

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Analysis of constant participation in public speaking and debate can conquer fear and gain confidence

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ABSTRACT

Students experience high speaking anxiety due to fear of negative evaluation, concerns about making mistakes, and self-consciousness in front of peers and instructors. This anxiety is often intensified by limited prior exposure to public speaking, a lack of confidence in language proficiency, and pressure to meet academic expectations. As a result, speaking anxiety can hinder students' participation, affect their academic performance, and impact their ability to develop essential communication skills for future professional settings. This paper explored the experiences of college public speakers in intensive speaking experiences like public speaking and debates, how they managed their anxiety, and how they developed long-term engagement to this activity. College students (n=16) were selected using purposive sampling, with preliminary data gathered through open-ended questions to ensure their suitability for the study. The findings suggested that intensive public speaking experiences contributed to students' confidence, cognitive skills, growth mindset, and creativity. Confidence was built through practice, emotional regulation, and consistency, allowing students to manage anxiety and articulate their thoughts effectively. These experiences enhanced cognitive abilities, such as quick thinking, logical structuring, and information recall, which were essential for public speaking and debates. In addition, students developed a growth mindset by recognizing that confidence and competence were skills cultivated through persistent effort and constructive feedback. Lastly, public speaking encouraged creativity, as students learned to present compelling arguments, explore innovative communication techniques, and engage audiences dynamically. Experiential learning opportunities can be introduced by encouraging a positive environment, providing constructive feedback, ensuring reflective practice, and integrating real-world applications that promote active engagement and skill development in speaking.

Keywords: confidence; experiential learning; public speaking; speaking anxiety

1. Introduction

Speaking anxiety affects students' academic and professional communication, making it essential to

ARTICLE INFO

Received: 18 February 2025 | Accepted: 28 May 2025 | Available online: 11 June 2025

CITATION

Quinto JB, Sildon GA, Dalocdoc VB, et al. Analysis of constant participation in public speaking and debate can conquer fear and gain confidence. *Environment and Social Psychology* 2025; 10(6): 3456 doi:10.59429/esp.v10i6.3456

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address through education and psychological support^[1]. Colleges implement guidelines to help students manage public speaking anxiety, as speaking tasks are integral to academic and career success. Anxiety can hinder idea delivery, class participation, and business presentations, which are crucial for professional growth^[2].

Speaking anxiety is very common among Filipino students, especially in academic and formal settings where public speaking is required. This anxiety is often rooted in a fear of negative evaluations, where students worry about making grammatical errors, mispronunciations, or being perceived as incompetent by their peers and instructors. Despite English being widely taught, the lack of regular conversational use outside the classroom can hinder oral proficiency and fuel anxiety in performance-based tasks such as speeches and presentations. Plandano et al.^[3] suggested that school administrators should actively promote public speaking opportunities both within and outside the institution, encouraging student participation in these events to enhance their speaking skills and gradually reduce public speaking anxiety.

This paper analyzed the application of experiential learning in the context of intensive speaking experiences like debates and public speaking. Learning is inherently tied to experience, as one cannot truly acquire knowledge without engaging in practical application. For instance, mastering the act of tying shoelaces requires hands-on practice, just as the ability to ride a bike becomes ingrained through repeated experience. John Dewey^[4] emphasized that while not all experiences contribute equally to learning, “all genuine education comes about through experience.” Experiential learning views experience as a fundamental component of knowledge acquisition, asserting that knowledge is created through the transformation of experience^[5]. Despite its significance, empirical research on experiential learning remains limited^[6].

A case study from Shenoy, Challa and Narain^[7] revealed that experiential learning enhanced students’ confidence and had a positive influence on their spoken English proficiency. Engaging in two-way interactions, including discussions, debates, constructive feedback, and repeated speaking practice, helped alleviate their fear of public speaking and build a sense of empowerment. Therefore, integrating experiential learning into educational programs should be encouraged, as it could help in strengthening students’ confidence and improving their spoken communication skills.

