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Improving self-confidence and speaking skills in elementary students through action-based learning

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Abstract

Low self-confidence and limited oral proficiency remain significant hurdles for young language learners, often exacerbated by high affective filters and conventional, non-interactive teaching methods. This study aims to evaluate the effectiveness of Action-Based Learning (ABL), integrated with gamified digital tools, in enhancing English-speaking skills and self-confidence among elementary school students. Drawing on constructivist learning theory and the Affective Filter Hypothesis, the pedagogical framework was operationalized through iterative "act-and-reflect" cycles, supported by digital platforms such as Wordwall, to foster a low-anxiety, high-engagement classroom environment. The research employed a quasi-experimental pretest-posttest control group design involving 50 fifth-grade students ($n=25$ per group). Data were gathered through standardized speaking tests, Likert-scale questionnaires, and classroom observations, and analyzed using paired and independent t-tests. Findings revealed that the experimental group achieved substantial gains in self-confidence (M_{dif} = 1.30, p < .001) and English-speaking skills (M_{dif} = 1.25, p < .001). Post-test comparisons confirmed that the ABL group significantly outperformed the control group in both confidence (t = 4.51, p < .001) and oral performance (t = 3.35, p = .0012). These results provide empirical evidence that experiential "learning-by-doing" tasks and gamification effectively mitigate Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety (FLSA) while bolstering communicative competence and self-efficacy. Consequently, ABL is recommended as a strategic pedagogical tool to evolve traditional instructional methods and foster early language success in elementary contexts.

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1. Introduction

Self-confidence and speaking skills are two essential aspects of language learning, particularly at the elementary school level. However, many elementary students experience anxiety and a lack of self-confidence when speaking in public, which significantly hinders their ability to communicate effectively and decreases their motivation to learn. In the Indonesian context, students often struggle to master the language due to a widespread lack of effective learning strategies; this problem persists across domains, including reading comprehension and oral performance (Hilmi, 2024). Consequently, addressing these pedagogical gaps through targeted interventions is imperative to fostering a more successful and engaging language-learning experience for young learners.

Language acquisition failure is often rooted in a high "affective filter," where excessive anxiety prevents linguistic input from being processed into competence. This study draws on the work of Tsuchiya (2010), who emphasizes the essentials of learning strategies in overcoming reliance on ineffective memorization techniques—a frequent trigger of low student confidence. This reliance on conventional, non-interactive methods leads to learning difficulties, a vicious cycle that further diminishes self-belief and exacerbates challenges in language mastery (Yassin et al., 2024).

An effective foundation for teaching speaking skills lies in Constructivist Learning Theory (CLT), which posits that learner constructs knowledge most effectively through direct experience and interaction within contextual activities. This theory advocates for a pedagogical shift from traditional lecturing to a facilitative role, promoting active, student-centred approaches that are essential for increasing engagement and oral proficiency (Fauziah et al., 2023). Strategies aligned with constructivism—such as cooperative learning and collaborative tasks—are vital in this regard, as they not only enhance language performance but also foster critical thinking, social interaction, and essential collaborative skills among elementary students (Anggriani et al., 2024; Halid, 2024; Jumaah, 2024).

In line with the need to evolve instructional methods, the integration of innovative media and digital tools has been highlighted as a critical factor in fostering student engagement and addressing the diverse needs of elementary education (Maulana et al., 2025). The use of platforms such as Wordwall provides a structured framework for gamification, which is defined by Deterding et al. (2011) as the application of game design elements in non-game contexts to enhance user experience and engagement. By incorporating these digital elements, Action-Based Learning (ABL) transforms the classroom into a dynamic environment where students are motivated to participate through interactive challenges and immediate feedback. Furthermore, the implementation of game-based methods has been shown to significantly enhance learning in elementary settings (Zega & Tangkin, 2023). This effectiveness stems from the foundational principles of game-based learning, which imply that digital interactions can foster critical thinking and problem-solving skills when aligned with educational objectives (Plass et al., 2015). In the context of language learning, this approach can be further optimized by "flipping" the traditional classroom dynamic, enabling students to engage with material actively rather than passively (Hung, 2015).

