

The Reading–Speaking Connection: EFL Students' Perceptions of How Reading Habits Foster Self-Confidence and Fluency

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ABSTRACT

Reading is widely regarded as a foundational language skill, yet its role as a direct input for oral communication is less understood, particularly the authentic, self-initiated reading students pursue outside formal instruction. This qualitative study examined how ten students from the English Language Education and English Literature programs at a private university in Jakarta perceived the relationship between their reading habits and their self-confidence and fluency in speaking English. Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews, complemented by observation of five participants' recorded speaking performances and by member checking to strengthen credibility, then analyzed using Creswell's interactive qualitative analysis procedure. Findings show that participants perceived reading as the primary source of vocabulary, sentence patterns, and ideas that prepared them to speak, generating a self-reinforcing cycle in which reading built confidence, confidence encouraged speaking practice, and practice consolidated fluency. Fluency was largely context-dependent, and speaking anxiety, while universal, was actively managed through reading-based preparation. The study underscores the pedagogical value of treating reading, including students' everyday digital reading, as a deliberate strategy for developing oral English proficiency.

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INTRODUCTION

Reading has long been recognized as a cornerstone of literacy and cognitive development, shaping how learners acquire knowledge, expand their vocabulary, and refine their capacity for critical thought (Jerrim & Moss, 2019). In academic settings, this role becomes even more pronounced: tertiary students are expected to draw the bulk of their subject knowledge from independent reading rather than classroom instruction alone, making sustained reading practice a prerequisite rather than an option for scholastic success (Fatiloro et al., 2017). For students learning English as a foreign language (EFL), reading additionally functions as a primary channel of linguistic input, supplying the vocabulary, grammatical patterns, and pragmatic knowledge that learners eventually draw upon when they produce language of their own (Putro & Lee, 2017).

Existing research has firmly established the contribution of reading to receptive and academic skills, and a smaller body of work has linked structured or assigned reading interventions, such as extensive reading programs, to gains in oral proficiency (Meniado, 2021; Aizawa et al., 2023). What remains comparatively unexamined is how students themselves perceive the everyday, self-initiated reading they engage in outside these formal interventions, including reading embedded in digital and recreational contexts such as social media, games, and online articles, as contributing to their spoken English. Most available evidence still treats assigned or extensive reading as a pedagogical intervention rather than treating naturally occurring reading habits as a learner-driven resource for speaking development.

Understanding this relationship matters for several reasons. It can inform how lecturers design activities that deliberately connect reading to speaking practice rather than treating the two skills separately, help students recognize an accessible, self-directed avenue for building the vocabulary base speaking requires, and extend the theoretical conversation about the input–output relationship in second language acquisition (Krashen, 1985) into the underexplored territory of authentic, learner-selected reading material.

However, it remains unclear how students enrolled in English-medium literature and language education programs make sense of this relationship in their own terms: whether they experience their reading habits as directly feeding their speaking performance, and if so, through what perceived mechanisms. Accordingly, this study explored how students in the English Language Education and English Literature study programs at a private university in Jakarta, Indonesia, perceived the relationship between their reading habits and their self-confidence and fluency in speaking English.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Perception as an interpretive lens

Perception is treated here not as passive reception of stimuli but as an active process through which individuals select, organize, and interpret experience to arrive at personal meaning (Robbins & Judge, 2022). Nisa et al. (2023) describe this as a three-stage process of selection, organization, and interpretation, in which people attend to particular cues, arrange them into recognizable patterns, and then assign significance to those patterns based on prior knowledge and experience; because that prior knowledge differs across individuals, the same phenomenon can be perceived quite differently by different people (van Eymeren, 2016). Applied to language learning, this means that how a given reading practice actually functions for a learner's speaking development matters less, for the purposes of a perception-based study, than how the learner interprets and narrates that

function. This is the premise on which the present study rests: rather than measuring a causal effect of reading on speaking, it investigates how students themselves make sense of the connection between the two.

