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Enhancing Students' Speaking Competence Through Balanced Language Activities and Small-Group Discussion Techniques

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ABSTRAC

Developing speaking competence is a central objective in language education. Burkart (1998) advocates for a pedagogical approach combining language input, structured output, and communicative output. This article explores these dimensions in detail and emphasizes small-group discussion as an effective instructional technique. Drawing from established educational theorists and practical implementations, the article demonstrates how structured and communicative group discussions enhance linguistic, strategic, and sociolinguistic competencies among learners. It also outlines the key benefits of small-group work in improving speaking proficiency, critical thinking, collaboration, and learner autonomy.

Keywords: Speaking Competence, Second Language Acquisition, Small-Group Discussion, Burkart's Framework, Language Input, Structured Output, Communicative Output, Active Learning, Collaborative Learning, Group Dynamics, Language Anxiety, Willingness to Communicate, Fluency and Accuracy, Peer Interaction, Classroom Implementation Strategies.

INTRODUCTION

In the domain of second language acquisition, speaking is widely regarded as a crucial yet challenging skill to develop. It requires not only grammatical accuracy but also strategic competence, fluency, and sociolinguistic awareness. According to Burkart (1998), effective speaking instruction should integrate language input, structured output, and communicative output. These components build a comprehensive instructional framework that scaffolds learners' transition from passive language reception to active, purposeful communication. Within this framework, small-group discussion emerges as a particularly effective technique for facilitating real-world interaction and collaborative meaning-making in the classroom.

Techniques for Teaching Speaking: Burkart's Framework

Language input refers to the exposure students receive to the target language through various sources such as teacher talk, listening exercises, and reading materials. Burkart distinguishes between content-oriented and form-oriented input.

Content-oriented input focuses on the transfer of meaningful information (e.g., lectures, dialogues, or weather reports) and can include descriptions of learning strategies.

Form-oriented input, on the other hand, targets linguistic elements such as vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, and conversational norms (e.g., turn-taking and pause length). It directly supports the development of four communicative competencies:

• Linguistic competence: correct use of vocabulary and grammar.

•   Discourse competence: organizing ideas coherently.

•   Sociolinguistic competence: using appropriate expressions in social contexts.

•   Strategic competence: managing miscommunications and clarifying meaning.

The quantity and complexity of input must align with students' current language proficiency to be effective. Structured output refers to student language production that emphasizes accuracy. It usually occurs during the transition between the presentation and practice stages of a lesson. Students engage in activities where they use newly introduced structures in controlled formats. For instance, they might complete sentence prompts or dialogue scripts that require specific grammatical constructions. While response options may vary, they all rely on the target structure, reinforcing both recall and accuracy in form.

Communicative output prioritizes fluency and meaning over form. Students perform tasks such as role plays, information-gap activities, or project-based tasks (e.g., planning a trip or conducting an interview), where the main goal is to get the message across, regardless of minor grammatical inaccuracies. This phase allows learners to integrate both newly learned and previously acquired language features in dynamic, real-world-like interactions.

Small-Group Discussion as a Speaking Technique

Small-group discussion is a pedagogical method in which students are divided into smaller subgroups—usually between 3 to 12 members—to engage in purposeful oral interaction. According to Gulley (1960), a group is more than a collection of individuals; it is a dynamic entity characterized by mutual interaction and reciprocal influence. In educational contexts, small groups are structured to maximize each participant's speaking time and active engagement.

As Hoover (1964) states, a discussion involves talking things over to reach understanding or make decisions. Therefore, small-group discussion is best defined as the exchange of ideas, opinions, and information among group members, with the objective of problem-solving, decision-making, or conceptual exploration.

Implementing small-group discussion provides several pedagogical advantages:

Increased Speaking Opportunities: In large classes, not every student gets the chance to speak frequently. Dividing the class into smaller groups ensures more equitable participation and lowers the affective filter associated with speaking in front of the whole class.

Collaborative Learning: According to Kitzvatter (1996), small-group discussion enhances learners' responsibility, social skills, and leadership potential. It encourages peer learning through questioning, negotiation, and explanation.

Cognitive Development: Engaging in small-group discussions develops higher-order thinking skills. Alexander (1957) notes that learners improve their problem-solving abilities by observing and participating in how others approach tasks.

Attitudinal and Moral Growth: As learners negotiate ideas and build consensus, they develop mutual respect and confidence, which fosters a positive classroom culture (Gulley, 1960).

Real-Life Communication Practice: Small-group tasks often mimic real-world scenarios, helping learners practice the target language in authentic contexts.

Competencies Developed through Small-Group Discussion

According to educational research, small-group discussions contribute to the development of the following learning outcomes:

Subject-Matter Mastery: Students better understand academic concepts through peer discussion and shared interpretation.

Problem-Solving Skills: Exposure to diverse perspectives enhances critical thinking and the ability to tackle open-ended questions.

Attitudinal Growth: Participation builds self-esteem, fosters cooperation, and encourages active engagement.

Communication Competence: Learners improve their speaking fluency, coherence, and ability to interact meaningfully with others.

Furthermore, discussion provides a practice-rich

environment where learners can rehearse newly learned structures in an interactive setting, supporting both accuracy and fluency. To effectively use small-group discussion in language teaching, instructors should:

• Assign Clear Objectives: Each discussion should have a specific goal or task that guides students' interaction.

• Structure Groups Thoughtfully: Group students by skill level, interest, or learning style to maximize collaboration.

