

Exploring the Influence of ESL Learners' Self-confidence on their Speaking Competence: A
Narrative Study

Turkish Online Journal of Qualitative Inquiry (TOJQI)
Volume 12, Issue 9, August 2021: 6543-6551
Research Article

**Exploring the Influence of ESL Learners' Self-confidence on their Speaking Competence: A
Narrative Study**

Anh Tuan Pham

English Language Department, FPT University, Vietnam. (email: anhpt66@fe.edu.vn)

Abstract

English speaking ability has been considered as one of the most necessary qualifications in a world-wide workplace. To prepare ESL learners for future competition, English speaking skills are centred in most educational settings, so understanding the factors influencing their speaking performance is essential. The study aims to investigate the influence of ESL learners' self-confidence on their speaking skills. In this study, the theoretical framework of confidence in terms of attitudes by Ostrom (1969) was employed to figure out the influence of affective, behavioral and cognitive factors on ESL learners' speaking ability. The participants involved in this study were 20 students from English language major at a university. A semi-structured interview was used to explore learners' views and then qualitatively coded transcriptions were utilized for thematic analysis. The results indicated that learners' self-confidence had an influential effect on their ability to speak English. This finding is a reference for language instructors to help their learners enhance their self-confidence when they are speaking and for ESL learners to seek strategies to be more confident in their English-speaking tasks.

Key words: speaking skills, self-confidence, influence, ESL learners

1. Introduction

Researchers have examined learners' ability to use English language in order to find out effective ways for ESL instructors to help their students to communicate at least in their classrooms before they can use English for communication in real practices. Morozova (2013) stated that English competence can be learned and mastered in a possible way. When examining learners' speaking results and their self-confidence, the relationship between them was revealed as an evidence to prove the role of confidence in achieving high speaking scores (Park & Lee, 2005). Moreover, main factors of self-confidence as affectivity, behaviorism and cognition were determinants to examine the links to learners' speaking ability (Shrauger & Schohn, 1995). Learners could achieve higher if their self-confidence was also high, so the correlation between them was clearly recorded (Tridinanti, 2018). Whereas, learners were likely to suffer from uncertainty, insecurity, fear and social distance when low self-confidence appeared (Rubio, 2007). Therefore, teachers found out various strategies to help learners increase their learners' self-confidence in speaking (Listiani & Kristie, 2018; Muin & Aswati, 2019).

2. Literature

2.1 Self-confidence

Many scholars have defined self-confidence from different perspectives. Some related it to one's skills and abilities to deal with a certain situation (Berger, 1992; Axelrod, 2017; Shrauger & Schohn, 1995).

In addition, it is also an awareness of one's ability to see whether or not they are capable of doing things (Oney & Oksuzoglu-Guven, 2015). Self-confidence appeared when people are not shy, anxious and fearful in any circumstances (Compte & Postlewaite, 2004). Therefore, self-confidence could affect one's success since their performance was much enhanced (Hanton et al., 2004).

Researchers classified self-confidence into different categories. Self-confidence could be examined as one's notions and emotions with themselves, namely inner confidence while outer-confidence was described as communication and emotion controlling (Gürler, 2015). Besides, self-confidence could fall into four types as situation, communication, language potential and language ability (Park & Lee, 2005). According to Ostrom's theory of attitude (1969), three factors contributed to one's confidence were affective, behavioral, and cognitive. Affective factor has been described as one's emotional reactions or feelings toward the object (Hilgard, 1980; Ajzen, 1993; Eagly & Chaiken, 1998; Abun et al., 2019). In second language acquisition, affective factor influenced learners' process of acquiring a language (Arnold, 1999; Krashen, 2003). Behavioral factor has been defined as reactions or responses to a stimulus that one was received from the outside world or inside their body (Watson, 1998; Skinner, 2019). Regarding behaviorism in language learning, learners could develop their language through behavioral reactions and repetition or practice to form a habit (Brown, 2000; Johnson, 2004; Chomsky, 2013). Cognitive factor is an essential part to examine one's ability to gain knowledge in a certain field (Piaget, 1957). To arrange the hierarchy of knowledge acquisition, Bloom (1956) and Anderson et al. (2001) described cognitive thinking levels as remember, understand, apply, analyze, evaluate, and create. In terms of language learning and development, learners went through this cognitive process from the lowest level to the highest one, which happened in learners' minds (Swain, 2011). In fact, good students in special classes usually achieved higher level of self-confidence than students in regular classes (Santoso, 2021)

