

# Exploring Senior High School Students Speaking Confidence During Pair Work Activities

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## ABSTRACT

This study investigates the role of pair-work activities in developing students' speaking confidence at SMAN 5 Palu. Using a descriptive qualitative research design, four Grade 11 students were purposively selected based on varying levels of speaking confidence. Data were collected through classroom observation, semi-structured interviews, and documentation. The findings reveal that pair-work activities create a supportive, low-anxiety environment that encourages students to speak more freely. Students reported feeling more comfortable, less nervous, and more motivated when interacting with a peer instead of speaking individually or in front of the whole class. Despite challenges such as limited vocabulary, pronunciation difficulties, and fear of making mistakes, pair-work activities helped reduce anxiety and increased communication effort. The study concludes that pair-work is an effective strategy for improving speaking confidence and suggests that teachers integrate more structured and supportive pair-speaking tasks in classroom practice.

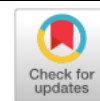
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## INTRODUCTION

Speaking is one of the most challenging skills for Indonesian EFL learners, as many students still experience anxiety, hesitation, and fear of making mistakes when using English. These psychological barriers reduce their willingness to participate and limit their speaking practice. Research by (Ajiza et al., 2022) shows that low confidence, fear of negative evaluation, and limited proficiency are key factors contributing to speaking difficulties in EFL classrooms. In pair-work settings, such challenges can hinder students from speaking freely and developing the confidence needed for effective communication.

In the Indonesian context, speaking anxiety commonly emerges because students rarely use English in daily interaction, and classroom settings often emphasize accuracy over communication. As highlighted by (Sari et al., 2024), many students feel tense when speaking in front of the whole class, yet become more expressive and relaxed when interacting in pairs. This suggests that instructional scaffolding – especially in the form of collaborative speaking tasks – may help reduce the pressure that typically inhibits students' confidence in oral communication.

Pair work is one of the most widely adopted communicative strategies to promote meaningful interaction. It provides a supportive, low-stakes environment where learners can rehearse ideas, negotiate meaning, and receive immediate feedback from peers. (Kerimov et al., 2023) found that activities such as Think-Pair-Share (TPS) allow learners to clarify their thoughts privately before speaking publicly, which significantly increases their confidence. Similarly, (Saputra et al., 2024) reported that pair work enables students to speak more freely because they feel less worried about negative evaluation. These findings highlight the pedagogical value of pair speaking tasks as an alternative to

teacher-fronted speaking activities.

Other studies also demonstrate that structured and collaborative activities – such as role-play (Santoso & Prasetyo, 2024), communicative games (Karsudianto, 2020), and interactive group tasks (Maisaroh et al., 2024) can alleviate speaking anxiety and boost self-confidence when guided by supportive teacher feedback. Teacher behavior, including encouragement, positive reinforcement, and the creation of a non-threatening environment, has been identified as a decisive factor in shaping students' willingness to communicate (Ulpa et al., 2025) (Khoudri, 2024). These insights indicate that improving speaking confidence requires both pedagogical strategies and psychological support.

Although previous studies have examined speaking anxiety, teacher strategies, and the impact of collaborative tasks in general, research specifically exploring how senior high school students experience pair work as a confidence-building strategy remains limited especially in the Indonesian high school context. Most existing studies focus on either younger learners (Saputra et al., 2024) or university students (Ajiza et al., 2022), making senior high school students a group that requires further investigation. Additionally, few studies integrate students' real-time behaviors during pair work with their personal reflections and challenges.

Therefore, this study aims to fill that gap by exploring how senior high school students experience pair speaking activities and how these activities contribute to building their speaking confidence. By examining students with different confidence levels, this research provides a nuanced understanding of how pair work supports or challenges learners during communication. The findings are expected to contribute not only to classroom pedagogy but also to broader discussions on affective factors in EFL learning, particularly regarding how interaction-based strategies can cultivate students' confidence and willingness to communicate.

## METHOD

### Research Design

This study employed a descriptive qualitative research design, which is widely recognized as suitable for examining students' real-life experiences, perceptions, and behaviors in natural classroom contexts (Miles, Huberman, 2014). This design enabled the researcher to explore not only students' observable speaking performance during pair-work but also the underlying feelings and confidence-related factors that influenced their participation. A qualitative approach was essential for capturing students' personal experiences, emotional responses, and interactions during pair speaking activities, providing a rich and in-depth understanding of how pair work contributes to speaking confidence, consistent with the views of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña.

### Subjects

The subjects of this study consisted of four Grade 12 students at SMAN 5 Palu, selected through purposive sampling. The selection process involved a screening questionnaire, teacher recommendations, and short classroom observations to ensure variation in speaking confidence levels. Students' questionnaire scores (10–50) were categorized into low, medium, and high confidence levels. Based on these criteria, the final participants included one highly confident student, two moderately confident students, and one student with low speaking confidence. Purposive sampling ensures that participants represent a range of perspectives relevant to the research focus (Zoss, 2015) (Untong et al., 2023).

### Procedures

The research procedures consisted of conducting interviews, classroom observations, and collecting documentary data. Throughout the process, the researcher actively observed students during pair speaking activities, focusing on interaction patterns, emotional expressions, fluency, and confidence indicators. Observations were guided by a structured checklist adapted from validated instruments (Kellam, 2018). The interviews were conducted

face-to-face, recorded with permission, and transcribed for authenticity. Documentary data such as lesson plans (RPP), attendance lists, and teacher notes were also collected to support triangulation.

