

عدد خاص بالمؤتمر الدولي السادس

بعنوان:

مقومات تطبيق منظومة التعليم الرقمي وآليات  
تنفيذه، تحديات الحاضر، واستشراف المستقبل



International Journal of Educational and  
Psychological Research and Studies

المجلة الدولية للبحوث  
والدراسات التربوية والنفسية  
(IJRS).

مجلة علمية دورية محكمة

تصدرها أكاديمية رواد التميز  
للتعليم والتدريب والاستشارات

The Online ISSN : (2735-5063).

The print ISSN : (2735-5055).

مقدم للمؤتمر الدولي السادس لتطوير التعليم العربي.

تحت رعاية أكاديمية رواد التميز للتعليم والتدريب والاستشارات.  
والمجلة الدولية للبحوث والدراسات التربوية والنفسية.  
والمجلة الدولية لبحوث ودراسات العلوم الإنسانية والاجتماعية.  
والجمعية العربية لأصول التربية والتعليم المستمر.  
وجمعية رواد التميز للتنمية المستدامة (عطاء ومشاركة).

تحت شعار: **(نحو رؤية علمية ناجحة لبناء منظومة التعليم الرقمي).**  
بعنوان: مقومات تطبيق منظومة التعليم الرقمي، وآليات تنفيذه  
(تحديات الحاضر، واستشراف المستقبل).

المنعقد بالقاعة الرئيسية بأكاديمية رواد التميز للتعليم والتدريب والاستشارات.  
وعبر برنامج الزووم أيام (السبت – الأثنين) 24-26 جماد الآخر 1442هـ.  
الموافق 6-8 فبراير 2021 م

## Learners' Speaking Activities at Iraqi intermediate schools.

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### ABSTRACT.

Speaking is an important language skills that have to be mastered by English learners to its significant and its use for communication. Students' speaking skill can improved by giving them enough practice, because practice gives the students opportunities to use and master the language.

Effective practice can be done by conducting communicative activities and this can be applied through the activity which is called small group discussion . Therefore, the current study aimed at investigating the effect of using small group discussions, in developing student's speaking skills. The present research was conducted in the intermediate schools of Iraq during the first term of the academic year 2019-2020.

The subject of the study are 50 secondary school teachers. The study has employed survey questionnaire to collect the data from the subjects. Based on the gathered data, the findings showed that the use of small group discussion has a positive effect on the students' speaking skills and can improve the students' speaking ability in terms of pronunciation, structure, vocabulary, fluency, and content.

## 1. Introduction.

### 1.1 The problem and its significance

While reading and listening are considered to be the two receptive skills in language learning and use, writing and speaking are the other two productive skills necessary to be integrated in the development of effective communication.

Of all the four macro English skills, speaking seems to be the most important skill required for communication (Zaremba, 2006). Students who study English as a foreign language usually have limited opportunities to speak English outside the classroom and also limited exposure to English speakers or members of the international community (Zhang, 2009).

This might be one reason for teachers to provide more situations and activities for students to strengthen their speaking competence. Therefore small group discussion is an effective way that can be used in teaching speaking since it fulfills two important language learning needs:

prepare students with real-life language use, and encourage the atomization of language knowledge. It is a system that can improve the speaking skill, it also lowers the inhibitions of the students who are unwilling to speak in front of the whole classes.

In learner-centered class, the students are provided with more opportunities in using their English in an authentic and realistic way.

So this study comes to highlight on the role of communicative activities in small group discussion in developing learners' speaking skill.

### 1.2 Aims:

This research was intended to:

1. Investigate whether communicative activities in small group discussions can improve the students' speaking skill at the intermediate level in Iraqi intermediate and secondary schools.
2. To find out factors of communicative activities in small group discussions that influence the students' speaking skill.

### 1.3 Limits

The present study is limited to:

1. The male and female teachers of the intermediate level in intermediate and secondary schools in Baghdad during the academic year 2019- 2020.

### 1.4 Procedures

To achieve the aims of the study, the following procedures are adopted:

1. Selecting a representative sample of secondary school teachers ,
2. Designing a questionnaire to be administered on the sample of the study,
3. Exposing the questionnaire to a jury of experts in ELT to ensure its validity and reliability ,
4. Conducting a pilot study to find out the suitability of the questionnaire items and the time required for responding to these items,
5. Using suitable statistical tools to analyze the data ,and
6. Presenting and discussing the results, drawing conclusions and setting recommendations.

## 1.5 Value

The present study is intended to be valuable to the researchers and experts in ELT since it is an attempt to highlight on the role of Small Group Discussion in enhancing students' speaking activities.

