



The Role of Input-First Preparation in Building EFL Learners' Public Speaking Confidence

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study explored how input-first preparation influences the public speaking confidence of EFL learners at the University of Insan Budi Utomo. Using a semi structured interview approach, data were gathered from learners who engaged in a preparation sequence emphasizing comprehension before production. Participants were first exposed to authentic speech models, such as TED Talks, and guided through analysis of rhetorical openings, delivery techniques, and language use, prior to producing their own speeches. Findings revealed that this method transformed learners' perception of public speaking from a high anxiety performance to a skill that can be systematically learned. Students reported reduced anxiety, improved delivery, and greater use of natural intonation and varied sentence structures. The analysis indicated that having a clear opening strategy and exposure to authentic speech rhythms provided psychological readiness and linguistic resources during performance. Compared to traditional output-first methods, the input-first approach offered a lower pressure entry point into speaking tasks which later enables learners to internalize effective techniques before application. The study suggests that input-rich preparation can demystify public speaking, particularly for learners with high speaking anxiety, and positions comprehension as a critical foundation for confident oral communication in EFL contexts.

Keywords: input-first preparation, public speaking, EFL learners, speaking anxiety, comprehension based instruction

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INTRODUCTION

Public speaking is widely recognized as one of the most important yet demanding skills for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners. Beyond demonstrating linguistic competence, students must perform in front of an audience with clarity, confidence, and persuasive impact. However, for many EFL learners, public speaking is accompanied by considerable anxiety, often intensified by limited vocabulary, restricted fluency, and a lack of exposure to authentic speaking

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models (Lucas, 2019; Mahmudi & Anugerahwati, 2024). At the University of Insan Budi Utomo, Indonesia, students frequently report that while they can prepare speeches in written form, they struggle to deliver them effectively due to nervousness and insufficient familiarity with authentic delivery styles. These challenges highlight the need for pedagogical practices that foster both linguistic competence and communicative confidence.

Theoretical perspectives in second language acquisition (SLA) provide insights into addressing these challenges. Krashen's Input Hypothesis (1982) argues that learners acquire language when exposed to comprehensible input slightly beyond their current level, while his Affective Filter Hypothesis (1985) suggests that high anxiety impedes acquisition. Bandura's Self-Efficacy Theory (1997) further emphasizes that belief in one's capability directly affects performance, including oral communication. Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory underscores the role of scaffolding, where learning is mediated through guided interaction before independent performance (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). Together, these frameworks highlight that meaningful exposure, confidence building, and structured support are critical in preparing learners for public speaking.

Recent studies also reinforce these perspectives. Research consistently identifies public speaking as one of the most anxiety-provoking tasks for EFL learners (Horwitz, 2017; Juhana, 2012). Indonesian studies, such as Yunus, Amin, and Faridawati (2024), show that fear of negative evaluation and lack of preparation contribute to persistent speaking anxiety. Similarly, Mahmudi and Anugerahwati (2024) demonstrate that insufficient exposure to authentic delivery styles exacerbates nervousness among university students. Beyond anxiety, Polyanskaya and Ordin (2019) reveal that rhythm, intonation, and speech rate significantly shape perceptions of fluency and competence, highlighting the importance of modeling prosodic features.

Pedagogical innovations suggest promising directions. Takaesu (2013) shows that TED Talks can provide accessible models of authentic speech, supporting both comprehension and rhetorical awareness. Abdullah (2021) finds that scaffolding strategies in speaking classes promote fluency and confidence by breaking complex tasks into manageable steps. More broadly, Jiang and Zhang (2023) and Wang and Lu (2024) report that input-rich environments allow learners to internalize discourse patterns before production. However, in practice, many EFL classrooms continue to prioritize output-first approaches, requiring learners to produce speeches without adequate exposure or modeling. This often results in mechanical, hesitant delivery and heightened anxiety (Zhou, 2024).

Despite growing recognition of input-based instruction in SLA, little empirical research has examined its role in public speaking pedagogy, particularly within Southeast Asian higher education. This gap is significant given the increasing importance of English public speaking for employability and academic competitiveness in Indonesia (Astuti, 2022; Putri & Ariyanti, 2019).

