

Exploring the Factors of Focus Group Discussions in Developing Vocational Students' Speaking Skills

Yoana Gita Pradnya Lengari^{1*}, Yohanes Ragil Purnomo², Yuniarmelinda Ikha Meru Brahmanty³, Dwi Ratih Nolaputri⁴

^{1,2}Program Studi Teknik Mesin, Politeknik Negeri Cilacap, Indonesia

³Program Studi Teknik Rekayasa Mekatronika, Politeknik Negeri Cilacap, Indonesia

⁴Program Studi Teknik Pengendalian Pencemaran Lingkungan, Politeknik Negeri Cilacap, Indonesia

*Penulis Korespondensi: yoana.gita.pradnya@pnc.ac.id

Abstract. *In vocational higher education, traditional teacher-centered instruction focused on grammar often leaves students with high communication anxiety and limited opportunity for authentic speaking practice, despite growing regional industrial demands in Cilacap Regency. This study investigated the implementation of Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) to explore factors contributing to students' speaking skill improvement and identify the defining characteristics of student interaction. Using a descriptive qualitative method integrated with quantitative data triangulation within a collaborative research framework, the study involved 28 second-semester Agro-industrial Product Development study program at Politeknik Negeri Cilacap. Data were collected using quantitative pre and post-test combined with qualitative participatory observation and in-depth interviews. The quantitative results showed a 36,97% improvement in speaking fluency and a 72,28% increase in vocabulary mastery. Qualitatively, key factors supporting these improvements included reduced speaking anxiety through small-group peer scaffolding, active vocabulary use driven by practical topics such as marketing strategies and packaging design, along with strategic code-switching to handle language gaps. Interactional patterns shifted from passive reliance on the lecturer and long pauses into spontaneous turn-taking, active negotiation of meaning, and mutual problem solving. The study demonstrates that FGDs effectively serve as a supportive pedagogical tool for developing vocational students' speaking skills.*

Keywords: Collaborative Learning; Focus Group Discussion (FGD); Peer Scaffolding; Speaking Skills; Vocational English.

Abstrak. Dalam pendidikan tinggi vokasi, pembelajaran tradisional yang berpusat pada pengajar sering kali menyebabkan kecemasan berkomunikasi dan membatasi praktik berbicara pada mahasiswa, meskipun tuntutan industry daerah di Kabupaten Cilacap terus meningkat. Penelitian ini membahas penerapan Focus Group Discussion (FGD) untuk mengeksplorasi faktor-faktor yang berkontribusi pada peningkatan keterampilan berbicara mahasiswa serta mengidentifikasi dinamika interaksi mahasiswa. Menggunakan metode deskriptif kualitatif yang diintegrasikan dengan triangulasi data kuantitatif dalam kerangka riset kolaboratif, penelitian ini melibatkan 28 mahasiswa semester dua program studi Pengembangan Produk Agroindustri Politeknik Negeri Cilacap. Data dikumpulkan menggunakan pre dan post-test kuantitatif serta observasi partisipatif dan wawancara. Hasil kuantitatif menunjukkan peningkatan kelancaran berbicara sebesar 36,97% dan peningkatan penguasaan kosa kata sebesar 72,28%. Secara kualitatif, faktor utama penentu peningkatan ini adalah menurunnya kecemasan berbicara melalui peer scaffolding dalam kelompok kecil, menggunakan kosa kata yang berhubungan dengan topik dunia kerja seperti pemasaran produk dan desain kemasan, serta alih kode untuk mengatasi kesulitan menemukan kosa kata. Pola interaksi bergeser dari ketergantungan pasif pada dosen dan adanya jeda yang lama dalam berbicara menjadi pembicaraan yang lebih spontan, negosiasi makna yang aktif, dan penyelesaian masalah bersama. Penelitian ini membuktikan bahwa FGD efektif menjadi sarana pedagogis yang mendukung pengembangan kompetensi lisan mahasiswa vokasi.

Kata kunci: Bahasa Inggris Vokasi; Focus Group Discussion (FGD); Keterampilan Berbicara; Peer Scaffolding; Riset Kolaboratif.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the field of vocational higher education, mastering English speaking skills has shifted from an academic requirement to a professional necessity. Vocational institutions are tasked in giving students with practical, market-ready ability that enable seamless communication in the dynamic work environments. As emphasized by (Pride & Holmes, 1972), communicative competence ranges not only from grammatical mastery, but also a blend of linguistic accuracy, social awareness, and strategic adaptability in human interaction. Consequently, the main benchmark of success for vocational graduates is their ability to articulate ideas clearly, negotiate effectively, and also collaborate in multicultural work setting.

