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Students' voices on how drama builds English-speaking confidence in an Indonesian university

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative case study examines how drama supports English speaking confidence among undergraduate students in an English Education Study Program. Data were obtained from video recorded analyses of three performances by seventeen students and interviews with six purposively selected participants. The analysis followed Braun and Clarke's thematic procedures. Six themes emerged. Repeated practice strengthened confidence. Role play functioned as an emotional shield that reduced self-consciousness. Students experienced a shift from hesitation to greater fluency. Nonverbal behaviors signaled increased assurance. Peer support helped students regulate emotions during performance. Participants viewed drama as more engaging than conventional instruction. The findings align with Bandura's self-efficacy theory and Krashen's affective filter hypothesis. Drama provided mastery experiences, social models, persuasive feedback, and reduced anxiety, which supported language development. The study offers practical direction for curriculum design by recommending scaffolded drama tasks in speaking courses. Teachers are encouraged to use role play and impersonation activities to strengthen confidence. The study contributes contextually by examining a compulsory drama course in a private university, providing evidence of confidence gains that are transferable beyond elective drama contexts.

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1. Introduction

The ability to speak English with confidence is central in contemporary EFL education because spoken proficiency links directly to academic participation, employability, and social mobility in many contexts, including Indonesia (Hidayat, 2024). Despite sustained curricular emphasis on English from school to university, many Indonesian undergraduates still report reluctance to speak, especially in formal academic settings, where fear of negative evaluation and perceived low competence restrict oral participation (Fauzi & Asi, 2023; Rindi, 2024). Studies across Asian higher education show that speaking anxiety and weak self-efficacy remain strong predictors of limited oral performance and lower achievement (Wu et al., 2022; Lin et al., 2025). These affective constraints show the need for pedagogies that target confidence and agency, not only linguistic accuracy.

Teacher-fronted, form-focused instruction still dominates many Indonesian university classrooms, with heavy attention to grammar explanation, vocabulary exercises, and controlled dialogues. These practices support knowledge of linguistic forms, yet they often leave learners in passive roles and do little to shift anxiety, self-doubt, or fear of mistakes (Rindi, 2024; Hartono et al., 2023). In contrast, work in educational psychology shows that self-efficacy beliefs strongly shape willingness to engage

and persist in demanding tasks, including L2 speaking (Bandura, 1977; Wu et al., 2022). When learners repeatedly experience communicative success, observe peers succeed, and receive supportive feedback, their speaking self-efficacy increases and anxiety tends to decline (Rindi, 2024). Designing speaking classes around such experiences is therefore a key challenge.

Drama-based pedagogy offers a promising response. Empirical studies show that role-play, improvisation, and performance tasks create emotionally engaging contexts that promote risk-taking, lower speaking anxiety, and improve fluency (Galante, 2018; Lee et al., 2020). Systematic reviews of drama in EFL and ESL report consistent benefits for motivation, willingness to communicate, and oral performance, while also highlighting the importance of safe, collaborative classroom climates (Dawoud et al., 2024; Luo et al., 2024). Yet these reviews note that most published studies employ short-term interventions, elective courses, or extracurricular clubs, often outside teacher-education contexts and with limited attention to learners' own narratives of confidence development. Evidence from Indonesian higher education drama courses also tends to focus on gains in speaking scores or global anxiety indices rather than students' detailed accounts of how confidence shifts over time and performance cycles (Fahmi et al. 2020; Rizkiya & Pratolo, 2023; Rindi, 2024).

Recent work on affective variables in EFL suggests that drama should be interpreted through complementary theoretical lenses. Self-efficacy theory explains how mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, verbal persuasion, and regulation of physiological arousal underpin changes in learners' beliefs about their speaking capability (Bandura, 1977; Rindi, 2024). At the same time, affective filter research shows that anxiety, low motivation, and negative self-perceptions restrict access to input and opportunities for output, while supportive, low-pressure tasks promote uptake and participation (Cruz, 2025; Wang, 2024). Although drama is often claimed to lower the affective filter, few studies integrate fine-grained analyses of performance data with learners' own reflections in a single design, especially in compulsory courses where participation includes students who initially feel reluctant to perform.

