

# Expectation vs. Experience: Comparing Pre-Assessment Expectations and Post-Assessment Perceptions of Real-Time Communication Barriers in Tertiary Speaking Assessment

Irda Haryani Tahir<sup>1\*</sup>, Nur Syazwani Mohd Zolkifli<sup>2</sup>, Nur Hazwani Mohd Muhridza<sup>3</sup>, Rika Diana Busri<sup>4</sup>, Atiqah Shaharuddin<sup>5</sup>, Siti Rahmah Abdullah<sup>6</sup>

Language Academy, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia

**\*Corresponding Author**

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2026.102100123>

Received: 05 September 2026; Accepted: 10 September 2026; Published: 01 October 2026

## ABSTRACT

One significant skill to have for university graduates entering the workplace is the ability to speak, but many students find it hard to move from prepared individual presentations to spontaneous group discussions. This study looks at Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM) students' views on their formal group discussion skills before and after an assessment in UHLB 3132 (Professional Communication Skills 2). It explores students' baseline preparation, concerns and confidence before the assessment, as well as their perceived challenges, confidence and views on the course materials after the assessment. Responses from Google Form questionnaires were collected before (N=291) and after (N=167) the assessment across 10 faculties. The comparison revealed differences between the challenges students anticipated before the assessment and those they reported after completing it. 52.9% expected the major challenge with the task to be managing arguments. However, during the actual assessment, 48.5% found organising their ideas in real time to be the hardest part. Among the forms of blended learning support, live classroom practice received the highest usefulness rating (85.0%). Taken together, these findings suggest that instructors should pay greater attention to teaching students to quickly arrange their points under time pressure.

**Keywords:** Formal Group Discussion, Pre-Assessment Expectations, Post-Assessment Perceptions, Real-Time Communication Barriers, Speaking Confidence, Pedagogical Support.

## INTRODUCTION

Higher education institutions play a critical role in preparing students for their future profession. One of the abilities graduates are required to have is to be able to communicate well especially when talking about ideas and making decisions in a group. They might have to debate project strategies, solve problems, clarify their views and collaborate with others. However, many undergraduates experience troubles and challenges transitioning from individual presentations to spontaneous group discussion (McCroskey, 1977). They often find it challenging to sustain a discussion, to take turns properly and to arrange their thinking when the clock is running out.

A blended learning strategy creates a flexible and encouraging learning environment by fusing traditional classroom techniques with online digital material. To assist students, instructors use a blended learning approach that includes lecture slides, brief videos, online MyLinE courses, and practice in the classroom (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004). Comparing pre and post opinions of students before and after a formal discussion assessment is helpful to find out what support students found valuable. It can also show whether the challenges students anticipated beforehand were the same as those they experienced during the assessment.

The undergraduates from various programmes at UTM are expected to be proficient in professional communication in English. Most students can provide an opinion, but some students find it challenging to persuade others and respond during a natural group discussion. During the formal discussion assessment students are assessed on how successfully they perform their roles, clarify their arguments, take turns, manage disagreement politely and encourage the group to reach consensus.

This is a demanding evaluation since students need to listen to their group members and come up with an appropriate response. The baseline survey found that 29.6% of the students had written and memorised a complete script as preparation. This may be because they are fearful of speaking without a script (McCroskey, 1977). However, relying too much on a script can restrict spontaneous interaction within the group. It is also useful to compare students' concerns before the evaluation with the challenges they face in completing it.

This study is significant because it compares students' pre-assessment expectations with their post-assessment perceptions of the communication barriers encountered during a formal group discussion. By identifying differences between anticipated and reported challenges, the study provides practical evidence for designing instructional support that better prepares students for real-time speaking demands.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Language learners face psychological and cognitive barriers when shifting from individual, prepared speeches to spontaneous group conversations. McCroskey (1977) points out that Communication Apprehension (CA) tends to spike during graded speaking tasks, leaving students worried about being judged or running into arguments. To shield themselves from this pre-task stress, many fall back on memorising complete scripts word for word. Despite that, relying heavily on scripts ends up blocking natural turn-taking, fluid exchanges of ideas, and genuine interaction (King, 2002).