Despite of this demand, a significant pedagogical misalignment still continues in many vocational English classrooms. Traditional instructional models continue to rely on grammar skills, teacher-centered methodologies that positioned students to passive receivers of theoretical knowledge (Pratiwi et al., 2020). This approach limits active oral participation, leaving students poorly prepared for spontaneous communication. As a result, when confronted with professional or conversational contexts, vocational students often experience communication anxiety, feelings of awkwardness, and lack of confidence, primarily due to the lack of authentic opportunities to practice speaking (Nugraha, 2020).

This communicative gap becomes particularly serious when observed through a regional lens, such as in Cilacap Regency. As a coastal region, Cilacap possesses a great economic potential driven by its rapidly expanding industrial hubs, agro-industrial sectors, and maritime corporations. This economic line naturally generates a pressing demand for a local workforce to be equipped with global communication competencies. However, local industries face a lack of graduates who can effectively engage in international communication. Therefore, bridge-building ideas between academic output and regional industrial needs are required to ensure local talents can drive regional development forward.

To overcome these problems, active and collaborative learning frameworks must be put into the curriculum. Among various student-centered approaches, Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) offer a promising pedagogical path. Unlike conventional group work, a structured FGD provides a good environment that stimulates critical thinking, mutual support, and organic interactions. By engaging in a goal-oriented dialogue, vocational students are forced to actively solve realistic problems, this mirroring the authentic communication dynamics in the professional workplace.

This study aims to investigate the dynamics of FGDs within a vocational context, specifically focusing on the second semester students of Agroindustry Product Development

Program at Politeknik Negeri Cilacap. This research examines peer-to-peer discourse to answer two primary questions: (1) What factors contribute to the improvement of students' speaking skills by utilizing Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) for the second semester students of Agroindustry Product Development Program at Politeknik Negeri Cilacap? and (2) What are the defining characteristic of student interaction and collaboration during the implementation of FGDs for the second semester students of Agroindustry Product Development Program at Politeknik Negeri Cilacap?.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

English Speaking Skills and Communicative Competence

Within language acquisition, the ability to communicate fluently in English is an important asset, particularly for students preparing to navigate the global workforce. This competence involves the ability to articulate thoughts, establish interpersonal relationship, and also express concept effectively (Zainal Abidin et al., 2021). Speaking functions as a dynamic process for exchanging information and perspectives in various situations, using both verbal and non-verbal elements. This form of oral interaction serves as a primary instrument for individuals to express their insight, knowledge and emotions, which eventually prepares greater communicative fluency in all aspects of life.

Furthermore, speaking skills provides immediate insight into the speaker's real-time thoughts and feelings, allowing listeners to assess the speaker's character, logic, and motivation (Barrass, 2006). According to Sanulita et al., (2024) speaking proficiency does not solely rely on the grammatical structure and vocabulary, but also the ability to navigate social interactions successfully. Therefore, utilizing group discussions within the classroom setting can significantly enhance students' verbal capabilities by providing an authentic and interactive environment for practical language application.

Vocational English and English for Specific Purposes (ESP)

English for Specific Purposes (ESP) frameworks that bridge language pedagogy with specific professional fields are closely linked to improve students' motivation and long-term skill acquisition among vocational students (Novikova & Suima, 2026). Rahman, (2015) differentiates ESP from general language instruction by highlighting its concentrated focus on targeted language competencies, discourse exercises, and related academic or professional genres. According to Johns and Salmani Nodoushan, (2015), the flexibility of WSP across various educational and professional landscapes can be attributed to several specialized

branches, such as English for Academic Purposes (EAP) and English for Occupational Purposes (EOP).

Vocational training is most effective when classroom activities replicate real-world workplace practices, enabling students to see a direct connection between their study and future careers (Villabona & Cenoz, 2022). According to Liu et al. (2025) connecting language learning to future career align closely with self-determination theory. When students see how English proficiency directly benefits their professional motivation, they invest more effort into the course and engage more deeply in autonomous learning.

Integrating professional skills like communication, digital literacy, and collaboration into ESP coursework aligns students' linguistic development with workplace expectations. According to Virginiya et al. (2025), this approach is most effective when courses include collaborative projects, industry frameworks, and systematic self-reflection.

