

EXPLORING STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF ACADEMIC SELF-EFFICACY IN DEVELOPING ENGLISH SPEAKING SKILLS (A QUALITATIVE STUDY)

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Abstract: This study explores students' perceptions of academic self-efficacy in developing English speaking skills among junior high school students. Using a qualitative descriptive method, the research involved two purposively selected eighth-grade students at SMP Negeri 9 Cirebon, each exhibiting different confidence levels in speaking English. Data were collected through classroom observation, semi-structured interviews, and a speaking test. Findings revealed that students with higher self-efficacy demonstrated greater motivation, confidence, and persistence in speaking activities, whereas those with lower self-efficacy showed anxiety and hesitation. Internal factors such as prior success and emotional regulation, along with external factors such as teacher feedback and peer support, were found to strongly influence students' self-efficacy. The study concludes that building a supportive classroom atmosphere and integrating confidence-building activities into teaching can significantly enhance students' speaking competence.

Keywords: Academic self-efficacy, student perceptions, speaking skills, English language learning, qualitative study.

INTRODUCTION

Speaking English effectively remains one of the most difficult competencies for EFL learners, particularly in Indonesia, where English is taught as a foreign language rather than used for daily communication (Normawati et al., 2023). Although students have been exposed to English since elementary school, many still find it difficult to express themselves confidently. The most common barriers include anxiety, fear of making mistakes, and low self-confidence. These psychological challenges are closely related to the concept of academic self-efficacy, which refers to a student's belief in their ability to accomplish academic tasks successfully (Graham, 2022). In the context of speaking English, self-efficacy determines how willing students are to participate in oral communication, how they manage anxiety, and how persistent they are in improving their proficiency (Waddington, 2023).

Self-efficacy plays a pivotal role in shaping students' motivation, engagement, and emotional regulation in language learning. Students with high self-efficacy tend to demonstrate greater persistence, effort, and optimism in completing speaking tasks, even when faced with difficulties (Xu & Liu, 2023). Conversely, learners with low self-efficacy are more likely to avoid participation, give up easily, and experience higher anxiety, which negatively affects their language development (Rahmawati, 2024). The perception of one's own speaking ability influences not only performance outcomes but also long-term attitudes toward learning English. When students believe they are capable, they are more willing to communicate and take risks in speaking, which are essential components of language fluency.

According to Mazzetti et al. (2020), self-efficacy has a direct impact on academic performance because it regulates cognitive, motivational, and emotional processes. Students who feel confident in their academic abilities use more effective learning strategies, such as goal setting and self-monitoring, which improve their overall outcomes. In the same way, Özcanlı and Kozikoğlu (2024) found that students with high levels of self-efficacy in speaking are better at organizing thoughts, speaking more fluently, and recovering quickly from errors during communication. These findings highlight the importance of psychological readiness in supporting linguistic competence.

Several studies have shown that developing self-efficacy in speaking requires more than linguistic instruction; it depends on how learners perceive their own progress and how they are supported by their teachers and peers. Halim et al. (2023) revealed that students who practiced self-regulated learning by setting personal goals and reflecting on their performance achieved higher speaking proficiency. Similarly, Septiana and Rahayuningsih (2022)

discovered that teacher feedback, emotional support, and classroom atmosphere significantly influence students' willingness to participate in English-speaking activities. These studies confirm that self-efficacy is both an internal and external construct, shaped by the interaction between personal belief and the learning environment (Wei et al., 2022).

In the Indonesian classroom context, speaking is often perceived as the most anxiety-provoking skill due to limited opportunities for authentic interaction. Traditional teacher-centered instruction and an emphasis on grammatical accuracy have made students overly cautious about speaking (Abduhalilovich et al., 2024). As a result, many learners hesitate to use English spontaneously, fearing negative evaluation from teachers or peers (Bagus & Bayu, 2023). This situation underscores the need to shift the focus from mere linguistic correctness to confidence-building and communicative competence. Educators must understand the psychological aspects of speaking performance and implement pedagogical strategies that strengthen students' belief in their abilities.

Bárkányi (2021) emphasized that self-efficacy is closely linked to motivation and speaking anxiety in language learning. Students with higher confidence are more likely to view mistakes as learning opportunities, while those with lower self-efficacy interpret them as signs of failure. Therefore, addressing learners' self-perception is as crucial as teaching linguistic forms. When teachers create supportive environments that normalize errors, provide constructive feedback, and encourage participation, students gradually develop stronger self-efficacy. This sense of belief then translates into higher speaking fluency and more positive attitudes toward language learning.