2.2 Relations between self-confidence and speaking skills

Speaking is a complex skill that requires the ability to produce sounds and words to express ideas, thoughts and feelings (Harris, 1974; Brown, 2004). They also categorized speaking skills as pronunciation, syntax, lexis, fluency, and comprehension. To improve learners' speaking skills, instructors used a variety of strategies to help learners perform better in speeches. One of the aspects that contributed to the enhancement of learners' speaking competence was confidence (Boonkit, 2010). The correlation between self-confidence and learners' speaking skills have been investigated by a number of researchers in the field of language learning. The results showed that there was a significance between the two variables (Nadiyah, Arina & Ikhrom, 2019; Al-Hebaish, 2012). In other words, high self-confidence when learners used English to communicate or present ideas entailed high English-speaking competence (Park & Lee, 2005).

Learners' self-confidence was conceptualized by Ostrom (1969) with three components- affective, behavioral and cognitive. These components influence learners' speaking competence which were classified by Harris (1974) and Brown (2004). The conceptual framework can be visualized as follows:

Exploring the Influence of ESL Learners' Self-confidence on their Speaking Competence: A Narrative Study

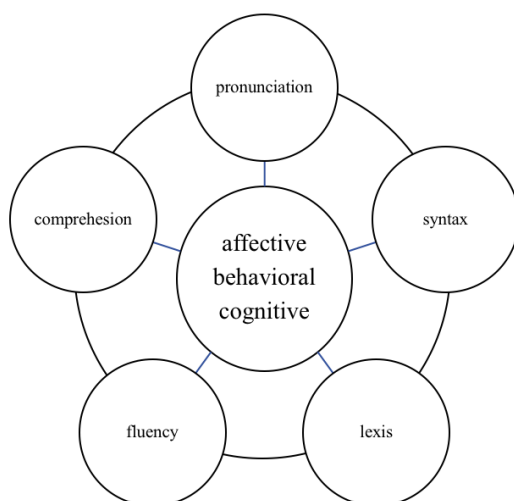


Figure. 1 The conceptual framework about the links between self-confidence and speaking skills

3. Method

3.1 Research questions

1. How does the affective factor influence learners' speaking skills?
2. What is the influence of the behavioral factor on learners' speaking skills?
3. Does the cognitive factor really affect learners' speaking skills?

3.2 Research design

The study employed a qualitative research design to explore learners' views on the influence of self-confidence on their speaking skills. A semi-structured interview was conducted with a purposive sampling technique which aims to collect data from experienced and knowledgeable individuals or groups (Flick, 2009).

3.3 Participants

The total population of interviewees was 20 students majoring in English language studies whose English level of proficiency was advanced, aged 20-24 at a private university in Vietnam. Half of them achieved good speaking scores and the rest obtained the poor ones.

3.4 Research instruments

The participants were invited to participate in a semi-structured interview with 13 questions focusing on 3 main factors from research questions which followed the mentioned-above conceptual framework. These questions were to gain deep understanding about learners' perspectives on the influence of self-confidence on speaking skills and their relationships as well. Recordings on Google Meet were carried out, then coded and transcribed by themes. The interviews were conducted in either English or Vietnamese. It took around 15 minutes for each interview.

4. Results

Question 1: How does the affective factor influence learners' speaking skills?

The results revealed that 80% of the participants supported that the affective factor had a strong impact on speaking competence. When learners felt more anxious, their speaking performance was negatively affected. When presenting something, they thought that their negative feelings caused problems in their speeches.

“I’m afraid of talking in front of my class. When I stand, my heart is beating too strongly. I can’t really think of any ideas. Everything in my mind has gone away. I know I feel nervous, so I try to practice more to overcome it, but when my name is called. I feel anxious again.” (Participant B)

Besides, their sounds or pronunciation might be shaking or changed. It meant that the affective factor did interfere their speech production of sounds.

