageable interaction. Throughout the treatment, they exchanged opinions, posed and answered questions, and delivered short oral responses to the provided prompts. These activities were designed to reduce hesitation, promote spontaneous language production, and enhance speech clarity, while the control group continued using the school's conventional method without group discussion.

After the treatment concluded, a post-test was administered to examine the extent of improvement in students' speaking abilities. The analysis began with calculating descriptive statistics for both groups, followed by a comparison of their pre-test and post-test scores. Students' performances were evaluated using an analytical rubric assessing fluency and comprehensibility. The inferential analysis was conducted using procedures outlined by Arikunto [15], which helped determine whether the differences between the two groups were statistically significant. The resulting t-counted value exceeded the critical threshold at the 0.05 significance level, indicating that the improvement observed in the experimental group was not incidental. These findings confirm that the group discussion technique had a significant, positive effect on students' speaking performance.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study indicate that implementing the group discussion technique led to a marked improvement in students' speaking proficiency, as reflected in the substantial increase in post-test scores in the experimental group compared with the control group. Learners who participated in structured peer interaction demonstrated more sustained speech, fewer breakdowns, and clearer delivery of ideas, suggesting that collaborative exchanges provided meaningful space to practice formulating and articulating thoughts orally. The statistical evidence further shows that the treatment enhanced both fluency and comprehensibility, confirming that guided group discussion serves as an effective instructional approach for strengthening students' overall speaking performance.

3.1. Results

3.1.1 Result of Pre-test and Post-test

The findings indicate a substantial improvement in the speaking fluency and comprehensibility of grade seven students following the implementation of the group discussion method.

Table 2. Total Score of Pre-test and Post-test

Groups	N	Total score of Pre-test		Total score of Post-test	
		Pre-test	Mean	Post-test	Mean
Experimental	29	1437	49.55	1931	66.57
Control	29	1441	49.67	1609	55.48

In the pre-test, the experimental class obtained a total score of 1437 with a mean of 49.55, while the control class obtained a total score of 1441 with a mean of 49.67, indicating that both groups started with similarly low speaking proficiency. After the treatment, the experimental group's total score increased to 1931, yielding a mean of 66.57, whereas the control group improved to 1609, yielding a mean of 55.48. These results show that although both groups experienced progress, the experimental class demonstrated a substantially greater gain, confirming the effectiveness of the group discussion technique in enhancing students' speaking fluency and comprehensibility.

3.1.2 Result of Score Deviation

The deviation score was computed to determine the extent of change in students' pre-test and post-test performance between the experimental and control classes.

Table 3. Total Deviation, Mean Deviation, Square Deviation, Sum of Squared Deviation

Groups	N	Total score of Deviation			
		d	Mean	d ²	Sum d ²
Experimental	29	493	17	9,458.75	1,077.75
Control	29	168.5	5.81	3,265.75	2,286.71

The analysis of deviation scores revealed a clear difference in improvement between the experimental and control groups. In the experimental group, the total deviation score was 493, yielding a mean deviation of 17. Additionally, the total squared Deviation was 9,458.75, and after correction using [15], the sum of squared Deviation was 1,077.75. These results indicate that students in the experimental class experienced a substantial increase in speaking performance after the group discussion technique was implemented.

In contrast, the control group obtained a total deviation score of 168.5 with a mean deviation of 5.81. The total squared Deviation in this group was 3,265.75, while the corrected squared Deviation amounted to 2,286.71. Compared with the experimental group, the improvement in the control group was considerably lower, suggesting that conventional teaching methods led to minimal progress. These findings demonstrate that the group discussion technique produced a significantly greater improvement in students' speaking ability than the method used in the control class, as confirmed by the subsequent t-test analysis.

$$t = \frac{M_x - M_y}{\sqrt{\left(\frac{\sum x^2 d + \sum y^2 d}{N_x + N_y - 2}\right) \left[\frac{1}{N_x} + \frac{1}{N_y}\right]}} \quad (1)$$

$$t = \frac{17 - 5.81}{\sqrt{\left(\frac{1,077.75 + 2,286.71}{29 + 29 - 2}\right) \left[\frac{1}{29} + \frac{1}{29}\right]}} \quad (2)$$

$$t = \frac{11.19}{\sqrt{\left(\frac{3,364.46}{56}\right) \left[\frac{2}{29}\right]}} \quad (3)$$

$$t = \frac{11.19}{\sqrt{(63.48)[0.068]}} \quad (4)$$

$$t = \frac{11.19}{\sqrt{4.31}} \quad (5)$$

$$t = \frac{11.19}{2.07} \quad (6)$$

$$t = 5.41 \quad (7)$$

Based on the computation above, the obtained t-count value is 5.41, which is higher than the t-table value at the 0.05 significance level. This result indicates that the difference between the experimental and control groups is statistically significant.