## 2. Review of Related Literature

### 2.1 Speaking Skill

Learning English, especially speaking is considered difficult for many students. Hornby (1987:827) states that speaking is the ability of people to make use of the language in ordinary one.

Then Ur (1996:120) says that of all the four skills, speaking seems intuitively the most important so that people who know a language are referred to as "speakers" of that language. Bum and Joyce (1997:32) state that speaking is an interactive process of constructing meaning that involves producing, receiving and processing information. On the other side, Nunan (1998:39).

says that mastering the art of speaking is the single most important aspect of learning second or foreign language, and success is measured in terms of the ability to carry out a conversation in the language.

Moreover, learning to speak requires more than knowing its grammatical and semantic rules. Learners are also required to have the knowledge of how native speakers use the language in the context of structured interpersonal exchange. In other words, the learner must be able to speak the target language fluently and appropriately.

Ur(1996:120) suggests his idea about characteristics of successful speaking activity:

1. "The teachers should give more time and opportunities for students to speak as much as possible;
2. Give chance to every student to speak;
3. Use positive motivation to make students eagerly speak because they are interested in the topic and have something new to talk about.
4. Using suitable level of language make students are able to express themselves in utterances that a relevant, easily comprehensible to each other, and of an acceptable level of language accuracy". According to the students' views, there are some problems make it difficult for them to speak.

Ur (1996:121) states the following factor:

1. "inhibition which mean that students are often worried about making mistakes, fearful of criticism or simply shy of attention their speech attracts;
2. It is often heard they complain that they cannot think of anything to say.
3. Low participation. Only One student can talk in one time if he/she wants to be heard; and in a large class this means each student will have only a very little time taking.
4. Mother-tongue use". In classes where lots of students share the same mother tongue, they may tend to use it, because it is easier.

The teachers, however, may not be confused or disappointed with' these situations. They should use their experiences and authorities to solve the problems. The following things can be held by the teachers, Ur (1996:121).

- (1) Use group work;
- (2) Base the activity on easy language;
- (3) Make a careful choice of topic and task to stimulate interest;
- (4) Keep students speaking the target language.

## 2.2 Small Group Discussion.

Small group discussion or working in a small group is arrangement of students into small groups to participate in a range of activities to develop thinking or to complete practical task. Small group discussions will increase the amount time for students' talk during the given period of time.

It has been shown to improve the students' understanding and retention of material. Dobson (1981:60), Harmer (1991:123), and Thom bury (2006:102) say that discussion is an excellent way to give students opportunities to speak, especially if the class is a large one.

Moreover, it is widely practiced at all levels of teaching as well. Part of the problem here is concern with the ways the teacher conducts the discussion. Sometimes, a discussion may develop spontaneously during the lesson period.

Such discussion is a successful discussion, but it cannot be planned. In order to be successful, small group discussion must be carefully structured and the students must receive support as well.



**There are some techniques that can be used to make the students talking. They are:**

- (1) put the students into group first.
- (2) give the students a chance to prepare.
- (3) give the students a task. Harmer(1991:124).

**Harris (2007) offers some useful hints to make group discussion work well They are as follows:**

- (1) Group size: ideal group size is from 4-6.
- (2) Teaching philosophy: make sure that the students understand why the teacher uses group discussion.
- (3) Group member selection.
- (4) Icebreakers: Make sure the students know each other before they begin a group activity.
- (5) Scaffolding the group work.
- (6) Self and peer evaluation: Consider having student write a confidential mid-term and final self and peer evaluation;
- (7) Assigning roles.
- (8) Reflection on group work.

Through a well-planned process as suggested above, a small group discussion offer the opportunity for the students to be more active participants, making them partners in educational process.

Finally, based on the explanation above it can be concluded that small group discussions will create a safe and active learning environment for the students to participate freely in the educational process.

At the same time small" group discussions also improve the knowledge of sharing and interaction among the students and the teacher as well.

**So the indicators of small group discussions areas the following:**

- (1) Carefully structured.
- (2) Formulate clear expectations and instructions or directions.
- (3) Help students learn to think.
- (4) Provide benefits: independent thinking and problem solving; (5) Provide interaction.
- (6) Encourage participation;
- (7) Provide positive feedback.
- (8) Provide non-verbal communication

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1 The sample of the study.

The sample is (50) male and female teachers of English at the intermediate level in the intermediate and secondary schools at Baghdad Governorate. teachers have been chosen according to stratified Random sampling. Therefore, (10%) has been chosen randomly from the general Directorate of Education Al-Resafa 1. see Table (1).

