



USING GROUP DISCUSSION TO IMPROVE THE EFL STUDENTS' SPEAKING SKILLS AT DONG NAI TECHNOLOGY UNIVERSITY, VIETNAM

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Abstract:

The research was conducted by the teacher as a writer of the study at Dong Nai Technology University. The study was carried out by using group discussion with two aims. They are: (1) to investigate the EFL students' attitudes towards group discussion in their speaking classes and (2) to evaluate the effectiveness of applying group discussion activity in English speaking classes. The results of the study show that group discussion activity helped increase most of the students' motivation in speaking lessons. Moreover, the findings of the study also indicated that after using group discussion activity in speaking lessons, the number of students getting GPA from B to A⁺ increased significantly with the rate from 35% to 63,33%. The researchers' expectation was resulted by using group discussion activity in improving the students' speaking proficiency.

Keywords: group discussion, speaking class, Dong Nai Technology University

1. Introduction

As lecturers at Dong Nai Technology University, the authors noted that speaking is one of the difficult skills for non-native English Foreign Language students. The teachers also found that students were embarrassed whenever speaking in English. And they are always afraid of making mistakes in speaking English and keep silence during the lessons. So, the difficult question to answer is how to stimulate students to be active in speaking English. To answer the question, it is necessary to investigate what motivates and de-motivates students in English learning in general and in speaking in particular.

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2. Research questions

- How do group discussion promote the students' motivation at DNTU?
- To what extent, do group discussion increase the students' speaking proficiency at DNTU?

2.1 Scope of the study

This research was carried out based on random samples of 60 students at DNTU in Dong Nai province. They are non-English majored students from 2 classes of 2 researchers as their lecturers.

3. Literature review

3.1 Speaking skill

According to Chaney (1988, p.13), speaking is the process of building and sharing meaning through the use of verbal and non-verbal symbols in a variety of contexts.

Scott (1978, p.18) identified that *"speaking can be typified as an activity involving two or more people in which the participants are both hearers and speakers having to react to what they hear and make their contribution."* The hearers and listeners are required to reflect on the information that they have heard and contribute with their ideas.

In 1976, Byrne (p.8) claimed that speaking is a two-way process between the speaker(s) and the listener(s) involving the productive skill of speaking and the receptive skill of understanding. In the two-way process, speaking requires the speaker(s) to have the productive skills to encode the message and the listener(s) to have receptive skills to decode the message.

Brown (1983) also stated that speaking is an interactive process of constructing meaning that involves producing, receiving and processing information. Speaking skill is defined as *"the range of exercise types and activities with a communication approach is unlimited, provided that such exercises and activities enable learners to attain the communicative objectives of the curriculum, engage learners in communication and require the use of such communicative processes as information sharing, negotiation of meaning, and interaction"*. (Richard and Rodgers, 1986: 165).

To summarize, different researchers have different definitions of the word "speaking", however, they all agree on one very important feature of speaking. Speaking is one of the most important skills of all the four language skills because individuals who learn a language are referred to as the speakers of that language (Ur, 1996).

3.2 Group discussion

According to Byrne D. (1980) discussion is *"any exchange of ideas and opinions either on a class basis, with the teacher as mediator, or within the context of the group, with the students talking among themselves"*.

Gulley (1960, p.4) states that discussion occurs when a group with group orientation purposefully interacts orally for enlightenment or policy determination. If the aim is enlightenment, members systematically define, analyze, and exchange information. When the end is problem-solving, members systematically define, analyze, evaluate possible solutions, and attempt to agree upon a high-quality decision to which all or the majority will be committed.

Regarding language teaching, Brown (2001) claimed that discussion is one of the techniques used in language teaching. Furthermore, in teaching speaking or teaching oral communication, discussion belongs to one of the activities to promote teaching speaking in the classroom (Kayi, 2006).

Kidsvatter (1996, p.242) states that a small-group discussion dividing the large classroom into small groups of students to achieve specific objectives permits students to assume more responsibility for their own learning, develop social and leadership skills and become involved in an alternative instructional approach.

