

Teachers' Perceptions of Speaking Confidence Strategies: A Case Study at Cambridge English School

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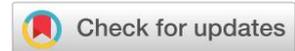
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ABSTRACT

In EFL (English as a Foreign Language) classrooms, many students struggle with speaking due to anxiety, low self-confidence, and fear of making mistakes. This issue is particularly prevalent among learners with limited vocabulary or basic proficiency levels, making it a persistent challenge for language teachers. This study explores teachers' perceptions of the strategies they employ to build students' speaking confidence in an EFL context. Conducted at Cambridge English School in Makassar, Indonesia, this qualitative research involved in-depth interviews and classroom observations of three experienced English teachers. Thematic analysis of the data revealed four key strategies perceived as effective: active learning (e.g., role-play and peer interviews), collaborative learning (especially small group discussions), praise and positive feedback, and creating safe peer-based environments. Teachers reported that these strategies increased students' willingness to participate, enhanced their fluency, and encouraged risk-taking in communication. The emotional support provided through praise and structured peer collaboration helped reduce anxiety and fostered a sense of psychological safety. These findings are interpreted through theoretical lenses such as Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, Krashen's affective filter hypothesis, and Bandura's self-efficacy theory. The study concludes that promoting speaking confidence in EFL learners requires not only linguistic input but also strategies that address emotional and social aspects of learning. Implications for learner-centered pedagogy are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Speaking is often regarded as the most challenging of the four language skills, particularly in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context. It requires learners not only to produce grammatically accurate sentences but also to communicate meaning fluently and confidently. Among the affective variables influencing speaking performance, self-confidence plays a crucial role. Learners with high self-confidence are more likely to take risks in communication, persevere through challenges, and participate actively in oral activities (Brown, 2001; Yashima et al., 2004; Aswad et al., 2019; Rahman & Weda, 2018; Sachiya et al., 2025).

One of the major psychological factors influencing language learners' willingness to communicate and their success in speaking is self-efficacy, a concept developed by Bandura (1997). Self-efficacy refers to an individual's belief in their capability to organize and execute the courses of action required to manage prospective situations. In the context of language learning, speaking self-efficacy plays a critical role in determining how confident learners feel about their ability to speak a foreign language.

Bandura's theory suggests that higher self-efficacy leads to greater motivation, perseverance, and willingness to take risks—key elements for effective language acquisition. Learners with strong speaking self-efficacy are more likely to engage actively in communication tasks, persist despite difficulties, and recover from failures without losing confidence. Conversely, low self-efficacy can cause anxiety, reluctance to participate, and ultimately hinder language development.

Given that many EFL learners face challenges such as fear of making mistakes and limited opportunities to practice speaking, fostering students' speaking self-efficacy becomes a vital goal for language teachers. Understanding how teachers perceive and implement strategies to build this self-confidence can provide valuable insights into effective language teaching practices.

Self-confidence in language learning refers to learners' belief in their ability to succeed in speaking tasks. Brown (2001) defines it as a form of self-efficacy that enables learners to overcome anxiety and engage in communicative interactions. Dornyei (2001) adds that without a basic sense of self-assurance, even the most motivated learners may fail to perform effectively. In line with this, Su (2021) found that students who reported higher levels of speaking confidence demonstrated greater willingness to communicate and adopted more achievement-oriented strategies during oral tasks.

Teachers' strategies are central to shaping students' affective and cognitive engagement in speaking. Teachers influence students' confidence through the learning environment they create and the techniques they employ. According to Hattie (2009), teacher-student relationships, feedback, and the clarity of instructional goals are among the highest-impact factors on student learning outcomes. Teachers who foster supportive environments and consistently provide constructive feedback contribute significantly to learners' willingness to speak (Christophel & Gorham, 1995; Riasati, 2012; Rahman et al., 2019; Youngsun et al., 2024).

Active learning methods, such as discussions, role-plays, and simulations, have been shown to improve speaking fluency while also building confidence. Bonwell and Eison (1991) argue that students who are cognitively and physically engaged in the learning process develop stronger communication skills and are more likely to take initiative in speaking tasks. These approaches align with Krashen's (1982) affective filter hypothesis, which posits that a low-anxiety classroom enhances language acquisition.

Collaborative learning further supports confidence development by providing a peer-based support system. Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory highlights the importance of social interaction in cognitive development. Within this framework, learning occurs most effectively in the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), where students collaborate with more capable peers. Johnson and Johnson (1999) found that collaborative activities promote mutual support, reduce anxiety, and enhance oral participation, especially when students feel safe and respected in group settings.

