Improving Students' Speaking Ability through Small-Group Discussion

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This research aimed to investigate how small-group discussion can be implemented to improve vocational high school students' speaking ability and to identify the role of small group discussion in improving students' speaking skill. This research was conducted by using action research, with 35 students of the second grade participating in this research. The findings of research can be explained in three cycles. Cycle 1 revealed that there were 37.2% of the students who did well; 42.8% were good although they had weaknesses in some aspects of using statements of introduction and choosing good sentences; 20% were weak and did not understand to choose appropriate sentences for introduction. Cycle II showed that 45.7% of the participants were good either in choosing appropriate sentences and pronunciation; 54.3% were considered good although they still lacked speaking communicatively with appropriate words. Cycle III was implemented after having additional classes, small guidelines of active speaking, and intensive practices. It found that 71.4% of the participants could communicate with English basic words and better structure, and 28.6% of them were still slightly below. Findings of this study showed that small group discussion could effectively improve students' speaking skill, engage them in the group work discussion actively, encourage them to be independent learners who can expose themselves in learning activities, make them feel more relaxed at learning, give them more opportunities to improve their speaking skills.

Keywords: speaking ability, small group discussion, and classroom action research

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengetahui bagaimana diskusi kelompok kecil dapat dilaksanakan untuk meningkatkan kemampuan berbicara siswa sekolah menengah kejuruan dan untuk mengidentifikasi peran diskusi kelompok kecil dalam meningkatkan kemampuan berbicara siswa. Penelitian ini dilakukan dengan menggunakan Classroom Action Research yang menjelaskan tiga siklus yang terdiri dari Planning, Acting, Observing dan Reflecting dengan 35 siswa kelas dua yang berpartisipasi dalam penelitian ini. Temuan penelitian dapat dijelaskan dalam tiga siklus. Siklus 1 mengungkapkan bahwa ada 37,2% dari 35 siswa yang

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melakukannya dengan baik; 42,8% baik meskipun mereka kurang dalam menggunakan ucapan dan memilih kalimat yang baik, 20% lemah dan tidak mengerti dengan baik dalam memilih kalimat yang tepat untuk ungkapan perkenalan. Siklus II menunjukkan bahwa 45,7% baik dalam memilih kalimat dan pengucapan yang tepat, 54,3% bagus walaupun mereka kurang berbicara secara komunikatif dengan kata-kata yang tepat. Siklus III yang dijelaskan setelah memiliki kelas tambahan, pedoman kecil untuk berbicara aktif dan praktik intensif, 71,4% dapat berkomunikasi dengan kata-kata dasar bahasa Inggris dan struktur yang lebih baik dan 28,6% sedikit berkurang. Penilaian keseluruhan menghasilkan bahwa diskusi kelompok kecil dapat secara efektif meningkatkan kemampuan berbicara siswa, melibatkan mereka dalam diskusi kerja kelompok secara aktif, memberikan mereka kebebasan yang dapat mengekspos diri mereka dalam kegiatan belajar, membuat siswa merasa lebih rileks dalam belajar, dan memberikan mereka lebih banyak kesempatan untuk meningkatkan kemampuan berbicara mereka.

INTRODUCTION

Language is a system for expressing meaning, and the primary function of language is for interaction and communication. As one of international languages in the world, English should be mastered by people around the world. Owing to the reason, English becomes the first foreign language that is taught in Indonesia, starting from elementary school to higher education. Studying second or foreign language becomes necessity when it comes to building relationship among peoples across the world. Rubin and Thompson (as cited in Ma'mur, 2006) state that "in today's world, contact with speakers of language other than English is increasingly common; we encounter such people in school, in our travels, in our jobs, as these contacts increase our motivation to study foreign languages" (p. 27). As an international language, English has an important role in this world. It can be seen from many aspects such as in business, academic, tourism, and it has been one of the main languages used internationally. Harmer (2001) comments that "English will remain a vital linguistic tool for many business people, academics, tourists, and citizen of the world who wish to communicate easily across nationalities for many years to come" (p.3).

Speaking is an integral part of communication and one of language skills learned. For most people the ability to speak a language is synonymous with knowing that language since speech is the most basic means of human communication. Brown, Rogers, and Rogers (2004) define speaking as a productive skill that can be directly and empirically observed and colored by the accuracy and effectiveness of listening skill. It can be inferred that speaking is an activity involving two or more people in which the participants are both the listener and speaker making their contribution. To communicate successfully, they should use effective language, as stated by Fulcher (2003) that "a speaker has to employ language effectively and appropriately in order to communicate his/her needs to a listener (p.23)".