One major critique is that Kolb’s model assumes a linear progression through the learning cycle, which may not align with the often non-linear, emotional, and context-dependent nature of real-world learning. Experiential learning places a high demand on learners’ autonomy and instructors’ ability to facilitate meaningful experiences, which may not be feasible in all classroom contexts, particularly where resources, time, or institutional support are lacking. The nature of experiences also poses challenges for standardizing or assessing learning outcomes. Despite these limitations, this study sought to use experiential learning as a practical intervention for minimizing anxiety, believing that repeated exposure to intensive speaking engagements, such as debates, impromptu speeches, and reflective discussions, could build emotional regulation, resilience, and a growth mindset. This paper would like to contribute to the understanding of experiential learning in reducing speaking anxiety among students. Experiential Learning Theory proposes that experiential learning activities can serve as a more effective and meaningful approach to student learning, particularly in initiating the learning cycle^[5]. In applying experiential learning, Gittings, Taplin and Kerr^[8] suggested that future research should prioritize evaluation of the benefits of experiential learning activities.

2. Literature review

2.1. Public speaking anxiety

Oral communication apprehension refers to the anxiety individuals experience when speaking in public or before an audience, potentially hindering effective communication and impacting academic and professional success^[9]. This anxiety stems from personality traits such as introversion, shyness, and self-consciousness, as well as past negative experiences and fear of judgment^[10]. In addition, situational factors, including audience size, topic complexity, and available support, influence apprehension levels^[9].

Pörhölä and Kunttu^[11] found that certain college students experience significant social anxiety in classroom environments. Filipino college students in Cauayan, Isabela exhibited low to mildly low levels of English language anxiety, suggesting that their familiarity with using English as a second language in classroom settings has helped reduce their anxiety levels^[12]. In contrast, Plandano et al.^[3] discovered that the college students from St. Paul University Surigao exhibited extremely high levels of audience anxiety in public speaking, primarily driven by their fear of being judged for mistakes made during their speech and concerns about appearing nervous before an audience.

Public speaking anxiety often arises in specific situations^[13]. For example, presenting in front of a live audience can trigger symptoms like nervousness, an elevated heart rate, and sweaty palms—characteristics of state anxiety^[14]. Repeated negative experiences in such settings may cause this situational anxiety to evolve into a more generalized fear of public speaking, leading individuals to perceive themselves as consistently anxious in similar contexts^[15]. A study from Olongapo City, Philippines indicate that college students exhibit a notable level of communication apprehension, suggesting they often experience anxiety or nervousness when communicating^[16]. Also, their comfort in using English is moderate, implying a reasonable level of confidence, though not exceptionally high, in engaging with the language across different contexts^[16].

2.2. Speaking engagement

Physical engagement appears to be a crucial element in experiential learning, which integrates social, intellectual, and physical interactions^[17,18]. While the method demands substantial time and effort, it offers unique benefits in both breadth—exposing learners to diverse experiences that develop social competencies—and depth—allowing for sustained engagement that enhances higher-order thinking^[19].

For example, meaningful interaction with people and engagement with local rhythms and histories are essential for understanding the sociocultural and sociospatial dimensions of learning^[20,21]. Effective speakers integrate social, intellectual, and physical elements, using gestures, posture, and movement to reinforce their message and maintain audience interest. Such contextualized learning encourages critical reflection on societal norms and power structures, broadening life experiences and developing transcultural understanding^[6].

2.3. Experiential learning

Experience becomes a learning opportunity when individuals actively engage in reflection, analysis, and application of knowledge gained from real-life situations. Experiential learning places learners at the center of the educational process, requiring active engagement, participation, and direct involvement^[22]. This approach is fundamentally “learning by doing,” emphasizing hands-on, task-oriented activities that are deeply embedded in real-world contexts^[23-25]. Through immersive and often collaborative experiences, learners could explore rich contextual environments that provide uncontrived, real-time learning opportunities^[26,27].

This paper analyzed how exposure to intensive speaking experiences reduces fear in speaking and develops self-confidence among college students. Numerous innovative educational models have emerged, utilizing experiential learning as their basis—including adult education programs, service-learning initiatives, prior learning assessments, and outdoor experiential education. Likewise, the core principles of experiential learning become the foundation for education abroad programs, reinforcing their practical and immersive learning components^[28]. However, experiential learning also presents inherent risks, as learners must explore novel and unpredictable challenges, requiring adaptability, spontaneity, and resilience^[27,29]. Engaging with the real world inevitably involves uncertainty, making each learning experience unique and unlikely to be replicated^[30,31].