To address this gap, the present study investigates how input-first preparation influences the public speaking confidence of EFL learners at the University of Insan Budi Utomo. Specifically, it examines how structured exposure to authentic speech models, such as TED Talks and academic lectures, before production can (1) reshape learners' perceptions of public speaking, (2) reduce performance anxiety, and (3) enhance delivery skills. By focusing on comprehension as a precursor to production, the study explores whether public speaking can be transformed from a high-anxiety event into a systematic, learnable skill.

This study contributes to EFL pedagogy in two ways. First, it extends SLA theory by demonstrating the application of input-first preparation to the specialized context of public speaking. Second, it provides practical insights for instructors who want to design classroom practices that both enhance performance and empower learners psychologically. For the Indonesian context in particular, where English is increasingly tied to career mobility and academic engagement, this study offers timely recommendations for bridging the gap between competence and confident oral communication.

METHOD

2.1 Research Design

This study employed a qualitative descriptive design to investigate how input-first preparation influences the public speaking confidence of EFL learners. The design was chosen to capture participants' subjective experiences and perceptions in detail, particularly their reflections on how exposure to authentic input affected their performance and confidence when delivering speeches. Semi-structured interviews served as the primary instrument for data collection, which allows the researcher to explore both common patterns and individual differences across participants.

2.2 Participants

The participants were twelve undergraduate students enrolled in the English Education Study Program at the University of Insan Budi Utomo, Indonesia. They were selected through purposive sampling based on their participation in a public speaking course that integrated input-first preparation into its instructional design. The group included both male and female students,

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aged between 19 and 23, with intermediate to upper-intermediate proficiency in English as determined by institutional placement tests. All participants had some prior experience with traditional public speaking tasks, such as class presentations, but limited exposure to structured input-based approaches.

2.3 Instructional Context

The course module in which the participants were enrolled emphasized comprehension before production. Over four instructional sessions, students engaged with authentic speech models, including TED Talks and recorded academic presentations. Classroom activities focused on analyzing rhetorical openings, delivery techniques, intonation patterns, and lexical choices. Group discussions were used to deepen learners' understanding of effective strategies. Only after repeated exposure to and analysis of these models were students asked to prepare and deliver their own speeches. This sequence provided the experiential foundation for subsequent interviews.

2.4 Data Collection

Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews conducted after the completion of the instructional sequence. Each interview lasted approximately 30–45 minutes and was conducted in either English or Bahasa Indonesia, depending on the participants' preference, to ensure comfort and depth of response. The interviews explored learners' perceptions of input-first preparation, its impact on their confidence, and the differences they noticed in their delivery compared to previous experiences with output-first methods. All interviews were audio-recorded with consent and later transcribed for analysis.

2.5 Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was applied to the interview data following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework. An inductive coding process was used to identify emerging themes related to confidence, anxiety reduction, delivery improvement, and perception of public speaking as a learnable skill. To enhance trustworthiness, peer debriefing was conducted with two colleagues in applied linguistics, and member checking was implemented by sharing preliminary findings with participants for confirmation.

FINDINGS

This study investigated how an input-first preparation method influences the public speaking confidence of EFL learners. Analysis of the semi-structured interviews revealed a consistent pattern, i.e. the approach fundamentally transformed the learners' experiences of public

speaking. The findings are presented across three main themes; (1) the demystification of public speaking, (2) the anchor of a structured opening, and (3) the internalization of a speech rhythm.

3.1 The Demystification of Public Speaking

Prior to the intervention, most participants regarded public speaking as an intimidating performance dependent on natural charisma or confidence. This perception often led them to rely on rigid memorization or to avoid opportunities to speak in English altogether. The input-first approach, which emphasized analyzing authentic models such as TED Talks, shifted this perception. Learners began to view public speaking as a process that could be broken down into identifiable, learnable components.

“Before, I thought public speaking was only for extroverts or born leaders. But after we broke down those TED Talks, looking at how they started, how they told a story, how they used pauses, I realized, ‘Oh, this is a structure. I can learn this.’ It’s not about being a different person, it’s about following a blueprint.” (Participant 07)

“I always felt it was like jumping into a cold lake. Now, I feel like I have steps to walk in. Analyzing the models showed me that every good speaker uses certain techniques, and those techniques can be copied and practiced.” (Participant 12)

These reflections reveal a fundamental cognitive shift. Rather than seeing public speaking as a performance that only the naturally gifted could succeed in, students began to perceive it as a skill that could be scaffolded and practiced. The metaphor of “steps to walk in” suggests a gradual, less overwhelming entry into the task, reinforcing the idea that structured input can transform learners’ orientation from fear to agency. This shift also indicates that demystification plays a key role in reducing performance pressure, once learners realized that effective speeches followed recognizable patterns, their sense of helplessness diminished, replaced by a belief in systematic improvement.

