UNIVERSITI TEKNOLOGI MARA

BULETIN APB

EDUCATION FOR BETTER FUTURE



EDISI 17

OKTOBER 2026

AKADEMI PENGAJIAN BAHASA
UNIVERSITI TEKNOLOGI MARA
CAWANGAN NEGERI SEMBILAN
KAMPUS SEREMBAN

e-ISSN : 2682-7948

Helping ESL Learners Find Their Voice in Group Discussions

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In today's interconnected world, speaking English is no longer just an academic requirement; it is a vital tool that helps students share ideas, collaborate across disciplines, and enter the professional world with confidence. Yet, for many English as a Second Language (ESL) learners, knowing the language intellectually does not automatically translate into the confidence to speak it (Horwitz et al., 1986). This internal disconnect becomes glaringly obvious during group discussions. Although collaborative learning aims to foster active dialogue, speaking up among peers often triggers deep anxiety as it is fuelled by the fear of making grammatical errors, facing judgement, or stumbling over complex thoughts (Amoah & Yeboah, 2021). As a result, many capable students choose silence, keeping valuable perspectives to themselves.



This silence, however, does not stem from a lack of awareness of the value of speech. Recent research highlights a frustrating paradox: speaking anxiety remains a major hurdle even for advanced university students who fully recognise how essential group discussions are for their future careers (Amengual-Pizarro, 2018). This contradiction reveals a crucial distinction: knowing that English matters is vastly different from feeling safe enough to use it. A student can thoroughly understand the career benefits of language proficiency and still freeze when asked to share an opinion in class. Therefore, helping ESL learners find their voice requires more than encouraging them to speak; it requires creating conditions that make speaking feel possible and safe.

Recognising this gap points directly to the learning environment's critical role. Because language acquisition is inherently social, it cannot flourish through textbooks and assessments alone; students build genuine competence through meaningful human interaction (Vygotsky, 1978). Research shows that strong peer support correlates with reduced speaking anxiety, increased participation, and improved emotional well-being (Huang, 2023; Ayiz & Tauchid, 2024). Ultimately, speaking anxiety is rarely just a measure of a student's linguistic ability, but it is a reflection of psychological safety. A learner's question shifts from *"Can I speak English?"* to *"Is it safe for me to speak English here?"*

To address this question, educators must change how they approach classroom engagement. Moving beyond simple calls for students to "participate more", teachers need to actively create spaces where

mistakes are welcomed as natural steps in the learning process, not sources of embarrassment. This supportive atmosphere can be practically established through deliberate instructional design:

- **Scaffolded Interaction**: Ease students into discussions by starting with low-stakes pair work before moving to small groups or full class debates (Koyuncu et al., 2024).
- **Processing Time**: Provide a brief preparation period before inviting responses to reduce the pressure to perform immediately (An & Childs, 2023).
- **Culture of Effort**: Offer constructive feedback and celebrate a student's drive to communicate, prioritising clear meaning over perfect grammar (Saputra, 2018).



By implementing these intentional structures, group discussions evolve from assessment tools into substantive platforms for developing practical skills, including negotiating ideas, listening actively, and solving problems collaboratively. This transformation aligns directly with the core vision of Education for a Better Future, which aims to empower students to apply their knowledge beyond the classroom. A brilliant graduate who remains too anxious to speak will naturally struggle in global professional settings.

Building the confidence to bridge this gap is ultimately a shared responsibility. While students must take brave steps outside their comfort zones, educators and peers must cultivate a culture grounded in patience, respect, and mutual growth. When classrooms acknowledge the complexities of language learning, they move beyond passive instruction and become vital platforms for developing confident global citizens.

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