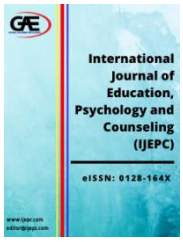
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FROM SILENT TO SPEAKING: THE EFFECT OF INTERACTIVE ORAL ACTIVITIES ON PUBLIC SPEAKING CONFIDENCE AMONG PRIMARY ESL PUPILS

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Abstract:

At a young age, primary school pupils begin to develop communication skills that are important for their academic learning and personal growth. However, many pupils lack the confidence to speak English in front of others because they fear making mistakes or being judged. This study aims to examine the effectiveness of interactive speaking activities in improving public speaking confidence among primary school pupils in the ESL classroom. A quasi-experimental one-group pre-test-post-test design was used, involving 20 Year 5 pupils from a Malaysian primary school. Before the intervention, pupils completed a performance-based pre-test by delivering a short speech, which was assessed using a public speaking rubric. The rubric evaluated five aspects, namely confidence, fluency, pronunciation, eye contact and body language, and content organisation. The intervention lasted eight weeks and included interactive speaking activities such as role-plays, storytelling, pair discussions, group discussions, picture description, and short presentations. After the intervention, pupils completed the same speaking task as the post-test using the same rubric. The findings show an improvement in pupils' public speaking performance, especially in confidence, fluency, and oral communication skills. The interactive activities also encouraged pupils to participate actively, practise speaking in meaningful situations, and become more confident when using English. The findings suggest that interactive speaking activities can be an effective teaching approach for developing public speaking confidence among young ESL learners. This study provides useful insights for primary school English teachers who wish to create a more engaging and supportive speaking environment in the classroom.

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Introduction

English is a critical language for learning and prospects in Malaysia. From an early age, primary school pupils are expected to communicate in English not only through reading and writing but also through speaking. In general, speaking is considered the more challenging skill, since it involves pupils thinking, organising ideas, and producing language simultaneously in the presence of an audience (Nation & Newton, 2009). It is observed that many ESL learners in primary school's encounter anxiety and shyness when speaking in front of the class in Malaysian primary schools. This can affect participation and delay their language development. Public speaking self-confidence is not related to language skills. It is also associated with emotional issues like embarrassment, fear, and anxiety (Horwitz et al., 1986). Pupils who feel anxious about making mistakes are reluctant to take speaking opportunities, limiting opportunities for practice and improvement. Therefore, teachers will need to use classroom strategies which will allow them to reduce anxiety and increase confidence simultaneously. Interactive speaking tasks such as role-play, storytelling, pair and group discussions, picture description, and brief presentations are thought to foster a positive and enjoyable environment for young children to engage in speaking (Cameron, 2001; Richards, 2008). This study explores the effectiveness of interactive speaking activities in enhancing the public speaking confidence of ESL Year 5 pupils. Specifically, the study aims to: (1) examine the difference in pupils' public speaking performance before and after the intervention, and (2) identify which rubric aspects show the most improvement after eight weeks of interactive speaking activities. The following research questions guide the study:

- RQ1: Is there a significant difference between pupils' pre-test and post-test scores in public speaking after the intervention?
- RQ2: Which aspects of public speaking (confidence, fluency, pronunciation, eye contact and body language, content organisation) show the greatest improvement?

The findings of this study are expected to provide useful guidance for primary school English teachers seeking to design more engaging and supportive speaking lessons. The results of this study will provide valuable suggestions for primary school English teachers to create more engaging and effective speaking instruction.

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Literature Review

Confidence is one of the key factors in second language (L2) speaking performance. Dörnyei (2005) states that low-confidence learners tend to have higher anxiety levels than others, and this may affect their retrieval and production of language. MacIntyre and Gardner (1994) found that language anxiety may affect cognitive processing during speaking activities, leading learners to forget known words or ideas. In children, this fear is sometimes related to the fear of being laughed at or corrected in front of other children (Tanveer, 2007). The patterns are similar as reported by several studies conducted in the Malaysian context. Gilbert and Soekarno (2025) reported that Malaysian secondary ESL learners may experience low confidence and speaking anxiety, highlighting the importance of supportive opportunities for oral practice.

