ENHANCING ESL LEARNERS' SPEAKING CONFIDENCE THROUGH REAL-LIFE SIMULATION: A QUALITATIVE CASE STUDY

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ABSTRACT

Many English as a Second Language (ESL) learners struggle with speaking confidence which hinders their ability to communicate effectively and participate actively especially in classroom discussions. This study explores how real-life simulation activities influence the speaking confidence of 30 Form 4 ESL students in Sabah secondary school. Using a qualitative case study design, data were collected through focus group interviews and an open-ended questionnaire and analyzed thematically. The findings revealed five major themes: presentations and group-based tasks increased students' confidence; students developed a more positive attitude toward speaking English; learners transferred their speaking confidence to real-life situations; relatable and familiar topics reduced speaking anxiety; and peer support and preparation contributed significantly to confidence building. These findings suggest that real-life simulation activities can create meaningful, supportive learning environments that encourage ESL learners to speak more confidently in Malaysian classrooms.

Keywords: ESL learners, real-life simulation, speaking confidence, speaking proficiency

INTRODUCTION

The ability of English as a Second Language (ESL) learners to communicate in English is crucial. Speaking is the most challenging of the four language skills because, apart from linguistic accuracy, it also requires confidence and fluency. Speaking helps enable the learners to express their ideas, thoughts, and opinions effectively; however, most ESL learners are not confident, thus hindering them from communicating effectively (Kashinathan, 2021). Building speaking confidence, therefore, has been an area of attention in the teaching of English.

In line with this need, the Malaysian Education Blueprint (2013–2025) emphasizes communicative competence through a national vision for every student to be at least at

independent level in English, as outlined in the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2019; Dumitrean, 2017/2018). Yet achieving this aim remains a challenge for the majority of ESL classrooms, which are often mixed proficiency with little scope for real communication. Problems such as anxiety, overreliance on textbooks, and insufficient speaking practice still detract from learners' progress (Al-Subaiei, 2017; Nadesan & Md. Shah, 2020). This highlights the necessity to create class environments that actively foster communication and confidence development.

In response to these concerns, teachers have begun adopting more innovative and learner-centered methods, such as real-life simulation activities, to develop the speaking confidence of learners. According to Bandura's Social Learning Theory, real-life simulations engage learners in authentic and meaningful communication through experiential learning, where they observe, imitate, and model the use of language successfully (Bandura, 1977; Cherry, 2024). Role-plays, interviews, presentations, and group discussions mirror real-life interactions and allow students to apply language skills to functional situations while gradually overcoming their fear of speaking English.

Studies have shown that simulations activities can improve language proficiency, self-esteem and motivation (Razali & Ismail, 2017; Nguyen & Nguyen, 2020). Although international studies have shown the benefits of simulation-based activities in language learning, research in Malaysian ESL context remains limited, particularly in relation to speaking confidence. Most Malaysian studies on simulation focus on general speaking proficiency and ICT integrated simulations, with few examining how real-life classroom simulations influence learners' confidence in speaking English. In addition, research involving secondary school learners, especially in Sabah, is scarce, and existing studies often employ quantitative or experimental designs. Therefore, qualitative insights into ESL learners' perception and experiences are lacking. This study seeks to fill that gap by exploring the perception of Form 4 students at a public school in Sabah, Malaysia about their experiences with real-life simulation activities. Therefore, this present paper aims to investigate:

(i)   explore ESL learners' confidence in speaking English after participating in real-life simulation activities.
(ii)   learners' perceptions of the impact of different components of real-life simulation activities (e.g., presentations, debates, role-plays) in enhancing their speaking confidence.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Several studies have explored the effectiveness of simulation-based activities implementation in ESL classrooms. Chang et al. (2020) conducted a study using a simulation classroom integrated with Augmented Reality (AR) to improve EFL students' learning performance. The result indicated that AR significantly boosted students' concentration, confidence and their overall language proficiency. This suggests that simulation-based activities create engaging environments mimicking real-life situations allowing learners to be more comfortable in speaking English. Although the study conducted was more focused on technology integration, the findings still reinforced the idea that in interactive context, whether digital or not—it can help promote language development among ESL students.

In a more traditional classroom context, a study conducted by Razali and Ismail (2017) examined the use of simulation and role-play, which also depicted that simulation-based learning can help improve speaking proficiency as well as students' motivation to speak English in a classroom. The findings of the study showed that simulation-based activities such as role-play can build students' confidence overtime. Another study conducted by Nguyen and Nguyen (2020) explore on the impact of simulation activities on secondary school students' English-speaking skills. The findings revealed that simulation-based activities provided students with effective and meaningful opportunities to practice speaking. The participants in the study showed improvements in both fluency and confidence when speaking English.