This study addresses these gaps by foregrounding students' voices in a mandatory drama course at an English Education Study Program in a private university in Yogyakarta. Unlike research in elective drama or extracurricular theatre, the course involves a full cohort of pre-service English teachers, including those who initially report high anxiety and low speaking self-efficacy. Drawing on video-recorded performances and semi-structured interviews, the study traces how students describe their confidence trajectories, how they interpret drama-related experiences in terms of self-efficacy sources and affective filters, and how they perceive transfer of confidence beyond the drama classroom. The study therefore offers a contextually grounded account of drama as a core, not peripheral, component of an EFL teacher-education curriculum in Indonesia, with implications for integrating drama systematically into speaking courses.

Guided by this framing, the study addresses the following research questions:

1. How do drama activities influence students' English-speaking confidence
2. In what ways do students perceive drama as different from traditional speaking classes
3. How does the experience of performing drama enhance specific aspects of speaking, such as fluency, pronunciation, and non-verbal communication

2. Method

This study employed a qualitative case study design to examine how drama activities influence students' confidence in speaking English in a naturalistic classroom setting at a private Indonesian university. A case study was appropriate because it allows a focused, in-depth examination of a bounded system, in this case a single drama course in one English Education Study Program, while preserving contextual detail about participants, curriculum, and assessment practices (Tomaszewski et al., 2020; Fatimah et al., 2023). A qualitative approach supported the exploration of emotions, reflections, and behavior changes related to speaking confidence that are not easily reduced to numerical indicators.

Participants were sixth-semester students enrolled in the compulsory Drama course. Seventeen students took part in three video-recorded drama performances, and six students were subsequently selected for in-depth semi-structured interviews. Purposive sampling was used to achieve variation in

observed confidence levels, based on initial review of the performance videos, so that the interview sample included students who appeared more confident and those who appeared more hesitant. This strategy aligns with recommendations to purposefully select information-rich cases and to justify sample size with reference to analytical focus and information power rather than fixed numerical rules (Ahmed, 2025; Naeem et al., 2024). Data collection continued until no substantively new patterns relevant to the research questions were observed across performances and interviews.

Two primary instruments were employed: systematic video observation and semi-structured interviews. All three group drama performances were video-recorded and analyzed using a researcher-developed performance rubric targeting five observable indicators associated with speaking confidence in public and classroom contexts: remaining calm throughout the performance, communicating clearly, respecting others, maintaining eye contact, and displaying relaxed gestures. These indicators draw on recent work that links eye contact, posture, and gesture to perceptions of confidence, engagement, and communicative effectiveness in educational and public speaking contexts (Jasuli et al., 2024; Paneth et al., 2024). Each indicator was rated on a four-point scale (4 = Very confident, 3 = Moderately confident, 2 = Low confidence, 1 = Very low confidence), producing both individual indicator scores and an overall confidence profile for each student that informed subsequent qualitative sampling.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with six students selected to represent a range of confidence profiles across the rubric scores. Interviews were held in Bahasa Indonesia to reduce linguistic load and anxiety and to allow participants to articulate nuanced reflections on their experiences. The interview protocol was aligned with the three research questions and organised around: perceived changes in English-speaking confidence attributed to drama activities, perceived differences between drama-based learning and traditional speaking classes, and perceived changes in specific aspects of speaking such as fluency, pronunciation, and non-verbal communication. Question design was informed by Bandura's four sources of self-efficacy and by work on affective and behavioral indicators of engagement in learning environments, so prompts explicitly invited students to describe mastery experiences, observations of peers, feedback received, and emotional regulation during performances (Kiger & Varpio, 2020; Paneth et al., 2024). Each interview lasted approximately 30–45 minutes and was audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Data analysis followed a reflexive thematic analysis approach. Interview transcripts were first read repeatedly alongside field notes and performance rubrics to achieve familiarity with the data. Initial codes were then generated inductively to capture meaningful units related to confidence, speaking behavior, affective responses, and perceptions of drama. Codes from interviews and observational notes were iteratively grouped into candidate themes, which were reviewed against the full dataset and refined to capture coherent patterns that addressed the research questions. The process broadly followed the six-phase framework for thematic analysis outlined by Kiger and Varpio (2020), with particular attention to transparent documentation of analytic decisions, and was guided by recent methodological discussions of thematic analysis in applied educational and health contexts (Ahmed et al., 2025; Kiger & Varpio, 2020). Themes were then defined, named, and supported with illustrative extracts from both interview talk and performance descriptions.