The positive effect of group discussion is explained by Ornstein (2000). He states that dividing students into small groups seems to provide an opportunity for students to become more actively engaged in learning and for teachers to monitor students' progress better. It can also enhance students' cooperation and social skills.

Penny Ur (1998: 3) states that a discussion that works is primarily one in which as many students as possible say as much as possible. A further characteristic of a successful discussion is the apparent motivation of the participants: their attention to the speaker(s), their expression- that they are reacting to the humor, seriousness, or difficulty of the ideas being expressed.

In short, the discussion is one kind of speaking activity where students have a chance to express their ideas in front of their partners.

4. Methodology

4.1 Participants

In order to collect the data for the study, 60 students were randomly chosen to take participation in the study. Most of the students are second-year students who have just finished A1 level in English and going to move up to A2 level. They are non-English majors. This module lasts 8 weeks with 45 periods, 6 periods each week, and 40 minutes each period.

4.2 Research design

The research was carried out according to Kemmis and McTaggart (2000, p.564), the following figure illustrated an action research's cycles that the authors used in the study.

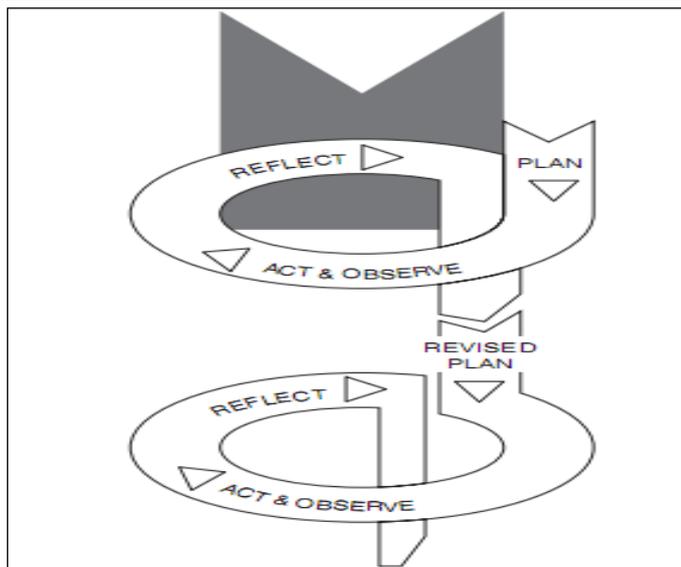


Figure 3.1: Kemmis and McTaggart's action research spiral

According to these authors, each action research cycle should involve:

- planning a change;
- acting and observing the process and consequences of the change;
- reflecting on these processes and consequences and then replanning for the next cycle.

4.3 Data collection instruments

In order to collect information about the students' motivation during speaking lessons and their speaking proficiency, the researchers used two survey questionnaires, classroom observation, and three tests (a pre-test and two post-tests).

4.4 Data analysis

To implement this study, the researchers used both qualitative and quantitative data. Quantitative data were gathered from the two tests and the two survey questionnaires, while the qualitative data was obtained from the classroom observation. For the results of the tests and the survey questionnaires, the percentage count was calculated. For the class observation, the researcher noted down the information carefully and evaluated the level of the students' motivation in the observation sheet in each speaking lesson.

5. Findings and Discussions

5.1. Pre-action findings

5.1.1 Students' levels of interest in English speaking lessons and using group discussion

In order to find the levels of the students' motivation in learning a speaking skill and their difficulties in speaking class, Survey Questionnaire 1 was carried out before the action. The following bar chart shows the motivation of the students.