Focus Group Discussion and Cooperative Learning

Campbell (2008) states that focus groups offer a mechanism for gathering qualitative insights from a targeted, small group of individuals regarding specific stakeholder-driven topics. This method allows lecturers and researchers to acquire a comprehensive understanding of a particular area of interest within a supportive, permissive, and completely non-threatening environment. Bonnet et al. (2018) argue that in language classrooms where students share a common native language, implementing tasks that utilize small-group or pair-work configurations is more effective to do individual public speaking assignments. This strategy optimizes large classroom dynamics by fostering student independence and maximizing opportunities for verbal self-expression during speaking activities.

Pochana & Sukying (2022) highlights that utilizing group discussions functions as an effective pedagogical intervention in big classrooms, as it facilitates verbal self-expression and encourages student autonomy. Additionally, this method deepens comprehension by providing direct feedback and clarification, increase classroom participation among students, and effectively stimulates the collective cognitive engagement of the group.

According to Arutmayanti & Astuti (2023), group discussions provide an autonomous platform where learners can freely express their viewpoints on specific subjects, serving as an effective pedagogical alternative to enhance students' verbal abilities. Furthermore, this collaborative approach stimulates critical thinking, promotes conceptual understanding, offers immediate opportunities for peer feedback and clarification, and actively bridges the gap for lower-proficiency students within the speaking classroom.

Peer Scaffolding and Contextual Learning

Peer scaffolding serves as an effective collaborative technique that deepens cognitive processing through the mutual exchange of explanations. This peer-to-peer dialogue helps students improve their thinking, restructure information, correct misunderstandings, and construct new knowledge (Simeon, 2014). Through the interactive creation of ideas, students improve their comprehension and internalized concepts, enabling them to solve problems autonomously in the future (Ge & Land, 2004, as cited in (Simeon, 2014). Furthermore, group collaboration encourage students to articulate and defend their viewpoints, re-evaluate personal assumption, gather additional information, and consider alternative perspectives.

3. RESEARCH METHOD

This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach integrated with quantitative data triangulation within a collaborative research approach (Creswell, 2018). A qualitative design was chosen to investigate classroom dynamics, peer collaboration patterns, and underlying socio-affective mechanisms during Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) that occurred in the learning environment (Creswell, 2018; Long, 2015). Alongside with that, quantitative metrics were embedded as supporting data to measure and validate tangible skill improvements in students' speaking performance (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013).

Data collection involved a combination of quantitative and qualitative instruments to ensure comprehensive analysis. Pre-test and post-test were administered before and after the FGD to measure quantifiable improvement in speaking fluency and technical vocabulary mastery. Speaking tests were evaluated using oral rubrics measuring hesitation rate, accurate use of agro-industrial terminology, and speech continuity.

Qualitative data were gathered through direct participatory observation logs, FGD audio transcriptions, and semi-structured post-FGD interviews. Observations focused on communicative strategies and student interaction patterns, while interviews discovered students' personal opinions regarding anxiety and peer support.

The study was conducted for the students in 2025/2026 academic year at Politeknik Negeri Cilacap using classroom and language laboratory. The research subjects were 28 students from the second semester of Agro-industrial Product Development study program who were enrolled in the compulsory English course. Participants were selected by purposive sampling based on their active involvement in classroom FGD activity.

Data analysis integrated descriptive quantitative statistics with qualitative analysis. Pre-test and post-test scores were counted to measure mean changes and percentage improvements

in fluency and vocabulary mastery. Qualitative data from observation notes, FGD transcripts and interviews were transcribed and organized to categories such as peer-scaffolding, code-switching, anxiety reduction, and vocational topics relevance. Finally, methodological triangulation was applied by verifying quantitative score gains with qualitative result to ensure the data validity.

4. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This chapter presents the findings regarding the use of Focus Group Discussion (FGDs) in developing vocational students' English-speaking skills. Using a descriptive qualitative design in collaborative research framework, the study combined quantitative data through pre-test and post-test and qualitative data through observations, interviews, and FGD transcript among 28 second-semester students of the Agro-industrial Product Development study program at Politeknik Negeri Cilacap.

