UNVEILING GEN Z STUDENT' CONFIDENCE BUILDING IN SPEAKING ENGLISH

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ABSTRACT

Speaking is a crucial skill in English language learning, particularly in EFL contexts where learners are required to communicate ideas effectively in academic settings. However, many EFL learners experience difficulties in speaking due to psychological factors such as low confidence, anxiety, and fear of making mistakes. This challenge is also faced by Generation Z students who, despite being familiar with digital communication, often struggle to express themselves orally in formal learning environments. Therefore, this study explores how Gen Z students build their confidence in speaking English and examines the role of teacher feedback in supporting students' speaking confidence in an EFL context. This study employed a qualitative research design involving six third-semester students from the English Education Study Program at Universitas Suryakancana Cianjur. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and classroom observations and analyzed thematically to identify patterns related to confidence development. The findings reveal that students develop speaking confidence through continuous exposure to English, self-preparation, emotional regulation, peer interaction, and the use of digital media. In addition, teacher feedback plays a significant role in enhancing students' confidence, particularly when delivered in a supportive, constructive, and non-judgmental manner. Such feedback helps students reduce anxiety, reflect on their speaking performance, and increase motivation to participate in speaking activities. Overall, the study highlights the importance of supportive learning environments and effective teacher feedback in fostering students' speaking confidence in EFL classrooms.

Keywords: Gen Z students, speaking confidence, teacher feedback, EFL context

INTRODUCTION

Speaking is one of the most essential skills in English language learning, particularly for students who are required to communicate ideas, opinions, and information effectively in academic and social contexts. In today's globalized world, English proficiency has become a crucial competence for academic success and professional development. However, speaking remains one of the most challenging skills for learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), as it requires not only linguistic competence but also psychological readiness, such as confidence, motivation, and emotional control.

Among psychological factors, self-confidence plays a vital role in determining students' success in speaking. According to Bandura (1997) theory of self-efficacy, individuals' beliefs in their capabilities strongly influence how they think, feel, and act. Learners with strong self-efficacy tend to engage more actively in learning tasks, persist in facing difficulties, and perform better in communicative situations. In contrast, learners with low self-confidence often experience anxiety, fear of making mistakes, and avoidance of speaking activities. In the EFL context, this condition significantly affects students' willingness to communicate and their overall speaking performance (Helmie, Puspitawati, and Salsabila 2023).

In higher education settings, particularly among Generation Z students, confidence in speaking English becomes increasingly important. Generation Z learners are generally characterized as technologically literate, adaptive, and accustomed to digital environments. However, despite their exposure to digital tools and online communication, many Gen Z students still experience difficulties in expressing themselves orally in formal academic contexts. Soraya & Pedo (2018) argue that although Gen Z students demonstrate flexibility and creativity in learning, they still require meaningful guidance and supportive learning environments to develop oral communication skills effectively.

Previous studies have shown that students' confidence significantly influences their speaking performance. Yuliana et al. (2025) found that self-confidence and vocabulary mastery contribute significantly to students' speaking ability. Similarly, Baktillah et al. (2024) reported that students with higher self-confidence tend to demonstrate better fluency and clarity in oral communication. These findings suggest that confidence is not merely a supporting factor but a fundamental component of successful speaking performance in EFL contexts.

In addition to internal factors, teacher feedback plays a crucial role in shaping students' confidence. Hattie & Timperley (2007) emphasize that effective feedback provides learners with information about their performance, learning progress, and strategies for improvement. Feedback becomes powerful when it answers three key questions: Where am I going? How am I going? and Where to next? Through meaningful feedback, students gain clarity about expectations and develop confidence in their learning process. In speaking activities, constructive and supportive feedback can reduce fear of making mistakes and encourage students to participate more actively.

This perspective is supported Annisa & Ardiana (2025), who found that teacher feedback, classroom interaction, and supportive learning environments significantly contribute to students' confidence in speaking English. Their findings align with Bandura (1997) self-efficacy theory, which emphasizes the importance of social persuasion and feedback in strengthening individuals' belief in their abilities.