These studies align with Bandura's (1977) Social Learning Theory which emphasizes learning through observation, imitation and modelling. According to the theorist, learners can practice by observing their peers and educators to practice communicative behaviors and eventually gain confidence from successful interactions. Collectively, these studies indicate that simulation-based learning can promote environment where English learners can practice speaking comfortably in an environment where they can mirror real-life interactions from one another without being afraid of being judged. However, while these studies exist, there remains lack of focusing on real-life simulation impact in Malaysian secondary ESL context. The present study addresses this gap by exploring how real-life simulation activities influence Form 4 students' speaking confidence in a local classroom setting.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore the perceptions of ESL learners on the effectiveness of real-life simulation activities in enhancing their speaking confidence. The qualitative approach was chosen to obtain in-depth insights into learners' experiences and thoughts related to speaking in English. A case study approach was used because the study focused on a bounded group of Form 4 ESL students within one specific school. the selected school is considered a unique case because it represents Malaysian public secondary school in Sabah with mixed English proficiency levels and limited exposure to communicative activities.

The participants consisted of thirty Form 4 ESL students from a public school in Sabah, Malaysia. These students were selected through purposive sampling based on their involvements in real-life simulation activities in ESL classroom conducted by the researcher as their English teacher. The participants consisted of both male and female students with different level of proficiency which allowed a diverse range of perspective, regarding their speaking confidence. The school was selected based on administrative approval and its use of CEFR-aligned English instruction, which provided a suitable context for integrating simulated-based tasks. A single upper secondary Form 4 class was chosen because the students represented a mixed-proficiency group and had sufficient prior exposure to English learning to reflect meaningfully on their speaking confidence. Their participation in the intervention also fulfilled the criterion of having first-hand experience with simulation activities making them appropriate respondents for the qualitative inquiry.

Data was collected through two qualitative instruments: a focus group interview and an open-ended questionnaire. The focus group interview allowed participants to share their experiences more precisely and reflect it in a conversational setting. The interview session was recorded and transcribed manually and analyzed. The open-ended questionnaire invited

students to write their thoughts about real-life simulation activities that they experience in the classroom. Both instruments were adapted from Griffee's (1997). The use of both instruments ensured data triangulation and increased the credibility of the findings.

Two qualitative instruments, an open-ended questionnaire and a focus group interview, were employed to collect research data. The instruments were utilized to solicit in-depth information on the attitudes, perceptions, and experiences of students on real-life simulation tasks to enhance speaking confidence. Both instruments were adapted from Griffee's (1997) model of investigating language learning experience to ensure validity and research purpose relevance.

The focus group interview was utilized to collect qualitative data on reflection and personal experience after experiencing simulation activities. It offered a channel for participants to express their opinions freely, elaborate on how they felt confident, and remark on the effectiveness of different classroom activities in a discussion setting. The session was conducted with six Form 4 students one week after the final simulation activity. The conversation was audio-recorded with a digital recorder, transcribed manually, and thematically analyzed.

The open-ended questionnaire was employed in order to obtain personal written feedback that complemented the focus group data. The questionnaire elicited personal opinions regarding the usefulness, challenges, and overall impact of the simulation activities. The students completed the questionnaire towards the conclusion of the final simulation session. Their feedback provided supporting evidence for themes emerging from the interview data, enabling triangulation and increasing the credibility of findings.

To provide a thorough understanding of the study's context, the table below summarizes the simulation activities conducted during the 10 weeks of intervention. Each activity was designed based on real-life situations aligned with the CEFR descriptors, especially for speaking.

Table 1. Weekly Implementation of Real-Life Simulation Activities

Week	Date	Activity	Lesson/topic	Feedback type
Week 1	14/04/2025	Presentation	Need vs Wants	Oral feedback
Week 2	17/04/2025	Charades	Being a teenager	Exit tickets
Week 3		*SPORTS WEEK*		
Week 4	20/04/2025	Impromptu debate and presentation	Phone addiction	Parking lot board
Week 5		*EXAM WEEK*		
Week 6	05/05/2025	Group discussion	Pros and cons of social media	
Week 7	23/05/2025	Impromptu debate & presentation	Murder Mystery	Oral feedback
Week 8	26/05/2025	Presentation and role play	Flip Learning (Emotions)	Exit ticket
Week 9	11/06/2025	Debate	Is homework unnecessary?	Oral feedback

Week 10	20/06/2025	Interview	Impact of real-life simulation activities on students' speaking confidence.	Written and oral feedback

Thematic analysis was used in this study which is the six-phase framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006) to analyze the data collected. The researcher manually transcribed and reviewed the transcript from the interview. The questionnaire responses were also reviewed one by one, then coded and grouped into themes related to the research questions. This study employed a few criteria based on Lincoln and Guba's (1985) framework; credibility and transferability.