3.2 The Anchor of a Structured Opening

A recurring theme was the critical role of the speech’s opening. Many participants identified the first minute as the peak of their anxiety, describing it as the moment when their confidence was most fragile. Input-first preparation directly addressed this by encouraging learners to focus on rhetorical openings, offering them a repertoire of strategies, such as starting with a question, a personal story, or a striking statistic.

“My biggest fear was always the beginning. What if I forget my first line? This time was different. I had analyzed three different ways to start a speech. I chose one that I liked and practiced it many times. Knowing exactly how I would start gave me the confidence to get through the rest.” (Participant 11)

“In the past, I would start speaking with my heart already pounding. This time, I began with the question I had practiced, just like the speaker in the video we watched. It felt familiar, not scary. It was like having a handrail when you’re climbing stairs.” (Participant 05)

These accounts highlight how structured openings acted as an “anchor,” which stabilizes learners during the most anxiety-inducing stage. The comparison to a “handrail” illustrates the psychological support such preparation provides, offering balance and security in a moment of vulnerability. By mastering their opening, learners were able to transition into the rest of the speech with greater composure. The trend here is clear. Confidence gained at the beginning created a positive ripple effect, allowing subsequent delivery to feel more natural and less pressured.

3.3 The Internalization of a Speech Rhythm

Beyond structural strategies, participants described how repeated exposure to authentic input allowed them to internalize paralinguistic features such as intonation, pauses, stress, and even gestures. This internalization shifted their attention away from the mechanics of grammar and pronunciation toward the communicative purpose of the speech. Learners began to model their delivery on authentic speakers, which gave their speeches a more engaging, natural quality.

“When I practiced before, I just read my script flatly. But after watching the TED speaker use pauses so effectively, I found myself doing it naturally in my practice. During my speech, I wasn’t just reciting, my voice had ups and downs. I paused after an important point. It didn’t feel like I was pretending anymore.” (Participant 04)

“I noticed how the speakers used their hands and changed their tone to emphasize key words. I didn’t memorize gestures, but when I was speaking, I found myself doing similar things because it felt right. It came from having that model in my head. I felt more like a speaker and less like a student being tested.” (Participant 09)

These narratives suggest that input-first preparation facilitated the absorption of performance cues that go beyond language accuracy. Students began to embody features of effective communication, aligning themselves more closely with authentic speaker identities. The distinction between “pretending” and “feeling like a speaker” captures a deeper transformation. Learners were no longer constrained by a focus on correctness but were instead engaging with public speaking as a communicative act. This evolution from mechanics to delivery underscores the power of authentic input in shaping not only linguistic competence but also self-perception as a confident communicator.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study demonstrate that input-first preparation substantially reshapes EFL learners’ experiences of public speaking. Learners not only reframed public speaking as a skill

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that can be systematically developed but also reported reduced anxiety, improved delivery, and enhanced psychological readiness. These results align with, and extend, existing theories in second language acquisition (SLA) and public speaking pedagogy.

First, the study supports Krashen's Input Hypothesis (1982), which emphasizes that comprehensible input is fundamental for language acquisition. By providing exposure to authentic speeches before requiring production, the input-first approach supplied learners with both linguistic and rhetorical scaffolding, thereby reducing the cognitive burden during performance. This finding echoes Jiang and Zhang (2023), who showed that input-rich environments facilitate the internalization of discourse structures. However, the present study extends this understanding by applying input-based learning to the specialized, high-stakes domain of public speaking. This focus is particularly significant because, unlike general language practice, public speaking involves heightened affective demands and evaluative pressure.