Several procedures were used to enhance the trustworthiness of the study. Credibility was supported through data triangulation, by systematically comparing interview accounts with video-based confidence indicators and course documentation, and through iterative discussion of coding and theme development among the research team (Korstjens & Moser, 2018; Cofie et al., 2022). Rather than relying solely on statistical indices, intercoder discussions were used to reach shared interpretive understanding of key segments, consistent with recent arguments that agreement processes in qualitative analysis should focus on meaning-making quality rather than only on coefficients (Clarke et al., 2023; Cofie et al., 2022). Thick description of the institutional context, course structure, and drama tasks was provided to allow readers to judge transferability to other settings (Fatimah et al., 2023). An audit trail was maintained by storing anonymised transcripts, observation rubrics, coding memos, and theme-development documents, which supports dependability and confirmability according to contemporary guidance on qualitative rigor (Zainal et al., 2024; Korstjens & Moser, 2018).

Table 1. Indicators of Confidence

Indicator	Very Confident	Moderate Confident	Low Confident	Very low Confident
Remains calm throughout the process	Always calm and focused during each stage, showing no signs of nervousness or panic.	Generally calm and focused, but occasionally appears a little nervous.	Often nervous and loses focus, but can still complete the stages with help or encouragement.	Very nervous, panics, and often cannot complete the stages without significant help from others.
Communicates clearly	Always speaks clearly, fluently, and is easily understood by everyone.	Speaks fairly clearly, but is sometimes not fluent or needs to repeat themselves.	Often speaks unclearly, with many pauses or errors that disrupt understanding.	Very difficult to understand, often stutters or speaks with a volume that is too low.
Respects others	Always shows respect and appreciation for others in all situations.	Usually respects others, although sometimes forgets to show appreciation.	Sometimes shows a disrespectful or condescending attitude towards others.	Often disrespects others and shows a condescending or impolite attitude.
Makes eye contact	Always maintains good eye contact with the person they are speaking to, showing attention and confidence.	Usually maintains eye contact, although occasionally looks away or to the side.	Rarely makes eye contact, often looking down or away while speaking.	Almost never makes eye contact, showing significant discomfort or a lack of confidence.
Gestures appear relaxed	Gestures always appear relaxed, natural, and show no signs of tension or nervousness.	Gestures are usually relaxed, although they sometimes appear a little tense or awkward.	Gestures are often stiff or tense, with movements that indicate nervousness.	Gestures are very stiff, tense, or fidgety, indicating significant discomfort.

[a] Note: Scores are based on a 4-point scale (4= Very Confident, 3 = Moderate Confident, 2 = Low Confident, 1 = Very Low Confident). Final confidence level is determined by the combination of all indicators.

3. Findings

The data analysis from both video observations and interviews revealed six major themes that illustrate how drama fosters students' confidence in speaking English. These themes are: (1) building confidence through repeated practice, (2) role-play as an emotional shield, (3) transformation from hesitation to fluency, (4) non-verbal indicators of confidence, (5) peer support and collaboration, and (6) students' comparison between drama and traditional classes.

Each theme is discussed below with supporting excerpts and theoretical connections.

3.1. Building Confidence Through Repeated Practice

Data from video-observations and interviews converge to show that repeated rehearsal and performance significantly boosted students' English-speaking confidence. Almost all participants reported that practising dialogues, acting scenes and collaborating with peers over multiple rehearsals helped them feel more prepared and less anxious over time. For example, one student (P6) stated:

"Now, when asked to speak in front of the class, I'm not nervous anymore, because in drama class we often practice together, perform together, so I feel more relaxed speaking English even after the drama class is over."