Reading habits as a source of language input

A reading habit is generally understood as a consistent, self-sustained pattern of engagement with texts, marked by regular frequency and duration, internal motivation, variety and quantity of material, active engagement, and a personal preference for reading over competing activities (Nmecha & Horsfall, 2019; Pardede, et al., 2023; Sutarno, 2006). Such habits vary considerably between learners, largely as a function of differences in educational background, learning environment, and personal motivation (Owusu-Acheaw & Larson, 2015), which is part of why a perception-based approach is useful for capturing how individual students experience and narrate their own reading practice. For language learners, this pattern matters beyond literacy itself: reading functions as a central linguistic skill that supplies vocabulary, factual knowledge, and pronunciation models (Bawawa et al., 2019; Zur & Hestiana, 2022), and EFL learners in particular are unlikely to show meaningful linguistic progress without investing sustained time in it (Andayani & Maryam, 2019). Cho and Krashen (2019) report that voluntary, pleasure-driven reading correlates positively with learners' self-perceived competence across all four language skills, not only reading itself, a finding that anticipates the present study's focus on speaking. This relationship is consistent with Krashen's (1985) Input Hypothesis, which holds that acquisition proceeds from comprehensible input rather than from output practice alone, and with the observation that students who read before a speaking task tend to be better equipped to articulate their ideas (Widowati & Kurniasih, 2018).

Self-confidence and self-efficacy in speaking

Speaking confidence is frequently theorized through Bandura's (1997) concept of self-efficacy: the belief in one's own capability to perform a task successfully, built through mastery experience rather than granted as an innate trait. Confident speakers are commonly identified through several converging indicators, including a stated belief in one's own ability, willingness to participate actively in communication, clarity and audibility of speech, the capacity to manage speaking anxiety, and an acceptance of mistakes as part of learning rather than as failure (Sudirman & Rahmadani, 2020; Brown, 2004; Thornbury, 2005). Learners who judge themselves well prepared, in terms of vocabulary, ideas, or prior exposure to a topic, tend to approach speaking tasks with less apprehension, whereas underpreparedness heightens the anxiety documented in Horwitz et al.'s (1986) model of foreign language classroom anxiety, which distinguishes communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation as distinct sources of learner discomfort.

Fluency as a multidimensional construct

Speaking fluency is not a single trait but a cluster of related dimensions, including temporal fluency (speech rate and pausing), repair fluency (self-correction and repetition), strategic fluency (the use of filler words and pragmatic markers to buy thinking time), cognitive fluency (the efficiency of lexical access and grammatical encoding), perceived fluency (how smooth a speaker sounds to a listener), and discourse fluency (the ability to sustain coherent talk over several sentences) (Segalowitz, 2010; Skehan, 2003; Thornbury, 2005). Levelt's (1989) model of speech production situates vocabulary retrieval at the

formulation stage, where a limited lexicon most often produces hesitation; listener-perceived fluency, in turn, correlates strongly with speech rate and the frequency of unfilled pauses rather than with grammatical precision (Derwing et al., 2004). Taken together, these frameworks suggest that reading, confidence, and fluency are theoretically linked through the shared currency of vocabulary and language exposure, yet the way EFL students themselves narrate this connection in their own everyday reading practice remains underexamined.

RESEARCH METHODS

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative design using in-depth, semi-structured interviews, an approach suited to exploring how participants themselves interpret a lived phenomenon rather than measuring it against a predetermined scale (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A qualitative design was considered appropriate because the aim was to understand students' own perceptions of, and meanings attached to, the relationship between their reading habits and their speaking development.

Participants

Ten students from the English Language Education (ELE) and English Literature (EL) study programs at a private university in Jakarta took part in the study. Participants were selected through purposive sampling, on the basis of their willingness to share their experiences and their active engagement in both reading and speaking activities during their studies. Table 1 summarizes their distribution across cohorts and programs.

Table 1. Participant Distribution by Program and Cohort

No.	Batch	Male	Female	Frequency
1	2022 (ELE)	1	1	2
2	2023 (ELE)	-	3	3
3	2024 (ELE)	1	1	2
4	2023 (EL)	1	-	1
5	2024 (EL)	2	-	2
Total		5	5	10

Data Collection

Data were collected primarily through semi-structured, in-depth interviews built around five indicators of reading habits (frequency and duration, motivation, variety of material, engagement, and preference) and the theoretical dimensions of speaking confidence and fluency described above. To strengthen credibility, the study also triangulated interview data with structured observation: recorded public-speaking performances from five of the ten participants were independently reviewed by two assessors against observable indicators of confidence and fluency. Member checking, in which transcripts and preliminary interpretations were returned to participants for confirmation, provided a further layer of validation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). All participants gave informed consent, and pseudonymous codes (P1–P10) were used throughout to protect their identities.

Data Analysis

Interview data were analyzed following Creswell's (2012) qualitative analysis procedure: preparing and organizing the data, coding the transcripts, describing findings and forming themes, representing the findings, interpreting their meaning, and validating their accuracy. This process allowed themes to emerge inductively from participants' own accounts rather than from a predetermined coding scheme, while the triangulated observation data and member-checking results were used to cross-validate the resulting themes.