Before speaking, students mostly dread social and emotional friction, such as handling arguments. However, the findings suggest that cognitive demands may become more prominent during live interaction. Sweller's (1988) Cognitive Load Theory helps explain this because spontaneous group discussion requires heavy real-time thinking. Learners must take in peer comments, process arguments, follow dynamic discussion rules, and build logical points all under tight time pressure. When working memory gets overwhelmed, logical structure falls apart. Blended learning setups that mix digital tools with live class practice help cushion this mental overload (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004). Hands-on practise in class builds confidence while cutting down anxiety (Bandura, 1997), and direct teacher notes provide the specific guidance students need to improve performance (Hattie & Timperley, 2007).

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

UHLB 3132 Professional Communication Skills 2 is a course to strengthen students' professional communication abilities through formal group discussions and other activities. The students' experience of the assessment is explained using Bandura's (1997) Self-Efficacy Theory and Sweller's (1988) Cognitive Load Theory.

According to Bandura's thesis, confidence is built via direct experience and practise. This course offers students an opportunity to practise the discussion task in classroom practice prior to the actual evaluation. This can assist them to feel less anxious and be more confident when speaking. Sweller's Cognitive Load Theory can help explain why speaking in real time can still be challenging. In group discussion, students must listen, decide how to answer and structure their views at the same time. All these tasks may place substantial demands on their working memory. The two ideas complement each other to explain the growth in the confidence of the students and the challenges in arranging thoughts throughout the conversation.

## Research Aims

This study aims to compare students' pre-assessment expectations with their post-assessment perceptions of the challenges experienced during a formal group discussion assessment in UHLB3132 (Professional Communication Skills 2). The aims are:

- To identify students' basic knowledge, confidence, and expectations before they undertake the group discussion assessment.
- To examine the challenges students reported, their perceived improvement, and their views on the teaching materials after the assessment.

By comparing the survey answers before and after the assessment, this study provides practical ideas on how the UHLB 3132 course can better help UTM students become confident group communicators.

## METHODOLOGY

Comparing students' expectations before an assessment with their perceptions afterwards can provide insights into the demands of interactive speaking tasks. A comparative pre- and post-assessment survey design with open-ended written questions was used to study student preparation, real-time challenges, and perceived skill improvement during a formal discussion task (Cohen et al., 2017). Teaching was delivered in a hybrid format. Students completed online MyLinE modules, attended lectures, watched sample videos, and joined live classroom practice sessions focused on discussion tactics and turn-taking.

Participants were undergraduate students taking the compulsory UHLB 3132 course. Data collection was done in two phases. The pre-assessment survey (N=291) investigated students' study habits and the challenges they anticipated. The post-assessment survey (N=167) examined their confidence and tactics used and their perceptions of the course materials. Both surveys had similar gender distributions. Female students constituted 68.0% (N=198) of the pre-assessment sample and 63.5% (N=106) of the post-assessment sample. Male students were 32.0% (N=93) and 36.5% (N=61) respectively.

The students came from ten UTM faculties and institutions. The largest categories were the Faculty of Science, Faculty of Civil Engineering, Faculty of Management and the School of Human Resource Development and Psychology. Other participants were Computing, Education, Built Environment, Mechanical Engineering, Chemical Engineering and Electrical Engineering. The demographic breakdown of participants across both survey phases is detailed in Table 1.