In the video observation, P1 exhibited strong eye contact, clear voice projection and naturally relaxed gestures, while P4 began with stiff gestures and low voice but improved noticeably in both fluency and confidence by the final performance. These progressive increases reflect the accumulation

of successful performance experiences. According to Albert Bandura's self-efficacy theory, mastery experiences—successfully completing a relevant task—are the most influential source of self-efficacy beliefs, which then support future task persistence and performance (Bandura, 1977). Each rehearsal and performance in the drama course provided mastery experiences. Indeed, recent studies confirm that students who engage in repeated performance tasks exhibit higher self-efficacy in oral communication (Fauziah et al., 2025; Dewi & Hayati, 2025).

Therefore, the evidence suggests that the structured design of the drama course—multiple rehearsals, peer collaboration, culminating in a performance—operated as a scaffold for confidence development. This kind of repeated, scaffolded opportunity is rarely available in conventional speaking classes, which often focus on isolated speaking tasks rather than iterative, performance-based cycles.

3.2. Role-play as an Emotional Shield

Data from observations and interviews showed that role-play functioned as an emotional buffer that reduced students' fear of negative evaluation and encouraged more confident English use. Students repeatedly stated that adopting a character made them feel protected, because attention shifted toward the character's actions rather than their personal linguistic limitations. This distancing effect reduced self-consciousness and made speaking English feel less threatening.

Video analysis supported this claim. Some students who appeared tense and reluctant at the beginning of a performance became more expressive once they settled into their roles. One student (P16), initially withdrawn and avoiding the audience, gradually adopted stronger eye contact and clearer projection as she embodied her character. This behavioral shift shows a cognitive transition from "I am nervous" to "the character needs to speak," consistent with evidence that performance identities reduce learners' perceived performance risk (Galante & Thomson, 2021).

Interview data reinforced this interpretation. P4 explained, "I focus on the character I am playing and imagine that I am that character, not myself. When I do that, the fear slowly goes away." This aligns with findings that distancing the self through character enactment reduces affective pressure and increases willingness to communicate (Lee et al., 2020). P16 also noted that role-play encouraged spontaneous language production during improvisation, which she normally avoided because of fear of making mistakes. This illustrates how role-play lowers psychological threat and encourages exploratory language use.

These findings align with the Affective Filter Hypothesis, which proposes that anxiety and fear inhibit language processing and output (Krashen, 1982). When students adopt an alternate identity, anxiety decreases and participation becomes less risky. Recent empirical work confirms that drama-based tasks lower anxiety and support more confident oral performance in EFL contexts (Luo et al., 2024). Meta-analytic and review studies also show that drama improves learners' emotional readiness and reduces speaking-related tension by externalizing performance responsibilities to the character rather than the learner (Dawoud et al., 2024).

Overall, role-play served as an affective shield that reduced self-focused worry, facilitated embodied expression and supported confident spoken performance. This mechanism explains why even initially anxious students showed measurable improvement in voice projection, clarity and expressive movement during later stages of the performance.

3.3. Transformation from Hesitation to Fluency

A consistent pattern across the data was the transformation from hesitation and anxiety to increased fluency and communicative ease. Many students initially described themselves as anxious, fearful of making mistakes and reluctant to speak English in front of peers. As the drama course progressed, however, they reported noticeable improvements in fluency, pronunciation and vocabulary control. These changes align with recent findings showing that drama creates conditions that promote spontaneous language production, reduce performance fear and support oral fluency development (Galante & Thomson, 2021; Luo et al., 2024).

Video observations provided concrete evidence of this shift. Participants such as P4 and P11 demonstrated early indicators of anxiety, including rigid posture, lowered vocal intensity and hesitations when delivering lines. As scenes progressed, their delivery became smoother, their voice

projection strengthened and their gestures appeared more controlled. P4, for instance, began with a low and hesitant tone but later spoke with clearer articulation and steadier rhythm. Meanwhile, P1 consistently demonstrated accurate pronunciation and used a wide range of vocabulary, supported by the script-writing process that required deliberate lexical choices. These patterns mirror evidence that repeated performance-based tasks help stabilize speech rate, improve articulation and increase lexical access during oral production (Dawoud et al., 2024).