Understanding how experiential learning reduces anxiety in public speaking requires examining its role in building confidence and communication skills. However, empirical and theoretical studies on experiential learning remain limited^[6]. Other researchers believed that Kolb's framework is eclectic because the phases of the learning cycle lack an inherent or necessary connection^[32]. This paper considered experiential learning as a distinct and essential approach to education, enabling the promotion deep conceptual understanding and allowing learners to learn from hands-on experiences that reinforce theoretical knowledge.

2.4. Objectives

Speaking anxiety is very common among Filipino students primarily driven by their fear of judgement and lack of speaking experience. This paper analyzed the experiences of college students who are widely exposed to public speaking. This paper explored how they were able to conquer their speaking anxiety and gain confidence as a public speaker. Below are the specific objectives that guide the analysis.

1. Determine how intensive experiences in public speaking shape the confidence of students.
2. Determine the skills or characteristics developed in exposing to intensive speaking experiences.

3. Methods

3.1. Research design

This paper explored the experiences of college students participating in public speaking and debate activities. It described how constant exposure helped in mitigating fear and gaining confidence when participating in these activities. An exploratory design is essential for examining emerging topics and acquiring knowledge about less-studied occurrences^[33,34]. It often utilizes deliberate and organized techniques to uncover notable trends, facilitating the systematic evaluation of sociocultural and psychological dimensions^[35,36].

Although some researchers question its methodological robustness, contemporary scholarly discourse highlights its essential function in deepening comprehension of research topics and ensuring the coherent collection of qualitative information^[37,38]. A key advantage of exploratory studies is their adaptability, allowing changes in response to evolving data. This is an important characteristic for analyzing subjects with limited academic exploration^[39]. This paper answered one critical question in learning: how constant exposure to intensive experiences shape the confidence of students? The findings could contribute to educational psychology by emphasizing the role of experiential learning in reducing anxiety and developing self-assurance, which has broader implications for student development and professional preparedness.

3.2. Participants and sampling

Exploratory studies utilize carefully chosen small participant groups to conduct an in-depth examination of crucial factors and their relationships^[40]. Instead of broad statistical generalization, this approach focusses

on a specific population whose perspectives are essential to understanding the subject under investigation^[36,38]. The number of participants remains flexible, determined primarily by their capacity to offer valuable insights aligned with the research objectives^[41]. A common strategy in exploratory studies is purposive sampling^[42], where individuals are deliberately chosen through a structured identification process^[43].

In this study, an online purposive selection method^[44] was applied, using Google Forms to distribute open-ended questions and collect preliminary perspectives. Five key participant criteria were established: (1) currently enrolled as a college student for Academic Year 2024-2025, (2) enrolled in English courses, (3) participates in public speaking and/or debate clubs, (4) has clear experience in public speaking and/or debates (like competitions, trainings, etc.), and (5) willingness to participate in one-on-one interviews. There were 75 who responded to the online screening for participants but using these criteria only 16 were selected to be interviewed. Having a small sample size allows for in-depth analysis, as it helps in closely examining each participant's responses and identifying subtle patterns and meanings that might be overlooked in larger datasets.

3.3. Instrumentation

A semi-structured protocol was developed to guide the interview process. The interview protocol was designed in accordance with the framework outlined by Kallio et al.^[45], involving essential phases such as establishing prerequisites, integrating prior research, formulating preliminary questions, conducting a pilot test, and refining based on feedback. Follow-up questions were included to enable exploration of participants' perspectives, beliefs, and lived experiences^[46,47].

To enhance coherence and methodological soundness, expert evaluation was carried out to verify alignment with research goals and reinforce the credibility of the findings^[48]. Furthermore, preliminary testing was conducted in evaluating the clarity, relevance, and effectiveness of the questions in eliciting substantive insights^[49,50]. The feedback from experts and participants was used in finalizing the interview guide. The guided interview approach facilitated an in-depth examination of emerging themes while allowing clarifications and additional inquiries^[51]. Following expert review and pilot testing, the finalized interview guide is presented in **Table 1**.

