

Research Article

Fostering Students' Engagement in EFL Speaking through Small Group Discussion: A Classroom Action Research

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ABSTRACT

Student engagement plays an important role in supporting students' participation and learning in EFL classrooms. However, limited opportunities for communicative practice may limit students' confidence and participation in speaking activities. This classroom action research investigated how the implementation of Small Group Discussion fostered students' engagement in speaking. The study was conducted with nine eleventh grade students at a private senior high school in Yogyakarta through two classroom action research cycles. Data were collected using an engagement observation checklist, interviews, and field notes and were analyzed descriptively and thematically. The observation checklist focused on two dimensions of engagement, namely Effort and Initiative. The findings showed an increase in both dimensions across the two cycles. Students also demonstrated greater enthusiasm, more active participation, and increased use of English during speaking activities. Interview findings further indicated that students perceived Small Group Discussion as an enjoyable approach that provided more opportunities to practise speaking, express opinions, and work collaboratively. The findings suggest that Small Group Discussion can serve as a practical classroom-based approach to fostering students' engagement in EFL speaking.

Keywords: Classroom Action Research; Learning Engagement; Small Group Discussion; Speaking; Students

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1. Introduction

Speaking is widely regarded as the most immediate indicator of communicative competence in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning, as it requires learners to mobilize vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation simultaneously under real-time social pressure. For Indonesian secondary school students, opportunities to use English for authentic oral communication remain limited within the classroom, where instruction is often organized around grammar exercises and teacher-fronted question-answer sequences rather than sustained interactional talk. Malik et al. (2025) report that senior high school EFL learners frequently perceive themselves as unprepared to speak spontaneously, citing limited vocabulary, fear of making mistakes, and insufficient practice as recurring barriers. Without deliberate pedagogical opportunities for meaningful oral exchange, speaking skills risk remaining underdeveloped even after years of formal English instruction.

Beyond exposure and practice time, learners' engagement in speaking activities functions as a proximal condition for developing oral proficiency. Engagement is commonly conceptualized as a multidimensional construct comprising behavioral,

emotional, cognitive, and agentic components (Beymer et al., 2025; Kassab et al., 2023). In speaking classrooms specifically, engagement can be observed through students' active participation in discussion, sustained effort when a task becomes demanding, persistence despite hesitation or error, and willingness to communicate in the target language rather than withdrawing into silence. Liu et al. (2025) found that classroom interaction predicts learners' willingness to communicate partly through its effect on speaking self-efficacy and foreign language enjoyment, suggesting that engagement in speaking is shaped as much by classroom conditions as by individual disposition. Framed this way, engagement is not simply a byproduct of speaking instruction but a condition that instruction needs to actively cultivate.

How teachers organize classroom interaction substantially influences whether this engagement develops. Ariyani et al. (2024) observed that lecturers who deliberately used verbal and nonverbal interpersonal strategies, including modeling English use and structuring engaging discussions, supported students' motivation, confidence, and active participation in speaking classes, whereas more teacher-centered formats left quieter students disengaged. Liu et al. (2025) similarly demonstrated that interactive classroom conditions, rather than passive exposure, are what translate into learners' willingness to communicate. Task design and interaction structure therefore appear to function as levers that teachers can adjust to broaden participation beyond the small subset of confident speakers who typically dominate whole-class discussion.

Discussion-based and collaborative learning arrangements are frequently proposed as a practical response to this need. By organizing students into small groups, teachers can increase the proportion of class time each student spends producing language, distribute participation more evenly, and lower the social risk associated with speaking in front of an entire class. Magfira et al. (2024) found that EFL learners perceived online group discussion as beneficial for building confidence, exchanging ideas, and practicing spontaneous language use, while Telaumbanua et al. (2024) reported gains in secondary students' speaking ability following the implementation of small-group discussion in an EFL classroom. In non-formal EFL contexts, Mawsally et al. (2026) likewise found that small-group discussion techniques supported learners' speaking confidence by reducing the pressure of individual performance in front of a whole class. Collectively, these studies position small-group discussion as a plausible mechanism for fostering speaking engagement, primarily by increasing opportunities for peer interaction, idea exchange, and low-stakes English use.

