

Debate Technique and Teacher Encouragement as Pedagogical Strategies to Enhance Speaking Confidence in Vietnamese College English as a Foreign Language Learners

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ABSTRACT: *This study investigates how structured debate and teacher encouragement contribute to speaking confidence among Vietnamese English as a Foreign Language (EFL) college learners. Conducted over 15 weeks with 80 students in two intact classes at a public college in Southern Vietnam, the study adopted a mixed-methods design combining speaking tests, questionnaires, and reflection journals. Quantitative analyses included paired-samples t-tests and regression modeling, while qualitative reflections provided complementary insights. Findings showed a substantial increase in speaking confidence from pre- to post-test (Cohen's $d = 1.27$). Regression analysis indicated that debate ($B = 0.429$, $\beta = 0.496$, $p < 0.001$) had the strongest association with students' post-test confidence, followed by teacher encouragement ($B = 0.194$, $\beta = 0.211$, $p = 0.037$). Debate was reported to help students construct arguments and manage peer interaction under pressure, while encouragement reduced fear of reprimand and fostered a safer classroom environment. Interactive tasks and individualized adjustments were positively perceived but not significantly correlated with confidence. These results highlight the value of participatory, constructivist strategies in fostering learner confidence. Limitations include the one-group pre-/post-test design, single-site sample, and the dual role of the researcher as instructor and assessor, although the post-test was rated independently with a high interrater reliability ($ICC = 0.97$). Future studies should employ multi-site, controlled designs with external or blinded raters and develop multi-item validated measures of encouragement and debate participation.*

KEYWORDS: EFL, speaking confidence, debate, college students, teacher encouragement, pedagogical strategies.

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1. Introduction

In Vietnam, English is one of the seven foreign languages taught in educational institutions and is the most commonly chosen foreign language by students. Students are required to study English continuously from primary to tertiary education, and it is also a compulsory component of the national high school graduation examination. As Vietnam increasingly integrates into the global community, English has become an essential tool that can significantly support learners' future careers if mastered effectively. Among the four language skills, speaking deserves particular attention, as it is widely regarded as the most salient marker of language ability in real-life

communication (Ur, 1996).

Despite more than a decade of instruction, many Vietnamese students still lack confidence and competence in speaking. Prior research attributes this gap to exam-oriented curricula that prioritize grammar and reading over communicative skills, leaving learners with limited opportunities for authentic practice (Ho & Truong, 2022). Speaking activities in Vietnamese classrooms often consist of scripted dialogues or mechanical drills, restricting spontaneous interaction (Bui & Newton, 2021). As a result, learners frequently report difficulties with vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation; more critically, they struggle with anxiety, fear

of mistakes, and low speaking confidence. Recognizing these challenges, national initiatives have sought to improve English proficiency across the education system. However, evaluations indicate that outcomes in speaking and writing remain below expectations (Pham & Bui, 2019; Tran & Marginson, 2018). This highlights the need for more effective classroom-level interventions that foster both linguistic competence and psychological readiness to communicate.

Although numerous studies have sought to enhance the speaking confidence of English as a foreign language (EFL) learners in Vietnam, most have focused primarily on university students, leaving college learners relatively underexplored. This group often exhibits lower self-confidence and more passive participation in English-speaking activities, highlighting the need for targeted interventions. While general classroom strategies have been examined, little research has systematically explored the combined potential of debate techniques and teacher encouragement in fostering speaking confidence. Building on my earlier work that investigated debate as a standalone intervention (Dao, 2024), the present study extends this line of research by examining how structured debate activities, supported by teacher encouragement, can improve college learners' confidence in speaking English. In doing so, it contributes theoretically by clarifying the interplay between competence and confidence in speaking (Pham *et al.*, 2021) and practically by aligning with recent calls for learner-centered approaches in EFL pedagogy (Ghafar, 2023).

2. Literature review

2.1. The Importance of Speaking Skill in Language Learning

Speaking is widely acknowledged as one of the most important skills for second language acquisition. The fact that humans learn to speak before learning to read and write emphasizes the centrality of speaking among the four language skills. Unlike receptive skills such as listening and reading, speaking requires learners to actively produce language, often under time

pressure, making it both cognitively and socially demanding (Zhang, 2021). Similarly, speaking is often viewed as the most salient marker of language ability, since people who know a language are usually referred to as *speakers* of that language (Fan & Yan, 2020).

Beyond its linguistic value, speaking carries significant personal and professional benefits. Effective oral communication empowers learners to express ideas, engage in social interactions, and access wider employment opportunities (Fan & Yan, 2020). In the Vietnamese context of rapid globalization, English speaking competence enables participation in international exchanges and global labor markets. Yet, despite years of study, Vietnamese students often underperform in speaking due to test-driven curricula that prioritize grammar and reading comprehension (Ho & Truong, 2022).

Research highlights that Vietnamese EFL classes frequently lack communicative tasks. Prior studies show that students are often engaged in controlled practice such as repetition, reading aloud, or memorized dialogues. While these activities may support accuracy, they offer limited opportunities for spontaneous interaction; consequently, speaking continues to lag behind other skills despite years of English instruction (Bui & Newton, 2021; Ho-Minh & Suppasetserree, 2025; Tran & Marginson, 2018).