**Table 1: Demographic Distribution of Participants Across Pre- and Post-Assessment Phases**

| Demographic Profile           | Pre-Assessment (N=291) | Post-Assessment (N=167) |
|-------------------------------|------------------------|-------------------------|
| <b>Gender</b>                 |                        |                         |
| Female                        | 68.0% (n=198)          | 63.5% (n=106)           |
| Male                          | 32.0% (n=93)           | 36.5% (n=61)            |
| <b>Faculty Representation</b> |                        |                         |
| Faculty of Science            | 30.2%                  | 21.6%                   |

|                                             |       |       |
|---------------------------------------------|-------|-------|
| Faculty of Civil Engineering                | 25.4% | 29.9% |
| Faculty of Management                       | 16.5% | 18.0% |
| School of Human Resource Dev. & Psychology  | 10.3% | 13.8% |
| Faculty of Built Environment & Surveying    | 2.7%  | 10.2% |
| Faculty of Computing                        | 8.2%  | 0.6%  |
| Faculty of Educational Science & Technology | 4.1%  | 3.6%  |
| Faculty of Mechanical Engineering           | 1.4%  | 2.4%  |
| Faculty of Chemical & Energy Engineering    | 0.7%  | 0.0%  |
| Faculty of Electrical Engineering           | 0.3%  | 0.0%  |

Data were collected from two surveys created in Google Form before and after the formal group discussion assessment.

Instrument 1 (Pre-assessment survey): This survey included students' backgrounds, previous experience with group discussions, familiarity with the discussion format, methods of preparation, feedback preferences, predicted problems, and general expectations. Familiarity was assessed on a 3-point scale from 1 (Unfamiliar), 2 (Somewhat familiar) to 3 (Very Familiar).

Instrument 2 (post-assessment survey): This survey investigated student confidence following the task, the tactics employed by students, the difficulties encountered by students, and the usefulness of four kinds of learning support: lecture slides, videos, MyLinE activities, and classroom practice. Confidence was graded on a 3-point scale (1=Low, 2= Middle, 3=High). The survey also had open-ended questions and there were 164 replies to those questions.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### Data Analysis

The data were analysed using descriptive statistics and qualitative thematic analysis to identify patterns in students' responses. Frequencies and percentages were used to compare responses from the pre- and post-assessment samples (Cohen et al., 2017). As the two surveys involved different numbers of respondents, the findings were interpreted as comparisons between the two samples rather than changes among individual students. The open-ended responses were grouped into recurring themes, including disagreement strategies, argument structures, leadership skills and voice control.

## Development of Basic Knowledge, Expectations, and Confidence

Before the classroom activities, 29.6% (N=86) of the students prepared by drafting and memorising a full script. Their responses varied following the evaluation. In the post-assessment survey, 50.9% (N=85) reported that their main tactic was to communicate their thoughts effectively. A further 26.9% (N=45) concerned sharing thoughts and taking turns. In the written answers, students also reported learning how to engage all the members of the group, how to respond nicely, and how to start a topic. For many students, the introduction seemed to be the easier section, with 41.3% saying it was the easiest element to prepare for.

In the baseline survey, 22.7% (N=66) of the students said that they had never participated in a formal group discussion in a professional setting. 66.7% of the others claimed they were just slightly familiar with the format. 52.9% (N=154) thought that dealing with disagreements would be among their major challenges before the assessment. Confidence ratings differed between the two samples. Low confidence was reported by 8.9% of the pre-assessment respondents, compared with 0.0% of the post-assessment respondents. Meanwhile, high confidence was reported by 24.4% of the pre-assessment sample and 49.7% of the post-assessment sample. All respondents in the post-assessment survey therefore rated their confidence as moderate or high.

The comparison revealed differences between the challenges students anticipated and those reported after the assessment. Managing conflict was selected by 52.9% of the pre-assessment sample and 35.9% of the post-assessment sample, a difference of 17.0 percentage points. In contrast, organising thoughts in real time was reported by 34.0% of the pre-assessment sample and 48.5% of the post-assessment sample, a difference of 14.5 percentage points. It was the second most frequently reported post-assessment challenge. Fluency remained a concern in both samples, reported by 52.9% before the assessment and 47.3% afterwards. These findings indicate that students anticipated interpersonal disagreement, whereas post-assessment respondents more frequently reported difficulty structuring their thoughts under time pressure. Cognitive Load Theory suggests that managing several communication demands simultaneously may make it more difficult for students to process and organise their ideas (Sweller, 1988). Table 2 summarises the differences between anticipated challenges and post-assessment perceptions.