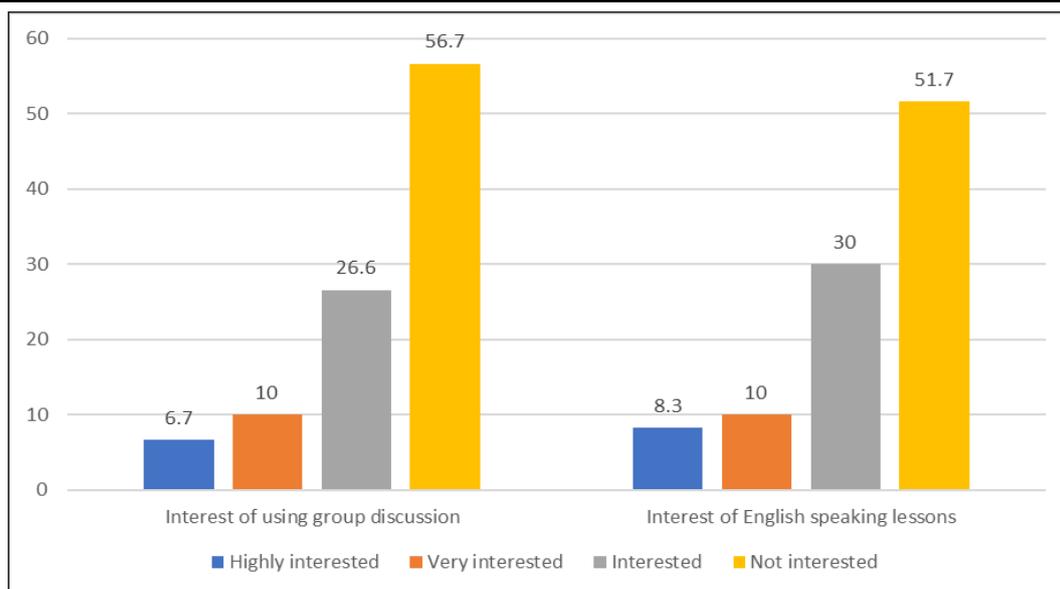


Figure 4.1: Students' levels of interest in English speaking lessons and using group discussion

5.1.2 Students' speaking opportunities

The following table states the students' speaking opportunities information in speaking lessons.

Table 4.1: Students' speaking opportunities during speaking lessons

Speaking English when...	Number of students	Percentage %
You talk with your friends	2	0.3
Your teacher asks you	52	87
You think it's useful	5	0.75
You are interested in speaking activities	5	0.75

4.1.3 Students' difficulties in learning to speak English

The collected data in the next figure revealed certain difficulties faced by the students during the process of learning to speak English.

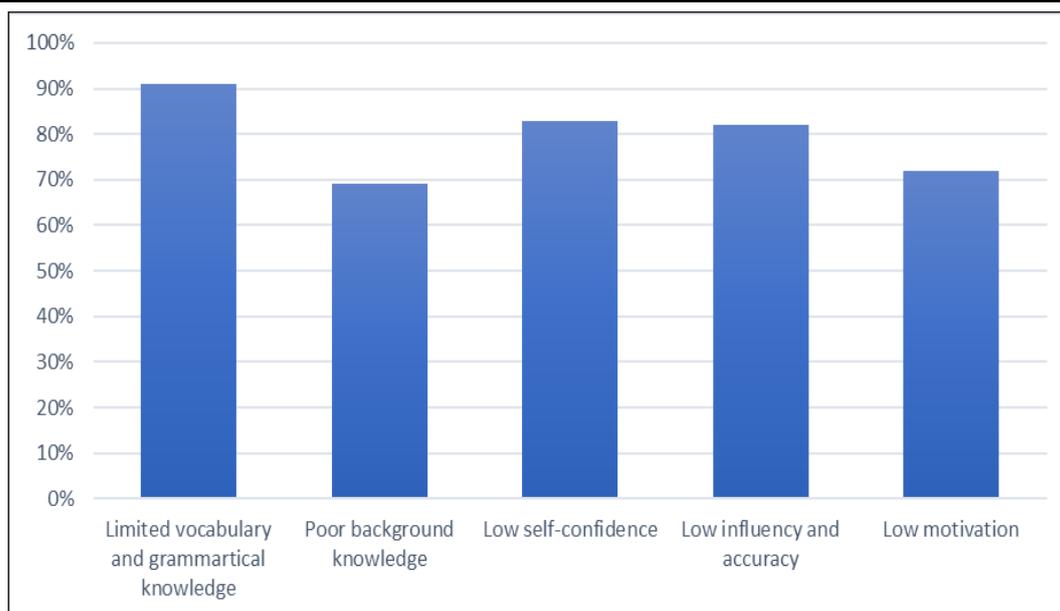


Figure 4.2: Students' difficulties in learning to speak English

5.2. After action findings

5.2.1 Level of interest in learning speaking lessons

In the table below, the students' levels of motivation were clearly indicated.