Taken together, recent studies converge on two broad patterns. First, engagement in EFL speaking is shaped jointly by learner-internal factors, such as self-efficacy and enjoyment, and classroom-level conditions, such as interaction structure and task design (Ariyani et al., 2024; Liu et al., 2025). Second, small-group and collaborative discussion formats are consistently associated with gains in students' willingness to speak and their reported confidence (Magfira et al., 2024; Mawsally et al., 2026; Telaumbanua et al., 2024). What remains less settled is whether these gains reflect genuine engagement or merely increased talk volume. Wotring et al. (2024) caution that small-group talk does not automatically translate into productive engagement with a task's communicative goals, and that the quality of group interaction depends heavily on how groups are structured and facilitated. Zhong et al. (2025) similarly found that project-based speaking activities strengthened learners' behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement but had a comparatively limited effect on agentic engagement, indicating that not all dimensions of engagement respond equally to a single collaborative format. Working with tenth-grade EFL students in an Indonesian secondary school, Kamaruzzaman (2025) documented improved classroom engagement and reduced speaking anxiety across two cycles of forum group discussion but reported these changes mainly through

pre- and post-test scores rather than a structured, multi-indicator engagement instrument tracked cycle by cycle.

Across this literature, comparatively few studies have examined how structured Small Group Discussion, implemented iteratively across successive Classroom Action Research (CAR) cycles, fosters multiple observable indicators of students' engagement, rather than test scores alone, within an Indonesian secondary-school EFL speaking classroom. Existing evidence on discussion-based speaking interventions in this context tends to rely on single-cycle designs, university-level samples, or outcome measures centered on speaking test scores rather than triangulated observation of engagement itself (Kamaruzzaman, 2025; Telaumbanua et al., 2024). Consequently, there is limited classroom-embedded evidence of how engagement develops and is refined across cycles of planning, action, observation, and reflection when Small Group Discussion is deliberately adjusted between cycles in response to observed student behavior.

The present study addresses this gap by implementing a Small Group Discussion across two classroom action research cycles with eleventh-grade EFL students in an Indonesian senior high school, using an observation-based engagement checklist together with interview data to examine how students' effort, initiative, and participation in speaking activities develop as the discussion format is refined from cycle to cycle. Rather than treating engagement as a fixed outcome, the study documents how it is fostered and sustained through iterative pedagogical adjustment. Accordingly, this study seeks to answer the following research question:

How does the implementation of Small Group Discussion foster students' engagement in speaking?

2. Method

2.1. Research Design

This study employed classroom action research (CAR) based on the model proposed by Kemmis and McTaggart (1998). CAR was selected because it provides a systematic framework for identifying classroom problems, implementing pedagogical interventions, and refining teaching practices through cycles of action and reflection (Mills, 2017). As illustrated in Figure 1, the CAR process in this study consisted of four interrelated stages: planning, action, observation, and reflection. The findings from each cycle were used to inform the planning and implementation of the subsequent cycle. Consistent with the practice-oriented nature of CAR, this study focused on examining and improving students' engagement within a specific classroom context rather than establishing causal relationships or generalizing the findings to other populations (Mills, 2017).

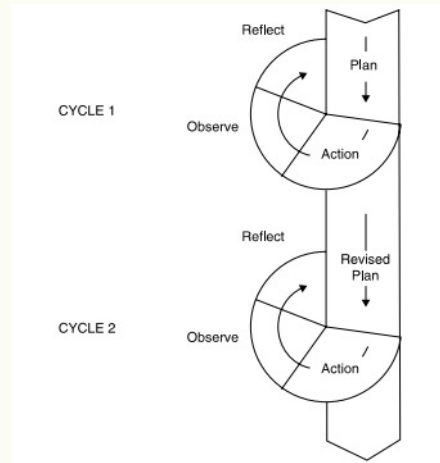


Figure 1. Cyclical model of AR steps based on Kemmis and McTaggart (1998)

2.2. Research Setting and Participants

This study was conducted in an eleventh-grade social science class at a private senior high school in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, during the September to October 2025 academic term. English was taught once a week, and the intervention was implemented within the regular weekly schedule across four faces to face meetings, with two meetings conducted in each cycle. The class consisted of nine students, all of whom participated in the study. As the study focused on the entire class, all students were included as participants. This whole class approach is consistent with the practice-oriented nature of classroom action research, which focuses on addressing and improving teaching and learning within a specific classroom context.