Although self-efficacy has been extensively studied in second language acquisition, most previous research has focused on quantitative correlations rather than qualitative insights. For instance, Wang and Sun (2020) examined the relationship between self-efficacy and language proficiency through meta-analysis, demonstrating a strong positive link between the two. However, fewer studies have explored the lived experiences of students how they internally construct their sense of efficacy, respond to classroom challenges, and regulate their emotions while speaking English. Thus, there remains a research gap in understanding the subjective nature of self-efficacy within authentic learning contexts, especially at the junior high school level in Indonesia.

This study aims to fill that gap by exploring how students perceive their academic self-efficacy in developing English speaking skills, focusing on both internal and external factors that shape their confidence. Internal factors include prior learning experiences, motivation, and emotional regulation, while external factors involve teacher support, peer influence, and classroom climate. By investigating these dimensions, the study seeks to uncover how students interpret their speaking experiences and what contributes to their confidence or hesitation in using English.

This research introduces a scientific novelty by analyzing students' self-efficacy through a qualitative descriptive approach. Rather than measuring self-efficacy numerically, this study captures the depth of students' perspectives through interviews, observations, and speaking assessments. Such an approach provides a more comprehensive understanding of how learners develop and maintain confidence in real learning environments. It also highlights how social interaction and emotional safety contribute to students' willingness to speak.

The findings are expected to provide theoretical contributions to the field of educational psychology and EFL pedagogy by illustrating how self-efficacy operates within the sociocultural context of Indonesian classrooms. Practically, the results can help teachers design instruction that nurtures self-belief, promotes risk-taking in speaking, and fosters supportive learning communities. Teachers can, for example, use scaffolding techniques, provide step-by-step speaking activities, and incorporate reflective feedback sessions to strengthen students' self-efficacy (Halim et al., 2023; Rahmawati, 2024).

RESEARCH METHOD

This research used a qualitative descriptive approach with a phenomenological orientation to explore students' perceptions of academic self-efficacy in developing English speaking skills. The qualitative method was chosen because it enables in-depth exploration of students' beliefs, emotions, and experiences in real classroom settings, allowing a holistic understanding of how they interpret their confidence and communication performance (Creswell & Creswell, 2019).

The study was conducted at Public Junior High School 9, Cirebon City, Indonesia, during the second semester of the 2024/2025 academic year. The school was selected purposively because English speaking activities were regularly integrated into the curriculum, yet many students still displayed anxiety and low confidence when speaking English. These

conditions made the site suitable for investigating the role of self-efficacy in shaping students' speaking behaviors.

The participants were two eighth-grade students, aged 13–14, chosen through purposive sampling. The English teacher assisted in identifying students with contrasting levels of self-efficacy one categorized as confident and the other as less confident in speaking. This method was effective for generating rich, comparative insights (Halim et al., 2023). Both students participated voluntarily, after receiving a full explanation of the study's purpose, and pseudonyms were used to protect their identities. Ethical approval was obtained from the school, and confidentiality was strictly maintained (Rahmawati, 2024).

Data were gathered through classroom observation, semi-structured interviews, and short speaking performance tasks. Observation allowed the researcher to record students' verbal and non-verbal behaviors, including hesitation, participation, and reactions to feedback, across two 80-minute English sessions. The semi-structured interviews served as the primary data source, conducted in a mix of English and Bahasa Indonesia to ensure clarity. Each interview lasted around 35 minutes and was recorded using a Sony ICD-PX470 voice recorder. The questions explored confidence levels, learning experiences, motivation, teacher support, and peer influence. In addition, a speaking task was used to observe natural communication performance and cross-check the interview data. Students performed simple oral tasks such as describing a daily activity and responding to short prompts, which were video-recorded using an Oppo Reno8 smartphone.

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework. The process involved reading and re-reading transcripts, coding meaningful statements, grouping similar codes, and developing themes that represented key ideas. Three major themes emerged: internal factors (motivation, past success, emotion), external factors (teacher feedback, peer support, classroom atmosphere), and coping strategies (self-regulation and persistence). All coding was done manually to ensure close engagement with the data, and results were verified through member checking, where participants reviewed transcripts for accuracy.