Furthermore, the Ministry of Education Malaysia (2016) has emphasised that the development of oral communication skills is required in the English Language Education Reform, and that students' confidence and fluency are as important as their grammatical knowledge. Interactive speaking activities are classroom activities that involve pupils in active communication with others instead of passive listening. These activities include role-play, storytelling, discussions, picture descriptions, and presentations. According to Nunan (2003), interaction provides learners with real opportunities to use the target language for genuine communicative purposes, thereby fostering competence and confidence. Role play provides pupils with an opportunity to practise their speaking skills in a safe, imaginative environment, thereby lowering the pressure of being evaluated (Woodrow, 2006). Storytelling is used to practise fluency and organise ideas in a familiar and enjoyable format (Anggarini et al., 2023). Pupils have opportunities to speak in pairs or groups before speaking in front of the whole class. Picture description tasks are used to develop vocabulary, and sentence organisation (Nation & Newton, 2009), while short presentations are used to practice the formal aspects of public speaking such as posture, eye contact, and delivery. In a classroom-based study with Malaysian primary school children, Gilbert and Soekarno (2025) reported positive speaking development among Malaysian secondary ESL learners who engaged in digital storytelling activities. The results indicate that speaking anxiety can be gradually decreased by structured, repeated practice in a supportive environment. This study is guided by two theories namely Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis and Bandura's Self-Efficacy Theory. Together, these theories explain both the emotional barrier to speaking and the psychological process of building confidence through practice. Krashen (1985) proposes that emotional factors such as anxiety, low motivation, and low self-confidence can act as a mental "filter" that blocks language input from being processed and acquired. When the affective filter is high, learners are less able to use the language they already know, even if their linguistic knowledge is sufficient. When the filter is low, learners feel relaxed and are more willing to take risks in speaking (Krashen & Terrell, 1983). This theory suggests that a classroom environment which reduces fear and embarrassment, such as one built around fun, non-threatening interactive activities, can lower the affective filter and allow pupils to speak more freely. Bandura (1997) explains that self-efficacy, a person's belief in their own ability to succeed at a task, develops through four main sources: mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, verbal persuasion, and physiological states. Interactive speaking activities can support all four sources. Repeated practice through role-play and presentations gives pupils mastery experiences. Watching classmates perform successfully provides vicarious experiences. Encouragement and positive feedback from teachers and peers serve as verbal persuasion. A relaxed, enjoyable classroom atmosphere helps reduce the physiological symptoms of anxiety, such as a racing heart or shaky voice. The two theories complement each other well for this study. Krashen's hypothesis explains why pupils may

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avoid speaking when they feel anxious, while Bandura's theory explains how repeated, supportive practice can build the confidence needed to overcome that anxiety. In this study, interactive speaking activities are expected to work in two interconnected ways, first, by lowering pupils' affective filter through an enjoyable, low-pressure classroom environment; and second, by building pupils' self-efficacy through repeated opportunities to succeed, receive encouragement, and observe positive role models. The conceptual framework below summarises this relationship.

Table 1: Theoretical Framework for Interactive Speaking Activities and Public Speaking Confidence Example

Theory	Core Concept	Application in This Study
Affective Filter Hypothesis (Krashen, 1985)	Anxiety and low confidence block language use	Interactive activities lower anxiety and create a safe speaking environment
Self-Efficacy Theory (Bandura, 1997)	Belief in one's own ability, built through mastery, modelling, and encouragement	Repeated practice, peer modelling, and teacher feedback build pupils' confidence to speak

As shown in the framework, interactive speaking activities act as the independent variable, working through the two theoretical mechanisms (lower affective filter, higher self-efficacy) to influence the dependent variable, which is pupils' public speaking confidence, measured through the five rubric aspects that are confidence, fluency, pronunciation, eye contact and body language, and content organisation.

Methodology

This study was designed as a quasi-experimental one-group pre-test and post-test design. This design was selected because the researcher does not need a separate control group, which can be challenging to set up in real classroom settings (Lightbown & Spada, 2013). The subjects were 20 Year 5 children (aged 11) from a national primary school in Malaysia. Pupils were purposively sampled based on their availability and willingness to participate in the 8-week intervention led by their teacher. The English language proficiency of the pupils ranged from low to high, and this is typical of a Malaysian ESL classroom. Pupils' performance was evaluated using a pre-test and a post-test, with a public speaking rubric. The rubric measured five aspects that are confidence, fluency, pronunciation, eye contact and body language, and content organisation. The following 25 items were scored on a scale of 1 (very weak) to 5 (excellent) for each aspect. The rubric was modified from the criteria used in public speaking assessment in ESL classroom research (Richards, 2008). The pre-test was a brief individual speech (approximately 2 minutes) on a familiar topic before the intervention. The intervention then lasted for 8 weeks, during which there were two 30-minute speaking lessons per week. The weekly topics were based on different interactive activities: role play, storytelling, pair discussion, group discussion, picture description, and short presentation. The last two weeks were a mixture of activities to prepare pupils for the final presentation task. At the end of the eight weeks, pupils were asked to repeat the speaking task, which they were evaluated on with

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the same rubric as the post-test. Descriptive statistics (means and standard deviations) and a paired-samples t-test were used to analyse pre-test and post-test scores to determine whether the difference between them was significant. Data were intended to be analysed using SPSS software, and the significance level was $p < .05$.