In this context, Action-Based Learning (ABL) is a pedagogical framework that integrates direct experience with critical reflection to develop communicative competence. It is crucial to distinguish ABL from Classroom Action Research (CAR). While CAR serves as a reflective research design to improve practitioners' teaching, ABL is an instructional strategy focused on students' active engagement in authentic tasks. This approach is deeply rooted in the broader tradition of Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT), which emphasizes that language is best

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acquired when learners are focused on meaningful communication rather than isolated linguistic forms (Nunan, 2004; Richards & Rodgers, 2014). By emphasizing a continuous "act-and-reflect" cycle, ABL transcends simple role-play by providing a structured, goal-oriented environment. As noted by Bygate (2016), such task-based approaches are essential for developing oral fluency because they require students to mobilise their linguistic resources in real time. Furthermore, the effectiveness of this method lies in its ability to enhance oral proficiency through iterative cycles of task performance (Ellis, 2018; Safitri et al., 2020). For teachers, implementing these components serves as a strategic roadmap for fostering a more interactive classroom, ensuring that every instructional activity translates into a practical communicative skill (Hismanoglu & Hismanoglu, 2011).

By fostering a safe, nonjudgmental learning environment, ABL systematically reduces Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety (FLSA) while simultaneously enhancing students' self-efficacy—two core components of self-confidence in oral performance. Ultimately, the implementation of an Action Learning Strategy (ALS) has been shown to effectively address speaking struggles by fostering active participation and improving oral performance across various levels of English education (Kasmaini et al., 2023; Putra et al., 2022). Consequently, integrating action-based strategies within a constructivist framework supported by digital media provides a holistic environment that fosters both psychological confidence and cognitive creative capacity in young learners (Eka et al., 2025).

While numerous studies have explored ABL to improve speaking skills, research that combines and comprehensively examines both key aspects—self-confidence and speaking skills—at the elementary school level remains limited. Existing literature often focuses solely on one aspect or targets higher educational levels. This study is therefore unique, as it combines these two essential variables within the context of action-based learning and gamified digital tools for elementary students, aiming to fill this gap by exploring in depth the positive impact of ABL on both students' self-confidence and their speaking proficiency. Grounded in the identified literature gap, this study is directed toward answering two primary research questions:

1. Does the implementation of Action-Based Learning significantly improve English speaking skills among elementary students compared to conventional methods?
2. To what extent can the ABL strategy bolster students' self-confidence by mitigating oral speaking anxiety?

In alignment with these questions, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H_1: There is a significant difference in English speaking skill scores between students taught using the ABL strategy and those taught using conventional instruction.

H_2: The application of the ABL strategy significantly increases students' self-confidence levels and reduces affective barriers compared to traditional instructional methods.

2. Method

This study employed a quantitative, quasi-experimental design to investigate the impact of Action-Based Learning (ABL) strategies on self-confidence and speaking skills among elementary school students. The quasi-experimental method was chosen because it enabled comparisons of outcomes between two non-equivalent groups while still allowing rigorous pretest–posttest measurement to examine causal relationships between the independent variable (action-based learning strategies) and the dependent variables (students' self-confidence and speaking skills).

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The research was conducted in the second semester of the 2024/2025 academic year and lasted 4 months. It took place at two schools in Mojokerto Regency, the Islamic Nature School (eLKISI) and Jatijejer Public Elementary School. These schools were selected based on practical criteria, including the institutional willingness to collaborate and the logistical feasibility of implementing the four-month intervention cycle. The use of two distinct school contexts provided a more robust basis for comparison and contributed to the ecological validity of the study.

The study involved 50 fifth-grade students from two distinct schools in Mojokerto. To mitigate potential school-level effects and internal validity threats, schools were matched on identical "A" accreditation status, use of the same national English curriculum, and comparable socioeconomic backgrounds of students. The experimental group (n=25) comprised 13 males and 12 females (M_{age} = 10.5 years), while the control group (n=25) consisted of 12 males and 13 females (M_{age} = 10.7 years). An independent t-test on pretest scores confirmed no significant initial differences between the groups ($p > 0.05$), establishing baseline equivalence.

Ethical approval was obtained from the University's Research Ethics Committee. Written informed consent was secured from parents, and students were informed of their right to withdraw without academic penalty. The intervention was delivered by the regular classroom English teachers, who attended a preparatory workshop on ABL principles. Implementation fidelity was monitored by the research team through weekly classroom observations using a standardized instructional checklist to ensure the ABL and conventional protocols were followed as designed.

