



Exploring Libyan EFL Students' Perceptions of Small Group Discussion in Speaking Classrooms: A Focus Group Study at Elmergib University

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استكشاف تصورات طلبة اللغة الإنجليزية بوصفها لغة أجنبية في ليبيا بشأن المناقشة في مجموعات صغيرة داخل فصول تدريس مهارة التحدث: دراسة باستخدام مجموعات التركيز في جامعة المرقب.

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Abstract:

The purpose of this study is to investigate the use of small group discussions in an English-speaking classroom setting. The study was conducted at the Faculty of Languages, English Language Department, at Elmergeb University, Libya. A total of twelve students volunteered to participate in the study. To attain this goal, qualitative research was conducted using a semi-structured interview. The study's findings demonstrate that students thought that employing small group discussion in the English-speaking classroom increased their interest in learning to speak and inspired them to learn more. The participants acknowledged that the model of learning by utilizing small group discussion increased their interest in studying speaking and made them feel encouraged to learn by using small group discussion approach. Each participant described the benefits of using small group discussions. The benefits include: making it easier for learners to study, increasing student activity, allowing students to express their ideas, and motivating students.

Keywords: Classrooms, EFL, Speaking, Small Group Discussion, Perceptions.

المخلص:

تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى استقصاء استخدام المناقشات في مجموعات صغيرة داخل الفصول الدراسية المخصصة لتدريس مهارة التحدث باللغة الإنجليزية. وقد أجريت الدراسة في قسم اللغة الإنجليزية بكلية اللغات في جامعة المرقب، ليبيا. وشارك في الدراسة اثنا عشر طالباً تطوعوا للمشاركة فيها. ولتحقيق هدف الدراسة، اعتمد المنهج النوعي، مع استخدام المقابلات شبه المنظمة أداة لجمع البيانات. وأظهرت نتائج الدراسة أن الطلبة يرون أن توظيف المناقشات في مجموعات صغيرة داخل فصول تدريس مهارة التحدث باللغة الإنجليزية يساهم في زيادة اهتمامهم بتعلم التحدث، ويحفزهم على مواصلة التعلم.

كما أقرّ المشاركون بأن نمط التعلّم القائم على المناقشة في مجموعات صغيرة يعزّز اهتمامهم بدراسة مهارة التحدث ويشجّعهم على التعلّم من خلال هذا الأسلوب. وقد وصف المشاركون الفوائد المترتبة على استخدام المناقشات في مجموعات صغيرة، والتي تتمثل في تيسير عملية التعلّم، وزيادة نشاط الطلبة ومشاركتهم، وإتاحة الفرصة لهم للتعبير عن أفكارهم، وتعزيز دافعيتهم نحو التعلّم.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الفصول الدراسية، اللغة الإنجليزية بوصفها لغة أجنبية، مهارة التحدث، المناقشة في مجموعات صغيرة، التصوّرات.

Introduction:

Small group discussion is a valuable learning method that promotes active student engagement and encourages collaboration towards achieving shared goals. According to Atkins and Brown (2002), students in small groups have the opportunity to support, exchange, and receive opinions, actively listen, read, and speak during discussions. This approach also helps students gain confidence in expressing their own viewpoints. Furthermore, small group discussions foster idea exploration, problemsolving skills, effective thinking and communication, group cooperation, and student involvement in decision-making processes. In this context, a group is defined as a gathering of two or more individuals who interact and work together (Tubbs, 2012). It is essential for students to be positioned in a manner where they can see and hear each other without causing disturbance to other groups. The size of a group can vary based on opposing perspectives: larger groups offer a wider range of skills and knowledge for problem-solving and workload distribution.

Small group discussions provide an active and collaborative learning environment that supports students in achieving set goals. It enables the exchange of ideas, enhances understanding, problem-solving abilities, thinking skills, communication effectiveness, group cooperation, and student engagement in decisionmaking. These discussions involve three or more students engaging in face-to-face interaction, with or without an assigned leader, where each individual's influence and impact are important within the group (Tubbs, 2012). Maintaining a conducive setting, where students can see and hear each other without causing disturbance, is crucial. The group size can differ based on the intended objectives, with larger groups providing access to a broader range of abilities and expertise for collaborative problem-solving and sharing of responsibilities.