Second, the results highlight the importance of reducing speaking anxiety through structured exposure. Public speaking has long been identified as one of the most anxiety-provoking tasks for EFL learners (Horwitz, 2017; Juhana, 2012; Yunus et al., 2024). Anxiety often peaks when learners are required to deliver speeches without sufficient scaffolding, leading to hesitant, mechanical, or disengaged delivery (Mahmudi & Anugerahwati, 2024). In contrast, participants in this study reported that input-first preparation lowered their affective filter (Krashen, 1985), transforming debilitating nervousness into manageable performance readiness. The strong emphasis learners placed on mastering speech openings is particularly noteworthy. While much prior research has focused on fluency, vocabulary, and pronunciation (Wang & Lu, 2024; Polyanskaya & Ordin, 2019), the present study shows that the very first minute of a speech plays a pivotal psychological role. Structured openings gave learners a secure entry point and became a catalyst for confident performance, a nuance that remains underexplored in the literature.

Third, the study extends existing research on the benefits of authentic models by demonstrating how repeated exposure to input fosters the internalization of paralinguistic features such as rhythm, intonation, pausing, and gesture. This aligns with Takaesu (2013), who highlighted TED Talks as valuable resources for EFL listening and rhetorical awareness. The current findings, however, move beyond listening outcomes by illustrating how learners transferred these paralinguistic features into their own speeches, thereby shifting their identity from hesitant students to confident speakers. This identity transformation suggests that input-first preparation not only enhances linguistic competence but also supports the development of speaker self-

efficacy (Bandura, 1997), positioning learners as capable communicators rather than passive language learners.

Critically, these findings challenge the dominance of output-first approaches still prevalent in many EFL classrooms. While production-focused tasks aim to maximize practice opportunities, they often place learners in high-pressure situations with limited scaffolding, exacerbating anxiety and reinforcing formulaic speech patterns (Putri & Ariyanti, 2019). By contrast, the input-first approach provided a low-pressure entry point, allowing learners to internalize effective techniques before applying them. This supports Ellis's (2020) call to reconsider the balance between input and output in communicative pedagogy, especially in contexts where oral performance is both evaluative and emotionally charged.

Taken together, these findings position input-first preparation as a pedagogically sound approach that bridges cognitive and affective dimensions of public speaking in EFL contexts. By demystifying the task, reducing anxiety, and enhancing delivery, the approach not only supports SLA theory but also empowers learners psychologically. For the Indonesian higher education context, where English public speaking increasingly intersects with employability and academic competitiveness (Astuti, 2022), the study offers timely evidence that input-rich, scaffolded instruction can transform public speaking from a high-anxiety burden into a systematic, learnable skill.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to explore how input-first preparation influences the public speaking confidence of EFL learners at the University of Insan Budi Utomo. The findings provide clear evidence that the approach reshapes learners' orientation toward public speaking in three important ways; it demystifies the task by presenting it as a learnable skill, it reduces anxiety through structured openings, and it promotes more natural delivery by enabling learners to internalize authentic speech rhythms. Together, these outcomes suggest that input-first preparation offers both linguistic scaffolding and psychological readiness, positioning learners to engage in public speaking with greater confidence.

Despite these promising results, the study is not without limitations. The sample size was relatively small and limited to learners from a single institution, which may affect the generalizability of the findings. Moreover, the study relied exclusively on self-reported data from interviews; while rich in detail, this approach does not capture long-term changes in performance. Future research should expand the participant pool across different contexts, integrate

observational or performance-based data, and examine how input-first preparation influences learners' confidence and delivery over time.

Based on the findings, several recommendations can be made. Instructors of public speaking in EFL contexts are encouraged to adopt input-first strategies, particularly in the early stages of instruction, to help students overcome initial anxiety. Incorporating a variety of authentic models beyond TED Talks, such as debates, professional presentations, or informal vlogs—may further enrich learners' exposure and provide a broader repertoire of strategies. Institutions may also consider designing curricula that explicitly balance input and output, ensuring that learners develop both linguistic resources and communicative confidence.

The implications of this study extend to both theory and practice. Theoretically, the results provide empirical support for Krashen's Input Hypothesis and affective filter hypothesis, showing how comprehensible input can lower anxiety and facilitate output in high-stakes speaking tasks. Practically, the study demonstrates that input-first preparation can serve as an inclusive pedagogical strategy, particularly for learners with high levels of speaking anxiety. By reframing public speaking as a skill that can be systematically learned, this approach equips learners not only with tools for effective performance but also with the confidence to use English in authentic communicative situations.

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