Speaking plays an important social role to human life, also. It is the most vital tool of communication. Therefore, we may not communicate well if the ability of speaking is not good. The ability to speak effectively is an important element of our success in any field. Achieving speaking ability, however, is not simple. Spratt, Pulverness, and Williams (2005) argue that:

> Speaking involves a lot more than just using grammar and vocabulary accurately in speech. When we speak we constantly have in mind the person

we are speaking to and our wish to communicate our meaning successfully to them. We use interactive strategies to help us achieve this. These include using body language such as gestures, eye contact, facial expression and movement to put our message across more strongly and clearly, and functions such as clarifying our meaning …, asking for opinions …, agreeing … to keep the interaction (communication) going and check that is successful. (p. 48-49).

Furthermore, Luama (2004) comments that "speaking is also the most difficult language skill to assess reliably. A person's speaking ability is usually judged during a face to face interaction, in real time, between an interlocutor and a candidate" (p. 1). Speaking skill is an important part of the curriculum in language teaching, and the majority of teachers consider it as the most difficult skill to be taught since it is an interactive process that requires the ability to corporate the management of taking turns.

There have been a lot of techniques in teaching speaking skills. One of them is small-group discussion. The literature informs that small group could be an effective organizational medium for encouraging, clarifying, and guiding students' participation in planning classroom activities, both academic and social. In conducting a discussion group, a teacher presents the students with a problem to solve. In small groups, they discuss possible solutions, which they then present to the class for comparison or further discussion. During the small group interaction, the teacher acts as a facilitator and at the end may summarize group comments or give other possible solutions.

Sharan (1976) states that small-group teaching is an approach to classroom organization, encompassing a wide variety of teaching techniques, for structuring the relationships of students and teachers. They wish to emphasize that the aim of small groups is to foster cooperation and communication among students for learning purposes and create a social context for individual investigation and involvement.

Regarding small group discussion as an effective teaching strategy in language actvity, Harmer (2001) points out that there are some classroom tasks for which pair work is not sufficient and could be ineffective. Thus, it will be better to organize them in groups through which students can write a group story or role-play. Small-group activities help students create more interactional environment. Similarly, Ur (2000) asserts that in a group work, learners perform a learning task through interaction. It is a form of practice of oral fluency. In small groups, learners have the opportunity to interact, question, and elaborate with peers more frequently than they have in a teacher-centered environment, thus enhancing learning and understanding.

The importance of student-student interaction should not be underestimated as it is considered to be an interaction that mostly influences students' performance in instructional situations. The use of small groups for learning creates a non-threatening environment that allows all students to participate in discussions that they may not have the opportunity to do so in a large group environment. The use of group work could improve learning outcomes because it fosters learners' responsibility and independence, apart from creating an interactional classroom atmosphere. Through participating in group, learners will have more language practice since they do not just listen to their teachers.

The roles of teacher and students in group discussion are different from those in the whole-class setup. The teacher is no longer a lecturer or transmitter of materials, but rather the facilitator of learning process by encouraging cooperation among the students, while the students are no longer trying to impress their teacher but are busy learning actively. Therefore, in small group discussion, the students would have been obliged actively to speak as much as they can possibly say to express their feelings and ideas.

The teacher acts as a facilitator and at the end may summarize group comment or give other possible solutions. In the small group classroom, learning process becomes the main focus of the teacher's attention. Preparation of materials still occupies his or her thought and time, however. A teaching plan is no longer synonymous with deciding what ideas to teach about a subject. It must be accompanied by plans of how the students will utilize the materials in their learning activities.

Students' roles also change in this new learning environment. They must be helped to acquire the social skills they need for cooperative learning. They must learn to do independent research as part of larger group projects, to formulate their findings, to help place their work in the context of the others, and to conduct themselves in this setting without being under the vigilant aye of authority. Students are removed from their roles as 'learning machines' with constant input and output and become active planners and deciders.

Effective study in group discussion necessitates the social skills and functions for group participation, such as attentive listening, effective implementation of peers' ideas, cooperation and sharing of information, mutual help, talking in turn, serving as group leader, and so on. Group discussion helps pupils to clarify their own ideas and helps them become aware of others' opinion. Constructive group discussion could produce a better solution to problems.