2.3. Data Collection

The study was conducted in two cycles, with two meetings in each cycle, resulting in four faces to face sessions. Each cycle consisted of four stages: planning, action, observation, and reflection. During the planning stage, the researcher prepared the lesson plan, learning materials, observation checklist, and interview protocol, and determined the indicators of success for each cycle. During the action stage, Small Group Discussion was implemented through six steps. First, the researcher introduced a discussion topic. The students then wrote down their opinions on sticky notes and placed them on the whiteboard. The researcher grouped the students according to similar opinions, after which the students discussed the topic in their respective groups. Finally, each group presented and defended its arguments. During the observation stage, the research team observed students' engagement using the observation checklist and recorded field notes. During the reflection stage, the researcher and teacher reviewed the observation findings and discussed the students' responses to the activities. Interviews with the students and teacher were also conducted to evaluate the implementation and identify aspects that needed improvement in the following cycle.

2.4. Data Analysis

The data obtained in this study consisted of qualitative and quantitative data. Qualitative data were obtained from classroom observations and field notes recorded during the teaching and learning process, particularly regarding students' participation and classroom activities. Interview data from the teacher and students were analyzed thematically to provide further support for the observation findings. Quantitative data were obtained from the student engagement observation checklist, which was adapted from the blueprint developed by Cassar and Jang (2010) and included the Effort and

Initiative subscales. The mean score for each subscale was calculated for each cycle and compared descriptively to examine changes in students' engagement in speaking between Cycle 1 and Cycle 2.

3. Results

The results of this classroom action research showed an increase in students' engagement in speaking following the implementation of Small Group Discussion across two cycles. The results were obtained from the observation checklist and were supported by interview and field-note data.

3.1 Cycle 1

The data in Cycle 1 were collected using an observation checklist to examine students' engagement in speaking. The observation data were supported by interview data from the students regarding their views of the Small Group Discussion. The implementation of Small Group Discussion consisted of four stages: planning, action, observation, and reflection. During the planning stage, the activities were prepared according to the research scenario. In the action stage, the researcher implemented Small Group Discussion through six steps. First, the researcher presented an issue for discussion. The students then wrote their opinions on sticky notes and placed them on the whiteboard. The researcher grouped the students based on similar opinions, after which they discussed the issues in their respective groups. Finally, the students presented their arguments. During the presentations, students were expected to present their own arguments and support those of their teammates. The issues discussed in this cycle were "why we should use public transportation" and "why bullying has to be stopped." During the observation stage, field notes indicated that students were quite enthusiastic about participating in the learning activities. They generally followed the instructions and were able to carry out the discussion according to the given procedure. The observers also assessed students' engagement in speaking using the observation checklist adapted from Cassar and Jang (2010), particularly the Effort and Initiative dimensions. Tables 1 and 2 present the mean scores for these two dimensions in Cycle 1.

Table 1. Mean Scores of Students' Effort Indicators in Cycle 1

Item	Statement	Mean
P1	pays attention in class	3.444
P4	completes assigned seatwork	3.555
P7	persistent when confronted with difficult problems	2.555
P10	approach new assignment with sincere effort	3.444
P14	tries to finish assignment even when they are difficult	3.555
P16	get discourage and stop trying when encounter an obstacle in schoolwork; is easily frustrated	3

Table 2. Mean Score of Students' Initiative Indicators in Cycle 1

Item	Statement	Mean
P2	attempts to do his/her work thoroughly and well, rather than just trying to get by	3.444
P3	participate actively in discussion	2.888
P11	asks question to get more information	2
P15	raises his or her hand to answer a question or volunteer information	2.111

The reflection on Cycle 1 identified three main issues that needed to be addressed in Cycle 2. First, students still used English infrequently during the discussions and often switched to Bahasa Indonesia. Second, some students mispronounced words and hesitated when speaking. Third, several students lacked confidence when presenting their arguments.

3.2 Cycle 2

The data in Cycle 2 were collected using the observation checklist to examine students' engagement in speaking. The observation data were supported by interview data from the students about their views of the Small Group Discussion and field notes describing the classroom activities. The implementation of Small Group Discussion in Cycle 2 followed the same four stages as Cycle 1: planning, action, observation, and reflection. The six steps used in Cycle 1 were also maintained. The main difference was the use of more debatable topics, namely "the positive and negative sides of social media" and "whether online classes are good or bad for students." These topics gave students opportunities to respond to opposing opinions and develop their arguments during the discussion. During the observation stage, field notes indicated that students were more enthusiastic about participating in the learning activities. Their familiarity with the discussion procedure also appeared to help them understand how and when to participate in the discussion and presentation. The observation checklist showed changes in students' engagement in terms of Effort and Initiative. Tables 3 and 4 present the mean scores for these two dimensions in Cycle 2.