“I don’t know how to describe my voice. My mouth can’t open wide as usual, so when I speak out, I see my voice is shaking and strange. I can’t control it, but when it’s over, my voice is becoming normal again. Perhaps, I don’t speak often with strangers.” (Participant F)

“When I’m in the speaking exam room, I lost my confidence. I’m afraid I’ll fail the exam, so my voice changes. I can’t speak smoothly though I can do it well in daily conversations.” (Participant H)

Moreover, many participants (60%) stated that they could not speak fluently when they were nervous. The reason was that the anxiety really existed and restrained their fluency.

“Before I speak about a topic, my teachers usually give me some time to prepare. Although I have a lot of ideas, I still have some problems expressing them fluently. Sometimes, my ideas are not as organized as I planned before. I forgot some ideas I intend to speak. I say “uh” many times and I speak slower than usual.” (Participant K)

The participants also encountered the problem about syntax. Half of the participants did not use grammar accurately when they felt nervous. When speaking, they focused on how to speak more fluently, so they made mistakes in some grammatical points. That rarely happened when they practiced their speaking individually. Therefore, syntax was caused by anxiety when the participants performed their speeches in class.

“I care much on grammar when I speak alone, but when I’m asked to speak with my friends or in a speaking test, I’m afraid of forgetting my ideas. I try my best to speak fluently, so I don’t care about grammar. As a result, I make many grammatical errors. That’s too bad! It’s hard to control my nervousness and use good grammar at the same time.” (Participant A)

“My grammar is quite good. I focus much on my grammar when I speak. However, when I present something in my class, I feel like I’m not confident, so I forget the correct tense I should use. I used the present instead of the past tense to tell a story.” (Participant M)

Question 2: What is the influence of the behavioral factor on learners' speaking skills?

Exploring the Influence of ESL Learners' Self-confidence on their Speaking Competence: A Narrative Study

From the interviews, 75% of the participants agreed that the behavioral factor strongly influenced their speaking skills. Gestures, eye contact and body language were noticed when participants performed their speaking tasks. Those who were confident usually used good gestures or non-verbal communication. The effects of non-verbal communication also played a vital role in achieving good scores. Many confirmed that they spoke better and more fluently when they were confident about their gestures or eye-contact making.

“I think my confidence is higher when I use appropriate gestures. The speaking score is also higher when I'm confident using good gestures or looking at the audience.”
(Participant C)

More importantly, participants' gestures when presenting a speech could help listeners or viewers comprehend what they were listening to.

“I can speak faster and more confidently when I use my hand gestures to visualize things or my ideas. I look at my friends when speaking that can help me to know if he is listening to me or understands me.” (Participant S).

However, 60% of the participants realized that they could not use any non-verbal communication because they were not self-confident about their speaking ability.

“When I'm asked to present something in my class. I just stand still and look at somewhere or the ceiling. I'm afraid of looking at my teachers or friends. I sometimes put my hands in my pant pockets or folded across my chest to hide my anxiety or shaking. I know I'm not confident, so I can't speak in a fluent way. My speaking score is affected too.” (Participant D)

One-third of the participants could not handle the questions when being asked or react inappropriately before they answered the questions from their teachers or friends.

“In my presentations, I sometimes react silly or have some funny behaviors when my teachers and friends ask me questions. I feel nervous especially when the questions are by my teachers. I step my feet or jump up, or scratch my hair. I know it's not a good habit, but it's hard to change it.” (Participant P)

“Sometimes in my speaking exam, I feel nervous and cry a little because I'm afraid I can't answer the questions then I fail. I'm scared of looking at my teacher. I never feel comfortable in my exam room. I don't know how to react to my examiner's questions though they are not very difficult. I don't remember how many times I have asked my examiners to repeat a question. Finally, my speaking score is just average.” (Participant G)

Question 3: Does the cognitive factor really affect learners' speaking skills?