Trustworthiness was ensured through triangulation, peer debriefing, and reflective journaling. Data from observation, interviews, and speaking performance were compared to

confirm consistency, while two English teachers reviewed the coding process to enhance reliability. Ethical research conduct was prioritized throughout: participants' rights were respected, participation was voluntary, and all recordings were stored securely. Emotional well-being was considered by creating a supportive environment during interviews to avoid discomfort when discussing anxiety or fear of speaking.

This methodological framework ensured the research could be replicated under similar conditions. The combination of interviews, observation, and speaking assessment provided a comprehensive view of students' lived experiences. The qualitative design enabled the researcher to go beyond numerical measures and capture the nuanced ways self-efficacy influences communication behavior. By integrating internal and external perspectives, this approach provided deeper insight into how belief, motivation, and environment interact to shape students' willingness to speak English. The study's method ensured rich, authentic data and strong contextual understanding, offering valuable guidance for teachers and future researchers seeking to strengthen students' confidence and performance in English speaking.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

RESULT

Classroom Observation and Student Behavior

The classroom observation revealed notable behavioral differences between the two participants. Student A frequently raised her hand, maintained steady eye contact, and continued speaking even after minor mistakes. In contrast, Student B appeared more hesitant, often waiting for the teacher's prompt before engaging in classroom discussions. Non-verbal cues such as posture, gestures, and tone of voice further illustrated these distinctions. Student A displayed confidence through open body language and steady tone, while Student B often avoided eye contact and showed visible nervousness. These behavioral indicators suggest that Student A possessed a higher level of self-efficacy, enabling her to participate more actively and confidently in English-speaking activities, while Student B's low self-perception limited her communicative engagement (Septiana & Rahayuningsih, 2022).

Figure 1. *Learning activities during English class (Grade VIII, Public Junior High School 9 Cirebon city, 2025).*



Interview and Self-Efficacy Strategies

Interview findings indicated that Student A demonstrated proactive learning behavior supported by strong self-belief. She set a personal goal to speak English fluently within one year and practiced daily for at least five minutes through mirror exercises and peer conversations. Her success experience receiving praise from her teacher for a class presentation became a powerful mastery experience that strengthened her self-confidence. In contrast, Student B reported irregular practice habits, reliance on textbook memorization, and feelings of anxiety when speaking in front of peers. Laughter or negative reactions from classmates weakened her self-assurance, making her less willing to participate in speaking activities. These contrasting patterns of behavior and self-perception highlight how internal motivation and social feedback jointly shape students' self-efficacy in speaking English (Halim et al., 2023).

Figure 2. *Interview sessions with Student A and Student B (Public Junior School 9 Cirebon city, 2025).*



Speaking Test Results

During the speaking test conducted via Zoom, Student A produced longer, coherent sentences with accurate structure and fluent delivery. She was able to paraphrase and use filler words to maintain the flow of speech. Student B, on the other hand, used shorter utterances, paused frequently, and displayed limited vocabulary range. Despite grammatical simplicity, Student A’s responses were rich in content and demonstrated her ability to organize thoughts effectively, while Student B’s performance reflected low self-confidence and linguistic hesitation. This performance gap further confirmed the relationship between perceived self-efficacy and speaking proficiency (Özcanlı & Kozikoğlu, 2024).

Table 1. Speaking, Interview, and Presentation Assessment Summary

Component	Key Indicators	Student A (Score)	Student B (Score)
Speaking Test	Fluency, pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, confidence	21/24	13/24
Interview	Expressiveness, content relevance, reflection, awareness	15/16	9/16
Presentation Task	Idea organization, media use, delivery, engagement	13/16	8/16
Total		49/56	30/56

Source: Field data from Public Junior High School 9 Cirebon city (2025).

DISCUSSION

The Relationship Between Self-Efficacy and English-Speaking Performance

The findings of this study strongly support the theoretical assumption that academic self-efficacy has a significant impact on students’ oral communication performance. Student A’s higher self-efficacy beliefs were expressed through her confidence, persistence, and strategic engagement during speaking tasks. In contrast, Student B’s low self-efficacy was reflected in avoidance behavior, speech hesitation, and dependence on external cues from the teacher. This contrast mirrors the findings of Xu and Liu (2023), who revealed that students with strong self-efficacy demonstrate greater communicative persistence, higher fluency, and better self-regulation when performing speaking tasks.