Table 1. Final interview questions

Objectives	Questions
Determine how intensive experiences in public speaking shape the confidence of students.	1. Can you describe a time when you had to engage in intensive public speaking? How did it affect your confidence over time? 2. What challenges did you initially face when speaking in front of an audience, and how have these challenges evolved with more experience? 3. In what ways do you think repeated exposure to public speaking has influenced your self-assurance and ability to communicate effectively?
Determine the skills or characteristics developed in exposing to intensive speaking experiences.	1. What specific skills have you developed as a result of engaging in frequent public speaking activities? 2. How has your ability to handle stress or anxiety changed through repeated exposure to public speaking? 3. Beyond communication skills, what personal traits or professional qualities do you think have been strengthened through your public speaking experiences?

3.4. Data collection

The interviews sought to explore participants' firsthand experiences by utilizing a structured yet adaptable approach to analyze their actions, viewpoints, and personal accounts^[52]. The interviews adhered to a structured process involving informed consent, ethical protocols, confidentiality, and systematic

questioning^[53]. Due to the exploratory nature of this study, semi-structured interviews were conducted to uphold data integrity while permitting natural discussions that uncovered deeper perspectives^[42,54].

Before the interview process, the researchers defined study objectives, developing thematic questions, and reviewing relevant literature to establish a strong investigative foundation^[55,56]. During the interview process, a supportive atmosphere was cultivated, allowing participants to articulate their thoughts openly, including in their chosen language, to mitigate potential linguistic limitations. Probing techniques were employed to reveal underlying meanings and enhance the depth of participants' responses^[40,55]. With permission, interviews were digitally recorded using encrypted mobile devices, while significant themes and preliminary insights were systematically logged in a Microsoft Excel file for further examination.

3.5. Data analysis

Reflexive thematic analysis was conducted to systematically explore qualitative narratives from individual interviews, identifying prevalent themes and patterns that frame the participants' personal experiences. It involves structuring, classifying, and interpreting qualitative data, providing a balance between organization and flexibility for extracting insights directly from participants' accounts^[57,58]. Its flexibility made it particularly suitable for exploratory studies, allowing themes to develop organically rather than being confined by pre-established theoretical frameworks^[59,60].

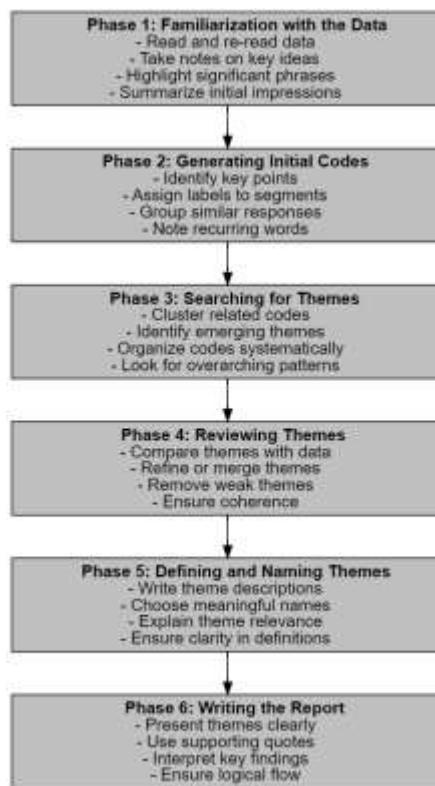


Figure 1. Workflow of reflexive thematic analysis

Braun and Clarke^[61] six-step model was adopted (**Figure 1**), involving data familiarization, coding, theme identification, refinement, definition, and final synthesis. Reflexivity was integral to the process, requiring researchers to critically engage with the data while acknowledging and assessing potential biases—not as limitations but as opportunities to deepen analytical insight^[62,63]. An inductive method was implemented to reduce researcher bias, aligning findings with participants' actual perspectives and enhancing the validity and reliability of the findings^[64]. This approach facilitated an in-depth exploration of

underlying meanings and conceptual themes, not just surface-level categorization. This allowed themes to emerge naturally, preserving the integrity of participants' lived experiences and producing nuanced, contextually relevant interpretations^[59].