Table 4.2: Students' level of interest in learning speaking lessons

Level of interest in learning speaking lessons	Number of students		
	Preliminary	Cycle 1	Cycle 2
Highly interested	0 (0%)	1 (0%)	4 (12%)
Very interested	5 (8%)	8 (20%)	7 (24%)
Interested	18 (28%)	37 (40%)	42 (56%)
Uninterested	37 (56%)	14 (32%)	7 (8%)

5.2.2. Students' attitude in speaking lessons

Table 4.3: Students' attitude in speaking lessons

Level of students' interest in discussion activities	Number of students		
	Preliminary	Cycle 1	Cycle 2
Highly interested	0 (0%)	2 (8%)	5 (8%)
Very interested	5 (16%)	13 (8%)	17 (16%)
Interested	18 (32%)	27 (80%)	36 (76%)
Uninterested	37 (48%)	18 (4%)	2

Moreover, in order to know the students' feelings after participating in applying the discussion activity, the following table shows students' comments on some of the opinions about the group discussion activity.

Table 4.4: Students' comments on using group discussion activity

Opinions	No. of Students									
	Cycle 1					Cycle 2				
	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
A. Using group discussion make you feel relaxed and enjoyable.	0	22	20	18	0	2	27	23	8	0
B. Using group discussion helps lower your anxiety and develop confidence.	0	27	15	18	0	3	30	22	5	0
C. Using group discussion gives you more opportunities to speak English.	2	23	13	16	6	3	27	22	6	2
D. Using group discussion makes the speaking lessons more interesting because you can get the tasks easily, and discuss them with your friends.	7	23	25	5	0	17	31	12	0	0
E. Using group discussion helps you in improving my speaking motivation.	7	26	19	8	0	7	35	13	5	0

Note: 1: highly agree, 2: agree, 3: neutral; 4: disagree, 5: strongly disagree

5.3. Class observation findings

The researchers observed the classes during speaking lessons of pilot teaching and learning. There were eight items to remark and assess. Each item was scored on a scale of 1 (low) to 5 (high). The figure below specifically indicated the level of the whole class's motivation from the first week to the last week of implementing the action.