Task-based learning (TBL) also offers opportunities to foster confidence by focusing on real-life communication. Ellis (2003) and Nunan (2004) emphasize that TBL shifts the focus from form to meaning, allowing students to communicate naturally and purposefully. Tasks such as interviews, presentations, and information-gap activities encourage students to take ownership of their language use and reduce their fear of making mistakes, which in turn increases confidence (Al-Obaydi, & Rahman, 2021; Karubaba et al., 2024; Ko et al., 2025).

In the context of language education, understanding how teachers perceive and implement instructional strategies is critical, as these perceptions significantly shape their pedagogical decisions and classroom behavior. According to Walgito (2002), perception is a psychological process that involves receiving, interpreting, and giving meaning to sensory stimuli based on past experiences, needs, and expectations. This means that what teachers perceive to be effective teaching strategies is not merely a reflection of objective classroom conditions, but rather a construct influenced by their beliefs, teaching experience, and contextual realities.

Walgito (2002) emphasizes that perception is subjective and dynamic, and can vary between individuals depending on how they interpret stimuli in their environment. Applied to the EFL classroom, teachers' perceptions of students' speaking confidence and the strategies to enhance it are deeply rooted in how they interpret learners' behaviors, reactions, and progress. This interpretative lens influences the extent to which teachers choose to implement certain approaches such as active learning, collaborative tasks, or praise—based on how effective they believe these methods are in addressing learners' affective and linguistic needs.

In this study, Walgito's (2002) theory offers a useful framework for analyzing how teachers construct meaning from their classroom experiences and how these constructions shape their strategic choices in fostering students' speaking confidence. Rather than viewing teaching practices as isolated actions, this approach highlights the psychological foundation underlying teachers' decisions, reinforcing the importance of understanding the inner cognitive processes that inform classroom instruction. Building on this perspective, the study positions teacher perception not merely as a reflection of observable teaching behavior, but as a complex cognitive process influenced by experience, context, and pedagogical values.

This study, therefore, aims to explore how teachers at Cambridge English School perceive the strategies they use to boost their students' confidence in speaking English. By examining their insights and experiences, this research seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of teacher agency in shaping effective speaking instruction. Moreover, the findings may inform professional development initiatives and curricular planning by emphasizing strategies that not only develop students' language skills but also nurture their confidence as communicators in English.

2. Methodology

A qualitative case study approach was employed to explore teachers' subjective experiences and beliefs about their teaching strategies (Creswell, 2013). This method is suitable for investigating complex, context-dependent phenomena such as perception. This study employed a qualitative research design, using in-depth semi-structured interviews and non-participant classroom observations to explore teachers' perceptions. The participants consisted of three English teachers at Cambridge English School. The research instruments included an interview protocol designed to elicit personal reflections on teaching strategies, and an observation checklist used to validate the practical application of these strategies.

Data collection followed ethical research procedures, ensuring voluntary participation and confidentiality. The interviews were conducted in Bahasa Indonesia and transcribed before being translated and analyzed thematically using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach.

3. Result and Discussion

3.1 Result

Three main themes emerged from the analysis:

a. Active and Collaborative Learning as Catalysts for Building Speaking Confidence

Active learning refers to instructional methods that engage students in the learning process through meaningful activities, such as speaking, problem-solving, or hands-on tasks. Collaborative learning, on the other hand, emphasizes learning through interaction and cooperation among students, often in pairs or small groups. These approaches are particularly effective in language classrooms, as they provide opportunities for real communication and peer support.

Teacher 1,2 and 3 illustrated this perspective clearly, stating:

Data 1: "Then regarding discussions, of course, like they do interviews each other so they can practice asking and answering questions not just answering or not just asking like that. So, they are fully actively involved." (Teacher 1).

Data 2: "So, I often apply collaborative learning because for a very basic level of English, students are usually shy to speak because of the lack of vocabulary. When they are given the task of discussing with group friends, they tend to be more enthusiastic and open especially if they are paired with friends who are above their abilities." (Teacher 2)

Data 3: "I personally prefer active learning and collaborative learning. Because in active learning, of course students will be active in speaking, so they can multiply their experience in speaking, a lot of practices, so it will make them accustomed to speaking English. The second one is collaborative learning, especially small group discussion." (Teacher 3)