The Significance of Speaking Skills:

Speaking skill is regarded as the most crucial skill to acquire in foreign or second language. Out of the four main language skills, speaking is the most important skill in acquiring second language. According to Brown (2004) he asserts that, "Speaking is the skill that the students will be judged upon most in real life situations". Despite of their significance, the importance of speaking teaching skills has been undervalued, and most EFL/ESL teachers have continued to teach them speaking skills just like keeping conversations or repeating exercises.

In this study, the aim is to determine the views of students learning English as a foreign language about the use of small group discussion in improving speaking skills. The research question in academic English can be phrased **as follows:**

- What are students' perceptions on the impact of using Small Group Discussion in English speaking classroom?

Research Design:

This research is a qualitative study conducted to determine the use of small group discussion in developing the Speaking skill of EFL learners and it was conducted with a focus group study. A qualitative research model is an approach to research that focuses on qualitative characteristics such as human behaviors, experiences, beliefs, and perceptions in the social sciences. This type of research often aims to gain in-depth understanding and seeks to understand people's thought processes and experiences (Corbin & Strauss, 2015).

The Participants:

This study was conducted with Libyan undergraduate students studying in the English department of the Faculty of Languages at El-Merghib University, which was established in 1991 in Libya. The sample included 12 students, all of whom were Libyan and native speakers of Arabic. Eight (66%) of the students were female and Four (34%) were male. Students were included in the study on a voluntary basis.

Data collection instrument:

In this qualitative study, data was collected using semi-structured interviews and classroom observations as part of the research methodology. Semi-structured interviews were chosen for their suitability in exploring participants' perceptions and opinions (Bryman, 2004). This approach was selected primarily because it facilitates discussions on topics that may not have been considered

previously by both the participants and the researcher. Furthermore, the question-answer-question format is known to minimize misunderstandings and enhance clarity through the use of follow-up questions (Kvale, 2007).

Data analysis:

Individually, each participant underwent interviews, and their responses were recorded in audio format. Subsequently, the recorded responses were transcribed for qualitative analysis. The transcribed data were examined using thematic coding. To identify the emerging themes, the researcher utilized marginal note-taking and color-coded techniques.

Results:

The results of students' perspectives about the influence of small group discussion in improving speaking skills in this qualitative study are presented here.

Firstly, the question "What is your opinion about the use of small group discussion in your speaking class?" was asked to the students and it was determined that all of the students (100%) had positive opinion of using small group discussion in English speaking classroom. Some of the students' responses **to this question**;

- Four students (S1, S7, S9, S12) stated that: "In My point of view small group discussion in speaking class is really good. Because it can make the students easier to interact with their friends and deliver their ideas in speaking".
- Similar to S2, three students (S8, S10, S12) stated that "As a student, I believe that small group discussions are successful in speaking classes since they allow students to support one another".
- For me, it is beneficial to use small group discussion in speaking class. I believe that through this method students can enhance their speaking(S3).
- Actually, I think that the use of small group discussions in speaking class is very useful for the reason that it helps students comprehend easily and make it more interesting.(S4)
- In my viewpoint, it is interesting since we may have a discussion with my friends. (S5)
- In my view, this approach is appropriate for learning to speak since it allows for a broader range of issue solutions. (S6)
- After evaluating the responses, it was evident that the students think that using small group discussions in the English-Speaking classroom was beneficial in all areas, particularly in terms of motivating them to study Speaking, which was critical for their future success. Subsequently, students were asked the question, "Do you like the use of small group discussion in your speaking class?" and the subsequent detailed responses were collected:
- S1 stated that "I believe that small group discussions make it simpler for students to master speaking".
- Similar to S2, four of the students (S7, S10, S11, and S12) stated that "From my perspective, Small group discussions help me comprehend the speaking courses. For example, if we are reluctant to ask the teacher about something we do not understand, we might consult our friends.
- As for me, I like small group discussions since they keep me engaged in the process of learning to speak and prevent boredom. (S3)
- Moreover, three of the students (S4, S8, and S9) stated that "As a student, I believe studying through small group discussions gets me more engaged since the students ask for more information. The more we communicate, the more we learn, and the more diverse our perspectives become, which we may share.
- Studying via small group discussions piques my interest in studying speaking. (S5)
- To be honest, small group discussions pique my passion in studying speaking, which I must admit. (S6)
- As mentioned above, it was found that all of the students (100%) expressed the view that learning to speak through small group discussions has a favorable influence on their drive to study. All of the students benefited from small group discussions in English speaking; they were able to readily comprehend the speaking lessons offered via small group discussion. Consequently, students were asked the question, "Do you think that small group discussion has an influence in your speaking class?" and the subsequent responses were collected:
- Small group discussion has a vital impact on me simply because it makes it easier for me to learn to speak. (S1)
- Similar to (S2), (S11) stated that "As for me, through small group discussions. It became easy to converse with other friends.
- "Well, I believe students seem more engaged while applying this approach" (S3)
- "Yes, I'm inspired because we can express our opinions with our peers". (S4)