Ethical considerations were carefully addressed throughout the study. All participants agreed and were assured of confidentiality and anonymity and were informed that their participation was voluntary. Ethical approval for the research was obtained from the Faculty of Education and Sport Studies, University Malaysia Sabah.

RESULTS

This study aimed to explore how real-life simulation activities impact ESL learners' speaking confidence. Thematic analysis of qualitative data collected from a focus group interview, and an open-ended survey revealed five major themes that align with the two research objectives.

Objective 1: To explore ESL learners' confidence in speaking English after participating in real-life simulation activities.

Theme 1: Confidence through Presentations and Group Activities

Students consistently reported that they gained confidence by giving presentations and conducting group work. These provided a controlled but secure environment that encouraged them to speak more freely in English. Although some were initially nervous, consistent engagement allowed them to overcome their fear and eventually increase their fluency. Responses from the open-ended questionnaire and interviews supported this theme with a few students responding that presentations made them feel more confident.

Interview Excerpts:

> *"The time when I feel confident is when I know the answer for my friends."* *(Interview, P6)*

> *"Presentation really help me in speaking more confidently, even though I don't like presentation." (Interview, P6)*

> *"Presentations help me boost my confidence… I try to ignore people staring at me." (Interview, P5)*

Questionnaire Excerpts:

> "*I was scared at first… after making some presentations, I was more confident.*"

> "*Group discussion helped me because my friends supported and corrected me well.*"

This result is aligned with the findings from Bakrania (2011) who noted that structured speaking time enables students to consolidate ideas and reduce reliance on memorization, thus building confidence and performance.

Theme 2: Positive Attitude Towards Speaking English

The data showed that real-life simulation activities encouraged students to develop a more positive attitude toward speaking English. Students began to associate English with enjoyment, expressions, and less fear of making mistakes. The questionnaire and interview reflected this finding as many students stated that simulation activities made English more exciting and less scary.

Interview Excerpts:

> "*I feel excited to talk English with my classmates because I can speak freely with them and also have fun.*" (Interview, P4).

> "*Learning English is very fun for me… it makes me feel expressive and joyful.*" (Interview, P4)

> "*Speaking English outside of class is way better… it boosts my confidence.*" (Interview, P5).

Questionnaire Excerpts:

> "*I started to like speaking English because it helps me express what I feel and think.*"

> "*It's fun when we use English to talk about the things we like, not just what's in the textbook.*"

These results relate with Cadiz-Gabejan (2018) who found that positive classroom experiences foster learners; willingness to communicate and increase their confidence in using English.

Theme 3: English Usage in Real-Life Communication

Students reported applying their improved confidence beyond the classroom, such as in social media, online games, or conversations with peers and foreigners. Simulation tasks helped

bridge the gap between classroom learning and authentic language use. Survey responses indicated similar patterns with some students reporting they were more willing to use English in social media, games and interactions with other people after experiencing similar tasks in class.

Interview Excerpts:

> *"I speak English with my friends… sometimes with my siblings, I prefer to use English." (Interview, P1).*

> *"I use grammar rightly during texting somebody… and I understand song lyrics better now." (Interview, P3).*

> *"Now I can understand everything people say in games… before this I was embarrassed." (Interview, P4).*

Questionnaire Excerpts:

> *"After doing the activities, I'm not shy to use English when chatting online or with friends."*

> *"I can now talk to tourists or foreigners confidently since I already practiced similar scenarios in class."*

This is in line with Nguyen and Nguyen (2020), who stated that simulation-based activities enhance communicative competence and encourage learners to transfer classroom skills into real-life situations.

Objective 2: To identify specific elements of real-life simulation activities that ESL learners perceive as most helpful in developing their speaking confidence.

Theme 4: Relatable Topics to Reduce Fear

Familiar and personal topics relevant to people reduced fear and enhanced engagement. Students felt at ease and were more likely to speak up when topics were related to their interests or experiences. Responses from students further revealed that familiar topics made speaking easier because they it is similar to what they experienced in their daily lives and routine.

Interview Excerpts:

> *"The simulation feels realistic sometimes… it depends on the topic."*
> *(Interview, P1)*

> *"It's relatable when we present about emotions… it's about things we feel."*
> *(Interview, P2)*

> *"If the topic is sometimes that students favor the most… they will speak freely from the bottom of their heart." (Interview, P3).*

Questionnaire Excerpts:

> *"When the topic is something about my life every day or what I like, then I can speak freely without feeling nervous."*
> *"It is easier to talk after I am familiar with the topic; I don't have to think too much about what to say."*

This supports Qiu and Lo (2017), who asserted that familiarity with a topic enhances engagement and diminishes cognitive barriers to speaking.