Interview findings further illuminated this developmental process. P4 described his earlier fear of being judged for mistakes but explained that drama reduced that pressure: "If we say something wrong, we repeat it again, and it's not a problem." This cognitive shift from error avoidance to acceptance is central for fluency development, consistent with the argument that lowered anxiety facilitates more automatic lexical retrieval and smoother speech (Wu et al., 2022). Participants also emphasized the value of repeated practice, echoing findings that iterative rehearsal contributes to greater fluency and prosodic accuracy by enabling learners to internalize linguistic patterns over time (Li & Chen, 2024).

Students also discussed concrete improvements in vocabulary and pronunciation. P6 highlighted that writing scripts required them to search for new vocabulary and understand contextual meaning. Similarly, P1 noted that script preparation and pronunciation rehearsal made him "ready and understand the story when performing." These insights correspond with recent studies showing that drama tasks strengthen lexical acquisition because learners must select, rehearse and apply vocabulary in meaningful communicative contexts (Rahmat et al., 2023). P4 further explained how practicing intonation, pauses and articulation helped refine his pronunciation, a benefit also observed in experimental studies where drama significantly improved learners' control of prosodic features (Lee et al., 2020).

Collectively, these findings support Krashen's argument that low-anxiety environments enable smoother processing of linguistic input and more fluent output (Krashen, 1982). Drama lowered the affective filter by shifting attention away from self-focused fear and toward character-driven communication. At the same time, the progressive improvements through rehearsal reflect Bandura's concept of mastery experiences, which strengthen self-efficacy and encourage risk-taking in communication. The combination of reduced anxiety and accumulating mastery experiences explains why students became more fluent, articulate and confident speakers by the end of the course.

3.4. Non-verbal confidence

Video observations provided a complementary view of confidence by focusing on students' bodies, gaze and movement rather than only on spoken output. Across the three performances, there was a clear association between higher confidence ratings and more open, engaged non-verbal behaviour. Students such as P1, P12 and P13 maintained frequent eye contact with partners and audience, adopted relaxed but purposeful postures and used gestures that aligned with the emotional content of their lines. P13, after a short initial hesitation, began to walk with clear direction, used both hands for emphasis and displayed animated facial expressions that strengthened the impact of her speech. In contrast, students rated as less confident, such as P5, P11 and P16, tended to avert their gaze, restrict movement and display closed or stiff gestures, such as clasped hands or folded arms. The rubric scores in Tables 2 to 4 show that low scores on "makes eye contact" and "gestures appear relaxed" often co occurred with lower overall confidence ratings. This pattern is consistent with recent work showing that open posture, sustained gaze and congruent gesture predict higher perceived speaker confidence and clarity in English public speaking tasks (Jasuli et al., 2024).

These behavioural differences matter because non-verbal cues influence both how students feel and how they are perceived. Studies on non-verbal communication in English speaking classes report that students who use eye contact, appropriate facial expressions and natural gestures are rated as more persuasive and confident by peers and teachers (Jasuli et al., 2024; Uslu, 2020). At the same time, these behaviours reinforce internal confidence, since learners experience themselves as more agentive when they occupy space and direct their gaze outward. Research with EFL learners also indicates that limited eye contact and rigid posture often co-occur with high speaking anxiety, while coaching students to use more open non-verbal behaviours can reduce perceived anxiety and improve performance evaluations (Yalçın & İnceçay, 2014; Uslu, 2020). Although these studies were not conducted in drama courses, the present findings suggest a similar mechanism at work: as students

gained confidence through repeated performance, their gaze became steadier and their gestures more relaxed, which in turn supported more confident talk.

From the perspective of self-efficacy theory, these non-verbal shifts form part of mastery experiences. When students see themselves on video maintaining eye contact, projecting their voice and using expressive movement, they receive concrete evidence that they can perform competently in front of others. This evidence strengthens their belief in their speaking abilities and reduces avoidance. At the same time, more relaxed posture and congruent gesture may lower physiological arousal associated with anxiety, which aligns with affective filter accounts linking bodily tension to restricted oral performance. Recent classroom studies argue that training learners to attend to both verbal and non-verbal aspects of speaking leads to better overall speaking assessments and higher confidence ratings (Uslu, 2020; Jasuli et al., 2024). In the present drama course, the iterative rehearsal and performance cycles appear to have provided repeated opportunities to practise these non-verbal components until they became more automatic.