#### 3.2 Instrument.

A questionnaire has been constructed by the researcher herself To get information about the role of Communicative Activities - Small Group Discussion in enhancing EFL learners' speaking skill at Iraqi intermediate schools, drawing on the related literature and ready –made questionnaires available.

### 3.2.1 Pilot Administration.

To find out whether the questionnaire is well constructed or not and check the clarity of the items and estimate the time allocated for responding to the items, (30) teachers from the intermediate schools from the general Directorate of Education Resafa (1) in Baghdad have been chosen for the pilot administration of the questionnaire. Concerning the questionnaire items there is no serious ambiguity is found. Concerning the time allocated for answering the items, it has been found that EFL instructors need (20) minutes to answer them .

### 3.2.2 Validity.

Validity basically means "measure what is intended to be measure"(field,2005).in other words face validity refers to researchers' subjective assessments of the presentation and relevance of the measuring instruments as to whether the items in the instruments appear to be relevant. Face validity is determined by expert's judgment then by using the percentage of agreement among the experts' themselves.

Accordingly, an initial form of the questionnaire has been exposed to the experts in the fields of Linguistics and ELT to decide its face validity.

The final version of the questionnaire consists of (20) items built on five-points scale (always, often, sometimes , never , rarely).

### 3.2.3 Reliability.

Reliability refers to how consistent of evaluation results are from one measurement to another (Groland, 1976:102) However, the questionnaire has been re administered to the same pilot sample after two weeks.

The statistical manipulation of the data has been obtained from the two administrations. After using Pearson formula, the result has indicated that the correlation coefficient of reliability is (0.89).

### 3.2.4 Final Administration of the Questionnaire.

Accurate scoring procedures should be adopted in order to get proper results to ensure objectivity and reliability (Harrocks & Schannover, 1968:76). The teachers were asked to give their views regarding the scale of five dimensions. See table (1)

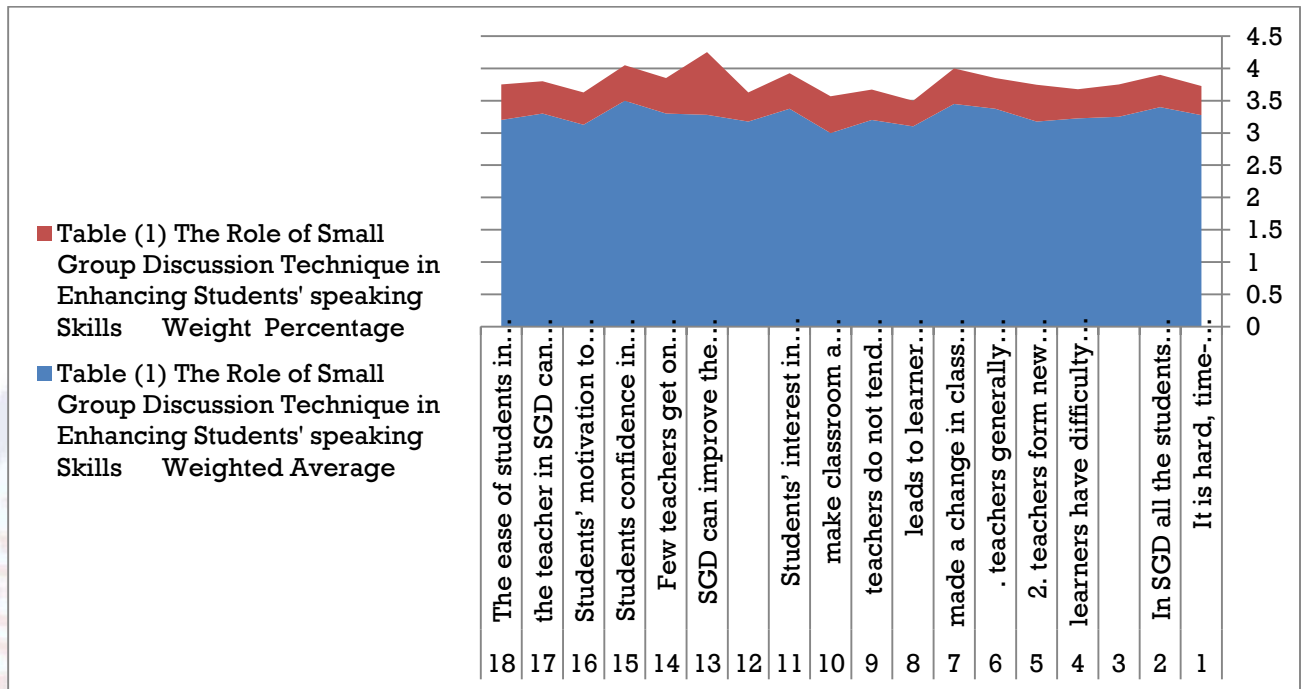
Table (1)

Teachers' attitudes towards the role of small group discussion in enhancing learners' speaking skill.