Theme 5: Peer Support and Preparation

Students identified preparation time, collaboration, and peer feedback as significant elements in establishing their speaking confidence. They indicated that they felt safe when they could practice and be assisted by peers. Students also mentioned that practicing speaking with their friends helped them feel prepared, supported and less anxious.

Interview Excerpts:

> *"Part of the simulation activity that helps me the most is when I was discussing the topic with my teammates."* (Interview, P1)

> *"Working in groups helps… I try to cooperate."* (Interview, P2)

> *"Preparing before the presentation helps me understand and learn new things."* (Interview, P3)

Questionnaire Excerpts:

> *"When we practice together before the presentation, it helps me feel ready and less scared."*

> *"My friends always help me with pronunciation and motivate me to speak."*

This finding aligns with Togimin and Jaafar (2020), who emphasized that peer scaffolding and cooperative learning environments enhance learner confidence and active participation in English-speaking activities.

Summary of Key Findings

Together, the findings suggest that real-life simulation activities are a powerful pedagogical tool in supporting ESL learners' speaking development. Structured tasks, relatable content, and a collaborative classroom climate help students gain confidence and extend their language use beyond academic settings.

This study was limited to a small sample from a single Malaysian secondary school, which may affect the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, the reliance on self-reported

data could introduce response bias. Future research could explore similar interventions with larger and more diverse populations, or incorporate mixed methods approaches to capture both qualitative insights and measurable improvements in speaking performance. Investigating long-term effects of simulation on language proficiency may also offer valuable perspectives for curriculum development.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study show that real-life simulation activities positively influence ESL learners' speaking confidence and these outcomes are aligned with established theoretical perspectives from past research. According to Bandura's (1977) Social Learning Theory, confidence develops through mastery experiences, modelling and social interaction. The increased confidence students demonstrated through presentations and group-based tasks reflects Bandura's concept of mastery experiences, where repeated successful performance builds self-efficacy.

The findings of this study show that real-life simulation activities positively influence ESL learners' speaking confidence, and these outcomes are consistent with established theoretical perspectives and prior research. According to Bandura's (1977) Social Learning Theory, confidence develops through mastery experiences, modelling, and social interaction. The increased confidence students demonstrated through presentations and group-based tasks reflects Bandura's concept of mastery experiences, where repeated successful performance builds self-efficacy.

The findings also align with previous studies emphasizing the value of simulation activities. Razali and Ismail (2017) found that role-play and simulation tasks enhance students' motivation and comfort in speaking English, while Nguyen and Nguyen (2020) reported improvements in students' fluency and confidence through simulated communication tasks. These studies support the results of the present research, where students indicated that relatable topics, real-life tasks, and supportive peer interactions helped reduce anxiety and promoted willingness to speak.

Furthermore, the positive attitudes learners developed toward speaking English align with Cadiz-Gabejan's (2018) findings that enjoyable and meaningful classroom experiences foster greater willingness to communicate. The ability of learners to transfer their confidence into real-life situations, such as online communication or interactions with foreigners, also reflects the value of authentic learning experiences highlighted in communicative language teaching research.

Overall, the study's findings reinforce the idea that real-life simulation activities create interactive, meaningful learning environments that encourage active participation, reduce speaking anxiety, and build sustainable speaking confidence among ESL learners. These insights are important for Malaysian ESL teachers aiming to create more communicative, student-centered classrooms.

Research Limitation

The first limitation of this study is the sample size. This study is going to be done on a small sample size, which is 30 form 4 students from a public school in Sabah, Malaysia. Hence, it would be difficult to get significant data from a small sample group. The study's findings, based on a small sample of ESL learners, may not accurately represent all Malaysian ESL learners, which could affect the trustworthiness of the results.

Other than that, this study also focuses on higher form secondary school students at a public school in Sabah, Malaysia is a specific subset of ESL learners. Consequently, the findings of the study may not be applicable or generalizable to other groups of ESL learners as well as limiting the broader relevance and applicability of the research findings in the field of ESL education.

CONCLUSION

This study confirmed that real-life simulation activities—roleplays, presentations, and group discussions—effectively enhance ESL learners' speaking confidence. Students reported feeling more reliable and engaged when tasks were meaningful and involved peer support and preparation. These findings emphasize the necessity of authentic, interactive learning in building speaking capacity.

However, the study was limited to a small sample in one school, and data was based on self-reported perceptions. Future studies can examine long-term effects of simulation activities, engage a larger and more diverse sample, or employ qualitative and quantitative methods in combination to measure actual speaking proficiency gains.

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