Several instruments were employed to measure the dependent variables and to ensure both linguistic and affective aspects were captured.

a. The Self-Confidence Questionnaire (e.g., "I feel brave when answering questions in English class") was piloted with 20 non-participating students, yielding a Cronbach's alpha of 0.87. For the speaking test, student performances were evaluated by two independent raters using a standardized rubric. Inter-rater reliability was assessed using Cohen's Kappa, resulting in a coefficient of 0.82 (k = 0.82), indicating strong agreement. Discrepancies in scoring were resolved through a joint calibration session.
b. A speaking test was designed to evaluate fluency, pronunciation, sentence structure, and content. This test aligned with the fifth-grade English curriculum and required students to perform both structured and spontaneous speaking tasks. The assessment criteria used a four-point scoring rubric (1 = Poor, 4 = Excellent) adapted from authoritative L2 assessment frameworks, with criteria defined for each dimension (fluency, pronunciation, structure, content). To ensure fairness and consistency, inter-rater reliability was assessed by having two independent raters score a subset of students' performances.
c. Complementing these quantitative instruments, classroom observations were conducted to monitor engagement and participation during the learning process, while semi-structured interviews with selected students and teachers provided qualitative insights into their experiences with ABL.

The intervention procedures were thoroughly designed to distinguish between the experimental and control conditions. Both groups participated in 16 sessions conducted over four months.

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Tabel 1. The intervention procedures were thoroughly designed to distinguish between the experimental and control conditions

Groups	Operational Definition (Treatments)	Specific Activities & Materials
Experimental Group (Action-Based Learning, ABL)	A student-centred, experiential approach that emphasized "learning by doing" through authentic, communicative tasks. The core principle was to minimize anxiety by treating mistakes as learning opportunities (derived from Classroom Action Research principles).	Role-playing and simulations of real-life scenarios (e.g., shopping, giving directions); Digital Game-Based Learning (DGBL) using tools like Wordwall to enhance motivation and collaborative interaction; Collaborative task-based activities requiring small-group negotiation and knowledge construction.
Control Group (Conventional Instruction)	A teacher-centred mode of teaching that focused on structured, non-experiential language practice. The instructional style limited opportunities for spontaneous interaction and experiential practice.	Grammar-translation exercises; Repetitive drills; Teacher-led question-and-answer routines; Vocabulary memorization.

Although the themes and syllabus content are parallel to those used in the experimental group, the control group's approach emphasizes accuracy over fluency and passive reception over active, spontaneous production.

Data analysis employed a convergent mixed-methods design, in which qualitative observations triangulated with quantitative findings. Quantitative analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) was employed, with post-test scores as the dependent variable and pre-test scores as the covariate. This procedure was determined to statistically control any initial variations between the two school sites. Before analysis, assumptions of normality (Shapiro-Wilk) and homogeneity of variance (Levene's test) were verified to ensure the robustness of the statistical model.

3. Results

The data collected from the pre-test and post-test instruments (self-confidence questionnaire and speaking test) were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics to determine the effect of Action-Based Learning (ABL) on students in the experimental group compared with those in the control group.

The statistical analysis was conducted with a significance threshold of $\alpha = .05$. To ensure a more conservative interpretation of the comparative effectiveness, findings were evaluated based on the magnitude of the effect sizes.

As shown in Table 1, the experimental group demonstrates a substantial and highly significant increase in self-confidence ($M_{diff} = 1.30$, $p < .001$). In contrast, while the control group also indicates an increase ($M_{diff} = 0.35$, $p = .041$), the magnitude is notably smaller, and the 95% confidence interval is significantly narrower than that of the experimental group.

Table 2. Comparison of students' average self-confidence scores (N = 50)

Groups	Pretest *M* (SD)	Posttest *M* (SD)	Mean Change [95% CI]	df	p-value	Interpretation
Experimental (*n = 25*)	2.50 (0.45)	3.80 (0.55)	1.30 [1.02, 1.58]	24	< .001	Large Significant Increase
Control (*n = 25*)	2.55 (0.42)	2.90 (0.48)	0.35 [0.05, 0.65]	24	.041	Small Significant Increase

The graphical representation of these results is presented in Figure 1, which highlights the significant difference in improvement between the two groups. Figure 1 reveals comparison of self-confidence mean scores between the ABL experimental group and the conventional control group. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals, indicating a significantly greater gain in the ABL group.