Self-efficacy functions as a motivational and cognitive mechanism that directly influences how learners approach linguistic challenges. When learners perceive themselves as capable, they exert greater effort, maintain focus longer, and recover more quickly from

mistakes (Bandura, 1997). In the present study, Student A exemplified this mechanism: she displayed consistent verbal initiative, actively volunteered in class, and viewed mistakes as opportunities for improvement rather than threats. Meanwhile, Student B tended to withdraw after errors, illustrating the demotivating cycle caused by self-doubt. This supports Halim et al. (2023), who noted that EFL learners with lower self-efficacy are more vulnerable to language anxiety and tend to avoid communicative interaction.

The contrast between the two students also demonstrates how self-efficacy can mediate affective factors such as anxiety and confidence. Student A's willingness to speak despite imperfections aligns with Graham's (2022) view that self-efficacy transforms anxiety into productive tension students feel challenged but not paralyzed. In contrast, Student B's hesitation shows how negative self-belief amplifies anxiety and limits speech output. This emotional dimension underscores that speaking proficiency in EFL contexts is not merely linguistic competence, but a dynamic psychological construct shaped by self-perception, emotion regulation, and social environment.

Furthermore, the consistency between self-perception (as expressed in interviews) and actual performance (as shown in speaking tests) indicates the strong predictive validity of self-efficacy in determining speaking success. Students who believe they can succeed are more likely to practice voluntarily and internalize feedback constructively. The correlation between belief and performance found in this study thus confirms previous empirical results that self-efficacy is a key predictor of speaking fluency and accuracy in second language learning (Özcanlı & Kozikoğlu, 2024).

Sources of Self-Efficacy: Mastery Experience, Verbal Persuasion, and Emotional Regulation

Self-efficacy is not an innate trait; rather, it develops through four main sources identified by Bandura: mastery experiences, vicarious learning, verbal persuasion, and emotional arousal. The data from this study illustrate how these sources operated differently for the two participants. Student A's confidence was built on multiple mastery experiences, such as successful classroom presentations and positive teacher evaluations. These experiences acted as reinforcing feedback loops, validating her effort and enhancing her perceived competence. This finding aligns with Mazzetti et al. (2020), who emphasized that

repeated success in academic tasks strengthens students' future performance through heightened efficacy beliefs.

Student B, on the other hand, lacked sufficient mastery experiences. Her previous speaking attempts were often accompanied by fear and embarrassment, particularly when peers laughed at her mistakes. Such negative experiences created an emotional imprint that hindered her motivation to participate in subsequent speaking tasks. In line with Wang and Sun (2020), such experiences can weaken learners' self-regulation and result in avoidance of communicative risk-taking.

Verbal persuasion from teachers also played a crucial role. Student A reported that her teacher's encouragement phrases like "You can do it!" and "Good job!" helped her feel more comfortable when speaking English. This form of social reinforcement is essential for building efficacy beliefs, especially in adolescents who rely heavily on teacher approval as a measure of competence (Graham, 2022). In contrast, Student B's experiences with peer ridicule diminished the positive impact of teacher support. The conflicting feedback within the classroom social environment created cognitive dissonance: while the teacher encouraged, peers discouraged. Such inconsistencies illustrate how fragile developing self-efficacy can be, particularly in contexts where social comparison is strong.

Emotional regulation also emerged as a defining feature differentiating the two students. Student A managed her nervousness through preparation strategies such as mirror practice, note-taking, and positive self-talk. These practices helped her maintain composure during speaking tasks and transformed anxiety into focused energy. Student B, however, reported physiological symptoms of anxiety, such as shaking hands and avoidance of eye contact, confirming that unregulated fear can disrupt cognitive processing during speech production (Thao et al., 2024). Hence, emotional management must be explicitly taught in EFL pedagogy not as an afterthought but as an integral skill alongside pronunciation and grammar.

Classroom Climate, Pedagogical Implications, and Theoretical Integration

The classroom climate emerged as a critical external determinant of students' speaking self-efficacy. The supportive environment observed in Student A's experience encouraging teachers, cooperative peers, and low anxiety contributed significantly to her verbal engagement. Conversely, Student B's exposure to ridicule and judgment from peers created a psychologically unsafe learning space, suppressing her participation. This observation echoes

Bárkányi (2021), who asserted that an emotionally secure classroom is fundamental to fostering communicative competence in language learners.

