

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

A. Background of the Study

Speaking skills are one of the crucial aspects in the language learning process, especially English, which serves as an international lingua franca (Robert & Meenakshi, 2022). Globally, English speaking proficiency is considered an important benchmark for success in academics, careers, and social interactions (Rao, 2019). The 2023 EF English Proficiency Index (EF EPI) report shows that the average English proficiency in the world is in the moderate category, with a score of 59.4 out of 100, even though only 20% of people in the world can truly communicate effectively using the language. This trend indicates a growing need for speaking skills that encompass not only grammatical knowledge, but also fluency, confidence, and the ability to interact in real-life situations such as academic presentations, group discussions, and professional communication (EF Education First, 2023).

At the national level, Indonesia faces similar conditions. According to the EF EPI 2023, Indonesia ranks 79th out of 113 countries with a low proficiency score of 49.3, indicating that most Indonesians still have difficulty communicating in English. Information from the Ministry of Education and Culture of the Republic of Indonesia in 2022 revealed that around 30% of high school students and college students achieved a level of English proficiency sufficient for global needs, with the main emphasis on reading and writing skills rather than speaking. This is exacerbated by an educational curriculum that prioritizes written exams such as TOEFL or IELTS so that students often have a strong linguistic foundation but lack confidence and proficiency in spontaneous speaking practice (Crisianita & Mandasari, 2022).

In Indonesian higher education, especially at universities, students often experience obstacles in developing their English-speaking skills despite having

undergone years of formal education. The main challenges include anxiety when speaking, lack of confidence, limited vocabulary, and fear of making mistakes, which ultimately hinder active participation in class activities (Hanifa, 2018; Kansil et al., 2022). In accordance with this, the results of a 2022 survey by the Central Statistics Agency (BPS) show that only 15% of Indonesian students feel confident when speaking English in public, with the major challenges being a learning environment that is less interactive and more reliant on conventional teaching methods such as lectures. Which shows that many students still have limited opportunities to practice speaking English actively and interactively in the classroom. As a result, students tend to become passive learners who rarely participate in communicative activities, which may influence their confidence and willingness to speak English during classroom interaction. This condition indicates the importance of implementing more interactive learning activities that encourage students to communicate, exchange ideas, and participate actively in speaking practice within the EFL classroom context.

According to Rahman and Jon (2023), group discussions are widely used as interactive pedagogical strategies in English language learning, particularly in speaking activities. Mardhiyah et al., (2023) also explain that group discussions are defined as collaborative learning activities in which students interact, share ideas, and build knowledge together in small group settings. Group discussions reflect the principles of social constructivism, which states that learning is essentially a social process mediated through interaction and dialogue (Kılınç & Buyuk, 2022). In the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), group discussions provide students with authentic communication opportunities that mimic real-life interactions, allowing them to practice fluency, negotiate meaning, and develop conversational strategies that are rarely cultivated through conventional teacher-centered teaching methods (Hoque et al., 2024).

Beyond linguistic benefits, group discussions have also been shown to develop critical thinking, problem-solving, and interpersonal communication skills, as students are required to analyze problems, respond to different perspectives, and articulate their thoughts coherently under the pressure of real

communication (Kaharuddin & Rahmadana, 2020). Furthermore, group discussions promote learning autonomy and active participation, as each member is expected to contribute meaningfully to the conversation, thereby increasing the quantity and quality of language output produced during learning activities (Wahyuningsih & Afandi, 2020). These interactive and collaborative characteristics make group discussions potentially beneficial in supporting students' engagement during speaking activities in EFL classrooms. Through continuous interaction with peers, students may become more accustomed to expressing opinions, responding to ideas, and participating actively in communication. As a result, group discussions are often perceived as creating a more communicative learning environment compared to teacher-centered instructional approaches.

From an affective perspective, Kansil et al. (2022) explain that the small group format inherently reduces anxiety associated with public speaking by creating a safer psychological environment, where students feel more comfortable taking linguistic risks, experimenting with new vocabulary, and speaking spontaneously without fear of being judged by a wider audience. This reduction in foreign language anxiety is particularly significant in the context of Indonesian EFL, where cultural norms and previous educational experiences often reinforce reluctance to speak openly in class. Overall, these characteristics position group discussions as potentially supportive learning activities that may encourage students' participation and communication during English speaking activities.

Students' perceptions are also important in understanding the implementation of group discussions in EFL classrooms. Perception refers to how learners interpret and evaluate their learning experiences during classroom interaction (Havik, 2020). In language learning contexts, students' perceptions may influence their participation, motivation, and willingness to communicate during speaking activities (Léger & Storch, 2009). Positive perceptions toward classroom activities can encourage students to participate more actively, while negative perceptions may reduce their confidence and engagement in communication (Awidi & Klutsey, 2024). Therefore, investigating students' perceptions toward group

discussions can provide valuable insights into how students experience and respond to speaking activities in the classroom.