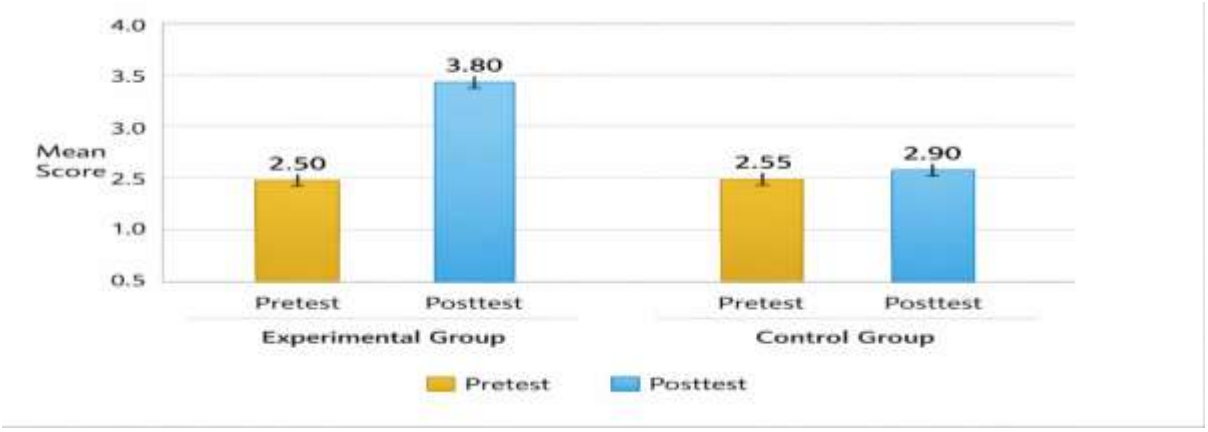

Figure 1. Comparison of self-confidence (pretest vs. posttest) between experimental and control groups.

A similar pattern was observed for speaking skills. As shown in Table 2, the experimental group's mean score increases significantly from 2.50 in the pretest to 3.75 in the posttest, with a mean change of 1.25 ($p < .001$). In contrast, the control group increases only slightly, from 2.55 to 2.85, with a mean change of 0.30 ($p = .048$).

Table 3. Comparison of students' average speaking skills before and after intervention (N = 50)

Groups	Pretest *M* (SD)	Posttest *M* (SD)	Mean Change [95% CI]	df	p-value	Interpretation
Experimental (*n = 25*)	2.50 (0.40)	3.75 (0.50)	1.25 [0.98, 1.52]	24	< .001	Large Significant Increase
Control (*n = 25*)	2.55 (0.41)	2.85 (0.44)	0.30 [-0.01, 0.61]	24	.0480	Small Significant Increase

The visual comparison in Figure 2 illustrates a sharper improvement in speaking skills among students in the experimental group than among those in the control group. Progression in speaking skills comes from pre-test to post-test across both groups. The ABL group exhibits a steeper improvement curve, indicating greater effectiveness in enhancing oral proficiency than traditional methods.