2.2. Self-confidence as a Factor Influencing Speaking Performance

Self-confidence, defined as an individual's belief in their ability to overcome obstacles, make sound decisions, and achieve goals, is closely linked to Bandura's (1997) concept of self-efficacy and plays a pivotal role in second language acquisition. Learners with strong self-efficacy are more willing to engage in speaking tasks, thereby enhancing their oral proficiency. According to Krashen's (1982) Affective Filter Hypothesis, higher confidence reduces affective barriers, allowing learners to receive and process comprehensible input more effectively. Similarly, Horwitz, *et al.*, (1986) introduced the concept of Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety, highlighting how fear of negative

evaluation, communication apprehension, and test anxiety can undermine learners' willingness to communicate and their overall confidence.

In language learning, self-confidence plays a crucial role in enabling learners to articulate and express their ideas effectively through spoken communication. Learners with higher confidence are more willing to take risks, initiate interactions, and sustain conversations in English (MacIntyre, *et al.*, 1998). Conversely, low confidence often leads to communication apprehension, hesitation, and avoidance of speaking opportunities. Confidence is therefore as important as competence in speaking and listening (Pham *et al.*, 2021), and recent empirical findings confirm a strong correlation between self-confidence and success in English language learning, particularly in speaking and overall academic performance (Chen & Zhang, 2022; Ghafar, 2023).

In the Vietnamese EFL context, students frequently experience fear of making mistakes, negative evaluation, and anxiety when speaking in front of peers, which limits participation and oral development (Le & Pham, 2023). Strengthening learners' self-confidence is therefore crucial, and Bandura (1997) suggests that teachers' encouragement, constructive feedback, and opportunities for mastery experiences or observational learning can significantly enhance students' self-efficacy and willingness to communicate.

2.3. Debate technique as a pedagogical tool

Debate-based activities have been shown to enhance both linguistic and affective outcomes in EFL contexts. By requiring learners to express opinions, defend positions, and respond spontaneously, debate develops fluency, argumentation, and critical thinking (Lumbangaol & Mazali, 2020). Unlike controlled speaking tasks, debates encourage learners to move beyond memorized phrases, fostering deeper processing of language and ideas. The approach is grounded in constructivist learning theories, which emphasize active knowledge construction through interaction (Piaget, 1970; Vygotsky, 1978). Furthermore, as Bandura (1997) notes, successful

performance in challenging tasks provides mastery experiences that strengthen self-efficacy. Within Krashen's (1982) framework, debates can reduce the affective filter by reframing speaking as purposeful communication rather than error-prone performance. Recent studies show that debate assists learners in integrating vocabulary and grammar into meaningful use (El Majidi *et al.*, 2021), promotes risk-taking, and reduces fear of mistakes (Chen & Zhang, 2022). Beyond linguistic benefits, debates also enhance transferable skills such as persuasion and teamwork, further contributing to learners' confidence (Linh, 2024). Recent studies among Asian EFL learners suggest that debate can reduce speaking-related anxiety while simultaneously fostering oral proficiency and critical thinking (Ali, 2021; El Majidi *et al.*, 2021; Tarigan & Lubis, 2024).

Despite this evidence, debate remains underused in Vietnamese EFL classrooms, where speaking practice is often limited to scripted dialogues and teacher-led question-answer sessions (Ly, 2020; Tran & Trung, 2022). When debates are attempted, they tend to be informal or unstructured, diminishing their pedagogical effectiveness. Thus, there is limited empirical evidence on the systematic use of debate to enhance speaking confidence in Vietnam, especially among college learners.

In a previous study, Dao (2024) demonstrated that structured debate alone significantly improved the speaking confidence of Vietnamese college learners, confirming its value as a targeted intervention. However, that study did not consider affective supports, which the broader literature suggests are equally important in reducing fear of mistakes and fostering self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997; Chen & Zhang, 2022). This gap points to the need to examine how debate may be strengthened when paired with teacher encouragement as a form of socio-affective support, an area that remains underexplored in the Vietnamese college context.

2.4. Teacher Encouragement in Enhancing Speaking Confidence

Teacher encouragement has long been recognized as a key affective factor in

lowering anxiety and facilitating risk-taking in communication (Bandura, 1997; Krashen, 1982; Chen & Zhang, 2022). In the literature, encouragement is often described broadly, encompassing praise, supportive teacher comments, and in some studies even corrective feedback. In the present study, however, encouragement is conceptualized more narrowly as praise and supportive teacher comments, while constructive feedback—especially gentle pronunciation correction—is treated as individualized adjustment, and interactive activities (e.g., games and group discussions) are considered separately as activity-based supports for motivation.

In the process of learning a foreign language, especially speaking skills, teachers not only act as knowledge transmitters but also serve as important sources of motivation. According to Dörnyei (2001), learners' motivation is strongly influenced by teachers' attitudes, teaching styles, and interpersonal support. Positive teacher behaviors such as praise, empathetic responses, and supportive comments can significantly enhance students' confidence and willingness to engage (Sun, 2021). More recent studies confirm that teacher encouragement, caring behavior, and praise improve learners' engagement and self-confidence in EFL contexts (Sun, 2021; Wang & Jiang, 2023), while supportive teacher–student relationships serve as external sources of motivational change, fostering more dynamic and participatory learning environments (Ma *et al.*, 2017; Chen & Zhang, 2022).