The results revealed that 90% of the participants found out the strong influence of cognitive factor on learners' speaking competence. The knowledge of a topic or theme would be a determinant when learners were required to perform a speaking task. Specifically, the hierarchy of knowledge by Bloom (1956) and Anderson et al. (2001) was the frame for learners to follow. Their level of confidence correlated with how much knowledge they had when they were asked to give a speech. If they

remembered more ideas and vocabulary from references or what they read before, they were likely to be more confident in speaking.

“I’m not confident in speaking because I don’t have knowledge about the given topic. I have to read to find information and then remember some ideas. My poor understanding or memory causes me some trouble when presenting in class. I don’t know what I should do, but I try to understand it first before I can talk with others about it.” (Participant E)

“I think it’s so difficult to talk about a topic that I have no ideas or knowledge about it. In my speaking exams, some questions about cultures confuse me because my cultural literacy is poor. In other situations, my geographical knowledge also causes me trouble. I don’t know much about some geographical features of a place when talking about travel topics.” (Participant S)

Moreover, 65% of the participants found it hard to apply what I understood in a topic to deliver their speeches to the listeners or audience. Sometimes, the participants failed to make the listeners or the audience comprehend what they were talking or presenting because their speeches were not coherent.

“Before I present something to my friends, I prepared so many ideas. However, my friends told me that they can’t really understand my ideas because they are not organized. I can’t apply what I have learned to make them understand me, so I feel less confident.” (Participant N)

Half of the participants felt anxious when they were asked to give arguments on which they were not familiar with. Their self-confidence was lower when they could not evaluate the sources of reliable and appropriate information. Their speaking performance was also at a low level because they could not speak comprehensively.

“To prepare for my speech, I do find much information on the Internet, but I can’t identify if the information is good. I’m afraid that my teachers will give me low scores, so I feel worried whenever I give my ideas. My speech sometimes is not fluent and understandable because I don’t know to choose which information is more important to focus on. My arguments are not strong enough since the information I choose to present is not good.” (Participant D)

More noticeably, most participants (80%) found the most difficult part was when they were asked to use their creative thinking in a speaking task. They thought that their knowledge was inadequate to make something innovative, so their self-confidence was recorded low.

“I’m not very creative, so I can’t really talk about a topic requiring my creativity. If I’m asked to speak about something with a sample, I find it easier. I think I don’t have the ability to put things together to make up something new. That’s a hard job, so I’d say I’m not confident at all in this situation.” (Participant H)

5. Discussion and conclusion

The results of the study revealed a strong influence of self-confidence on speaking skills. Learners found it hard to deal with affective, behavioral and cognitive factors to enhance their speaking performance. It is indicated that teachers should assist them to find effective solutions for better self-confidence in a speaking activity.

Exploring the Influence of ESL Learners' Self-confidence on their Speaking Competence: A Narrative Study

The affective factor caused learners much trouble in which they had to encounter various types of negative feelings and emotions such as anxiety and fear. Their physical symptoms as voice shaking and loss were transparently recorded during their speeches. These affected their pronunciation, fluency and syntax in a speaking task. This led to low self-confidence and speaking scores. From these results, it is suggested that teachers should give learners some time to practice until they find ready or confident enough to perform a speaking activity. Fun speaking activities are encouraged to increase their level of self-confidence in more real-life situations. Also, learners are encouraged to overcome their fear and anxiety by practicing more and applying more psychological techniques to gain confidence when talking with strangers or presenting in public.

The second determinant is related to behavioral factor, in which learners' negative reactions and behaviors restrained their speaking performance. Learners struggled with their non-verbal communication as gestures and body language since they did not use any to help them gain more confidence. Their reactions to the questions from their teachers and friends were not quick enough as they did not form a good habit of dealing with sudden questions. These results imply that teachers should guide their students with more practice to use non-verbal communication appropriately to boost their self-confidence as well as provide strategies and problem-solving skills in speaking. In addition, learners can apply some ways of using gestures or making eye contact to help their speeches more comprehensive. Avoiding some inappropriate reactions during their speaking task is necessary to show more of self-confidence and gain more fluency.