Some studies regarding speaking through small group discussion have been conducted. For example, Hartoyo (2010) did some small-group activities to 35 students to their speaking competencies. Using action research, the results show that that the activities conducted through small group can improve students' speaking competences in terms of their content aspect, accuracy, pronunciation, and fluency, as can be seen in the table below:

Table 1: The improvement of speaking competences using small-group activities

No	Speaking Competences	Cycle 1		Cycle 2	
		Pre-test	Post-test	Pre-test	Post-test
1	Students content aspect	5.83	6.11	5.83	6.57
2	Students speaking accuracy	5.91	6.31	6.92	8.18
3	Pronunciation aspect	6.23	6.40	6.23	6.88
4	Fluency aspect	5.77	6.25	5.77	6.74

The findings are also supported by Antoni (2014) who also conducted action research using small-group activities. After cycle 1 and 2, there was always improvement in the average score of five speaking components: pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension, as shown in the table 2 below:

Table 2: The Improvement of speaking components using small-group discussion

No	Indicator of speaking skill	Average of based score	Average score of cycle 1	Average score of cycle 2
1	Pronunciation	26	30	42
2	Grammar	30	40	46
3	Vocabulary	30	50	62
4	Fluency	24	36	50
5	Comprehension	24	34	42

Considering that speaking is a very important skill and the teaching of speaking could be conducted through small-group discussion, this study was interested in investigating small-group discussion in improving vocational school students' speaking ability. Two research questions were posed in this study: (1) What are the roles of small group discussion in developing students' speaking ability? and (2) How can small group discussion be beneficial to develop students' speaking ability?

METHOD
The research took place at a vocation high school in Serang, Banten, Indonesia and adopted action research consisting of three cycles. Richards and Farrell (2005) highlights that action research has some characteristics. First, its primary goal is to improve teaching and learning in schools and classroom, and it is conducted during the process of regular classroom teaching. Second, it is usually small-scale and is intended to help resolve problems rather than simply be research for its own sake. Third, it can be carried out by an individual teacher or in collaboration with other teachers. The first characteristic was actually the end of this research because students at the vocational school still had problems with speaking in English. As has been suggested by the literature in action research, there were four stages conducted in each cycle: planning, acting, observing, and reflecting. There were 35 students participating in this research. This research focused on five aspects supporting speaking skills: pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION
Cycle 1
In the planning stage, I initially planned to put students in pairs to set the learning scenario which consisted of patterns of communicative interaction. However, I decided not to talk to the students while the fluency activity was taking place. This is because I wanted to hear their answers and their follow-up discussion. The interaction patterns in the class were questioning personal data, introducing someone else to the group, and getting to know each other.

After the students discussed the material, they were paired up and given the question sheet to interview personal data, and then they reported orally in front of the class. During the activity, I paid attention to each pair to assess the extent to which they were using English or Indonesian and to determine whether they were doing it well.

There were some improvements students made after doing the activity. The class was active, and students showed their struggle to do the best. Although there were a few students who were still weak in doing this, the results showed that 13 students (37.2%) did well. 15 students (42.8%) were categorized good although there were still weaknesses in some aspects of using statements of introduction and choosing good sentences. Unfortunately, 7 students (20%) were weak and did not understand well in choosing appropriate sentences for introduction. The problem faced by these weak students was they were not familiar yet with good sentences of introduction.

The activity in the first cycle seemed successful. Some students gave a good response and looked happy with the activity. However, they still did not really understand how to conduct interview and introduction. I focused on this problem and decided to try again and reintroduce basic expressions of interview and introduction by referring to the handbook.

Cycle 2
In this cycle, the students worked in pairs and then in group (5 students in each group); each student had more chances to do the interview. After that, they presented their interview results for about 10 minutes in their group. I moved around to find out the problems. The results showed that 16 students (45.7%) were categorized as good, with the others not so good (still finding difficulties in communication using appropriate sentences. The strategies used in this cycle seemed more interesting. The result was also better: there were more students who belonged to 'good' group. This, however, was still not my expectation. Therefore, in the next cycle, the focus was on pronunciation and fluency.

Cycle 3
In the planning stage, I set the scenario to familiarize students with the expressions used for doing first meeting, asking questions about personal data, introducing someone else to the group, getting to know each other, expressing accepting and refusing invitations, agreeing and disagreeing, stating certainty and uncertainty, asking yes-no questions, and giving simple direction. That's why the expressions were reintroduced in this cycle with necessary changes.

The students kept going on speaking in pairs and then in group (5 students in each group), so each student had more opportunities to speak about the abovementioned activities (describing ideas, expressing agreement and disagreement, accepting and refusing invitation, etc.). Again, each student was given about 10 minutes in doing this activity. I observed the activity by moving around while anticipating the problems emerging.