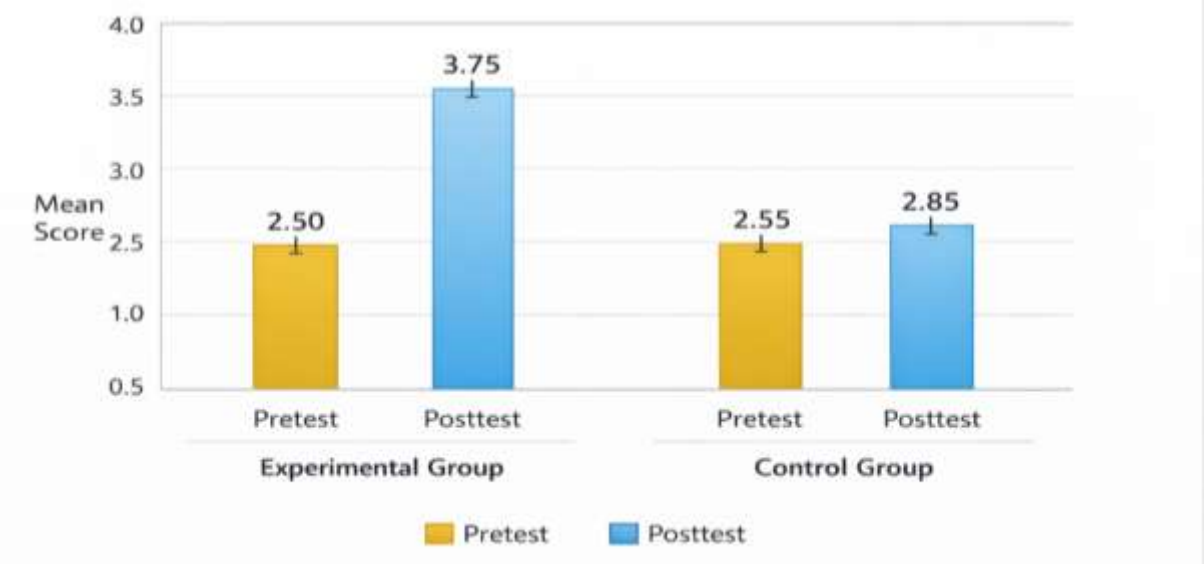

Figure 2. comparison of speaking skills (pretest vs. posttest) between experimental and control groups.

Observational data corroborates the quantitative results, revealing high levels of student engagement during ABL sessions. As shown in Table 3, 80% of students in the experimental group speak actively during class, 75% participate in group discussions, 70% ask questions, and 85% engage in active listening.

Table 4. Student engagement during action-based learning

Engagement Categories	Frequency (%)
Active Speaking	80%
Group Discussion	75%
Asking Questions	70%
Active Listening	85%

These findings suggest that ABL encourages students to take greater initiative, collaborate more effectively, and engage actively in oral communication.

To determine the magnitude of the differences between groups, independent t-tests were conducted. As shown in Table 4, the experimental group significantly outperformes the control group in both self-confidence and speaking skills after the intervention.

Table 5. Independent T-test comparison of posttest scores and effect size

Variables	Exp. Group M (SD)	Ctrl. Group M (SD)	t-value	df	p-value	Effect Size
Self-Confidence	3.80 (0.55)	2.90 (0.48)	4.51	48	< .001	1.30 (Large)
Speaking Skills	3.75 (0.50)	2.85 (0.44)	3.35	48	.001	0.97 (Large)

Qualitative findings reinforce the quantitative results. Students in the experimental group frequently reported that role-playing and collaborative activities made them feel more comfortable speaking English, reducing their fear of making mistakes. Teachers observed that students became more motivated and independent, with many initiating conversations independently. By contrast, students in the control group tended to remain passive, relying heavily on teacher prompts and showing less enthusiasm for participation.

To sum up, the results provide compelling evidence that Action-Based Learning significantly enhances both affective and linguistic outcomes in elementary school students. As demonstrated in Tables 1 and 2, ABL produces statistically significant improvements in self-confidence ($M = 1.30$, $p < .001$) and speaking skills ($M = 1.25$, $p < .001$). Engagement analysis (Table 3) further confirms that ABL creates a dynamic classroom environment conducive to participation, and the between-group comparison (Table 4) indicates that the experimental group's gains are significantly greater than those in the control group. These findings validate ABL's dual role as a pedagogical strategy to improve language skills and as a psychological support mechanism to reduce anxiety and build confidence.

4. Discussion

The research results indicate that Action-Based Learning (ABL) significantly enhances both self-confidence and English-speaking proficiency among fifth-grade students. The data revealed a substantial increase in mean scores for the experimental group, with large effect sizes ($d > 0.80$), suggesting that the intervention had a robust impact. While the control group revealed a marginal improvement, the comparative analysis confirms that the experiential "learning-by-doing" approach is more effective than traditional teacher-centred instruction in mitigating affective barriers and fostering oral competence.

The effectiveness of Action-Based Learning (ABL) in this study can be explained fundamentally by Krashen's (2013) Affective Filter Hypothesis. By engaging students in physical, task-oriented activities, ABL systematically reduces anxiety and creates a "low-filter" environment in which learners feel psychologically safe to produce spoken language. This finding aligns with Sari (2021), who argued that kinesthetic engagement in language tasks effectively reduces the fear of making mistakes, a primary barrier in early language acquisition. Furthermore, the significant increase in students' self-confidence observed resonates with findings from qualitative action research, such as those by Bangun (2018), which suggest that iterative cycles of active speaking tasks—including the "Show and Tell" method—allow students to overcome technical weaknesses and gradually develop a more robust speaking presence. Ultimately, this improvement confirms the theoretical link in which higher self-confidence is a crucial predictor of better oral performance and overall English-speaking achievement (Oktaria, 2023).