Previous studies have examined the role of group discussions in improving English speaking skills. Crisianita and Mandasari (2022) examined the use of small group discussions to improve speaking skills among vocational high school students in Lampung and found that students responded positively and showed greater confidence through group-based activities. Cempaka (2024) conducted a quantitative pre-test/post-test study at the university level and reported positive changes in students' speaking fluency, accuracy, and confidence after structured group discussion activities. Moreover, Sudiro et al. (2022) surveyed fifth-semester students at Yogyakarta University of Technology and found that the majority had positive perceptions of the Small Group Discussion Method in terms of subject matter comprehension, speaking enrichment, enthusiasm, and confidence.

Although these studies make valuable contributions, significant gaps remain. From a thematic perspective, most existing studies in the context of teaching English as a foreign language (EFL) in Indonesia have focused predominantly on measuring the effectiveness or learning outcomes of group discussions, with relatively few studies placing student perceptions as the main focus of research, especially among university students in Tasikmalaya. Understanding how students view a learning method is crucial because these perceptions directly shape students' motivation, engagement, and willingness to participate. Additionally, from a methodological perspective, studies that specifically use survey designs to investigate student perceptions of group discussions in the context of Indonesian higher education are still limited, and to the best of the researchers' knowledge, there have been no previous studies that specifically examine this phenomenon among students at Siliwangi University. The survey method offers its own advantages because it allows researchers to collect data from a larger and more diverse sample of respondents, resulting in findings that are more representative and generalizable than those obtained through single classroom action research or small-scale experimental designs.

The convergence of these gaps highlight the clear need for this research. Therefore, this study aims to address both gaps by conducting survey-based investigation on the perceptions of English Education Department students at Siliwangi University regarding group discussions as a strategy to improve their English speaking skills, thereby providing more contextual and representative insights for the field of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) pedagogy at the university level in Indonesia.

B. Formulation of the Problem

Based on the gaps, this study seeks to answer the question: “What are Indonesian university students’ perceptions of group discussions in enhancing their English speaking skills?”

C. Operational Definition

1. Students’ Perceptions

Students’ perceptions in this study refer to the way students consciously interpret, evaluate, and give meaning to their experiences in group discussions as a learning activity in English classes. Operationally, students’ perceptions were measured through their responses to a structured questionnaire designed to capture their subjective views and evaluations of group discussions in relation to the development of their English speaking skills.

2. Group Discussion

Group discussion refers to a structured collaborative learning activity in which students are divided into small groups to exchange ideas, share opinions, and engage in meaningful verbal interaction on a specific topic in English. This activity was conducted in English learning sessions at Siliwangi University as a strategy to practice and develop students’ English speaking skills.

3. English Speaking Skills

English speaking skills refers to students' ability to communicate effectively in spoken English, covering both linguistic and communicative aspects. Operationally, speaking skills in this study are measured based on five components: fluency, which refers to the ability to speak smoothly and naturally without excessive hesitation; accuracy, which refers to the use of correct grammatical structures so that meaning can be conveyed clearly; vocabulary, which refers to the range of lexical resources students can actively use during oral interactions; pronunciation, which refers to the ability to produce English sounds, stress, and intonation in a way that supports intelligibility; and confidence, which refers to students' willingness and courage to express their ideas in spoken English without excessive fear or hesitation.

D. Aim of the Study

The aim of this study is to investigate Indonesian university students' perceptions of group discussions in enhancing their English speaking skills. By employing a survey-based approach, this study seeks to identify and describe how students perceive group discussion as a pedagogical strategy in developing their spoken English proficiency particularly in terms of fluency, grammatical accuracy, vocabulary use, pronunciation, and confidence.

E. Significances of the Study

This study is expected to provide valuable contributions to English language education, particularly in understanding and improving the development of speaking skills through group discussions in EFL contexts.

1. Theoretical Significance

Theoretically, this study is important because it reinforces the application of Vygotsky's Social Constructivism Theory in English language learning, particularly in relation to the development of speaking skills through interaction. By examining students' perceptions of group discussion

activities, this study provides evidence that cooperation, peer support, and the process of building shared understanding can improve speaking skills. The results of this study also explain how peer support in discussions acts as scaffolding that helps students develop within their Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). These findings enrich the theoretical understanding of how collaborative activities in the classroom can encourage improvements in speaking skills in an EFL context.

2. Practical Significance

In practical terms, the findings of this study can be applied to improve teaching practices in the classroom. The results of this study can serve as a guide for English teachers and lecturers in designing more interactive and student-centered speaking activities that encourage participation, build confidence, and reduce speaking anxiety. The insights gained from student perceptions can help educators make more informed decisions about the use of group discussions as a strategy for improving communicative skills in college-level English as a foreign language (EFL) classes.

3. Empirical Significance

Empirically, this study provides new quantitative data on Indonesian university students' perceptions of group discussions and offers new insights into how this method affects certain aspects of speaking skills. As one of the few studies exploring this issue in the context of local universities, this study offers a new perspective on how collaborative learning operates in a real classroom environment. These findings can serve as a valuable reference for future researchers who wish to explore similar phenomena or conduct comparative studies in different EFL environments.