• Provide Linguistic Support: Offer sentence starters, key vocabulary, or communication strategies to scaffold learners' output.

• Monitor and Guide: Teachers should circulate, observe group dynamics, and provide feedback or clarification as needed.

• Debrief as a Whole Class: After group tasks, reconvene to reflect, summarize key insights, and correct any widespread misunderstandings.

Active Learning Small-group discussion is a cornerstone of active learning—an approach that engages students directly in the learning process through meaningful activities and reflection. Bonwell and Eison (1991) emphasized that strategies like peer discussions, debates, and role-playing are powerful complements to traditional instruction, as they promote deeper cognitive engagement. Through such activities, learners are not passive recipients of knowledge; rather, they actively construct understanding by hypothesizing, questioning, and making sense of language in a social context. When students participate in structured discussions, they generate meaning collaboratively, which makes the language input more relevant and easier to retain.

Collaborative Learning Beyond active participation, small-group discussions also exemplify collaborative learning—a model rooted in the idea that learning is enhanced through social interaction. Research shows that students working collaboratively tend to achieve higher academic outcomes, develop stronger critical thinking skills, and foster more positive attitudes toward learning than those working individually. Forming groups of three to five students, whether by language proficiency, interests, or learning styles, allows learners to contribute effectively while benefiting from the ideas and language use of others. Such collaboration fosters shared responsibility and cultivates interpersonal skills crucial for language use in authentic contexts.

Psychology of Group Interaction Group Dynamics and Cohesiveness The success of small-group discussion also relies on effective group dynamics. According to language education scholar Zoltán Dörnyei, group cohesiveness—built on mutual trust, shared purpose, and open communication—is essential for maximizing group performance. When students feel psychologically safe within their group, they are more likely to take language risks, express ideas freely, and engage in authentic dialogue. Teachers play a key role in nurturing this cohesiveness by designing icebreaker activities, carefully selecting group compositions, and establishing norms for respectful and constructive interaction. Over time, these efforts contribute to a classroom culture where learners feel both supported and empowered.

Overcoming Speaking Anxiety and Encouraging Willingness to Communicate One of the greatest barriers to developing speaking skills is anxiety. Many language learners fear making mistakes or being judged, especially in large group settings. However, research has consistently shown that smaller group formats reduce speaking anxiety and foster greater willingness to communicate. In these more intimate settings, students often feel less pressure and more support, which leads to increased confidence and risk-taking. Studies comparing teacher-centered and discussion-based classrooms report that learners engaged in regular group discussions show greater improvement in fluency and self-assurance. This supports Burkart's model, particularly the communicative output phase, where fluency and meaningful interaction take precedence over grammatical precision.

Empirical Impact of Small-Group Discussion The benefits of small-group discussion are not only theoretical but also strongly supported by empirical evidence. For instance, studies conducted in Indonesian secondary schools revealed that students who participated in regular small-group discussions significantly outperformed their peers in speaking assessments. One such study reported mean scores of 65.1 in the experimental group compared to 57.5 in the control group. A similar study conducted at the diploma level in Bandung found a striking difference in t-values (–12.97 vs. 2.22), confirming the statistical significance of this technique's impact on oral proficiency.

These findings highlight the importance of integrating both structured and communicative output stages in classroom practice. By providing learners with opportunities to first rehearse language forms and then apply them in meaningful discussions, teachers create a learning cycle that supports both accuracy and fluency.

To maximize the effectiveness of small-group discussion, teachers can implement several practical strategies: Proficiency-based Grouping: Arranging students by similar or mixed ability levels helps ensure that all learners can participate meaningfully while supporting peer learning.

Turn-Taking Structures: Incorporating methods such as speaking tokens, timers, or designated roles (e.g., facilitator, summarizer) can help ensure that all group members have opportunities to speak, especially those who are more introverted. Task Variety: Varying the types of tasks—from debates and interviews to storytelling and problem-solving projects—keeps students engaged and allows for the practice of different speaking functions. These practices support a student-centered learning environment where each learner plays an active role in their own language development.

Despite the proven benefits, small-group discussion does not come without challenges—particularly in contexts where exposure to authentic English use is limited, such as in some EFL environments. Limited Input and Practice: In regions like Uzbekistan, where learners may have minimal interaction with English outside the classroom, techniques such as role-playing can help simulate real-world communication and bridge the gap. Managing Anxiety: Teachers must design activities that gradually build confidence. This can be achieved by scaffolding tasks, starting with low-stakes practice, and offering supportive feedback. Differentiation and Inclusivity: Recognizing the diverse backgrounds, proficiency levels, and learning styles in any classroom, educators should tailor discussion topics and roles to align with students' interests and strengths. Doing so increases relevance and fosters engagement. By addressing these challenges with thoughtful planning, small-group discussion can become a powerful tool in any language teacher's toolkit—transforming the classroom into a vibrant, interactive, and empowering space for communication.

CONCLUSION

Teaching speaking requires a deliberate integration of input, structured practice, and authentic communication opportunities. As Burkart (1998) highlights, effective instruction should blend form-focused and meaning-focused activities. Within this framework, small-group discussion stands out as a practical and impactful technique. It not only enhances linguistic competence but also fosters critical thinking, collaboration, and learner independence. When implemented thoughtfully, small-group discussion transforms the classroom into a vibrant, communicative environment where language is not only learned but also lived.

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