Table 3. Mean Scores of Students' Effort Indicators in Cycle 2

Item	Statement	Mean
P1	pays attention in class	4.444
P4	completes assigned seatwork	4.222
P7	persistent when confronted with difficult problems	3.222
P10	approach new assignment with sincere effort	4.222
P14	tries to finish assignment even when they are difficult	4.222
P16	get discourage and stop trying when encounter an obstacle in schoolwork; is easily frustrated	3

Table 4. Mean Score of Students' Initiative Indicators in Cycle 2

Item	Statement	Mean
P2	attempts to do his/her work thoroughly and well, rather than just trying to get by	4.333
P3	participate actively in discussion	4
P11	asks question to get more information	3.555
P15	raises his or her hand to answer a question or volunteer information	3.444

Overall, the mean Effort score increased from 3.26 in Cycle 1 to 3.89 in Cycle 2, representing an increase of approximately 19%. The mean Initiative score increased from 2.61 to 3.83, representing an increase of approximately 47%. However, not all indicators showed improvement. Item P16, which concerns students' tendency to become discouraged when facing an obstacle, remained unchanged at 3.00 across both cycles. Based on the overall improvement in students' engagement and the supporting interview findings, the classroom action research was concluded after two cycles.

3.3 Interview Findings

The interview data further supported the observation findings. Thematic analysis of the interviews with the teacher and four students identified several themes related to the implementation of Small Group Discussion.

Teacher's responses. Three themes emerged from the teacher's interview. The first was the perceived effectiveness of the method. The teacher considered Small Group Discussion effective for the learning process, stating, "Yes, in my opinion, during learning this method is very effective." The second theme was increased participation and willingness to speak. The teacher explained that the discussion activities encouraged students to speak and participate, including students who had previously been reluctant to speak: "So, I think it's good, because with the discussion method, the children are provoked and each of them must speak and must want to," and "they are really provoked to speak even those who have never spoken they always try to speak properly." The third theme concerned suggestions for further use. The teacher suggested that the method could be used again in future lessons or combined with other teaching methods: "So, we may apply it as a learning method in the future, or we may combine it with other methods."

Students' responses. Two themes emerged from the student interviews. The first was speaking practice. Students described the activities as more engaging and enjoyable because the discussion format was new to them and gave them more opportunities to talk and express their opinions. Student 1 explained, "It's more efficient and less sleepy because it's a new method and we've never done it before so it's more fun because I'm a person who likes to talk and then I'm told to debate so with that I feel more trained." Student 2 similarly noted that increased interaction helped build confidence in speaking English: "In my opinion, it's because we talk more and interact more and from ourselves, we are more confident to speak English." Student 3 also appreciated the opportunity to formulate sentences and share individual opinions: "Like what is being done now is like making text sentences and pasting them, everyone has their own opinion so that's pretty good."

The second theme was teamwork. Students felt that the activities helped them work together and exchange ideas during group discussions. Student 3 stated, "Using the method that we have practiced is very good because it trains the development of a team," while Student 4 noted, "It's fun because it allows us to find new opinions or allows us to have better discussions with others."

4. Discussion

The results of this classroom action research indicate that implementing Small Group Discussion was associated with a consistent increase in students' speaking engagement across both the Effort and Initiative dimensions. Because the study did not include an inferential statistical test or a comparison group, this increase should be interpreted as a descriptive, context specific pattern of pedagogical improvement rather than as evidence of a statistically confirmed or generalizable causal effect. The larger relative increase in Initiative, from 2.61 to 3.83, or approximately 47%, compared with Effort, from 3.26 to 3.89, or approximately 19%, suggests that the Small Group Discussion format may have provided greater opportunities for proactive participation, such as asking questions, volunteering information, and taking responsibility for one's contributions, rather than simply sustaining students' existing effort.

This pattern is consistent with Zhong et al. (2025) finding that project based speaking activities strengthen behavioral and emotional engagement more readily than agentic engagement, since taking greater ownership of one's contribution may require repeated opportunities for participation before it becomes more established. The progression from cooperative opinion sharing in Cycle 1 to more argumentative discussion in Cycle 2 appears to have provided such opportunities. As students were required to defend a position rather than simply share an opinion, they had more opportunities to engage in proactive and self-directed participation, which is reflected in the Initiative indicators. This interpretation is consistent with Namaziandost et al. (2024), who found that learner autonomy and academic engagement can foster EFL learners' willingness to communicate in English. It also aligns with Liu et al. (2025) finding that interactive classroom conditions can strengthen willingness to communicate through speaking self efficacy, as well as Rafiee and Abbasian-Naghneh (2024) identification of task related interaction as an important predictor of situational willingness to communicate. Similarly, Sarwari (2024) argues that structured opportunities for communicative practice can support willingness to communicate more effectively than exposure alone, while Ranjbar et al. (2025) found that structured oral presentation and peer feedback can strengthen EFL learners' self efficacy by providing repeated opportunities to speak in front of peers.