Table 2. Table of Confidence Assessment Results from Video Observation 1

Participant	Remains calm throughout the process	Communicates clearly	Respects others	Makes eye contact	Gestures appear relaxed
P1	4	4	4	4	4
P2	3	2	4	3	3
P3	3	2	3	3	4
P4	4	3	3	4	4
P5	3	3	3	2	2

Table 3. Table of Confidence Assessment Results from Video Observation 2

Participant	Remains calm throughout the process	Communicates clearly	Respects others	Makes eye contact	Gestures appear relaxed
P6	4	3	4	4	4
P7	4	4	4	4	4
P8	3	2	3	3	2
P9	3	2	3	2	1
P10	3	2	3	3	4
P11	3	3	3	2	3

Table 4. Table of Confidence Assessment Results from Video Observation 3

Participant	Remains calm throughout the process	Communicates clearly	Respects others	Makes eye contact	Gestures appear relaxed
P12	4	4	3	4	4
P13	4	3	4	4	4
P14	3	2	3	3	3
P15	4	4	3	4	3
P16	3	3	3	1	2
P17	4	3	4	4	4

These findings indicate that speaking pedagogy should treat non-verbal behaviour as an integral part of confidence, not as an optional add on. Explicit attention to eye contact, posture, gesture and facial expression within drama tasks may help learners develop a more coherent speaking presence in English, which in turn supports the development of both perceived and actual confidence in oral communication.

3.5. Peer support in building confidence

Peer collaboration emerged as a central mechanism through which students developed and strengthened their confidence during drama activities. The group-based nature of the performances created a shared communicative space in which responsibility, risk and emotional load were distributed among members. Video observations showed that students relied on subtle non-verbal cues, such as nodding, eye signalling and brief glances, to maintain the flow of interaction. These behaviours reflected a tacit system of co-regulation that supported turn-taking, reduced performance pressure and allowed students to recover smoothly when they forgot lines or lost focus. This collaborative dynamic aligns with recent findings showing that peer coordination and shared attention play a critical role in sustaining engagement and reducing speaking anxiety in group performance tasks (Paneth et al., 2024).

Interview data offered further insight into this theme. P9 described relying on peers to repair communication breakdowns: “If I forget the script, my friend can help me, so if I forget, I can use eye signals.” This reflects an informal safety net that enhances students’ willingness to participate. Similarly, P6 explained that pre performance routines, such as deep breathing together and reassuring one another, helped reduce anxiety: “Before performing, we reassured each other that what we were doing was just practice.” Such verbal reassurance exemplifies peer-provided emotional regulation, a process shown to significantly enhance learners’ speaking self-efficacy in collaborative oral tasks (Hao & Chen, 2024). P16 emphasized that non-judgmental feedback from her peers and audience reduced her fear of errors, stating that positive reactions helped her realize that “it was okay to misspeak in English.” This shift from fear of failure to acceptance of imperfection aligns with research indicating that peer support improves emotional resilience and reduces language-learning anxiety (Huang, 2023).

These findings align closely with Bandura’s concepts of social modelling and verbal persuasion. Observing peers successfully deliver lines, improvise and manage unexpected challenges serves as a powerful modelling experience. When students see peers with similar abilities succeed, their belief in their own capability increases. Recent empirical studies confirm that collaborative peer performance enhances learners’ perceived communicative competence through shared modelling and co-regulated problem solving (Paneth et al., 2024). Furthermore, verbal encouragement, supportive comments and empathetic feedback from peers constitute verbal persuasion, which plays a meaningful role in strengthening self-efficacy, particularly in high anxiety tasks such as public speaking (Hao & Chen, 2024).

Taken together, these results show that peer support was not merely an additional feature of the drama class but one of its core mechanisms for fostering confidence. By distributing responsibility, offering emotional reassurance and supporting each other during challenging moments, students developed a stable sense of confidence that extended beyond the performance space. This environment contrasts with the more individualistic structure of traditional speaking classes, suggesting that drama-based collaborative learning can create stronger social and emotional foundations for confident oral communication.