3.1.3 Testing Hypothesis

The degrees of freedom were calculated using the formula $df = N_x + N_y - 2$. In this study, both the experimental and control groups consisted of 29 students; therefore, the degrees of freedom were 56. At the 0.05 significance level, the critical value was obtained directly from the t-distribution table without requiring interpolation, resulting in a t-table value of 1.673 for a one-tailed test.

The statistical results showed that the obtained t-value (5.41) exceeded the critical value. Accordingly, the null hypothesis was rejected and the alternative hypothesis accepted,

indicating that the group discussion technique significantly enhanced students' speaking fluency and comprehensibility.

At a significance level of 0.05, the degree of freedom ($df = 56$) produced a critical t-table value of 1.673 in a one-tailed test. Since the calculated t-value (5.41) exceeded the critical value, the null hypothesis was rejected, indicating a statistically significant effect of the group discussion technique on students' speaking fluency and comprehensibility. Beyond statistical reliability, the difference between the experimental and control groups had a substantial practical impact, as evidenced by the substantial gap in their mean deviations, confirming that the improvement was meaningful and educationally relevant.

3.2. Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that the group discussion method significantly improved the speaking fluency and comprehensibility of Grade Seven students at SMPN 7 Palu. This conclusion is supported by the statistical analysis, which revealed that the obtained t value (5.41) exceeded the critical t value (1.68) at the 0.05 significance level. The experimental group showed a substantial increase in mean score from the pre-test to the post-test, whereas the control group experienced only limited improvement. These results indicate that group discussion was more effective than conventional instruction in developing students' speaking performance, a finding that aligns with communicative language teaching principles emphasizing interaction and meaningful language use [16], [12].

Further analysis of the deviation scores reinforces this finding. The experimental group achieved a considerably higher mean deviation score (17) compared to the control group (5.81), suggesting that students who engaged in group discussion benefited more from the learning process. This improvement reflects the effectiveness of collaborative interaction in providing frequent speaking opportunities and meaningful peer feedback, which are essential for developing fluency and comprehensibility in EFL contexts [17], [18].

The present findings are consistent with previous studies reporting positive effects of group discussion on speaking ability. Utami et al. [19] and Sudiro et al. [20] similarly found that group discussion enhances students' oral fluency and clarity. More recent studies have also confirmed that structured group interaction significantly improves learners' speaking performance by encouraging active participation and sustained oral production [21], [17]. The current study extends these findings by demonstrating that such benefits can also be achieved among younger learners with relatively low initial proficiency, indicating that group discussion is pedagogically appropriate for early secondary school students.

The observed improvement in speaking performance can be attributed to the supportive and interactive nature of group discussion activities. Working in small groups reduced students' anxiety and allowed them to share ideas collaboratively, helping them maintain speech flow and express their ideas more clearly. This finding is consistent with recent research on speaking anxiety, which suggests that collaborative learning environments lower affective barriers and foster learner confidence in oral communication [22], [23], [24]. In addition, peer interaction enabled students to organize their thoughts more systematically, contributing to greater comprehensibility.

Despite these positive outcomes, several challenges were identified. Some students initially demonstrated low confidence and hesitation in speaking, primarily due to limited vocabulary and fear of making errors. Similar challenges have been reported in recent EFL studies, which highlight limited linguistic resources and anxiety as persistent obstacles to speaking development [10], [25]. However, these difficulties gradually diminished as students became more accustomed to group discussion and received encouragement from their peers, supporting claims that sustained exposure to collaborative speaking tasks can mitigate affective constraints [18].

7 Nevertheless, this study has certain limitations that should be considered. The research was conducted in a single school with a limited number of participants, which may restrict the generalizability of the findings. Moreover, the relatively short treatment period and the absence of inter-rater reliability may have influenced the results. Similar methodological limitations have been acknowledged in recent classroom-based speaking research [20], [17]. Future studies are therefore encouraged to involve larger samples, longer interventions, and multiple raters to provide stronger empirical evidence regarding the effectiveness of group discussion in improving EFL learners' speaking fluency and comprehensibility. 28

4. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that structured group discussion supports the development of students' speaking ability, particularly in fluency and comprehensibility, by providing meaningful opportunities for interaction and for organizing ideas. The findings indicate that collaborative speaking activities facilitate clearer and more continuous oral expression, thereby confirming that the research objective has been achieved.

The study also highlights important instructional implications, suggesting that interactive and student-centered approaches are more effective than conventional instruction for developing oral communication skills. Group discussion encourages active participation, reduces speaking anxiety, and enables learners to construct meaning collaboratively, making it a practical strategy for junior secondary EFL classrooms.

However, this research is limited by its short duration, restricted sample size, and focus on only two components of speaking ability. As a result, the findings should be interpreted within the specific context of the study. Future research is encouraged to investigate the long-term effects of group discussion, involve broader participant groups, and examine additional aspects of speaking performance. Overall, this study contributes to English language education by reinforcing the value of collaborative learning and offering practical insights for improving students' spoken communication skills. 1

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