In Vietnam, however, classroom practices often emphasize error correction and strict evaluation. Many students report anxiety about being reprimanded or criticized, which discourages them from speaking (Ho & Truong, 2022). This teacher-centered orientation limits opportunities for encouragement and contributes to learners' low confidence. Despite widespread recognition of the importance of encouragement, little empirical research has systematically examined how it may work in combination with structured debate to foster speaking confidence in Vietnamese college learners. This gap provides the rationale for the present study.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This study adopted a mixed-methods design, combining quantitative and qualitative approaches to investigate how debate techniques and teacher encouragement foster speaking confidence in Vietnamese EFL learners. While the dataset was originally collected during a semester-long intervention, the present analysis extends prior work by introducing teacher encouragement as an additional independent variable and by applying both statistical and thematic analyses to provide a more comprehensive understanding.

The study was conducted over a period of 15 weeks, amounting to 33.75 instructional hours, with the participation of 80 students from two intact English classes at a public technical college in Southern Vietnam. Out of four first-year classes, these two were randomly assigned to the researcher by the academic department for teaching allocation. The researcher, who also served as the instructor for these two classes, was therefore well acquainted with the learners' English proficiency levels and their attitudes toward language learning. No control group was included because the remaining classes were taught by other instructors, which would have made instructional comparisons inconsistent. Including them as controls would likely have introduced confounds rather than reduced bias. The present design therefore emphasizes ecological validity by investigating the intervention under authentic classroom conditions. Nevertheless, the two study classes were comparable in size, curriculum, and student background to the other first-year classes. All participants were non-English majors with several years of prior English instruction but limited oral proficiency. While this arrangement allowed close observation and consistent implementation of the intervention, the lack of a control group necessarily limits causal inference.

During the first three weeks, students engaged in informal speaking tasks to reduce initial anxiety. To trace students' development across the intervention, debate sessions were structured at three stages: the pre-speaking test (week 4), a mid-stage session (week 8), and a later session

(week 12). Before the final post-test (week 15), students were provided with a topic for each debate stage and required to prepare ideas at home. In class, students were assigned to random groups and required to defend their positions.

Each stage had a distinct pedagogical focus. The first session mainly encouraged students to overcome hesitation and raise their voices. The second session emphasized expressing ideas in their own words with reduced dependence on prepared notes. By the third session, the focus shifted to refining pronunciation, fluency, and coherence through the use of linking words.

Performance in each debate was categorized into four achievement levels (Good, Average, Pass, Fail) based on observable behaviors. Students rated as *Good* were able to speak loudly and clearly, generate and defend ideas, and interact with peers with limited reliance on notes, eventually demonstrating fluency, coherence, and accurate pronunciation. *Average* students could contribute more than one opinion and defend their stance, but their delivery was often constrained and heavily dependent on prepared notes. *Pass* students managed to express isolated ideas, usually with long pauses and strong reliance on notes, producing only short or disconnected contributions. *Fail* students struggled to produce complete ideas, often speaking too softly or uttering only single words, and remained almost entirely reliant on notes across sessions. This progressive design allowed the debate activities not only to function as communicative practice but also to serve as a scaffolded intervention, with increasing expectations for autonomy, fluency, and confidence at each stage.

Teacher encouragement was systematically integrated throughout the course. This included verbal praise, motivational statements, and supportive comments before and after speaking activities. Individualized adjustment, by contrast, consisted of gentle pronunciation correction and personalized feedback. Students' perceptions of both were later captured through surveys and reflection interviews, enabling their quantification alongside debate participation.

For the post-test, each student chose a previously covered topic and delivered a

presentation within a time limit. They were asked to focus on a more specific issue due to time constraints. Students were assessed according to five speaking dimensions based on the IELTS speaking band descriptors, with some adjustments to accommodate college students' proficiency levels. As the purpose of this study was to enhance speaking confidence, the researcher added *stage control* as the fifth dimension to capture confidence-related behaviors (e.g., body language, audibility, and audience engagement). The rubric therefore included fluency and coherence, lexical resource, grammatical range, pronunciation, and stage control, each rated on the same four-band scale (see Table 1, adapted from Dao, 2024). Although grammar did not emerge as a salient source of anxiety in the pre-course scale, it remained an essential dimension of oral proficiency assessment.

To ensure content validity, the rubric was reviewed by two senior EFL lecturers. Behavioral indicators were refined to clarify note reliance, voice projection, and audience engagement for each band.

Formative debate-session performances were rated by the researcher also the instructor of these classes solely for pedagogical feedback and descriptive tracking; these scores were not used in statistical analyses. In contrast, the final speaking test (week 15), which served as the primary summative outcome, was independently scored by another instructor using the standardized rubric (Table 1).