To measure tangible skill development, students underwent speaking test before (pre-test) and after (post-test) the FGD intervention, focusing on fluency and vocabulary mastery. The students' ability to produce spoken English smoothly with minimal hesitation during discussion was measured in fluency. The increased mean of fluency score can be seen in Table 1:

Table 1. Mean Sore of Students' Speaking Fluency

Aspect	Pre-Test	Post-Test	Improvement
Fluency	41,25	56,50	36,97%

The quantitative evaluation reveals that the mean fluency score increased from 41,25 in the pre-test and to 56,50 in the post test, reflecting a 36,97% improvement. Vocabulary mastery assessed students' accuracy in selecting terms related to agro-industrial products and presentation contexts. The result of the tests can be shown in Table 2:

Table 2. Mean Score of Students' Vocabulary in Pre-Test and Post-Test

Criteria	Pre-Test	Post-Test	Improvement
Vocabulary	36,80	63,40	72,28%

The obtained average score for pre-test was 36,80 and the score rose to 63,40 in the post-test showed a significant 72,28% increase. This development indicates a significant improvement in the active vocabulary utilized by students during oral tasks.

To see the qualitative mechanism underlying the 36,97% fluency gain and 72,28% vocabulary increase, qualitative observational logs, FGD transcriptions, and interview transcripts were analyzed. Participatory observations captured distinct shifts in student interaction dynamics throughout the research, as can be seen in Table 3:

Table 3. Qualitative Summary of Interactional Patterns

Interactional Aspect	Pre-FGD Observations	Post-FGD Qualitative Observation
Speaking Turns	Long pauses, one-word answers.	Spontaneous turn-taking, active negotiation.
Group Dynamics	Passive reliance on lecturer, individual anxiety when performing.	Mutual problem-solving, peer encouragement
Communication Strategy	Hesitation due to vocabulary gaps.	Using native language when needed, then switching up to put concept in English.

The qualitative data revealed that the collaborative research process revealed that prior to the FGD intervention, classroom observations showed a pattern of communication breakdown whenever students were asked to speak individually. Students frequently displayed physical signs of speech anxiety such as long silences, nervous laughter, excessive reliance on Indonesian, and minimal eye contact, primarily driven by the fear of making errors in front of the entire class. However, the transition into small groups (4-6 students) changed the dynamics by decentralized classroom authority. In smaller circles, the visibility of individual mistakes decreased. Students no longer felt put on the spot, instead they experienced a shared space where trial-and-error in speaking English became a part of group problem solving. As one student reflected during post-intervention interviews: *“In individual presentations, I am afraid to make mistakes. But, in our FGD, my friends helped me find the right words when I got stuck. It made me more comfortable to speak in English.”* (Student 07, Interview Data).

The 72,28% increase in vocabulary scores aligns with vocational relevance of the FGD topics. When discussion centered on authentic tasks – such as presenting agro-based product marketing strategies – students experienced a need to recall and use specialized terminology. Consequently, rather than passively memorizing word lists, students acquired target vocabulary through contextual interactive peer dialogue.

The score improvements were mainly because of three combined factors: peer support, strategic code-switching, and workplace-related topics. When lower-proficiency students struggled with specific words while discussing agro-industrial concepts – such as discussing packaging designs or presenting marketing strategies – the small-group setup kept the conversation going. Instead of staying silent, students briefly switched languages as a bridge, and stronger peers quickly offered the correct English terms. This real-time vocabulary sharing helped students learn and use technical terms in context, which directly led to the 72,28% increase in vocabulary mastery. At the same time, practicing real-world professional scenarios encouraged students to step into professional roles, keep the conversation moving, and clarify meaning on the spot, which also drive the 36,97% development in speaking fluency.

The classroom observations show that language growth in vocational higher education depends heavily on low-anxiety, interactive, and relevant environments. The peer support and

teamwork observed during FGD sessions align with Johnson and Johnson's (2018) cooperative learning principles, showing that small-group work effectively lowers anxiety and boosts communication. In addition, using agro-industrial topics encouraged students to use technical vocabulary, in line with Hudson and Whisler (2001) Contextual Teaching and Learning (CTL) framework by showing that vocabulary learning is most effective when connected to students' future careers. Methodologically, using observation and interview data show that improvements in speaking skills are best understood through real classroom interactions.

5. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

Based on the research conducted with second-semester students of Agro-industrial Product Development Program at Politeknik Negeri Cilacap, the implementation of Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) within a collaborative research design effectively improved both the language skills and interaction patterns among the students. Quantitatively, FGDs led to a 36,97% increase in speaking fluency and 72,28% gain in vocabulary mastery, it is driven by reduced speaking anxiety through peer support, practical learning with topics related to product packaging and marketing, and brief code-switching to bridge language gaps. Qualitatively, classroom dynamics shifted from passive reliance from the lecturer and high anxiety toward spontaneous turn-taking, active negotiation ideas, and problem-solving with peers. Ultimately, shifting the classroom focus to small-group discussions creates a low-stress, practical environment that directly connects English instruction with students' vocational needs.