	Components and Items	Weighted Average	Weight Percent age
1	It is hard, time-consuming to design and instruct a communicative activities.	3.275	45%
2	In SGD all the students have opportunity to express opinion or idea in group	3.4000	50%
3	Provide learners with significant intellectual and linguistic challenges	3.2500	50%
4	learners have difficulty in learning speaking skills due to lack of oral activities in the text book	3.2250	45%
5	Teachers form new pairs and groups for different activities during one oral lesson?	3.1750	57%
6	Teachers generally understand the value of pair/group work in class	3.3750	47.5%
7	Made a change in class atmosphere by forming students into new Pairs and groups for different communicative activities.	3.4500	55%
8	Leads to learner inattention, low motivation and ultimately less learning	3.1000	40%
9	Teachers do not tend to maximize this type of classroom interaction	3.2000	47%

10	Make classroom a lively and rich language environment for learners of all abilities	3.0000	57%
11	Students' interest in learning using communicative Technique	3.3750	55%
12	SGD can improve the students' skill in finding social function and generic structure of text.	3.1750	45%
13	SGD can improve the students' speaking skill. in terms of pronunciation, structure, vocabulary, fluency, and content	3.2821	97%
14	Few teachers get on well without facing certain difficulties in designing and instructing	3.3000	55%
15	Students confidence in speaking after being thought using communicative	3.5000	55%
16	Students' motivation to get used to speak English and to study harder	3.1250	50%
17	The teacher in SGD can give reinforcement and feedback to the students' work.	3.3000	50%
18	The ease of students in giving and responding expression after being thought using communicative games.	3.2000	55%
19	These activities promote more oral-production, active participation and great fun	3.5750	72.5%
20	Teachers are unable to implement CLT methodologies due to time factors that make learners passive	3.1500	40%

The Role of Small Group Discussion Technique in Enhancing EFL Learners' Speaking activities



#### 4.1 Research Findings and Discussions:

Based on the gathered data, the findings showed that the use of small group discussion has a positive effect on the students' speaking skills. the results remark that:

1.The Items 8, 9 and 20 which refer to( SGD leads to learner inattention, low motivation and ultimately less learning ), (teachers do not tend to maximize this type of classroom interaction) and (teachers were unable to implement CLT methodologies due to time factors that make learners passive ) gain the low effectiveness. They got a weighted mean (40%), (47.5%) and (40%).

2. Items 13and 19which refer to (SGD can improve the students' speaking skill. in terms of pronunciation, structure, vocabulary, fluency, and content) and (these

activities promote more oral-production, active participation and great fun) gain the high effectiveness. They got a weighted mean (97%) and (72.5%)

3. Small group discussions will increase the amount time for students' talk during the given period of time. It also lowers the inhibitions of the students who are unwilling to speak in front of the whole classes.

#### 4.2 Conclusion

Based on the result of this research, it can be concluded that:

- (1) Communicative activities in small group discussions can improve the students' speaking skill at the intermediate level . The improvements of the students' speaking skills, are in terms of pronunciation, structure, vocabulary, fluency, and content;
- (2) The factors of communicative activities in small group discussions that influence the students' speaking skill are:
  - (a) clear objectives stated and mentioned by the lecturer.
  - (b) problem solving activities that develop the students' independent thinking and motivation,
  - (c) a good classroom atmosphere that allow the students reduce their anxiety;
  - (d) natural learning process provided by the teacher,
  - (g) uncontrolled materials that do not focus on form but content,
  - (f) indirect corrections from the teacher that make them feel relax and speak in unstressed conditions and,
  - (h) interaction with partners or group members in achieving their purpose.



### 4.3 Suggestions.

**Based on the result of this research, it is suggested that:**

- (1) The researcher as an English lecturer has to continue conducting further research and applying communicative activities in small group discussions to other language skills such as listening, reading, and writing;
- (2) The researcher as an English lecturer should also be more creative in presenting the meaningful materials to make the students interested in studying, especially in improving their speaking skill.

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# **International Journal of Educational and Psychological Research and Studies**

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**( IJRS )**

*The Online ISSN : (2735-5063).*

*The print ISSN : (2735-5055).*