3.2. Research Instrument

Data were collected through multiple sources to ensure triangulation:

- Pre- and post-speaking tests were video-recorded. The pre-test was scored by the instructor-researcher to establish a baseline, while the final post-test (the main outcome) was rated by an independent instructor using the standardized rubric. To assess reliability, 20 randomly selected videos (25% of the sample) were double-rated by the independent rater and the instructor also the researcher after a calibration session, yielding excellent agreement (ICC = 0.97, 95% CI [0.93, 0.99], $p < 0.001$;

Table 1. Post-Speaking Test: Categories and Description (Adapted from Dao, (2024))

Result	Fluency & Coherence	Lexical Resource	Grammatical Range	Pronunciation	Stage Control
Good (8–10)	Willing to speak at length; minor repetition, self-correction, or hesitation; ideas well-organized and coherent.	Sufficient vocabulary to express and clarify ideas on familiar topics.	Produces basic and complex sentences with reasonable accuracy	Generally clear and intelligible; only occasional mispronunciation	Confident presentation; uses body language, voice projection, and linking words to engage audience, speaks mostly without notes, only using them for brief prompts.
Average (6.1–7.9)	Maintains flow of speech but relies on some repetition or self-correction; ideas mostly organized but may lack smooth transitions.	Vocabulary range adequate for topic but limited flexibility; some word-finding pauses.	Produces mostly simple but grammatically correct sentences; occasionally attempts complex structures, though these often contain errors. Demonstrates some ability to self-correct	Occasional mispronunciations of complex words or clusters, but overall intelligible.	Attempts audience connection; occasional misused linking words; audible voice, occasionally checks notes but able to speak independently for several sentences.
Pass (5–6)	Speaks with long pauses; limited ability to link simple sentences	Vocabulary very limited; struggles to find words and repeat basic terms	Relies heavily on simple sentences with frequent grammar errors; complex structures rarely attempted and mostly incorrect. Limited or no self-correction	Frequent mispronunciations, but some words are still understandable.	Minimal body language; weak audience connection; low but audible voice, heavily dependent on notes and struggles to sustain speech without reading.
Fail (<5)	Unable to present effectively	Only isolated words or memorized phrases	Cannot consistently produce accurate basic sentences; grammar errors severely limit intelligibility.	Frequent and severe mispronunciations difficult to understand	Shows no body language or eye contact; voice too soft to be heard clearly; relies entirely on notes or reads verbatim, unable to sustain speech.

Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.986$), confirming consistent use of the rubric.

- Interviews and reflections: Ten students representing different confidence levels were interviewed pre- and post-intervention. Written reflections were collected throughout.

- Questionnaires: Administered before and after the course to measure students' anxiety sources and perceived confidence.

- The pre-course questionnaire was developed based on interviews with 10 randomly selected students (Table 2). These insights were consistent with existing validated scales of speaking anxiety in Vietnam (Ho & Truong, 2022) and were used to generate an initial pool of eight items. Reliability analysis indicated that the items on remembering grammar tenses and feeling calm when being called by the teacher displayed weak and negative item-total correlations, respectively, thereby reducing the internal consistency of the scale. Excluding these items improved the internal consistency of the scale to an acceptable level, Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.752$. Accordingly, the final validated scale consisted of six items representing students' speaking anxiety

- The post-course questionnaire was developed by combining qualitative insights with theoretical grounding. Follow-up interviews with the same ten students who had been interviewed at the pre-course stage generated preliminary themes (Table 6), which were then refined through consultation with a peer instructor. This process identified four key factors influencing learners' speaking confidence that were not arbitrarily chosen but reflected both students' voices and constructs well-established in the literature: (1) **Teacher encouragement** captured praise and supportive comments, identified as affective scaffolding that may reduce anxiety and foster willingness to communicate (Bandura, 1997; Sun, 2021; Chen & Zhang, 2022). (2) **Individualized adjustment** referred to personalized feedback, particularly gentle pronunciation correction, consistent with Vygotsky's (1978) scaffolding framework (Le & Pham, 2023). (3) **Debate** represented structured speaking practice with authentic communicative stakes, recognized as a mastery experience that

promotes oral proficiency and self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997; El Majidi *et al.*, 2021; Linh, 2024). (4) **Interactive tasks** included games and group discussions that increase engagement and reduce classroom anxiety (Wang & Jiang, 2023; Ghafar, 2023). Each factor was operationalized as a single Likert-type item rated from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) (Table 7). Based on prior classroom-based studies (Sun, 2021; Wang & Jiang, 2023), single-item measures were adopted to minimize response burden. While these items were not validated as a multi-item psychometric scale, their construct validity was established through triangulation with student interviews and alignment with established constructs in the literature. Given the single-item format and modest sample size ($N = 80$), factor analysis was not applicable.

- Observation of debate sessions: Class performance records were analyzed to track progress over time.

This classroom-based study was embedded in a credit-bearing course and followed routine teaching and assessment procedures. A detailed teaching plan, including staged debates and a video-recorded final speaking task, was reviewed and endorsed by the department before the semester began. At the start of the course, students were briefed on the teaching approach, the use of in-class recordings for feedback and moderation, and the possibility that de-identified course data would be analyzed for scholarly reporting; students agreed to proceed. Debate sessions and the final speaking test were recorded to enable instructor feedback and cross-marking. For analysis and reporting, all student names were replaced with codes, and no personally identifying information is presented. Files were stored on password-protected devices accessible only to the instructor and retained according to college policy. In line with institutional guidance for scholarship-of-teaching-and-learning projects that use normal educational practices, formal IRB approval was not required.