While this study provides valuable insights into vocational ESP classrooms, it was limited to a sample of 28 students the Agro-industrial Product Development study program of Politeknik Negeri Cilacap. Future research should expand this collaborative FGD framework to other vocational disciplines to evaluate broader possibility.

DAFTAR REFERENSI

- Arutmayanti, N., & Astuti, B. (2023). Effectiveness Of Group Guidance Services with Discussion Techniques in Reducing Academic Procrastination of Class X Students of SHS 4 Samarinda, Indonesia. *European Journal of Education Studies*, 10(9). <https://doi.org/10.46827/ejes.v10i9.4948>
- Barrass, R. (2006). *Speaking for yourself "a guide for students"*. Routledge.
- Campbell, R. (2008). *Guide To Focus Group Discussions*. Agency for International Development.
- Creswell, J. W. ., & Plano Clark, V. L. . (2018). *Designing and conducting mixed methods research*. SAGE.

- Denzin, N. K. ., & Lincoln, Y. S. . (2013). *The landscape of qualitative research*. SAGE Publications.
- Hudson, C. C., & Whisler, V. R. (n.d.). *Contextual Teaching and Learning for Practitioners*.
- Johns, A. M., & Salmani Nodoushan, M. A. (2015). English for Specific Purposes: The state of the art (An online interview with Ann M. Johns). *International Journal of Language Studies*, 9(2), 113–120.
- Liu, H., Wang, Y., & Wang, H. (2025). Exploring the mediating roles of motivation and boredom in basic psychological needs and behavioural engagement in English learning: a self-determination theory perspective. *BMC Psychology*, 13(1), 179. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40359-025-02524-3>
- Long, M. H. . (2015). *Second language acquisition and task-based language teaching*. Wiley-Blackwell.
- Novikova, O., & Suima, I. (2026). DEVELOPING ENGLISH FOR IT PROFESSIONALS: CHALLENGES AND STRATEGIES IN HIGHER EDUCATION. *Journal "Ukrainian Sense,"* (2), 60–72. <https://doi.org/10.15421/462527>
- Nugraha, A. , & S. A. (20202). Analisis kecemasan komunikasi dan tantangan berbicara pada siswa sekolah menengah kejuruan. *Jurnal Pendidikan Vokasi*, 10(2), 145–158.
- Pochana, T., & Sukying, A. (n.d.). *The Effects of Cooperative Learning Techniques on Thai Secondary School Students' Reading Comprehension* *****.
- Pratiwi, N. P. A., Suryani, I., & Suarnajaya, I. W. (2020). Investigating the inhibiting factors in speaking English faced by senior high school students in Singaraja. *International Journal of Language Education*, 4(1), 48–58. <https://doi.org/10.26858/ijole.v4i2.10054>
- Pride, J. B. ., & Holmes, Janet. (1972). *Sociolinguistics : selected readings*. Penguin.
- Rahman, M. (2015). English for Specific Purposes (ESP): A Holistic Review. *Universal Journal of Educational Research*, 3(1), 24–31. <https://doi.org/10.13189/ujer.2015.030104>
- Sanulita, H., Lestari, S. A., Syarmila, Yustina, I., Atika, Nurillah, S., Iqbal, M., Elofhia, L., & Annisa, A. (2024). *Keterampilan Berbahasa Reseptif: Teori dan Pengajarannya*. PT. Sonpedia Publishing Indonesia.
- Simeon, J. C. (2014). *Language Learning Strategies: An Action Research Study from a Sociocultural Perspective of Practices in Secondary School English Classes in the Seychelles*.
- Villabona, N., & Cenoz, J. (2022). The integration of content and language in CLIL: a challenge for content-driven and language-driven teachers. *Language, Culture and Curriculum*, 35(1), 36–50. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07908318.2021.1910703>
- Virginiya, P. T., Yani, N. W. M. N., & Astuti, N. N. S. (2025). *Investigating the Integration of Employability Skills in ESP (English for Specific Purposes) Classrooms* (pp. 120–130). https://doi.org/10.2991/978-94-6463-882-0_15
- Zainal Abidin, M. Z. bin, Firdaus, A., & Md Syed, M. A. (2021). Komunikasi Strategik dalam Pengurusan Komunikasi Organisasi: Definisi, Pendekatan dan Pelaksanaan. *Jurnal Pengajian Media Malaysia*, 23(1), 49–64. <https://doi.org/10.22452/jpmm.vol23no1.4>