4. Results

Objective 1: Determine how intensive experiences in public speaking shape the confidence of students.

The findings highlighted the significant role of intensive public speaking experiences in shaping students' confidence. The results revealed three key themes: Practice, Regulation, and Consistency, each of which contributed to the development of self-assurance in public speaking settings. Practice emerged as a fundamental factor in overcoming anxiety, as students expressed that repeated exposure to speaking situations allowed them to gradually build confidence and familiarity. Regulation was also identified as essential, with students emphasizing that public speaking and debate training helped them manage nervousness, handle pressure, and remain composed in challenging situations. Lastly, consistency in engaging in speaking activities was found to reinforce confidence, enabling students to maintain progress and apply learned techniques effectively.

Theme 1: Practice

College students acknowledged that repeated exposure to speaking engagements helped in shaping their communication skills. Many expressed that consistent practice helped them overcome their initial anxiety and hesitation, allowing them to become more comfortable when addressing an audience.

“For me, practicing public speaking and debate is very important because it has taught me how to communicate effectively. With each practice, I become more prepared for situations where I need to speak in front of others.”

“I know that the only way to get comfortable and face my fear is by practicing every day.”

“With each practice, I get used to being in front of people, and it slowly becomes less scary.”

Students highlighted that through continuous practice, they became more familiar with the experience of speaking in front of others, which contributed to a notable increase in their confidence. They recognized that the key to overcoming fear was persistence, as each practice session reinforced their ability to articulate thoughts clearly and effectively.

“With every practice, I become more familiar with the feeling of speaking in front of others. This helps me build my confidence little by little.”

“Practicing public speaking helps me communicate more clearly and confidently. I learn to share my ideas in a way that people understand and respect. This boosts my confidence in expressing myself in different situations.”

Some shared that while nervousness remained present, regular practice gradually reduced their stage fright and enhanced their ability to manage mistakes. Participants noted that although the fear of making mistakes or forgetting key points persisted, regular practice allowed them to reinforce their knowledge and improve their delivery.

“I still feel nervous when speaking in front of an audience, especially when many people are watching and listening to me. But I know that with practice, it helps reduce my anxiety.”

“I do have stage fright but it reduces with every minor performance. I still fear making mistakes or forgetting to say something, but practice helps me reinforce my knowledge.”

Theme 2: Regulation

College students emphasized the role of regulation in managing anxiety and building confidence in public speaking. They expressed that engaging in public speaking and debate training not only helped them handle pressure effectively but also enabled them to generate and articulate ideas more fluently. Through exposure to speaking environments, they developed the ability to regulate their emotions, particularly in high-pressure situations.

“For me, public speaking and debate really help because I have learned to manage my nervousness.”

“Public speaking and debate training is what I really like to do as it helps me handle pressure well also helps get more ideas out.”

Public speaking and debate allowed them to repeatedly confront their fears in a controlled and supportive environment, making the experience less intimidating over time. This process reinforced their ability to remain calm, composed, and disciplined, even in challenging circumstances. Participants acknowledged that overcoming fear did not happen instantly, but through continuous practice, they became more resilient and adaptable.

“Public speaking and debate help conquer fear by letting me face my fear repeatedly in a safe setting.”

“An example is that fear can be overcome by publicly speaking and debating because they re-enforce the ability to remain calm, disciplined.”

“Because of this, I feel less afraid of unexpected situations, and I know I can handle difficult moments.”

Theme 3: Consistency

Some college students believed that regular participation in these activities helped them become more accustomed to speaking in front of others, gradually reducing their nervousness. Through repeated exposure, they developed a sense of familiarity with the experience, making it less intimidating over time.

“It’s really important to be consistent in joining public speaking and debate to build confidence. When I participate regularly, I become more accustomed to it and feel less nervous.”

“Consistent practice in public speaking and debate builds my confidence by helping me communicate my thoughts clearly.”

Further, consistent engagement in public speaking enabled them to develop not only their verbal articulation but also their non-verbal communication skills, such as maintaining strong posture, eye contact, and assertive delivery.

“Participating regularly allows me to continue creating and building my confidence in front of others. I learn to stand with my shoulders back, look someone in the eye when talking to them and speak assertively.”