3.3. Data Analysis

We estimated multiple linear regression models to predict post-confidence and post-

proficiency while controlling for baseline scores. Standardized coefficients (β), 95% confidence intervals, and p-values were reported. Regression assumptions were checked (normality of residuals, homoscedasticity, and independence), and no serious violations were detected. Multicollinearity was acceptable, with all variance inflation factors (VIFs) below 2. To examine the hypothesized synergy between debate and teacher encouragement, an interaction term (Debate \times Encouragement) was included. Robustness checks comprised (a) a reduced model retaining only significant predictors and (b) sensitivity analyses using alternative scaling of the confidence measure. Analyses of primary outcomes relied on independent rater scores from the final post-test; in cases of double rating, the independent rater's score was retained after reliability checks. In addition to significance testing, effect sizes (Cohen's d for pre-post comparisons) and model fit indices (R^2 , adjusted R^2 , and f^2) were reported. Consistent with the one-group pre-/post-test design, regression coefficients were interpreted as associations rather than causal effects.

4. Results

4.1. Findings on Low Speaking Confidence

Prior to the commencement of the course, students were asked to conduct a self-assessment of their confidence in speaking English (Fig. 1). Subsequently, ten students were randomly selected from different confidence groups (Table 2) to participate in interviews exploring the factors influencing their speaking confidence in English classes. The insights obtained from these interviews were further examined in consultation with other English lecturers and subsequently developed into a questionnaire using a five-point Likert scale, ranging from *never* (1) to *always* (5). Higher mean scores indicate a greater frequency of anxiety experienced by students.

Table 3 illustrates the factors contributing to students' self-reported anxiety when speaking English in class. The mean anxiety score across items was $M = 3.10$ ($SD = 1.25$), suggesting a moderate level of speaking anxiety with substantial variability across students.

The strongest sources of anxiety were fear of being reprimanded by the teacher ($M = 3.90$, $SD = 1.21$), fear of peers' judgment ($M = 3.60$, $SD = 1.39$), and lack of vocabulary ($M = 3.66$, SD

Table 2. Pre-class Interview

Name	Confidence level	Elements Affect Confidence
A	Strongly unconfident	It terrified me because of my limited vocabulary and I'm unable to express my ideas
B	Strongly unconfident	I can't understand what teacher is saying and unable to remember all grammar tense to use
C	Unconfident	I feel embarrassed with my intonation and pronunciation
D	Unconfident	I feel nervous whenever I have to speak English. I think friends will make fun of me
E	Neutral	I don't have enough vocabulary to understand and communicate and I'm afraid to upset teacher if making mistake
F	Neutral	I usually find it difficult to form a full sentence and my pronunciation is terrible
G	Confident	Teacher's anger and classmates teasing are those that make me uncomfortable when speaking
H	Confident	I'm afraid teacher will scold me if I make pronunciation mistakes
I	Strongly confident	I sometimes hesitate to talk because I don't recall which tense to use.
J	Strongly confident	I feel calm when teacher call me to speak English

Table 3. Students Anxiety Rate When Speaking in Classroom

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
I am deeply embarrassed by my pronunciation and prosody.	80	2.2625	1.2802
It frightened me because of my lack of vocabulary that makes me struggle to articulate my ideas.	80	3.6625	1.2006
It makes me anxious when I have no idea what my teacher is saying in English.	80	3.575	1.2904
I worry that my teacher will get angry and reprimand me when I make errors.	80	3.9	1.2076
I often struggle to put together a complete sentence.	80	2.825	1.1111
I'm afraid when I speak English, my classmates will make fun of me.	80	3.6	1.3870
AVERAGE		3.10	1.2451

= 1.20). Stress arising from not understanding teacher instructions was also prominent (M = 3.58, SD = 1.29). Students additionally reported moderate difficulty in forming complete sentences (M = 2.83, SD = 1.11). By contrast, pronunciation and intonation (M = 2.26, SD = 1.28) were rated as less anxiety-provoking.

Overall, the findings suggest that students' speaking anxiety stemmed primarily from psychological and social pressures—such as fear of negative evaluation and limited vocabulary—rather than linguistic accuracy alone. The relatively large standard deviations further highlight individual differences in confidence and language learning experiences.

4.2. Improvement in Students' Speaking Confidence and Performance

Speaking confidence increased between pre- and post-test, as seen in Fig. 1. Between the pre- and post-test periods, the percentage of students reporting extreme insecurity declined, while the proportion reporting confidence increased significantly to 35%, nearly a nine-fold increase, and the percentage of people who were strongly confident grew from 1% to 8%. The degree of insecurity also dropped by 30%.

Despite their higher confidence level (43%), many students continued to struggle with grammar and pronunciation (52%). Pronunciation and intonation had been rated as less anxiety-provoking in the pre-course scale (Table 3),

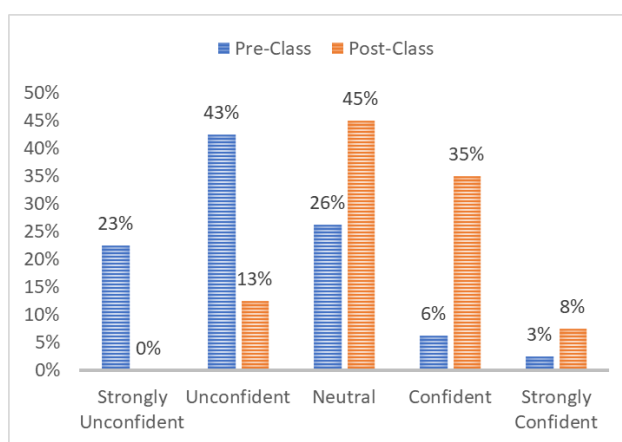


Figure 1. Confidence level between Pre- and Post-class

yet they re-emerged in post-test reflections as persistent weaknesses affecting performance accuracy. Grammar, although excluded from the validated anxiety measure due to weak reliability, was still perceived by students as a frequent source of error in actual speaking tasks. These findings suggest that while learner-centered methods helped reduce anxiety and enhance confidence, underlying linguistic limitations in grammar and pronunciation remained to be addressed.