All three teachers shared similar perceptions regarding the effectiveness of using active learning and collaborative learning strategies to enhance students' speaking skills, particularly for those at a basic level of English proficiency. Through methods such as role-play, group discussions, and peer interviews, the teachers created learning environments that encouraged active participation and social interaction. These strategies not only provided students with more opportunities to practice speaking but also helped build their confidence, sense of safety, and motivation to learn. Collaboration with peers, especially in small groups, was seen as especially helpful in making shy or less proficient students feel more comfortable and engaged. Thus, active and collaborative learning were perceived as effective approaches to holistically support students' speaking development.

b. Encouragement Praise and Positive Feedback Enhance Student Confidence

All teachers emphasized the motivational role of praise as a crucial strategy for enhancing students' confidence in speaking English. They consistently noted that acknowledging and validating students' efforts to speak that regardless of grammatical accuracy or fluency that played a significant role in reducing learners' anxiety and encouraging greater participation in classroom discussions. This supportive approach aligns with affective theories of language learning, which highlight the importance of emotional safety and positive reinforcement in promoting learner engagement.

Teacher 1,2 and 3 illustrated this perspective clearly, stating:

Data 1: "Because by giving praise, they can measure their ability like 'oh yes, I have done a good job because my teacher said that you are good'... so they will be more motivated." (Teacher 1)

Data 2: "Because I always position myself as a student. I want my students to feel that they are considered in the class, I want them to feel that my teacher is paying attention to my progress while learning." (Teacher 2)

Data 3: "I think every human being needs praise. I will give them positive feedback and praise first... then I will incorporate constructive feedback so that the student does not reduce their confidence" (Teacher 3)

This statement reflects a broader belief among the teachers that praise should not be contingent on correctness alone, but rather on the willingness to take communicative risks. Such an approach helps students overcome their fear of making mistakes is one of the primary affective barriers in language learning and fosters a sense of accomplishment that motivates continued effort.

c. Group and Pair Work Create a Safe Practice Space

Collaborative activities such as group and pair work were unanimously perceived by participants as highly effective strategies for reducing students' fear of judgment and fostering a more supportive environment for speaking practice. Teachers observed that students demonstrated greater willingness to speak when engaging with peers in smaller, less formal settings, as opposed to speaking in front of the entire class. This shift in classroom dynamic appeared to lower the stakes for students, allowing them to focus more on communication and less on performance.

As Teacher 1,2 and 3 explained:

Data 1: "Regarding discussions, of course, like they do interviews with each other so they can practice asking and answering questions not just answering or not just asking questions like that. So, they are fully actively involved." (Teacher 1)

Data 2: "When they are given the task of discussing with group friends, they tend to be more enthusiastic and open especially if they are paired with friends who are above their abilities." (Teacher 2)

Data 3: "Collaborative learning, especially small group discussion. For example, the class contains 10 people and then I divide it into groups of 4 or 3 people, so this is where I can maximize for students who are still at a basic level in English for them to support each other and will indirectly build confidence and a sense of security in learning in class." (Teacher 3)

This insight underscores the importance of creating psychologically safe spaces for learners to practice speaking without the fear of making mistakes in front of a large audience. Through methods such as role-play, group discussions, and peer interviews, the teachers created learning environments that encouraged active participation and social interaction. These strategies not only provided students with more opportunities to practice speaking but also helped build their confidence, sense of safety, and motivation to learn. Collaboration with peers, especially in small groups, was seen as especially helpful in making shy or less proficient students feel more comfortable and engaged. Thus, active and collaborative learning were perceived as effective approaches to holistically support students' speaking development.

d. Indicators of Increased Students' Confidence

Students' growing self-confidence in the language classroom can often be identified through observable changes in both their behavior and language use. Behaviorally, confident students tend to participate more actively, initiate interactions, and take risks in speaking activities without fear of making mistakes. Linguistically, this confidence is reflected in improved fluency, expanded vocabulary, and a greater willingness to express ideas in the target language. Such progress was seen as a direct result of supportive strategies implemented in the classroom. The following extracts illustrate how these changes became visible over time, according to the teachers' perspectives:

Data 1: "So far, with the strategies I have provided, I see changes in my students to be more confident and active in answering questions." (Teacher 1)

Data 2: "So far, I see changes in my students, although it may be very small. I always tell my students that I do not emphasize who is good or bad, who is right or wrong, but I want you to try and engage in

learning activities especially speaking. So, as time goes by, the changes are visible and students become more courageous and confident in speaking activities. (Teacher 2)