These gains also reflect the instructional design of the intervention. Consistent with Ariyani et al. (2024) argument that teachers deliberate interpersonal strategies, such as modeling language use and structuring engaging discussions, can support active participation, the researcher's role in facilitating rather than dominating the discussion appears to have created more opportunities for students to participate. This interpretation is also in line with earlier observations that task design and classroom climate, rather than curriculum content alone, influence the extent to which students engage with instructional activities (McNaught, 2012; Peng, 2017). Framing engagement as a condition that can be cultivated through task design, rather than as a fixed trait of individual learners, is also consistent with Lawson and Lawson (2013) argument that engagement emerges from the interaction between learners and their learning environment rather than residing solely within the learner.

The increase in students' spontaneous use of English between cycles also addresses the barriers identified by Malik et al. (2025), who reported that Indonesian senior high school EFL learners often avoid speaking because of limited vocabulary and fear of making mistakes. By working in small groups rather than speaking directly in front of the whole class, students in this study appeared to experience a lower pressure environment in which such concerns may have been less pronounced. This finding is consistent with Magfira et al. (2024) and Mawsally et al. (2026) findings that small group discussion can support speaking confidence by reducing the pressure associated with individual performance. The increase in Effort observed in this study further extends the classroom-based evidence reported by Telaumbanua et al. (2024), who found that small group discussion can improve secondary students' speaking outcomes. The present findings suggest that such improvement may also be accompanied by changes in students' observable engagement, rather than being reflected only in speaking performance.

Not every indicator improved uniformly, however. Item P16, which concerns discouragement when facing an obstacle, remained unchanged at a mean of 3.00 across both cycles. This indicates that some students continued to experience difficulties in maintaining their effort when facing challenging tasks despite the overall positive trend. This finding is consistent with Wotring et al. (2024) observation that small group talk does not automatically translate into productive engagement for every student and that its

benefits depend on how groups are facilitated and how individual students respond to task demands. It also echoes Kamaruzzaman (2025) observation that, although forum group discussion reduced speaking anxiety and improved test scores across two cycles in a comparable Indonesian secondary EFL setting, some students' engagement with more demanding classroom tasks remained limited. Taken together with broader evidence that behavioral and emotional engagement are closely related to learning outcomes (Munawir & Hasbi, 2021; Wang, 2025; Xu et al., 2023), these findings suggest that Small Group Discussion may be beneficial for improving students' engagement, but additional support may still be needed for students who become discouraged when facing challenging speaking tasks.

Taken as a whole, these findings extend the small but growing body of classroom-based evidence on discussion based speaking interventions in Indonesian EFL contexts (Kamaruzzaman, 2025; Telaumbanua et al., 2024). Through a structured observation instrument applied across two classroom action research cycles, the study provides descriptive evidence that a progressively more demanding Small Group Discussion format was accompanied by improvement in multiple dimensions of students' speaking engagement. At the same time, the unchanged P16 score shows that improvement was not uniform across all indicators. The findings therefore suggest that the value of Small Group Discussion lies not only in creating more opportunities for students to speak, but also in allowing teachers to adjust discussion activities in response to students' needs during the classroom action research process.

5. Conclusion

This classroom action research found a gradual improvement in eleventh grade students' speaking engagement following the implementation of Small Group Discussion across two cycles. The improvement was reflected in the mean scores for both Effort and Initiative, supported by qualitative findings indicating greater enthusiasm, more frequent use of English, and more active classroom participation. These findings suggest that Small Group Discussion can provide a practical and accessible approach to supporting students' engagement in EFL speaking within regular classroom activities.

Several limitations should be considered. The study involved only nine students in a single class, which limits the transferability of the findings to other classroom contexts. In addition, the study relied on descriptive analysis and did not include an inferential statistical test or a comparison group. Therefore, the observed improvement should be interpreted as a descriptive change within the specific classroom context rather than as evidence of a causal effect. Student engagement was also assessed through researcher observation, which may have been influenced by observer judgment. Future research could involve larger groups of students across several classes or schools to provide evidence from broader classroom contexts. Studies using a comparison group, longer intervention periods, and multiple measures of engagement could also provide a more comprehensive understanding of the potential of Small Group Discussion to support students' engagement in EFL speaking.

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