Findings

This section presents the results of the pre-test and post-test comparison. Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics for each of the five rubric aspects, and Table 2 presents the paired-sample t-test result for the overall total score. Overall, pupils' total scores increased from a pre-test mean of 11.6 (SD = 2.4) to a post-test mean of 18.1 (SD = 2.1), out of a maximum of 25 points. This represents a mean gain of 6.5 points across the eight-week intervention. All five rubric aspects showed improvement, with confidence and fluency recording the largest gains.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics for Pre-test and Post-test Public Speaking Rubric Scores

Rubric Aspect	Pre-test Mean (SD)	Post-test Mean (SD)	Mean Gain
Confidence	2.1 (0.6)	3.9 (0.5)	+1.8
Fluency	2.3 (0.7)	3.8 (0.6)	+1.5
Pronunciation	2.6 (0.6)	3.4 (0.5)	+0.8
Eye Contact & Body Language	2.2 (0.7)	3.7 (0.6)	+1.5
Content Organisation	2.4 (0.6)	3.3 (0.5)	+0.9
Overall Total (out of 25)	11.6 (2.4)	18.1 (2.1)	+6.5

As shown in Table 2, confidence recorded the highest mean gain (+1.8), rising from 2.1 to 3.9. Fluency and eye contact and body language showed the next largest gains, both increasing by 1.5 points. Pronunciation and content organisation showed more modest gains of 0.8 and 0.9 points respectively, suggesting these two aspects improved more slowly than the others over the eight-week period.

A paired-sample t-test was conducted to determine whether the difference between pre-test and post-test total scores was statistically significant. The result is presented in Table 3.

Table 3: Paired-Sample t-Test for Overall Pre-test and Post-test Public Speaking Scores

Measure	t-value	df	p-value
Overall total score (pre vs. post)	11.42	19	< .001

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The paired-sample t-test showed a statistically significant difference between pre-test (M = 11.6, SD = 2.4) and post-test (M = 18.1, SD = 2.1) total scores, $t(19) = 11.42$, $p < .001$. This confirms that the improvement in pupils' public speaking performance after the eight-week intervention was unlikely to have occurred by chance.

In response to RQ1, the findings confirm that there was a significant difference between pupils' pre-test and post-test public speaking scores after the intervention. In response to RQ2, confidence showed the greatest improvement, followed closely by fluency and eye contact and body language, while pronunciation and content organisation showed comparatively smaller gains.

Discussion

The improvement in pupils' confidence and fluency supports the idea that interactive speaking activities create a low-pressure environment where pupils feel safe to practise English. This is consistent with Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis, which suggests that reducing anxiety allows learners to use language more freely (Krashen, 1985). Activities such as role-play and storytelling allow pupils to speak through a character or narrative, which may explain why these two aspects showed the strongest gains, as pupils were able to reduce the personal pressure of speaking as themselves in front of the class (Woodrow, 2006; Anggarini et al., 2023).

The gains in confidence also reflect Bandura's Self-Efficacy Theory. Weekly opportunities to practise and receive feedback served as mastery experiences, while watching classmates take part in group and pair activities provided vicarious experiences that appeared to encourage more hesitant pupils (Bandura, 1997). Teacher encouragement during each activity likely served as verbal persuasion, reinforcing pupils' belief that they were capable speakers. This pattern is consistent with Gilbert and Soekarno (2025), who reported similar gains in confidence following sustained use of interactive speaking activities in a Malaysian primary classroom.

The smaller gains in pronunciation and content organisation suggest that confidence-building activities alone were not sufficient to develop all aspects of public speaking equally. This finding suggests that teachers may need to combine interactive speaking activities with more focused language instruction, such as vocabulary building and sentence structure practice, to support pupils' overall oral competence (Nation & Newton, 2009).

Overall, the findings suggest that interactive speaking activities were an effective classroom strategy for building confidence among young ESL learners, particularly in a Malaysian primary school context where speaking opportunities in English may be limited outside the classroom (Woodrow, 2006; Gilbert & Soekarno, 2025).

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study examined the effectiveness of interactive speaking activities in improving public speaking confidence among Year 5 ESL pupils in a Malaysian primary school. Guided by Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis and Bandura's Self-Efficacy Theory, the study found that structured, enjoyable, and low-pressure speaking activities, such as role-play, storytelling, discussions, picture description, and short presentations, helped lower pupils' speaking anxiety

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and build their belief in their own ability to speak English confidently. The paired-sample t-test confirmed that the improvement in pupils' overall public speaking scores was statistically significant.

Based on these findings, several recommendations can be made for classroom practice. First, English teachers are encouraged to include a variety of interactive speaking activities regularly in their lessons, rather than relying only on individual presentations. Second, teachers should provide consistent positive feedback and celebrate small improvements, since encouragement plays an important role in building self-efficacy. Third, since pronunciation and content organisation showed smaller gains, teachers should combine interactive speaking activities with targeted vocabulary and sentence-structure instruction. Fourth, activities should be introduced gradually, moving from smaller, less intimidating formats such as pair discussions towards larger, more formal tasks such as presentations, to help pupils build confidence step by step.

This study has some limitations. The sample size of 20 pupils from a single school limit how far the findings can be generalised. In addition, the one-group design without a control group makes it difficult to rule out other factors that may have influenced pupils' improvement, such as general classroom maturation over the eight weeks. Future research could use a larger sample, include a control group, and explore pupils' perceptions through interviews or questionnaires to gain a deeper understanding of how interactive speaking activities influence confidence over time.

Despite these limitations, this study offers useful insights for primary school English teachers who want to create a more engaging, supportive, and confidence-building speaking environment for young ESL learners.

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