**Table 2: Comparison of Student Expectations (Pre-Assessment) vs. Post-Assessment Perceptions (Post-Assessment)**

| Evaluated Dimension                             | Pre-Assessment (N=291) | Post-Assessment (N=167) | Difference (percentage points) |
|-------------------------------------------------|------------------------|-------------------------|--------------------------------|
| <b>Primary Perceived Challenge</b>              |                        |                         |                                |
| Managing Disagreements / Interpersonal Conflict | 52.9%                  | 35.9%                   | <b>-17.0%</b>                  |
| Organising Thoughts in Real Time                | 34.0%                  | 48.5%                   | <b>+14.5%</b>                  |
| Spoken Fluency                                  | 52.9%                  | 47.3%                   | <b>-5.6%</b>                   |
| <b>Self-Assessed Speaking</b>                   |                        |                         |                                |

|                                                  |       |        |               |
|--------------------------------------------------|-------|--------|---------------|
| <b>Confidence</b>                                |       |        |               |
| Low Confidence                                   | 8.9%  | 0.0%   | <b>-8.9%</b>  |
| High Confidence                                  | 24.4% | 49.7%  | <b>+25.3%</b> |
| Moderate / High Confidence Combined              | 91.1% | 100.0% | <b>+8.9%</b>  |
| <b>Preparation and Reported Strategies</b>       |       |        |               |
| Full Word-for-Word Script Memorisation           | 29.6% | —      | —             |
| Prioritising Clear Explanation of Ideas          | —     | 50.9%  | —             |
| Prioritising Fluid Opinion Sharing & Turn-Taking | —     | 26.9%  | —             |

### Utility of Pedagogical Assistance

Students considered classroom practice to be more effective than the other sources of support. 85.0% (N=142) found the live classroom practice very valuable. It gave them a chance to practise the turn-taking and feel the flow of a group debate.

Online and lecture material also received great reviews. 82.0% of the students viewed MyLinE exercises as extremely useful, followed by lecture slides (81.4%) and instructive videos (79.0%). In general, the learning support was rated extremely effective for 81.4% of the participants (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004).

Students found instructor feedback to be significant as well. In the pre-assessment poll, 81.1% (N=236) wanted to receive comments directly from the instructor, and 18.2% preferred to receive input from their peers.

This implies that students value explicit and detailed feedback from their instructor (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). Table 3 highlights student helpfulness ratings for each instructional resource alongside their feedback preferences.

**Table 3: Student Perceptions of Pedagogical Assistance and Learning Support Usefulness**

| Evaluated Category                      | Instructional Support / Feedback Preference | Usefulness / Selection (%) |
|-----------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------|----------------------------|
| <b>Instructional Support Usefulness</b> | Live Classroom Practice                     | 85.0%                      |
|                                         | MyLinE Online Modules                       | 82.0%                      |
|                                         | Lecture Slides                              | 81.4%                      |
|                                         | Instructional Videos                        | 79.0%                      |
|                                         | <b>Overall Blended Support Value</b>        | <b>81.4%</b>               |
| <b>Feedback Preference</b>              | Instructor Direct Feedback                  | 81.1%                      |
|                                         | Peer Feedback                               | 18.2%                      |

### Teaching Plans of Instructors

The results suggest three ways in which instructors can help students in formal group discussions. First, 47.3% of the students reported still having problems with fluency after the assessment. Short discussions can be included prior to the official assessment to provide students with more opportunities to speak without the use of a written script. Moreover, they might also get more comfortable to answer without preparation if they practise on a regular basis (King, 2002). Second, students require assistance in swiftly arranging their ideas. This was a difficulty for 48.5% of the students after the evaluation. Instructors can offer a simple structure such as PREP (Point, Reason, Example, Point). This gives students a basic framework to organise their ideas when they have limited time to answer (Vygotsky, 1978). Finally, time should be allowed for direct instructor feedback. Most students (81.1%) preferred comments from the instructor. Students can learn about their strengths and weaknesses through specific feedback (Hattie & Timperley, 2007).