The test conducted for this cycle referred to the students' ability to choose appropriate and their familiarity with and improvement in the expressions of introduction, questioning, agreement and disagreement, etc. The results show that 25 students (71.4%) were considered good, meaning that they could communicate using appropriate sentences and better structure, while 10 students (28.6%) were still below the criteria.

The highest score in this cycle was 99, and the lowest was 56. The mean score was 82.2, higher than the previous cycles. It means that in general, students' speaking skills improved. The improvement can be seen in all items (criteria). For example, for item 1, understanding agreement and disagreement, there were 8 students (22.8%) who were categorized 'very good,' with 17 students (48.6%) good and 10 students (28.6%) average. Item

2, understanding accepting and refusing expressions, 27 students (77.2%) were 'very good', and 8 students (22.8%) were 'good.' Item 3, understanding certainty and uncertainty expressions, 9 students belonged to a 'very good' group, with 20 students (57.2%) categorized as 'good,' 5 students (14.3%) average, and 1 student poor. Item 4, understanding yes-no question, 25 students (71.4%) were 'very good,' with 6 students (17.2%) 'good' and 4 students (11.4%) 'average.' Item 5, understanding simple direction, 17 students (48.5%) were categorized as 'very good,' and 11 students (31.4%) were 'good,' with 3 students (8.6%) 'average' and 4 students 'poor.'

The Roles of Small Group Discussion in Developing Students' Speaking Ability
The findings of the research above shows that the use of small group discussion could improve all indicators of students' speaking ability. Students were actively engaged in the discussion activity. After they did some practices and had additional classes, students felt more confident to express more ideas. As mentioned, in the cycle 2, it was found that 45.7% of the students were categorized as 'good,' while in the cycle 3 the percentage was 71.4%. The improvement could be seen from students' ability to choose appropriate answer for each question and their better understanding of the expressions of introduction, questioning, agreement and disagreement, etc.

The findings indicate that small group discussion proves to be effective enough in improving students' speaking ability. There are some roles of small-group discussion which can contribute to develop speaking ability. Firstly, in a small-group discussion student-student interaction can be fostered. It can be seen when the student discuss the material in group. The students can share ideas and ask something each other. It promotes their communicative skills. Secondly, discussion promotes meaningful interaction and enhances learning. This is because in the activity they negotiate meaning to solve a problem, thus encouraging learning processes. Finally, it encourages students' responsibility and independence. This can be shown when they act as a leader, secretary, or spokesman of the group. The can learn to be responsible for the job they get.

How small group discussion can be beneficial to develop students' speaking ability
Based on the score reached in each cycle showing improvement, small-group discussion can give positive results when implemented in EFL. Generally, findings of this research show the desired results with regards to the issue in speaking activities. Some of the issues identified include the students' proficiency of spoken language that hinder their participation in the class, their inability to practice the language outside the class, teachers' inconsistency in conducting speaking activities in the class, etc. Similarly, the students' perspectives with regard to the involvement in the oral group activities can also be identified, such as students' enthusiasm and motivation, contribution, sense of belonging as well as the importance of peer correction among group members. Also, there is a positive implication on the use of small group work activities in which students show improvement in their individual performance in speaking.

The interview result shows that all teachers agreed with the use of group work in teaching speaking. They argued that it was more student-centered and effective in getting every student to be involved in the task. Through the observation, students' engagement in the small

group work could be shown from their ability to communicate in English, team work, interaction among members, and enthusiasm & motivation in the activities.

From the three cycles conducted, it was found out that the students felt free to express themselves when interacting in the smaller group. It can be inferred that group work helps reduce students' anxiety to speak up in front of the class, enhance the students' motivation in joining the class, improve the students' motivation by discussing the task in group, make them feel comfortable to do the task with their group instead of working individually, and make them feel more relax to express their ideas.

CONCLUSIONS

The use of small-group discussion in the EFL classroom can improve students' speaking ability. Through discussion, they are placed in a situation where they are encouraged to interact using the target language. Group discussion provides the effective use of classroom 'speaking time' because it enables students to have greater opportunities for sharing ideas. Besides, it is much easier to talk to a peer in a small-group than to do it in a whole class. However, there are at least two weaknesses of implementing this activity with regard to this research setting: the situation was noisy when the students were working in a group and they tended to use the native language, especially when the teacher was not around. Therefore, before conducting this activity, teachers need to explain about the procedure of discussion clearly, mix students (high, middle, low), and move around to control the speech domination. Finally, small-group discussion can possibly promote argumentation leading to critical thinking (Ilyas, 2016) as it is also a skill worth teaching in higher education.

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