Data 3: "I see the development of their confidence in speaking, which was previously still limited in speaking, now they can start to say more. For their confidence, also those who were previously still afraid to speak are now more courageous. Maybe because I have given them many opportunities to be active in practicing their speaking with strategies in collaborative learning and active learning. First, I see my students are more open-minded, more confident in expressing what is on their minds in English. Then the second is fluency. When they are more fluent in speaking, that is also an indicator that I assess. The third is a wider or increasing vocabulary, that is also one of the indicators that I assess that my students are better at increasing their speaking success and of course their confidence." (Teacher 3)

All three teachers noticed that as students become more confident, this is reflected not just in how often they participate but also in their language skills. Teacher 1 observed that students are more eager to answer questions and take part actively. Teacher 2 added that even small changes, like students being braver to speak up, are important signs of growing confidence, especially when they feel supported. Teacher 3 pointed out that along with behavior, improvements in fluency and vocabulary show how students are becoming more comfortable expressing themselves. Overall, the teachers agree that both behavioral and language changes are good signs that students' self-confidence is increasing.

3.2 Discussion

This study explored teachers' perceptions of the strategies they use to foster students' confidence in speaking English, with a focus on active learning, collaborative learning, praise, and group dynamics. The findings of this study reveal that teachers perceive active and collaborative learning strategies, praise and positive feedback, as well as small-group or peer-based activities as instrumental in fostering students' speaking confidence in EFL classrooms. These perceptions can be critically analyzed using Walgito's (2002) theory of perception, which emphasizes the reciprocal relationship between the individual (subject) and their environment (object). According to Walgito, perception is not merely the reception of stimuli but is shaped by cognitive processes influenced by past experiences, motivations, and situational context.

a. Active and Collaborative Learning Promote Communicative Engagement

In the first theme, teachers reported that active and collaborative learning such as role-plays, peer interviews, and group discussions provided meaningful opportunities for students to speak English in low-anxiety, socially supportive environments. Based on Walgito's theory, this reflects a subjective interpretation by teachers that such strategies are effective in transforming the language classroom into a space where learners can overcome psychological barriers. Teachers' perceptions are not passive; they are formed from their observations of students' reactions, classroom dynamics, and prior teaching experiences. These perceptions then shape teachers' pedagogical decisions, reinforcing the idea that the individual's (teacher's) cognitive background and interaction with the learning environment significantly influence how strategies are evaluated and implemented.

Teachers consistently highlighted the value of active learning strategies, such as role-play and peer interviews, in encouraging students to speak more freely in the classroom. These methods were seen as particularly effective because they shifted the focus from passive reception of language input to active production through authentic tasks. Active learning facilitates language use in meaningful contexts, helping students internalize vocabulary and grammar while simultaneously building their communicative competence (Prince, 2004; Bonwell & Eison, 1991).

Closely tied to this was the use of collaborative learning, especially through small group discussions. Teachers reported that such interactions created a more comfortable space for students who might otherwise feel anxious about speaking in front of the whole class. This finding aligns with Vygotsky's (1978) Sociocultural Theory, which emphasizes the role of social interaction and peer scaffolding within the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). In these peer-supported settings, students not only practice speaking but also co-construct knowledge and confidence, especially when paired with more proficient classmates.

The practical implications are clear when students engage with one another in meaningful, interactive tasks, they are more likely to develop a positive speaking habit. This echoes the work of Johnson and Johnson (2009), who found that cooperative learning environments tend to enhance motivation and reduce anxiety in language learning contexts.

b. Praise and Positive Feedback as Tools for Emotional Support

The second theme highlights the motivational value of praise and positive feedback. Teachers believed that recognition of effort, regardless of accuracy, helped reduce students' fear and encouraged communicative risk-taking. From Walgito's (2002) perspective, this aligns with the notion that perception is affected by affective conditions and motivation. Teachers, as perceivers, are sensitive to students' emotional states, and their perception of praise as a tool for empowerment is shaped by empathy and a desire to cultivate self-worth in learners. This further confirms that perception is not an isolated act, but rather a product of the teacher's interaction with their students' behavioral cues and emotional expressions.

The teachers emphasized the value of recognizing student effort rather than focusing solely on linguistic accuracy. This approach resonates with Krashen's (1982) Affective Filter Hypothesis, which posits that emotional variable like anxiety and motivation influence language acquisition. When the affective filter is lowered through encouragement and praise, learners are more willing to take risks and participate actively in speaking tasks.