To assess the progress, pre- and post-tests were administered. From 56% of students who failed in the pre-speaking test, it was reduced to only 1% in the post-test (Fig. 2). The proportion of good results also surged almost 9 times from 9% to 44%.

A paired-samples t-test (Table 5) confirmed

Table 4. Students' Reflections on their Post-course Speaking Proficiency

Proficient Level	N	%
I'm able to present fluently with good intonation and minor pronunciation errors	22	28
I'm able to present logically without pausing but still have some minor pronunciation errors	16	20
I'm able to present with logical structure, but still make lots of grammar and pronunciation errors.	42	52
I'm unable to speak	0	0
Total	80	100

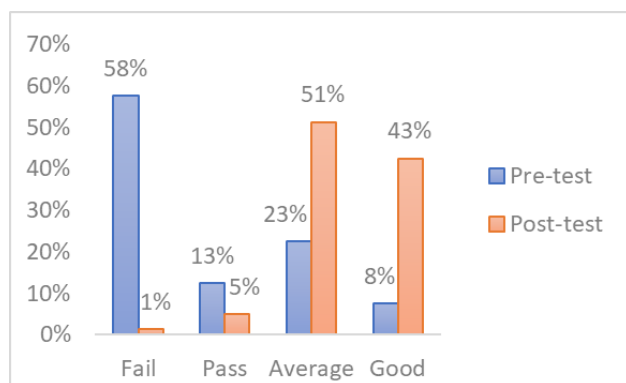


Figure 2. Speaking results in Pre- and Post-test

significant gains: pre-test $M = 3.91$ ($SD = 2.76$), post-test $M = 7.61$ ($SD = 1.31$), $t(79) = -12.86$, $p < .001$. While the p-value indicated statistical significance, the large effect size, Cohen's $d = 1.27$, further demonstrated that the observed improvement was practically meaningful, not merely a product of sample size.

4.3. Students post-reflection

After the research, the previous ten students were interviewed again to determine which

Table 5. Mean Comparison between Pre-and Post-test Results

Paired Samples Statistics						
			Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	Pretest		3.9100	80	2.75679	0.30822
	Posttest		7.6125	80	1.30717	0.14615
Paired Samples Test						
Paired Differences						
Pair 1 Pretest - Posttest	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean Lower	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference		Sig. (2-tailed)
				Upper		
	-3.70250	2.57387	0.28777	-4.27529	-3.12971	0.000

Table 6. Post-class Interview Previous Students

Name	Pre-Confidence Level	Post-Confidence Level	Pre-test	Post-test	Reason
A	Strongly unconfident	Confident	4	5.5	Combined games and interactive tasks make class more enjoyable
B	Strongly unconfident	Confident	0	9	Discuss and debate many topics, then have teacher corrected pronunciation
C	Unconfident	Strongly Confident	0	9	Through debate sessions and presentations

Name	Pre-Confidence Level	Post-Confidence Level	Pre-test	Post-test	Reason
D	Unconfident	Confident	7	8	Teacher encourage every time I have to speak
E	Neutral	Confident	7	10	Listen to English songs and do fill in blank exercises to improve vocabulary
F	Neutral	Neutral	0	7	Teacher gently corrected pronunciation errors.
G	Confident	Strongly confident	0	8	Teacher use gentle and soft voice to communicate with student
H	Confident	Neutral	4	8	Through many debate sessions
I	Strongly Confident	Strongly confident	7	9	The teacher patiently addresses students' pronunciation errors during speaking practice.
J	Strongly Confident	Strongly Confident	9	10	Teacher gently corrected pronunciation errors

elements influence their confidence. Their responses were then considered with problems in Table 4 from which drawn out four elements. Those were then transferred to a Likert scale questionnaire, ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5), for 80 students to rate.

In addition to these interviews, students were also asked to indicate which language skills they feared most before the class and which they perceived as most improved after the class. As shown in Fig. 3, speaking (40%) and listening (42%) were identified as the most feared skills prior to the course, while speaking (56%) emerged as the most improved skill afterwards, followed by reading (19%) and listening (18%).