Although previous studies have examined self-confidence, speaking performance, and feedback in EFL learning, most of them focus on these variables separately. Limited attention has been given to understanding how Gen Z students build their confidence in speaking English and how teacher feedback specifically supports this process. Moreover, few studies integrate psychological theory, such as self-efficacy, with empirical findings on teacher feedback within the Gen Z learning context (Mulyana, Burki, and Helmie 2024).

Therefore, this study seeks to explore how Gen Z students develop their confidence in speaking English and how feedback from teachers influences their speaking confidence. By grounding the study in self-efficacy theory and feedback theory, this research aims to provide deeper insights into the psychological and pedagogical processes that shape students' speaking development. The findings are expected to contribute to English language teaching practices by offering strategies to foster supportive and confidence-building learning environments.

Based on the discussion above, the research questions of this study are formulated as follows: How do Gen Z students build their confidence in speaking English? And How does feedback from teachers affect students' speaking confidence?

METHODS

This study employed a qualitative research design, which emphasizes an investigative approach where data are obtained through direct interaction between the researchers and participants in the natural research setting. This approach was selected because it enables an in-depth exploration of students' meanings, experiences, and strategies in developing confidence in speaking English. In qualitative research, the researcher serves as the primary instrument, requiring active engagement with participants to understand social phenomena from their perspectives (Dewi, 2022).

The participants of this study were six third-semester students from the English Education Study Program at Suryakancana University. They were selected using purposive sampling with classroom observation based on their experience in participating in English-speaking activities such as classroom discussions, presentations, and other communicative tasks. These participants were considered suitable for the study because their learning experiences provided meaningful insights into the strategies used to build confidence in speaking English.

Data were collected through classroom observation and face-to-face interviews conducted individually with each participant. The interviews consisted of several open-ended questions designed to elicit detailed information regarding the participants' experiences and strategies in enhancing their speaking confidence.

To ensure the accuracy and completeness of the data, all interviews were audio-recorded using a voice recorder. Each interview lasted approximately 10–15 minutes, which was considered sufficient to obtain relevant information without causing participant fatigue.

Data analysis was conducted systematically, beginning with the transcription of all interview recordings. The transcribed data were then carefully read and coded to identify recurring themes and patterns related to students' confidence-building strategies and perceptions of teacher feedback. The data were categorized based on emerging themes relevant to the research questions. Afterward, the findings were interpreted to identify relationships between categories and to generate meaningful insights. To strengthen the analysis, selected direct quotations from participants were included to illustrate their experiences and perspectives. Finally, the results were organized into descriptive narratives that clearly explained the strategies used by students to build confidence and the role of teacher feedback in supporting their speaking development.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Students' Strategies in Building Confidence in Speaking English. The findings show that Gen Z students build their confidence in speaking English through continuous exposure, self-preparation, emotional regulation, peer interaction, and engagement with authentic learning environments. Across participants, confidence was perceived not as linguistic perfection, but as the courage to express ideas clearly despite limitations.

Several participants defined confidence as the ability to speak without excessive hesitation or fear of making mistakes.

> *"Confidence is when I dare to speak even though I know my English is not perfect."* (Respondent 2)

Frequent exposure to English in both academic and non-academic contexts played a crucial role in confidence development. Participants reported using English during classroom discussions, presentations, interactions with lecturers and peers, as well as through online games and digital platforms.

> *"If it's been quite often lately, it's because I interact with my classmates and lecturers."* (Respondent 1)
>
> *"At first I was nervous, but because we often had discussions in class, I gradually got used to it and became more confident."* (Respondent 3)

Some participants highlighted that early exposure to English also contributed to long-term confidence.

> *"Since elementary school, I often heard English vocabulary, then collected it and it has become my foundation until now."* (Respondent 4)

Self-preparation emerged as a dominant strategy for reducing anxiety. Participants explained that preparing scripts, outlines, or key points before speaking tasks helped them feel more confident and organized.

> *"I usually write down the points before the presentation so that I don't go blank and feel calmer."* (Respondent 6)

In addition to preparation, emotional regulation was identified as an important factor. Some students deliberately shifted their focus away from audience judgment and concentrated on message delivery.