Teacher comments illustrated that praise functions as a form of emotional scaffolding; it reassures students that their contributions are valued, which can boost their self-esteem and willingness to speak. Importantly, praise was paired with constructive feedback, which maintains a balance between emotional support and linguistic development. Such an approach is supported by Dörnyei (2001), who advocates for motivational strategies that address both cognitive and affective needs in the language classroom.

c. Group and Pair Work Foster a Safe Practice Space

Another recurring theme was the effectiveness of group and pair work in creating psychologically safe environments for speaking practice. The use of group and pair work was seen by all teachers as a strategy to reduce student anxiety. This perception aligns with Walgito's assertion that individuals perceive environmental stimuli in relation to their own goals and experiences. Teachers perceived smaller groups as safer and more inclusive spaces for learners, especially those at the basic level of English proficiency. This perception is likely shaped by repeated observations where students who struggled to speak in front of the whole class showed improved participation in small groups. Thus, the perception is contextual and evaluative, formed through continuous interaction with teaching conditions and student responses.

Teachers observed that students especially those with low confidence were more willing to speak when paired with peers rather than presenting in front of the entire class. This aligns with findings from Liu and Jackson (2008), who noted that the fear of negative evaluation is a common source of anxiety among EFL learners. Smaller group settings reduce this pressure, allowing learners to experiment with language without the fear of public embarrassment.

Furthermore, these activities promote peer modeling and mutual encouragement, reinforcing Vygotsky's (1978) theory that learning is socially mediated. By observing and interacting with their peers, students gradually build the confidence to contribute their own ideas. The teachers' observations that shy or lower-level students became more active over time indicate that such social learning environments are not only inclusive but also developmentally supportive.

d. Indicators of Increased Confidence in Speaking

The final theme identified in the findings involved observable indicators of increased confidence, such as students' increased participation, improved fluency, and willingness to take communicative risks. Teachers did not rely solely on formal assessments but perceived changes in student behavior as evidence of increased confidence, consistent with Walgito's view that perception is influenced by prior knowledge and meaningful stimuli. These behavioral changes act as perceptual cues, which, once interpreted, reinforce teachers' belief in the efficacy of the strategies used.

Teachers noted that over time, students became more comfortable initiating conversations, asking and answering questions, and expressing their thoughts with greater linguistic range. These behavioral and linguistic shifts are consistent with the development of speaking self-efficacy, a concept explored in Bandura's (1997) theory of self-efficacy. As learners experience success in speaking tasks, their belief in their ability to use the language grows, leading to greater participation and effort.

Moreover, these observations echo the findings of Yashima et al. (2004), who found that learners with greater confidence in their communicative ability tend to seek out more opportunities to use the language, thereby creating a virtuous cycle of increased practice and further confidence-building.

e. Synthesis and Implications

Taken together, the findings underscore that speaking confidence is not merely a product of linguistic competence but also of emotional support, interactional opportunity, and instructional strategy. Teachers at Cambridge English School appeared acutely aware of the affective and social dimensions of language learning, and they tailored their approaches accordingly. Their emphasis on praise, collaboration, and student-centered tasks reflects a holistic pedagogy that supports both language development and learner identity.

Pedagogically, these findings suggest that EFL educators should consider integrating structured opportunities for peer interaction, providing consistent positive feedback, and designing tasks that emphasize authentic use of language. Such strategies can create a classroom culture where speaking is normalized, effort is recognized, and mistakes are seen as part of the learning process.

5. Conclusion

Teachers at Cambridge English School hold a largely positive perception of the strategies they use to enhance students' speaking confidence. The English teachers' perceptions of the strategies they employed to build students' confidence in speaking, with a particular focus on active learning, collaborative learning, praise, and peer-based classroom interactions. In line with Walgito's theory of perception, teachers' understanding of what works in the classroom is not objective or uniform, but rather constructed through experience, cognition, and emotional sensitivity to context. Their perceptions of strategy effectiveness are dynamic and deeply interwoven with their ongoing interactions with students. This emphasizes the importance of not only implementing effective pedagogical strategies but also acknowledging the subjective processes by which teachers make sense of their practice, which ultimately informs their instructional choices in fostering speaking confidence.

The results showed that active learning strategies allowed students to engage meaningfully with language, while collaborative learning created supportive peer environments that encouraged participation, especially among less confident or lower-proficiency students. Praise and positive feedback were also emphasized as critical tools in lowering anxiety and validating student effort, fostering a safe space for language experimentation. Importantly, teachers observed clear behavioral and linguistic indicators of increased confidence over time, such as greater student participation, expanded vocabulary, and improved fluency. The discussion connected these insights to key theoretical frameworks in second language acquisition, including Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, Krashen's affective filter hypothesis, and Bandura's concept of self-efficacy. Together, the evidence points to the need for language teachers to move beyond grammar-focused instruction and create emotionally and socially supportive classrooms that promote active communication.

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