A positive learning atmosphere not only influences emotional comfort but also cognitive performance. When students feel supported and unafraid of failure, their working memory is freed from anxiety, allowing for better lexical retrieval and grammatical control (Halim et al., 2023). The teacher's role, therefore, extends beyond delivering linguistic input; they must act as motivational architects who structure classroom interactions to reinforce mastery and minimize performance pressure (Zhao & Baharom, 2023). Constructive feedback, peer collaboration, and gradual task sequencing starting from guided dialogues to independent presentations were found to be effective pedagogical interventions for enhancing speaking self-efficacy (Bagus & Bayu, 2023).

The findings also demonstrate that feedback specificity matters more than frequency. General praise ("Good job") provides emotional comfort but limited developmental guidance. Specific, process-oriented feedback ("You used fillers well to keep talking" or "Your sentence restructuring was clear") strengthens the perceived connection between effort and improvement. Waddington (2023) confirmed that such targeted feedback helps learners build accurate self-assessment, a key component of self-efficacy formation.

Pedagogically, the results of this study highlight the need to create structured "micro-success experiences" within speaking curricula. For example, teachers can design short, manageable speaking tasks (60–90 seconds) that guarantee achievable success for low-efficacy learners. This approach, as supported by Rahmawati (2024), reinforces positive affect and creates a progressive exposure to risk-taking. Similarly, peer modeling allowing confident students like Student A to demonstrate effective speaking behaviors can serve as vicarious learning for peers such as Student B, who may internalize the belief that improvement is attainable.

Theoretically, this study extends Bandura's social cognitive theory by illustrating its operation in an EFL adolescent context. Self-efficacy, as evidenced here, is not a static individual attribute but a socially constructed belief system maintained through interaction, feedback, and emotion. The triangular relationship among the individual (belief and motivation), behavior (speaking performance), and environment (classroom support) reflects

Bandura's reciprocal determinism model (Woodcoch & Routnaki, 2023). Hence, interventions should be systemic rather than individual addressing both learner psychology and instructional ecology.

This study confirms that enhancing English-speaking proficiency in EFL settings requires more than linguistic instruction. It demands cultivating emotional resilience, designing psychologically safe learning spaces, and embedding structured mastery experiences that strengthen students' sense of control and achievement. Students like A flourish when belief, environment, and pedagogy align; students like B require deliberate scaffolding to rebuild confidence and transform anxiety into motivation. As Özcanlı and Kozikoğlu (2024) and Graham (2022) suggest, self-efficacy is the silent architecture of communicative success once strengthened, it empowers learners not only to speak, but to believe that their voice matters.

CONCLUSION

This research investigated the influence of students' academic self-efficacy on their English-speaking performance at *Public Junior High School 9 Cirebon city*. The findings clearly showed that students with higher self-efficacy demonstrated stronger confidence, fluency, and perseverance in speaking English, while those with lower self-efficacy struggled with hesitation, fear of mistakes, and limited participation. Through classroom observations, interviews, and speaking tests, the study confirmed that self-efficacy directly affects how learners engage, take risks, and sustain motivation in oral communication. These results indicate that the research objectives understanding the relationship between self-efficacy and speaking ability were successfully achieved.

The study also revealed that internal factors such as motivation, mastery experiences, and emotional regulation work together with external influences like teacher feedback, peer support, and classroom climate to shape students' self-efficacy. Students who received constructive feedback and practiced in supportive environments developed stronger self-belief and performed better in speaking activities. Conversely, negative peer reactions and lack of encouragement weakened students' confidence and reduced their willingness to participate. These patterns highlight that self-efficacy is not only a psychological state but also a social construct built through continuous interaction and experience.

Strengthening students' self-efficacy should be a central focus in English language teaching. Teachers play a crucial role in fostering learners' confidence by designing gradual

speaking tasks, providing specific and positive feedback, and ensuring an emotionally safe learning atmosphere. When students believe in their ability to succeed, they become more motivated, resilient, and active in communication. Thus, developing self-efficacy is both a psychological foundation and a pedagogical strategy for improving English-speaking proficiency and preparing students to communicate confidently in global contexts.

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