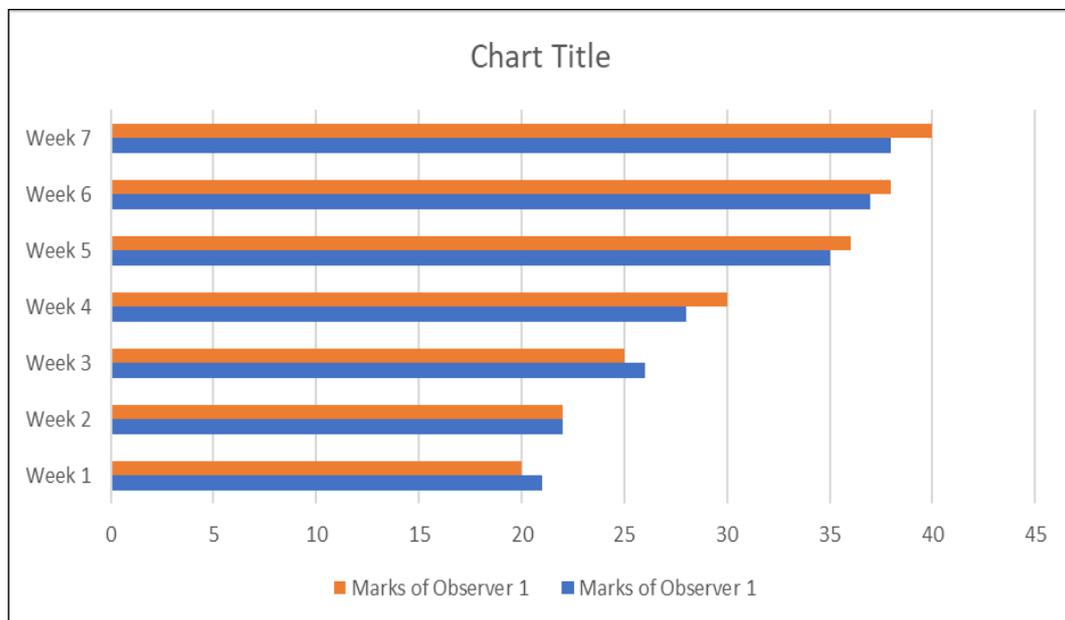


Figure 4.3: Overall class motivation scores for all students

After observing the lessons, observatories gave some comments:

a. Teacher

Optimistically, the group discussion activity which was used in those lessons was quite high appreciated. The teacher had prepared the lessons with different teaching aids. The invited teacher as an observer assessed that the teacher managed the classroom condition well, was very friendly with the students and used time effectively. The teachers know how to set up groups that can work effectively together.

b. Students

The students' motivation was significantly improved from the beginning to the last lesson of the implementation. Most of the students actively took part in group discussions and paid much attention to those lessons during the process of implementing the action. Some students were so shy at the first stage; however, they became more active and confident to speak in front of the class after 3 weeks of implementing the action.

In general, most of the students took part in group discussions and showed a positive attitude toward learning speaking skills. The results of overall class observation indicated that group discussion activity made sense in raising students' motivation in English speaking lessons.

5.4. Students' speaking proficiency

5.4.1. Pre-test results

Before implementing the action, the pre-test was used to measure students' English proficiency; the students' results were shown in the table below.

Table 4.5: General results of pre-test

GPA	Letter grade	Number of Students	Percentage %
9,0 – 10	A+	0	0
8,5 - 8,9	A	0	0
8,0 - 8,4	B+	4	6.67
7,0 - 7,9	B	17	28.33
6,5 - 6,9	C+	23	38.33
5,5 - 6,4	C	13	21.67
5,0 - 5,4	D+	3	5
4,0 - 4,9	D	0	0
< 4	F	0	0

5.4.2. Results of Post-test 1

In order to see if there was any change in students' speaking proficiency after three weeks of implementing the action, a Post-test 1 was carried out. The results of the Post-test 1 were shown in the following table.

Table 4.6: Overall mark of Post-test 1

GPA	Letter grade	Number of Students	Percentage %
9,0 – 10	A+	0	0
8,5 - 8,9	A	2	3.33
8,0 - 8,4	B+	5	8.33
7,0 - 7,9	B	20	33.33
6,5 - 6,9	C+	22	36.67
5,5 - 6,4	C	8	13.33
5,0 - 5,4	D+	3	5
4,0 - 4,9	D	0	0
< 4	F	0	0

4.4.3. Results of Post-test 2

After conducting the Post-test 1 and considering the reflection of the students, the researcher decided to do cycles 2 with the Post-test 2. The results of the Post-test 2 were shown in the following table.

Table 4.7: Overall mark of Post-test 2

GPA	Letter grade	Number of Students	Percentage %
9,0 – 10	A+	2	3.33
8,5 - 8,9	A	4	6.67
8,0 - 8,4	B+	7	11.67
7,0 - 7,9	B	25	41.66
6,5 - 6,9	C+	23	38.33
5,5 - 6,4	C	10	16.66
5,0 - 5,4	D+	2	3.33
4,0 - 4,9	D	0	0
< 4	F	0	0

5.5. Reflection

5.5.1. Reflection after Cycle 1

In general, the first cycle is quite successful. The groups of students worked well together and they did show their ideas quite confidently in front of the class. Although mistakes were still made, the students now show a positive attitude to the activities. There were some outstanding members who were very confident and usually gave valuable ideas and arguments. And there also were some students quite embarrassing to talk before the class and were limited in some aspects such as grammar or pronunciation which made them did not dare to show their opinion. However, in general, most of the students changed their attitude toward learning to speak English during the group discussion activity. The atmosphere of the class was raised up, and all of the students in the class could be encouraged to participate in the comparing activity. Almost all of the students found group discussion activities enjoyable and useful to get over their difficulties in speaking skills. What the teacher gave them before the given tasks, and what they had prepared before class helped them a lot when speaking in class because they gained more knowledge and used language as well as enlarged their vocabulary which was relevant

to the lessons. These made them more confident and enthusiastic to speak English in class.