3.6. Drama versus traditional class

A consistent pattern across the interviews was the students’ strong preference for drama-based speaking activities compared to traditional classroom tasks. Participants described conventional speaking lessons as passive, highly structured and dependent on teacher initiation. They often spoke only when prompted and felt constrained by the limited variety of interaction. In contrast, drama required movement, collaboration, emotional expression and spontaneous interaction. Students explained that these elements made speaking feel more natural and enjoyable, which increased their motivation to participate. These perceptions align with empirical findings showing that task-based and

performance-oriented environments promote higher levels of engagement and willingness to communicate than teacher-fronted speaking classes (Huang, 2023).

Interview excerpts highlight this contrast clearly. P4 stated that drama was "more fun than ordinary classes" because students were actively involved in communication rather than "just sitting and listening." P9 described drama as "playing while learning," which made him more enthusiastic about speaking English. P13 similarly emphasised that drama allowed her to develop ideas and speaking skills in an integrated, meaningful way. These reflections align with research showing that drama increases intrinsic motivation and creates emotionally rich learning experiences that support sustained participation (Luo et al., 2024). Studies in EFL higher education contexts also report that drama activities facilitate authentic communication and contextualised language use, both of which enhance oral fluency beyond what is typically achieved in textbook-driven speaking classes (Li & Chen, 2024).

Drama's emphasis on collaboration and embodied performance also appears to support deeper processing of language. Students repeatedly commented that drama "felt real" and that communication emerged from the story rather than from teacher-assigned drills. This aligns with findings that drama-based pedagogy stimulates cognitive, affective and social dimensions of learning simultaneously, which leads to more meaningful verbal output (Galante & Thomson, 2021). Furthermore, drama allows for repeated practice embedded in a narrative context, reducing the self-consciousness normally associated with public speaking tasks. In contrast, traditional speaking classes often isolate language features and rely heavily on accuracy-focused correction, which can increase anxiety and reduce speaking opportunities (Wu et al., 2022).

Students' comparisons in this study also echo broader pedagogical arguments that student-centred, experiential methods promote active learning and greater communicative competence. Process drama requires learners to co-construct meaning, negotiate roles and adapt language spontaneously, fostering the kind of real-time interaction often missing from traditional methods. Reviews of drama in EFL contexts show that these characteristics lead to higher overall gains in communicative competence and engagement than teacher-led formats (Dawoud et al., 2024).

Overall, participants' perspectives and performance behaviours suggest that drama offers a more dynamic and effective platform for speaking development than conventional classes. Its emphasis on interaction, embodiment and creativity not only increases enjoyment but also strengthens confidence, fluency and communicative competence in ways that traditional speaking classes seldom achieve.

4. Conclusion

The study showed that drama contributed to measurable gains in students' English-speaking confidence. Repeated rehearsals, collaborative performance and embodied role-play created conditions that reduced anxiety and encouraged active engagement. Students reported clearer speech, greater fluency, improved pronunciation and broader vocabulary as they moved through the performance cycles. Video data confirmed parallel non-verbal improvements, including steadier eye contact, more open posture and more purposeful gesture. These behavioral changes aligned with increased self-assurance reported in interviews.

The findings highlight the importance of mastery experiences, peer modelling and verbal support in strengthening self-efficacy. Drama lowered students' fear of making mistakes and shifted their focus from self-consciousness to character-driven communication. Peer support further stabilized confidence by distributing responsibility and offering emotional reassurance. Students consistently viewed drama as more meaningful and engaging than traditional speaking classes, emphasizing its value as a student centered, interactive approach.

The study provides evidence that integrating drama into speaking courses benefits learners across confidence levels, including those who initially experience anxiety or hesitation. Embedding drama tasks within the curriculum offers a practical pathway for improving oral communication and supporting positive affective development. Future work can extend this approach to larger cohorts, varied institutional contexts and longitudinal designs to examine how confidence gains transfer across academic and professional settings.

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Declarations

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