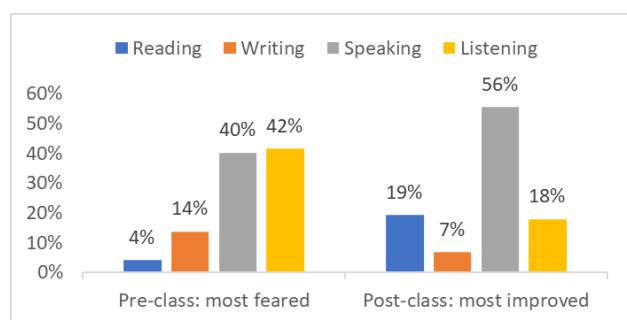


Figure 3. Students' Perceptions of Skills before and after the Class

Table 7 shows students' awareness of debate sessions, teacher encouragement, adjustments

based on individual levels, and interactive tasks. Among these factors, interactive tasks received the highest mean score ($M = 4.38$, $SD = 0.72$), with low variation, suggesting that most students strongly agreed such activities made learning more effective and less stressful. The debate technique also received positive evaluations ($M = 4.11$, $SD = 0.93$), indicating that debate is a useful tool for improving speaking skills, although the level of agreement was slightly less consistent than for interactive tasks. Teacher encouragement obtained a mean score of 3.98 ($SD = 0.87$), suggesting that motivational support from teachers plays an important and relatively consistent role in boosting students' confidence. By contrast, adjustment to individual levels received the lowest mean score ($M = 3.58$) and the highest standard deviation ($SD = 1.09$), reflecting more divided opinions: while some students found personalized correction helpful, others did not perceive its impact as strongly.

The result of the Pearson correlation analysis shows that the independent variables are correlated with the dependent variable (post-confidence) and, therefore, will be included to explain the dependent variable in the next regression analysis step.

The regression model was significant, $F(2, 77) = 23.94$, $p < 0.001$, explaining 38.3% of the

Table 7. Students' Reflections about their Improvements

Category	Survey Item	N	Means (M)	Std Deviation (SD)
Encouragement	My teacher often encourages/praises me when I participate in speaking.	80	3.98	0.871
Individualized Adjustment	Gentle pronunciation correction from my teacher helps me feel more confident next time	80	3.58	1.09
Debate	Participating in structured debates has improved my speaking.	80	4.11	0.93
Interactive tasks	Interactive activities help me grasp content without feeling overwhelmed.	80	4.38	0.72

Table 8. Pearson Correlation with Post-confidence

	Encouragement	Individualized Adjustment	Debate	Interactive Tasks
Pearson Correlation	0.431**	0.150	0.589**	0.280**
Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000	0.183	0.000	0.006
N	80	80	80	80

** Note: Correlation is significant at 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 9. Regression Coefficients for Post-confidence

Model Summary							
Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate			
1	0.619a	0.383	0.367	0.63750			
a. Predictors: (Constant), Encouragement, Debate							
	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients Beta	t	Sig	95.0% Confidence Interval for B	
	B	Std. Error				Lower Bound	Upper Bound
(Constant)				2.172	0.033	0.70	1.610
Encouragement	0.194	0.092	0.211	2.118	0.037	0.012	0.377
Debate	0.429	0.086	0.496	4.972	<.001	0.257	0.600

variance in post-confidence ($R^2 = 0.383$, Adjusted $R^2 = 0.367$). The overall effect size was large (Cohen's $f^2 = 0.62$), indicating that the predictors together had a substantial impact on students' speaking confidence. Both debate and teacher encouragement were positively associated with speaking confidence:

- Encouragement ($B = 0.194$, $\beta = 0.21$, 95% CI [0.01, 0.38], $t = 2.12$, $p = 0.037$)
- Debate ($B = 0.429$, $\beta = 0.50$, 95% CI [0.26,

0.60], $t = 4.97$, $p < 0.001$)

Accordingly, the regression equation can be expressed as:

$$Y = 0.840 + 0.194 * \text{Encouragement} + 0.429 * \text{Debate},$$

where Y represents students' speaking confidence.

Encouragement: Teacher encouragement when answering or speaking

Debate: Participation in debate sessions.

5. Discussion, Limitations and Recommendations

5.1. Interpretation of Results

The validated six-item scale indicated a moderate overall anxiety level ($M = 3.10$). Socio-affective pressures (teacher reprimand and peer judgment) and difficulties with vocabulary or comprehension were rated as the strongest sources, while pronunciation and sentence formation were much less salient. Grammar, though initially included, was removed during validation due to weak correlation with the construct. This finding diverges from Ho and Truong (2022), who reported that Vietnamese university freshmen often attributed their anxiety to grammar knowledge and linguistic accuracy. In contrast, the present study's college learners expressed much less concern about pronunciation or sentence formation, focusing instead on socio-affective pressures such as teacher reprimand and peer judgment. Such differences may reflect contextual variations between university and college students, with the latter being more sensitive to classroom climate than to linguistic precision.

Taken together, these pre-intervention findings suggest that students' reluctance to speak was driven more by fear of evaluation than by linguistic competence. This pattern aligns with Bandura's (1997) self-efficacy theory and Krashen's (1982) affective filter hypothesis, highlighting how fear of negative evaluation can obstruct participation. Prior studies (Sun, 2021) have similarly emphasized the critical role of teacher feedback in shaping learners' willingness to engage.

Following the 15-week intervention, students' speaking confidence significantly improved, with a large and practically meaningful effect (Cohen's $d = 1.27$). Although 52% still reported pronunciation difficulties, nearly half of the students delivered fluent and confident presentations. This may indicate that confidence develops faster than linguistic accuracy, as learners become more tolerant of imperfections while sustaining communication. From a constructivist perspective (Piaget, 1970), debates provided opportunities for students to actively

construct knowledge through interaction, while from a sociocultural scaffolding perspective (Vygotsky, 1978), teacher encouragement appeared to lower affective barriers and create conditions for risk-taking.