FINDINGS

Across all ten participants, five interrelated themes emerged from the coded interview data, summarized in Table 2. Every participant (10/10) described reading as directly supplying the vocabulary and ideas they drew on when speaking, and every participant also reported experiencing some degree of speaking anxiety, most often in formal settings such as classroom presentations. Confidence levels were more varied: seven participants described moderate confidence, two described high confidence, and one described low confidence, while all ten characterized their fluency as dependent on how familiar they were with the topic at hand.

Table 2. Summary of Coded Themes Across Participants

Theme	Key finding	Frequency
Reading as foundation	Reading supplies the vocabulary and ideas used in speaking	10/10
Confidence	Moderate (7), high (2), low (1) self-reported confidence	10/10
Vocabulary hurdle	Limited vocabulary is the main obstacle to fluency	10/10
Context-dependent fluency	Fluency is stronger on familiar, previously-read topics	10/10
Anxiety, manageable	Anxiety is universal but reduced through reading-based preparation	10/10
Digital reading habits	Reading occurs mainly through social media, articles, and games	10/10

Reading habits

All ten participants described reading as a regular, several-times-a-week activity conducted mainly through digital platforms, spanning social media posts, news, comics, game dialogue, short stories, and academic articles. One participant explained that reading had become a scheduled part of daily life rather than an occasional task: "I read almost every day. This has become a habit that I do consistently, not just when there are assignments" (P3). Motivation was predominantly intrinsic rather than externally imposed: "I read because I enjoy it, not just because of assignments. Reading is both entertainment and learning for me" (P2). Participants also reported a deliberate variety of material, since, as one put it, "each type gives a different learning experience" (P7), and several described active, meaning-focused engagement rather than passive skimming: "When reading, I try to understand the main ideas and connect them with the knowledge I already have" (P4).

Speaking self-confidence

Self-rated confidence clustered in the moderate range for most participants, with two rating themselves highly and one rating himself low. Participants who rated themselves

higher pointed directly to vocabulary and topic mastery as the basis for that confidence: "I would rate myself around 8 out of 10. I can communicate my ideas clearly in most everyday situations" (P1); "Mastery of vocabulary and understanding of the topic make me more confident" (P10). The participant with the lowest self-rating still linked his hesitation to a specific, nameable gap rather than to a general lack of ability: "I can answer simple questions in class, but I still feel nervous when I have to present in front of many people" (P8). Even participants who described themselves as reasonably confident acknowledged that some anxiety persisted, though it had eased with experience: "Yes, I still feel nervous when speaking English, especially in formal situations. However, my nervousness is not as strong as it used to be because I have gained more experience and confidence" (P5).

Speaking fluency

Participants described their fluency as functional but uneven: sustainable for one to two minutes on familiar topics, with pauses concentrated at clause boundaries and occasional self-correction. "For familiar topics, I can usually speak for one or two minutes without major pauses" (P5), one participant reported, while acknowledging that "I sometimes repeat words or restart sentences when I realize that I have made a mistake." Filler words served as a strategic buffer for retrieval time ("I sometimes use filler words when I need extra time to think about what I want to say," P5), and the vocabulary hurdle was named consistently as the central obstacle: "The main obstacles are limited vocabulary and nervousness. Sometimes I know what I want to say, but I need extra time to find the right words" (P5). Reading was repeatedly credited with narrowing that gap: "After reading, English expressions come to my mind more quickly, making conversations feel smoother and more natural" (P1).

Observation data from the five triangulated participants largely confirmed the interview findings: participants who described stronger reading habits (P1, P10) also received higher observed confidence and fluency scores from the independent assessors, and one participant (P3) was rated as more confident by observers than he had rated himself. The alignment between self-reported and observed performance, together with the member-checking results, in which all participants confirmed their transcripts and only one requested a minor clarification, supports the trustworthiness of the themes reported above.

DISCUSSION

The unanimous agreement among participants that reading underlies their speaking ability points to a broader claim about second language development: speaking is not an isolated skill but a product of accumulated input. Reading supplied the "raw material", vocabulary, sentence patterns, and content knowledge, that participants drew on when they spoke, consistent with Krashen's (1985) proposition that comprehensible input precedes and enables output. One participant explained that reading "gives me vocabulary, sentence structures, and ideas that I can use in conversations," a description that maps closely onto Levelt's (1989) formulation stage of speech production, where vocabulary retrieval most often determines whether speech proceeds smoothly or stalls.