### Three Primary Data Collection Instruments Were Employed

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore students' perceptions, emotional responses, and challenges experienced during pair-speaking activities. The interview guide was adapted from previous research on speaking confidence and communication anxiety (Kellam, 2018) (Tridinanti, 2018). All interviews were audio-recorded with consent and transcribed to support thematic interpretation. 2. Classroom observation was used to capture real-time behavioral indicators of speaking confidence during pair-work sessions, including engagement, hesitation, interaction, and error-handling. An observation checklist validated through CVR and CVI procedures (Zamanzadeh et al., 2015) guided the process. Field notes were also taken to document spontaneous reactions and classroom dynamics relevant to students' confidence levels. 3. Documentary data including lesson plans (RPP), attendance records, and teacher notes—were analyzed to contextualize classroom practices and verify patterns observed in interviews and observations. These documents supported data triangulation and provided additional insight into how speaking activities were structured and implemented (Untong et al., 2023).

### Data Analysis Techniques

Data from interviews, classroom observations, and documentary notes were analyzed using thematic analysis. The process involved coding, categorizing, and identifying emerging themes related to students' speaking confidence, anxiety reduction, and interaction patterns during pair-work activities. The analysis was guided by theories of affective factors, communicative interaction, and learner confidence to interpret how pair speaking shaped students' emotional comfort, willingness to speak, and overall confidence development.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal that students experienced notable emotional changes when participating in pair-work speaking activities. Observations and interview data indicated that most students felt more relaxed and less anxious when speaking with a peer rather than addressing the whole class. Students with higher levels of confidence expressed that they enjoyed exchanging ideas and appreciated the collaborative nature of pair interaction. Their responses suggested that speaking in pairs provided a sense of comfort and spontaneity. This supports the findings of (Saputra et al., 2024), who noted that peer interaction tends to lower tension and encourage more natural communicative behavior.

Students with moderate confidence reported that pair work helped reduce the pressure they typically felt during speaking tasks, although they still experienced occasional hesitation—particularly when unsure about vocabulary choices or pronunciation. Meanwhile, students with lower confidence initially displayed nervousness and apprehension. However, as the interaction progressed, these students became gradually more comfortable and willing to participate. This steady improvement aligns with the explanation provided by (Sari et al., 2024), who stated that supportive peer dialogue can gradually strengthen learners' affective readiness and willingness to communicate.

The analysis also identified several factors that contributed to the development of students' speaking confidence during pair-work sessions. Supportive peer interaction played a prominent role, allowing students to feel safe when making mistakes and to express their ideas without fear of harsh judgment. The learning environment during pair tasks was perceived as less intimidating compared to whole-class speaking, which further encouraged participation. Teacher encouragement also appeared to influence motivation positively, while familiar topics helped students formulate ideas more easily. Opportunities to rehearse or mentally organize their thoughts before speaking provided an additional sense of preparedness. These findings reflect (Kerimov et al., 2023), who emphasized that structured peer collaboration supports both cognitive preparation and emotional comfort.

Despite the benefits, students still faced several challenges that impacted their speaking performance. Limited vocabulary often restricted their ability to express ideas fluently, and concerns related to pronunciation caused noticeable hesitation. Fear of making grammatical mistakes remained a prominent issue, especially among students with lower confidence. Some students also worried about being judged by their partners, although this anxiety was milder compared to whole-class situations. Such difficulties are consistent with the issues documented by (Ajiza et al., 2022), who highlighted that language learners frequently grapple with both linguistic limitations and psychological pressure.

Classroom observations further revealed that students tended to be more active and engaged during pair-work activities than in whole-class speaking tasks. Even students who initially appeared quiet and hesitant became more involved when interacting in pairs. Many students attempted to construct sentences independently without waiting for teacher correction, indicating a reduction in their fear of making mistakes. Overall, the communicative environment created through pair-work activities appeared to provide meaningful opportunities for students to practice speaking with greater confidence. These results support the findings of (Maisaroh et al., 2024), who argued that pair-work fosters a communicative learning atmosphere that is conducive to the development of students' speaking confidence.

The results of this study demonstrate that pair-work plays a significant role in shaping students' speaking confidence. The findings resonate with prior research, which emphasizes the importance of interaction-based learning in reducing anxiety and promoting oral communication (Saputra et al., 2024) (Sari et al., 2024). Pair-work creates an interpersonal space where students feel psychologically safer, enabling them to take risks in language production—something high-anxiety learners often avoid (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994).

Furthermore, peer collaboration provides immediate feedback, encourages turn-taking, and allows learners to negotiate meaning more freely. These interactional benefits contribute to both cognitive and affective growth. Students in this study indicated that speaking with a classmate felt more natural and less intimidating than speaking publicly, reinforcing (Ulpa et al., 2025) assertion that supportive classroom dynamics are essential for developing confidence.

Despite persisting challenges such as limited vocabulary and fear of errors, students were more willing to practice during pair activities. This suggests that confidence is not developed by eliminating all linguistic difficulties but by creating conditions where students feel empowered to try, revise, and improve. pair-work should be positioned not merely as an activity but as a continuous pedagogical strategy that nurtures learners' emotional comfort and communicative engagement.

## CONCLUSIONS

Based on the results of this research pair-work activities significantly enhance students' speaking confidence by providing a supportive, low-anxiety environment where learners feel comfortable expressing ideas. Students of varying confidence levels benefited from peer interaction, though the extent of progress differed among them. Pair-work helped reduce fear of mistakes, encouraged more active participation, and motivated students to practice oral communication more frequently. For teaching implications, English teachers are encouraged to implement pair-based speaking tasks consistently and to design activities that allow students to prepare ideas, negotiate meaning, and build trust. Moreover, teachers should continue offering encouragement and constructive feedback to sustain students' motivation and confidence.

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