- "Yes, I like and am driven since I can quickly ask my classmate in that group if I don't understand". (S5, S9)
- "Using this strategy, all students appear more active". (S6)
- "Indeed, I am excited, and it brings me closer to my peers". (S7)
- Other participants (S8, S10, S12) added: "definitely, learning through small group discussions motivates me since it makes me feel more appealing in class".

According to the explanation above, it was found that all students (100%) enjoy learning to speak through the use of small group discussions for a variety of reasons, including the ability to ask their friends directly, increase their interest, and be more active in class. In the end, the students were posed with question, "From your own personal view, Do you think you get benefit from the use of small group discussion in your speaking class?" and the subsequent responses were collected:

Two students (S1, S7) stated that "Well, as a student facing problems in speaking it seems to me that learning through small group discussion has many benefits. These benefits include making it simpler for students to communicate ideas, engage with peers, and be motivated to learn speaking. While S2 stated that "As for me through this strategy, I occasionally obtain something new, and it might be more than I expected. I can more easily communicate my ideas".

S3 added "Well, from my perspective, the benefits may be summarized in two or three points: we can share thoughts, which allows us to learn new vocabulary, and we can indicate the primary concept from the assignment.

Similar to S4, three students (S6, S9, and S12) added:

"In my perspective, there are two distinct advantages to studying utilizing this way. First, students have the option of sharing their thoughts or accepting those of others. Second, students can learn new things from other classmates".

While S8 stated that "In fact, learning using this way motivates me since I want to maintain balance with my other group members. So that is a challenge for me. Furthermore, we may share thoughts with others, which is beneficial.

Moreover, two of the students (S5, S11) stated that "The primary advantage, in my opinion, is that it may help students learn to talk more easily, become more engaged, and discover a variety of strategies for understanding the material provided by the teacher. They may easily ask their peers in the group discussion".

Lastly S10 stated that "In my perspective, employing this way allows us to learn together and discover strategies and solutions more easily than doing it independently. We may also achieve the finest results by discussing it together".

It was found that all of students (100%) expressed the view that small group discussions benefit them by allowing them to discover a variety of speaking techniques.

Conclusion:

The application of small group discussion in English speaking classroom give positive and negative responses. The positive responses are small group discussion was good and make them more active to understand the speaking lessons. It also increases their interest in learning speaking and they were feel motivated in learning by using small group discussion technique.

The application of small group discussion in English speaking classroom has several advantages. The opinion about the advantages of small group discussions among others are: make the students easier in learning, the students become more active, students can share their idea, and motivate the students.

Limitations and Recommendations:

Some limitations must be addressed related to this study. Firstly, it is crucial to recognize that the study was done with a very small sample size, restricting the findings' generalizability to a larger population. Additionally, the data for the current study was gathered from a single source, which may have introduced biases and restrictions in the overall data quality and depth of analysis.

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