Regression analysis ($R^2 = 0.383$, adjusted $R^2 = 0.367$, $f^2 = 0.62$, indicating a large effect) suggested that debate ($B = 0.429$, $\beta = 0.50$, $p < 0.001$) was a stronger predictor of speaking confidence than teacher encouragement ($B = 0.194$, $\beta = 0.21$, $p = 0.037$). Debate may have provided opportunities for repeated mastery experiences (Bandura, 1997), requiring students to construct arguments, respond to peers, and perform under authentic communicative pressure. Teacher encouragement, in contrast, appeared to be associated with reduced fear of reprimand and perceptions of a safer classroom climate, consistent with Krashen's (1982) affective filter hypothesis. Together, these results align with prior findings that debate and supportive feedback jointly foster willingness to communicate and greater self-confidence (Linh, 2024; Chen & Zhang, 2022; Ghafar, 2023).

Beyond quantitative predictors of confidence, perception data also revealed important shifts in how students viewed their own skills. Speaking and listening were initially rated as the most feared skills before the course, yet afterwards were reported as the most improved (Fig. 3). This transformation aligns with Horwitz *et al.*'s (1986) framework of Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety and illustrates how scaffolded opportunities (debates, feedback, and encouragement) allowed students to turn difficult areas into domains of measurable progress.

Interestingly, while interactive tasks and individualized adjustments were rated positively by students (Table 7), consistent with evidence that learners value supportive and learner-centered practices (Sun, 2021; Wang & Jiang, 2023), they did not show significant correlations with post-confidence. This suggests that such activities may primarily promote cognitive engagement and scaffolding rather than directly lowering affective barriers in the short term. In contrast, teacher encouragement appears to function as immediate socio-affective support,

while debate provides structured practice with authentic communicative stakes, producing clearer and more measurable effects within a 15-week period. Debate may therefore offer opportunities that combine cognitive challenge with affective support, helping to explain its stronger association with confidence.

Beyond the primary analyses, an additional regression indicated a significant positive association between students' post-test performance and their post-course confidence ($\beta = 0.37, p < 0.001$). Although exploratory, this finding resonates with Bandura's (1997) concept of self-efficacy, highlighting the reciprocal link between performance outcomes and confidence. Such results suggest that linguistic competence and affective confidence may reinforce each other, creating a positive cycle in learners' oral development.

Taken together, the findings indicate that addressing both psychological barriers (e.g., fear of evaluation) and practical needs (e.g., opportunities for authentic practice) is important for fostering greater confidence. This interpretation is consistent with constructivist and sociocultural theories (Piaget, 1970; Vygotsky, 1978), which emphasize scaffolded, interactive, and socially situated learning experiences as critical for both cognitive and affective growth.

5.2. Pedagogical Implications

The findings suggest that structured debate should be a regular feature of speaking classes, as it creates authentic opportunities for interaction and provides mastery experiences that build learners' self-efficacy. Likewise, teacher encouragement through praise and motivational support plays a crucial role in reducing fear of evaluation and fostering active participation (Sun, 2021; Chen & Zhang, 2022). Interactive tasks such as games and group discussions can further enhance engagement in low-pressure contexts, while individualized adjustments, such as gentle pronunciation correction, may support learners at different proficiency levels even if their short-term impact on confidence is modest. Taken together, these approaches highlight the value of combining debate, encouragement, and

supportive activities in line with constructivist and sociocultural theories (Piaget, 1970; Vygotsky, 1978).

5.3. Limitations and Future Directions

While the study provides valuable insights, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the one-group pre/post design without a control group limits causal inference, as improvements may partly reflect maturation or external factors. Second, the sample was restricted to 80 students from a single technical college, constraining the generalizability of the findings. Third, although formative debate-session ratings were teacher-scored, they were used only for descriptive tracking and instructional feedback, not for hypothesis testing. The main outcome measures were the pre- and post-speaking tests, with the final post-test independently rated and demonstrating excellent reliability ($ICC = 0.97$). Nonetheless, the absence of rater blinding means that some expectancy effects cannot be completely ruled out. Future research should address these limitations by conducting multi-site replications with larger and more diverse samples, adopting randomized or quasi-experimental designs with control or comparison groups, and employing external or blinded raters for both formative and summative assessments. In addition, developing validated multi-item measures of constructs such as teacher encouragement and debate participation would strengthen psychometric robustness and provide deeper insights into their contributions to speaking confidence.

6. Conclusions

This study examined Vietnamese college EFL students' speaking confidence and the effects of debate, teacher encouragement, interactive tasks, and individualized adjustments. At baseline, reluctance to speak was driven more by fear of evaluation than by linguistic competence. After 15 weeks, both confidence and speaking performance improved markedly, as shown by quantitative tests and qualitative reflections. Debate and teacher encouragement showed the strongest associations with post-course confidence, while interactive tasks and

individualized adjustment provided additional support. Overall, learner-centered, constructivist approaches appear effective for enhancing oral proficiency, reducing anxiety, and fostering self-efficacy. An exploratory regression also indicated a positive association between post-test performance and post-course confidence ($\beta = 0.37, p < 0.001$), suggesting a reciprocal link between competence and confidence that merits further investigation.

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