Conversely, whenever they took breaks from public speaking, their confidence declined, making it feel as though they were starting over each time. This inconsistency led to moments of self-doubt and anxiety, particularly when they forgot techniques they had previously learned.

“If I don’t practice consistently, my confidence doesn’t grow as fast. Each time I speak, I’d feel like I’m starting over, and my fear might return because I might feel unsure or forget the techniques I learned.”

Objective 2: Determine the skills or characteristics developed in exposing to intensive speaking experiences.

The findings revealed that intensive public speaking experiences contributed to the development of key skills and characteristics among students, particularly in cognition, growth mindset, and creativity. In cognition, some students reported improvements in their ability to think quickly, structure arguments logically, and recall information efficiently under pressure. Some developed a growth mindset, as repeated exposure to public speaking and constructive feedback helped them overcome self-doubt, view mistakes as learning opportunities, and recognize the value of persistence in skill development. Lastly, students noted that debating and speech preparation pushed them to think creatively, express ideas dynamically, and develop compelling arguments that resonated with their audience.

Theme 1: Cognition

College students emphasized that engaging in debates and speeches enhanced their capacity to think quickly and respond effectively to challenging or unexpected questions. The structured nature of these activities trained their minds to organize thoughts more efficiently, enabling them to present arguments with clarity and logical coherence.

“Debates especially help me think quickly, so I’m less afraid of tough questions or unexpected moments.”

“Public speaking has trained my mind to organize thoughts faster, making it easier to respond clearly and logically.”

“Regular speaking practice has improved my ability to recall information quickly and articulate my ideas confidently.”

In addition, students reported that repeated exposure to public speaking improved their ability to recall information, reinforcing their confidence in articulating ideas under pressure. The process of critically analyzing arguments and structuring responses in debates strengthened their problem-solving skills, encouraging adaptability and the ability to construct well-reasoned positions even in high-pressure situations.

“Through debates, I’ve learned to analyze arguments critically and structure my points effectively under pressure.”

“Engaging in debates has sharpened my problem-solving skills, allowing me to think on my feet and present well-reasoned responses.”

Lastly, participants noted that speaking in front of an audience trained their minds to regulate stress and maintain clarity of thought, even in high-pressure situations. This ability to stay composed under scrutiny required cognitive control, as they had to manage nervousness while simultaneously organizing and delivering their ideas effectively.

“Speaking in front of an audience has helped me develop mental discipline, enabling me to stay composed and focused even in high-pressure situations.”

Theme 2: Growth Mindset

The development of a growth mindset among participants was deeply influenced by their experiences in public speaking and debate. Through repeated exposure to structured speaking engagements, they gradually recognized that improvement was a continuous process rather than an innate ability.

“Every time I step out of my comfort zone and speak in public, I realize that improvement comes with consistent effort.”

“I’ve come to understand that confidence is not something you’re born with—it’s something you build through experience and persistence.”

“Making mistakes during speeches used to discourage me, but now I see them as learning opportunities that help me grow.”

Many initially struggled with self-doubt, fearing failure or judgment, but as they persisted, they realized that setbacks were essential learning opportunities rather than indicators of inadequacy. Over time, they internalized the idea that confidence was not an inherent trait but rather a skill developed through sustained effort and experience.

“At first, I doubted my ability to speak well, but with practice and constructive feedback, I’ve learned that progress is always possible.”

“Challenging myself to speak in debates and public forums has shown me that skills develop over time, and fear can be turned into strength.”

Feedback served as a guiding tool, helping them pinpoint areas for development while also affirming their progress. Each speaking opportunity became a step toward mastering their skills, allowing them to manage their fears more effectively.

“The process of preparing and getting feedback also makes me feel more capable, little by little.”

“Structure and feedback I get make me feel more prepared and confident each time. This makes me realize that my fear is something I can handle and work through.”

Theme 3: Creativity

The engagement in public speaking and debates cultivated creativity among participants by encouraging them to think beyond conventional approaches and develop unique arguments spontaneously.