### Implications for Teaching

The results suggest that lowering worry alone may not be sufficient. Students also need to learn how to organise their ideas rapidly while listening and responding to others. Most were concerned about dealing with disagreement before the assessment. But the most frequently mentioned problem was the real time organisation of their ideas after the exercise. Course materials should therefore contain vocabulary for polite disagreement, simple frameworks such as PREP, and regular turn-taking practice. These might allow students to deal better with the demands of a live group discussion (Sweller, 1988; Vygotsky, 1978).

### LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

A few limitations should be mentioned, even if this study provides insightful information about the dynamics of student communication. First, self-reporting bias may be introduced because the data is based on self-reported survey responses from undergraduates at a single university (UTM). Second, the sample size decreased from the pre-assessment phase (N=291) to the post-assessment phase (N=167). To validate these self-reported patterns, future studies could incorporate direct observational grading rubrics or longitudinal tracking across multiple universities.

### CONCLUSION

This study highlights differences between students' pre-assessment expectations and their post-assessment perceptions of a formal group discussion task. Before the assessment, managing disagreement was among the most frequently anticipated challenges. After the assessment, organising ideas in real time was reported more frequently, while disagreement was reported less often. Post-assessment respondents also reported

higher levels of speaking confidence, and live classroom practice received the highest usefulness rating among the instructional resources evaluated.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

To help future students succeed in university formal discussion modules, three practical steps are suggested for the improvement of this course. Instructors should introduce low-stakes speaking practice early in the semester. Adding short, ungraded group discussions to weekly classes helps students build natural speaking confidence and breaks the habit of memorising full scripts before formal assessments. Additionally, learning materials should give students simple argument formulas like the PREP framework, along with useful phrases for agreeing, clarifying, and counter-arguing politely. Giving students these quick tools takes the pressure off their working memory so they can structure their points easily during spontaneous discussions. Lastly, the course structure should focus on detailed, one-on-one instructor feedback rather than general peer reviews. Giving students direct and specific comments on their performance helps them see what they did well and shows them the exact areas to work on for next time.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Sincere appreciation to the UHLB3132 Professional Communication Skills 2 committee members, students and all contributors involved in making this research a reality.

## REFERENCES

1. Bandura, A. (1997). Self-efficacy: The exercise of control. W. H. Freeman and Company. <https://www.macmillanlearning.com/>
2. Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
3. Cohen, L., Manion, L., & Morrison, K. (2017). *Research methods in education* (8th ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315456539>
4. Garrison, D. R., & Kanuka, H. (2004). Blended learning: Uncovering its transformative potential in higher education. *The Internet and Higher Education*, 7(2), 95–105. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.iheduc.2004.02.001>
5. Hattie, J., & Timperley, H. (2007). The power of feedback. *Review of Educational Research*, 77(1), 81–112. <https://doi.org/10.3102/003465430298487>
6. King, J. (2002). Using DVD technology in the EFL/ESL classroom. *System*, 30(3), 501–523. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0889-4906\(01\)00024-3](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0889-4906(01)00024-3)
7. McCroskey, J. C. (1977). Oral communication apprehension: A summary of recent theory and research. *Human Communication Research*, 4(1), 78–96. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2958.1977.tb00599.x>
8. Sweller, J. (1988). Cognitive load during problem solving: Effects on learning. *Cognitive Science*, 12(2), 257–285. [https://doi.org/10.1207/s15516709cog1202\\_4](https://doi.org/10.1207/s15516709cog1202_4)
9. Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Harvard University Press. <https://www.hup.harvard.edu/books/9780674576292>