The high level of enthusiasm observed in the experimental group further confirms that implementing active learning components—whether through situational rehearsals, presentations, or game-based interactions—positively affects instructional success by making the learning experience more memorable and engaging for pupils (Henisah et al., 2023; Pratiwi et al., 2024). These playful and collaborative tasks cater specifically to the developmental characteristics of young learners who, as noted by Cameron (2001), internalize language most effectively through physical action and concrete experiences. Elementary students benefit significantly from "learning through play" because it transforms abstract linguistic concepts into meaningful social interactions, a process essential for building the foundational communicative skills required at this age (Wijayanti & Dewi, 2020; Moon, 2005).

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Furthermore, creating a supportive, low-anxiety environment is critical for this age group, as emphasised by Pinter (2017), since young learners' motivation and willingness to communicate are deeply tied to their emotional state and the sense of security they feel in the classroom. By shifting the pedagogical focus from formal accuracy to successful task completion, ABL aligns with the specific educational needs of children in East Asia, where active engagement has been highlighted as a key driver for oral proficiency (Butler, 2015). Ultimately, using techniques such as storytelling and role-play serves as a "bridge" that builds children's confidence, ensuring they are not merely passive recipients of vocabulary but active builders of their own communicative success (Ghosn, 2013; Tan, 2012).

By fostering a safe, non-judgmental learning environment, ABL systematically reduces Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety (FLSA) while simultaneously enhancing students' self-efficacy. This effectiveness is theoretically grounded in the Affective Filter Hypothesis, which suggests that language acquisition is most successful when a learner's anxiety is low, allowing input to reach the brain's language acquisition device (Krashen, 2013). As emphasized by Young (1991), creating such a low-anxiety classroom environment is essential, as the teacher's role shifts from a source of correction to a facilitator of meaningful, stress-free interaction.

Figure 1. Krashen's affective filter hypothesis model

Despite the positive outcomes, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the study employs a quasi-experimental design across two schools, which introduces potential threats to internal validity, such as variations in school culture or teacher personality. Although ANCOVA is used to statistically control for initial differences, the non-random assignment of participants means that unobserved variables can still influence the results. Future research should consider a randomized controlled trial (RCT) within a single institution to further isolate the effects of the ABL strategy.

These findings suggest essential implications for elementary English pedagogy. Educators are encouraged to move beyond rote memorisation and to integrate more action-oriented tasks—such as simulations, total physical response (TPR) activities, and collaborative problem-solving—to bolster students' confidence. Instead of focusing solely on grammatical accuracy, teachers should prioritise fostering a supportive environment in which communication is the primary goal. Such a shift in strategy may help bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical oral proficiency in early language education.

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5. Conclusion and implications

This study points out that implementing Action-Based Learning (ABL), particularly when integrated with gamified digital tools such as Wordwall, is a highly effective pedagogical framework for enhancing both self-confidence and speaking skills among elementary students. By shifting the instructional focus from passive memorization to active, goal-oriented participation, ABL successfully addresses the pervasive issue of foreign language speaking anxiety (FLSA) that often hinders young learners in the Indonesian context.

The research findings highlight several key takeaways:

1. The Integration of Action and Technology: Integrating digital media within the ABL framework provides immediate feedback and interactive challenges that significantly boost student engagement and learning activeness.
2. Psychological Barrier Mitigation: By lowering the "affective filter," ABL creates a safe and non-judgmental environment where students feel empowered to take linguistic risks. This increase in self-efficacy is fundamental to the development of long-term oral proficiency.
3. Constructivist Alignment: The success of this method reaffirms the essentials of constructivist principles at the elementary level, where language is best internalized through direct experience, social interaction, and "learning through play."

In conclusion, ABL provides a holistic solution to pedagogical gaps in primary language education. It not only improves technical oral performance but also bolsters students' psychological resilience. For educators, these findings suggest that adapting traditional teaching methods to incorporate action-oriented and gamified strategies is essential to meet contemporary academic standards and to foster a more successful language-learning experience for the next generation.

Statement of Transfer of Responsibility

The preparer/editor did not received the necessary data or information required to complete and verify the following sections: CRediT authorship contribution statement, declaration of competing interest, data availability statement, ethical approval/ethical declaration, acknowledgements, and AI disclosure statement. Accordingly, full academic and legal responsibility for the content and accuracy of these statements is hereby transferred to the authors, including any consequences arising from non-compliance with the target journal's policies and applicable ethical standards.

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