"I try not to think about other people's opinions; what matters is that my message gets across." (Respondent 6)

Digital media also supported confidence building. Several participants reported learning English through music, videos, YouTube, and online interactions with international users, which provided low-anxiety opportunities for practice.

> *"I learned from YouTube and English songs, so I became more accustomed to listening and speaking."* (Respondent 2)

> *"The important thing is to be brave enough to speak, without worrying about grammar or accent at first."* (Respondent 5)

Peer interaction further strengthened confidence. Participants described how encouragement and support from friends reduced anxiety and increased motivation.

> *"Simple comments like "you're getting better" really build confidence."* (Respondent 5)

Overall, these findings indicate that confidence building among Gen Z students is a gradual process shaped by repeated practice, authentic communication, and supportive social environments. This supports Bandura's (1997) self-efficacy theory, particularly mastery experiences, where repeated successful speaking experiences strengthen learners' belief in their abilities.

Teacher feedback was consistently identified as a key factor influencing students' speaking confidence. Participants perceived feedback as highly motivating when it was supportive, tolerant, and focused on improvement rather than judgment.

Several participants stated that feedback helped them understand their weaknesses and encouraged them to improve.

> *"Feedback from lecturers lets me know which parts I need to improve, so I feel more confident to try again."* (Respondent 3)

Supportive lecturers were described as creating emotionally safe learning environments that encouraged students to speak more confidently.

> *"If the lecturer is friendly and doesn't immediately blame me, I become more confident to speak up."* (Respondent 2)

Some participants shared contrasting experiences from earlier educational stages, where judgmental feedback negatively affected confidence.

> *"When I was in high school, I once made a spelling mistake and was immediately judged for it. That really brought me down."* (Respondent 4)

In contrast, current lecturers were described as guiding rather than pressuring students.

> *"The lecturer doesn't pressure us, but guides us."* (Respondent 4)

Although not all participants actively asked for feedback, most reported that lecturers frequently provided feedback during speaking activities.

> *"Actually, I rarely ask for feedback, but lecturers usually give it right away."* (Respondent 1)

After receiving feedback, students tended to reflect on it and use it as motivation to improve through further practice.

> *"I take every piece of advice from my lecturers to heart and use it as motivation to study harder."* (Respondent 1)

Some participants emphasized the long-term motivational impact of positive feedback.

> *"Miss said my speech was "perfect," and those words still motivate me today."* (Respondent 1)

These findings align with Hattie and Timperley's (2007) theory that effective feedback enhances learning by clarifying performance, guiding improvement, and strengthening motivation. In this study, feedback functioned not only as instructional input but also as emotional reinforcement that supported confidence development.

The findings demonstrate that confidence building in speaking English among Gen Z students is a multifaceted and dynamic process influenced by personal strategies, emotional regulation, peer support, digital engagement, and teacher feedback. Confidence does not emerge instantly but develops gradually through repeated exposure, preparation, and reflective learning experiences.

Consistent with Bandura's (1997) self-efficacy theory, mastery experiences (frequent speaking practice) and social persuasion (encouragement from teachers and peers) emerged as the primary sources of confidence. Moreover, the findings support Hattie and Timperley's (2007) feedback framework, which emphasizes the importance of supportive and constructive feedback in enhancing motivation and learner confidence.

This study extends previous research by illustrating how Gen Z students actively combine self-directed strategies, technology-mediated learning, peer interaction, and teacher feedback to build speaking confidence in EFL contexts. The findings suggest that English teachers should foster emotionally safe classrooms, provide clear and supportive feedback, and create opportunities for authentic communication to enhance students' confidence in speaking English.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that Generation Z students develop confidence in speaking English through continuous practice, self-preparation, emotional control, peer support, and the use of digital media. Confidence grows gradually as students become more familiar with speaking situations rather than aiming for linguistic perfection. In addition, teacher feedback plays a crucial role in supporting confidence development, particularly when it is delivered in a supportive and non-judgmental manner. Such feedback helps reduce students' anxiety, increases motivation, and encourages active participation in speaking activities. Overall, the

findings indicate that both personal efforts and supportive teacher feedback are essential in fostering Gen Z students' speaking confidence in EFL classrooms.

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