For example, debating challenged them to generate innovative perspectives under pressure, enhancing their ability to formulate compelling and original viewpoints. Similarly, public speaking provided an avenue for experimentation, where individuals explored different techniques such as storytelling, humor, and analogies to make their speeches more engaging and dynamic.

“Speaking in debates pushes me to think outside the box and come up with unique arguments on the spot.”

“Public speaking allows me to experiment with different ways of expressing ideas, making my speeches more engaging and dynamic.”

In addition, making persuasive arguments require not only logical reasoning but also the creative framing of ideas to ensure they resonated with their audiences.

“Making persuasive arguments requires not just logic but also creativity in framing ideas so they resonate with the audience.”

Through consistent practice, they became adept at connecting seemingly unrelated ideas, enabling them to present arguments in a more compelling and persuasive manner. The ability to think quickly in debates sharpened their capacity to approach problems from multiple angles, maximizing their intellectual flexibility and adaptability.

“When I prepare for speeches, I enjoy finding creative ways to present my points, whether through storytelling, humor, or analogies.”

“Thinking quickly in debates has helped me develop the ability to connect different ideas in unexpected and innovative ways.”

5. Discussion

Experiential Learning Theory characterizes learning as the process wherein understanding emerges through the transformation of experience and insight is derived from the interaction between acquiring and reshaping experience^[65]. Acquiring experience pertains to the method of absorbing information; while reshaping experience involves the way individuals analyze and respond to that information^[28]. In the context of intensive speaking experiences, participants absorbed knowledge by repeatedly exposing themselves to speaking opportunities, reshaping their cognitive abilities, and strengthening their mental discipline.

Coker et al.^[19] emphasize that experiential learning requires considerable time and effort. They identify two key dimensions: depth, which involves prolonged engagement and supports higher-order thinking, and breadth, exposure to different learning sources. For instance, a student who consistently participates in public speaking competitions over time (depth) develops resilience and higher-order thinking skills, as they adapt their argumentation, critical reasoning, and ability to handle pressure in high-stakes settings. They also become more comfortable thinking on their feet, responding to unexpected questions, and maintaining composure in challenging situations. Meanwhile, another student who engages in different speaking formats (breadth)—such as debates, extemporaneous speeches, panel discussions, and storytelling—learns adaptability, audience awareness, and social competence. Exposure to different experiences enhances their ability to design their message to different contexts, communicate persuasively, and manage various social and professional interactions.

Furthermore, studies indicate that effectively solving context-based problems during learning requires careful consideration of specific conditions, as solutions are inherently context-dependent^[6,66]. In experiential learning, problems were authentic, generally open-ended^[67], and purpose-driven^[68], requiring learners to evaluate ambiguity and uncertainty with confidence^[69]. One student shared, *“Because of [constant exposure], I feel less afraid of unexpected situations, and I know I can handle difficult moments.”* This aligns with the need for learners to remain composed under pressure. This is a key element in addressing open-ended and purpose-driven problems. Just as individuals working in high-stakes environments must regulate their emotions to make sound decisions, public speakers develop the ability to think critically and articulate ideas despite fear or uncertainty.

There were three potential components for developing confidence in speaking: practice, regulation, and consistency. Sumanto and Saharani^[70] observe similar patterns in students’ perspectives about speaking competence and self-confidence. In their qualitative study, while students acknowledge moments of self-doubt, most are eager to improve and view speaking abilities as essential for learning English. Conversation emerged as the most effective method for skill enhancement and confidence building, yet many still struggle with larger audiences. Overcoming this challenge requires continuous engagement, adaptive strategies, and a supportive learning environment. In this study, structured speaking engagements, such as debates and public speeches, enhanced their cognitive abilities and reinforced a growth mindset. For instance, students reported that debating helped them think quickly and structure arguments effectively, which in turn reduced their anxiety when facing unexpected questions. However, they emphasized that building this skill was not an instant process but rather a gradual development through repeated exposure to challenging speaking experiences.

Concrete experiences (e.g., intensive speaking engagements) served as the foundation for developing students' confidence and communication competencies. Through reflective observation, students recognized the importance of practice and regulation in managing their emotions and building composure under pressure. As they continued these engagements, they moved toward abstract conceptualization, developing a growth mindset—understanding that confidence and skill in public speaking evolve through effort and constructive feedback. Finally, the learners engaged in active experimentation by applying techniques, refining delivery, and exploring creative strategies such as storytelling and improvisation.