Participants also described the relationship between reading and confidence as cyclical rather than linear: reading built vocabulary, vocabulary built confidence, and confidence encouraged further speaking practice, which in turn reinforced the value of reading. This pattern is consistent with Bandura's (1997) account of self-efficacy as a product of preparation rather than an innate trait, and it reframes classroom confidence-building not as a matter of personality but as something reading practice can deliberately cultivate. Several

participants used language suggesting reading functioned as psychological preparation, describing it as something that made them feel "braver" or as a "warm-up" before speaking, echoing the affective role reading can play in lowering the anxiety Horwitz et al. (1986) associate with fear of negative evaluation and communication apprehension.

Fluency, meanwhile, was described by participants as functional rather than flawless: they could sustain communication despite occasional self-correction and filler use, but their fluency varied markedly by topic familiarity. This is consistent with Skehan's (2003) and Thornbury's (2005) accounts of fluency as a strategic, resource-dependent performance rather than a fixed trait, and with Derwing et al.'s (2004) finding that listener judgments of fluency track speech rate and pausing more than grammatical accuracy. Because topic familiarity in this study was itself a product of what participants had previously read, reading effectively expanded the range of topics on which participants could speak fluently.

Reading's contribution to confidence appeared to operate through at least three converging mechanisms. First, it expanded vocabulary and background knowledge, which directly reduced anxiety by increasing participants' sense of preparedness: "The more I read, the more prepared I feel when I need to speak" (P5), a pattern consistent with Bandura's (1997) claim that mastery experiences, rather than innate disposition, are what build self-efficacy. Second, reading supplied participants with something to say, not only the words to say it with: "When I know that I have sufficient vocabulary and background information about a topic, I feel less worried about making mistakes" (P10). Third, the relationship was self-reinforcing rather than a one-time boost, described by one participant as functioning "like a warm-up before speaking" (P1), a metaphor that echoes Cho and Krashen's (2019) finding that voluntary reading correlates with learners' self-perceived competence across all four language skills, including the productive ones.

A further pattern worth noting is that participants' reading was predominantly digital and informally sourced, spanning social media, game dialogue, and online articles alongside academic texts. This diversifies the picture of what "reading habits" means for this generation of EFL learners and suggests that the input Krashen's (1985) hypothesis describes need not come from assigned or print material to be pedagogically valuable; it aligns with Cho and Krashen's (2019) broader claim that pleasure reading, regardless of format, builds competence across skills. Finally, while anxiety was reported by every participant, none described it as disabling. Even participants who rated their confidence highly still reported some residual nervousness in formal settings, but described it as manageable rather than paralyzing, and several explicitly reframed mistakes as part of learning rather than failure, a disposition consistent with a growth-oriented view of ability (Dweck, 2006). This supports the view that speaking anxiety and speaking competence can coexist, and that reading-based preparation is one accessible, learner-controlled strategy for narrowing the gap between the two.

CONCLUSION

This study explored how ten EFL students perceived the relationship between their reading habits and their self-confidence and fluency in speaking English. Across interviews, observation, and member checking, participants consistently described reading as the foundation from which their speaking confidence and fluency were built: it supplied the vocabulary and content knowledge that made speaking feel possible, it functioned as a preparatory strategy that reduced speaking anxiety, and it expanded the range of topics on which participants could speak fluently with what participants themselves characterized as "functional fluency", the ability to communicate effectively despite minor imperfections.

Confidence and fluency emerged not as fixed traits but as outcomes of a self-reinforcing, four-stage cycle: reading builds an internal "language library" of vocabulary, grammar, and ideas (input); that library reduces the anxiety associated with speaking by making learners feel prepared (preparation); reduced anxiety and increased confidence make learners more willing to engage in speaking practice (practice); and that practice consolidates the language input from reading into more automatic, fluent speech (improvement), which in turn motivates further reading. Participants' modern reading habits, largely digital, informal, and self-selected rather than assigned, were an integral part of this cycle rather than a departure from it, suggesting that the everyday reading students already do carries real pedagogical value once it is recognized and deliberately connected to speaking practice.

These findings suggest that lecturers might treat reading, including the informal, digital reading students already do, as a deliberate pedagogical resource for building oral proficiency, for instance by pairing reading assignments with speaking tasks that ask students to draw explicitly on what they have read, or by providing relevant reading material as structured preparation before a speaking assessment to reduce anxiety. For students, the implication is similarly direct: building a broad, self-selected reading habit is itself a strategy for becoming a more confident and fluent speaker, not merely a separate academic requirement. Because the study involved a small, purposively sampled group from a single university, its findings should be read as context-specific insights rather than generalizable claims; future research involving larger and more diverse samples, comparisons across proficiency levels, or quantitative and longitudinal designs, could test whether the reading–confidence–fluency cycle identified here holds across other EFL populations.

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