The importance of cognitive factor is undeniable since learners lacked knowledge in the fields they were asked to speak about. From the lowest level of remembering something to the highest one of creating something, learners experienced much anxiety and fear during their speeches. They were not confident, so they forgot something or not able to be creative in a particular situation. Each level of cognition did affect learners' way of using vocabulary, making things comprehensive, or being a fluent speaker. Therefore, learners should focus more on knowledge in different fields of study to gain more self-confidence so that they can perform a better speaking task.

In summary, there has been the influence of self-confidence factors on ESL learners' speaking competence. It is implied that both instructors and learners should gain insight into the relationships between self-confidence and speaking skills to find out constructive strategies to boost learners' speaking ability as required in every language learning environment.

References

- [1]. Abun, D., Magallanes, T., Incarnacion, M. (2019). College students' cognitive and affective attitude toward higher education and their academic engagement. *International Journal of English Literature and Social Sciences*, 4(5), 1494- 1507. <https://doi.org/10.22161/ijels.45.38>
- [2]. Ajzen, I. (1993). Attitude theory and the attitude-behavior relation. *New directions in attitude measurement*, 7(9), 41-57. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14792779943000116>
- [3]. Al-Hebaish, S. M. (2012). The correlation between general self-confidence and academic achievement in the oral presentation course. *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, 2(1), 60-65. <https://doi.org/10.4304/tpls.2.1.60-65>
- [4]. Anderson, L. W. (Ed.), Krahwahl, D. R. (Ed.), Airasian, P. W., Cruikshank, K. A., Mayer, R. E., Pintrich, P. W., Raths, J., & Wittrock, M. C. (2001). *A taxonomy for learning, teaching, and assessing: A revision of Bloom's taxonomy of educational objectives*. Longman. <https://eduq.info/xmlui/handle/11515/18345>
- [5]. Arnold, J. (1999). *Affect in language learning*. Cambridge University Press.

- [6]. Axelrod, R. H. (2017). Leadership and self-confidence. *Leadership Today*, 297–313. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-31036-7_17
- [7]. Berger, I. E. (1992). The nature of attitude accessibility and attitude confidence: A triangulated experiment. *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, 1(2), 103–123. [https://doi.org/10.1016/s1057-7408\(08\)80052-6](https://doi.org/10.1016/s1057-7408(08)80052-6)
- [8]. Bloom, B. S., Engelhart, M. D., Furst, E. J., Hill, W. H., & Krathwohl, D. R. (1956). *Handbook I: The Cognitive Domain*. David McKay.
- [9]. Boonkit, K. (2010). Enhancing the development of speaking skills for non-native speakers of English. *Procedia: Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 2(2), 1305-1309. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2010.03.191>
- [10]. Brown, H. D. (2000). *Principles of language learning and teaching* (4th ed.). Longman.
- [11]. Brown, H. D. (2004). *Language assessment: Principles and classroom practices*. San Francisco State University.
- [12]. Chomsky, N. (2013). A Review of BF Skinner’s verbal behavior (Vol.1, 48-64). Harvard University Press. <https://doi.org/10.4159/harvard.9780674594623.c6>
- [13]. Compte, O., Postlewaite, A. (2004). Confidence-enhanced performance. *American Economic Review*, 94(5), 1536-1557. doi: 10.1257/0002828043052204
- [14]. Eagly, A. H., & Chaiken, S. (1998). Attitude structure and function. In D. T Gilbert, S. T. Fiske, & G. Lindsay (Eds.), *Handbook of social psychology*, 2, 269-322. McGraw-Hill. <https://psycnet.apa.org/record/1998-07091-007>
- [15]. Flick, U. (2009). *An introduction to qualitative research* (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- [16]. Gürler, I. (2015). Correlation between self-confidence and speaking skill of English language teaching and English language and literature preparatory students. *Current Research in Social Sciences*, 1(2), 14-19. <https://dergipark.org.tr/tr/pub/curesosc/issue/4355/59562>
- [17]. Hanton, S., Mellalieu, S. D., & Hall, R. (2004). Self-confidence and anxiety interpretation: A qualitative investigation. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, 5(4), 477–495. [https://doi.org/10.1016/s1469-0292\(03\)00040-2](https://doi.org/10.1016/s1469-0292(03)00040-2)
- [18]. Harris, D. P. (1974). *Testing English as a second language*. McGraw Hill.
- [19]. Hilgard, E.R. (1980). The trilogy of Mind: Cognition, affection, and conation. *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences*, 16(2), 107-117. [https://doi.org/10.1002/1520-6696\(198004\)16:2<107::AID-JHBS2300160202>3.0.CO;2-Y](https://doi.org/10.1002/1520-6696(198004)16:2<107::AID-JHBS2300160202>3.0.CO;2-Y)
- [20]. Johnson, R. B., & Onwuegbuzie, A. J. (2004). Mixed methods research: A research paradigm whose time has come. *Educational Researcher*, 33(7), 14-26. <http://dx.doi.org/10.3102/0013189X033007014>
- [21]. Krashen, S. (2003). *Principles and practice second language acquisition*. Heinemann.
- [22]. Morozova, Y. (2013). Methods of enhancing speaking skills of elementary level students, 1-24. <https://www.translationjournal.net/journal/63learning.htm>
- [23]. Muin, A., Aswati, A. (2019). Effects of socio-affective strategies on students’ self-confidence in classroom speaking activities. *Loquen: English Studies Journal*, 12(2), 91-98. <http://dx.doi.org/10.32678/loquen.v12i2.2178>
- [24]. Nadiah, Arina, & Ikhrom. (2019). The students’ self-confidence in public speaking. *Elite Journal*, 1(1), 1-12. <http://www.elitejournal.org/index.php/ELITE/article/view/7>
- [25]. Oney, E., & Oksuzoglu-Guven, G. (2015). Confidence: A critical review of the literature and an alternative perspective for general and specific self-confidence. *Psychological reports*, 116(1), 149-163. <https://doi.org/10.2466/07.PR0.116k14w0>
- [26]. Ostrom, T. M. (1969). The relationship between the affective, behavioral, and cognitive components of attitude. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 5(1), 12–30. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0022-1031\(69\)90003-1](https://doi.org/10.1016/0022-1031(69)90003-1)