Furthermore, it was also more comfortable and easier for the students to ask and discuss with others. It was realized by the teacher that some students are encouraged to speak more than the previous time they had participated.

Based on the reflection got from Cycle 1, it is concluded by the researcher that the activity of continuing to carry out Cycle 2 is necessary in order to enhance the ability to speak of students and improve their speaking motivation.

5.5.2. Reflection after Cycle 2

After Cycle 2, it can be seen that the speaking ability of the students improved to a certain level. Furthermore, it was also more comfortable and easier for the students to ask and discuss with others, because they got experience from the first cycle. It was realized by the teacher that some students are encouraged to speak more than the previous time they had participated.

From the beginning to the last implementation of the action, it can be seen that the group discussion activity made a great contribution to the improvement of the students' motivation and their English proficiency. The number of students who became interested in speaking lessons increased significantly. Before the implementation, most of the students just spoke English when they were asked to do so or when they were interested in speaking activities. However, from the beginning to the end of the implementation, almost all of the students became more active and concentrated on the lessons.

Almost all of the students found group discussion activities enjoyable and useful to get over their difficulties in speaking skills. What the teacher gave them before the given tasks, and what they had prepared before class helped them a lot when speaking in class because they gained more knowledge and used language as well as enlarged their vocabulary which was relevant to the lessons. These made them more confident and enthusiastic to speak English in class.

5.4.6. Chapter summary

To summarize, from the results of the class observations and the tests, it can be concluded that almost all of the students whose motivation in speaking lessons was improved made progress in their speaking proficiency. Though there was not too much change, it was a good signal showing that the use of group discussion activities could contribute to the improvement in the students' speaking proficiency. For the students who could not improve their speaking proficiency and their motivation in this cycle, it is hoped that in the next cycle or cycles they will be more interested in speaking lessons and make progress with the help of their teacher and their friends. Hence, it is expected that if the study will be carried out in the next cycle, the researcher can give better results.

6. Recommendation

There have been a lot of researchers doing research on motivating students to speak or increasing students' speaking proficiency. Hopefully, there will be further research on using group discussion activities. Suggestions for further studies are as followings:

- More studies on using group discussion activity in speaking lessons to increase either students' motivation or their speaking proficiency can be conducted in a longer period of time and among a larger number of Vietnamese students.
- There are a lot of discussion activities, so other researchers can use more interesting and proper ones in their research.
- Besides, it is expected that there will be more studies on group discussion activities to improve students' motivation in other skills such as reading, writing or listening.
- Other researchers, when doing research on group discussion activities, should carry out on-task behavior observation besides overall class observation, as well as an interview with students in order to get more accurate results.

7. Conclusion

On the basis of the data analysis results of using action research for the students' motivation in using group discussion activity, it was stated that the researchers were going in the right orientation to reach the study's objectives. The findings of the study revealed that using group discussion in speaking lessons could increase almost of the students' motivation in the classes.

The results of the study show that group discussion activity helped to increase most of the students' motivation in speaking lessons. At the first stage, there were no students getting GPA from A to A⁺, however, the number increases to 9 students, accounting for about 10%. The number of students who got GPA from B to B⁺ also increased significantly with the rate from 35% to 53,33%. Although the number of students getting GPA from D to C⁺ did not change much, their attitudes toward group discussion activity have changed a lot. This was easily found considering the survey questionnaire, lessons observation and by asking them.

Compared with initial data, the post data show that the effectiveness of using group discussion was quite effective in increasing students' motivation and quite successful in improving their speaking proficiency.

Conflict of interest statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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