Clearly, experiential learning involves engaging in concrete experiences that challenge the boundaries of students' familiarity. There were several mechanisms for experiential learning to thrive. Public speakers noted that learning within a supportive, yet challenging environment encouraged risk-taking, critical thinking, and the development of interpersonal skills. Generally, a positive learning environment that encourages autonomy, competence, and positive social interactions can enhance students' intrinsic learning motivation^[71]. Likewise, Ibrahim, Napu and Darman^[72] believed that an environment offering appropriate challenges, support, and feedback can strengthen students' learning motivation, including their self-confidence, learning goals, and self-regulation. This explains why public speakers in this study were very positive in engaging with intensive speaking experiences because of positive reinforcement they receive from their environments, something that is lacking in mainstream classroom setting.

To enhance the development of students' confidence and communication skills, the curriculum should integrate several key strategies. First, structured experiential modules should be embedded, incorporating repeated and scaffolded speaking engagements such as debates, mock interviews, and impromptu speeches, beginning with low-stakes settings and gradually increasing in complexity to build familiarity and reduce anxiety. Reflection and feedback cycles must also be incorporated after each task through journals, peer evaluations, or guided discussions, allowing students to monitor their growth and regulate emotions, with feedback highlighting both strengths and areas for improvement. Resilience and a growth mindset can be nurtured through dedicated workshops that include peer-sharing, storytelling, and mindset coaching to help students embrace mistakes as part of the learning process. Cognitive skill-building should be enhanced through spontaneous tasks like extemporaneous speaking and argumentative role-play to develop quick thinking and effective information recall under pressure.

Future research should examine how experiential learning can be designed for different student profiles (like academic background or learning styles) and learning environments, particularly its long-term impact on confidence, problem-solving, and adaptability in public speaking. Longitudinal studies could track skill development over time, while experimental research may test scaffolded speaking programs to accelerate confidence-building. In addition, comparative studies between classroom-based and extracurricular speaking engagements can identify the most effective settings for skill acquisition. Given the role of positive reinforcement, future studies should explore ways to integrate experiential learning into traditional curricula through structured speaking activities that enhance communication, critical thinking, and academic performance.

6. Conclusion

This study contributed to the understanding of experiential learning in the context of developing students' cognitive abilities, problem-solving skills, and confidence through repeated exposure, active participation, and supportive learning environments. Confidence was strengthened through three main mechanisms: Practice, which allowed students to overcome anxiety through repeated exposure; Regulation, which helped them manage nervousness and perform under pressure; and Consistency, which reinforced

their communication abilities and sustained confidence over time. Public speaking experiences developed cognitive skills through quick thinking, logical structuring of arguments, and information recall under pressure. Students also developed a growth mindset, recognizing that confidence and skill improvement required persistence and feedback. Lastly, creativity was cultivated through debates and speeches, as students learned to formulate arguments, employ engaging speaking techniques, and think flexibly in high-pressure situations.

In general learning contexts, minimizing anxiety requires integrating active, reflective, and scaffolded learning experiences that help learners build competence over time, while being supported by feedback and positive reinforcement. Consistent exposure helps normalize discomfort, making anxiety a manageable and temporary part of the learning process. To minimize anxiety in learning, this study suggests that incorporating experiential learning, through structured, supportive, and progressively challenging experiences, can significantly enhance students' confidence and emotional regulation.

However, there were several limitations that needed to be addressed. A small or non-random sample may not adequately represent the broader population, reducing the applicability of the results. Generalizability is further constrained if the study focuses on a specific demographic, geographic location, or educational setting. Methodological choices, such as self-reported data or qualitative approaches, may introduce subjectivity, while potential biases—such as selection bias, researcher bias, or response bias—can skew interpretations. To enhance reliability, future research should consider increasing sample size, employing random sampling techniques, triangulating data sources, and using mixed-methods approaches to provide a comprehensive analysis. Ensuring transparency in data collection and analysis can also mitigate bias and strengthen the validity of findings.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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