Exploring the Influence of ESL Learners' Self-confidence on their Speaking Competence: A
Narrative Study

- [27]. Park, H., & Lee, A. R. (2005). L2 learners' anxiety, self-confidence and oral performance. Proceedings of the 10th Conference of Pan-Pacific Association of Applied Linguistics, 197- 208. PAAL Japan. <http://paaljapan.org/resources/proceedings/PAAL10/pdfs/hyesook.pdf>
- [28]. Piaget, J. (1952). The origins of intelligence in children (M. Cook, Trans.). W W Norton & Co. <https://doi.org/10.1037/11494-000>
- [29]. Rubio, F. (2007). Self-esteem and foreign language learning. Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- [30]. Christie, L. S., Listyani (2018). Teachers' strategies to improve students' self-confidence in speaking. Register Journal, 11(2), 139-153. <https://doi.org/10.18326/rgt.v11i2.139-153>
- [31]. Santoso (2021). Self-confidence comparative analysis. Turkish Online Journal of Qualitative Inquiry, 12(6), 4650-4656. <https://www.tojqi.net/index.php/journal/article/view/2145/1272>
- [32]. Skinner, B. F. (2019). The behavior of organisms: An experimental analysis. BF Skinner Foundation.
- [33]. Shrauger, J. S., & Schohn, M. (1995). Self-confidence in college students: Conceptualization, measurement, and behavioral implications. Assessment, 2(3), 255-278. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1073191195002003006>
- [34]. Swain, M. (2013). The inseparability of cognition and emotion in second language learning. Language Teaching, 46(2), 195-207. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261444811000486>
- [35]. Tridinanti, G. (2018). The correlation between speaking anxiety, self-confidence, and speaking achievement of undergraduate EFL students of private university in Palembang. International Journal of Education and Literacy Studies, 6(4), 35-39. <http://dx.doi.org/10.7575/aiac.ijels.v.6n.4p.35>
- [36]. Watson, J. B. (1998). Behaviorism (1st ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351314329>