

Strengthening Students' Soft Skills through a Structured Public Speaking Workshop among University and Senior High School Students in Central Aceh

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Abstract

Public speaking is an essential soft skill supporting academic and professional development. However, many students experience anxiety, low self-confidence, and difficulty organizing ideas when speaking before an audience. This community service program aimed to strengthen public speaking skills among university students of IAIN Takengon and senior high school students in Central Aceh through a structured training workshop. The program involved 41 participants and was implemented through conceptual explanation, guided speaking practice, interactive engagement using Mentimeter, and reflective evaluation. Training materials were designed using Canva to ensure structured and visually clear delivery. Initial responses indicated nervousness, fear of making mistakes, and lack of confidence. After the workshop, the majority of participants reported improved understanding of speech structure, anxiety management strategies, and higher confidence levels. After the workshop, participants reported improved understanding of speech structure, anxiety management strategies, and higher confidence levels. Although the evaluation relied on self-reported perceptions within a single-session format, the findings suggest that structured, practice-oriented workshops can positively influence communicative readiness and serve as an effective starting point for strengthening public speaking confidence in educational settings.

Keywords:

Public Speaking; Soft Skills; Communication Anxiety; Training Workshop; Community Service.

1. INTRODUCTION

In contemporary education, soft skills are increasingly recognized as essential competencies that complement cognitive and technical abilities. Global educational frameworks emphasize communication skills, self-confidence, collaboration, and adaptability as critical attributes for students' academic and professional success. Among these competencies, public speaking represents a core component of communication skill development, as it integrates verbal articulation, nonverbal expression, critical thinking, and audience engagement. The ability to speak effectively in public settings enables students to participate actively in academic discussions, present ideas persuasively, and navigate professional environments with confidence (Bylkova et al., 2021; Naira, 2024; W & S, 2025; Wang, 2024). However, despite its recognized importance, many students at both university and senior high school levels continue to struggle with public speaking

anxiety, limited speech organization, and low self-confidence. Large-scale surveys indicate that public speaking consistently produces the highest level of anxiety among various academic learning situations, with approximately 60–80% of university students reporting significant fear when delivering presentations (Grieve et al., 2021; Lintner & Belovecová, 2024). Similarly, senior high school students and EFL learners frequently report moderate to high levels of classroom speaking anxiety, which negatively affects their ability to articulate main ideas clearly and organize their speeches effectively (Cuamag et al., 2024; Pike & Raymundo, 2024).

In the context of Central Aceh, preliminary needs analysis revealed that students frequently experience nervousness, fear of negative evaluation, lack of mastery of presentation structure, and limited awareness of vocal and body language techniques. Classroom observations indicated that presentations often lacked clarity in opening statements, logical sequencing of ideas, and effective closing remarks. Furthermore, students tended to rely heavily on reading slides, avoid eye contact, and demonstrate minimal audience engagement. These patterns are consistent with findings suggesting that without structured, practice-oriented approaches, students struggle to progressively build presentation competence (W & S, 2025). Research shows that intensive training programs emphasizing clear presentation structure and confidence-building strategies significantly improve audience engagement and message delivery (Syafuruddin et al., 2023). Experiential workshops grounded in reflective learning cycles further support the development of technical speaking skills and self-confidence through iterative practice and feedback (Abellana et al., 2025; Ayiz & Tauchid, 2025). Although various public speaking seminars and motivational workshops have been conducted in educational institutions, many of these initiatives remain short-term, lecture-oriented, and minimally practice-based. They frequently emphasize inspirational motivation rather than structured, sustained skill-building processes supported by systematic reflection, which are crucial for fostering lasting communication competence (Abellana et al., 2025; W & S, 2025).

Although short-duration public speaking workshops are frequently conducted in educational institutions, many of them tend to emphasize motivational delivery rather than structured skill development, and reflective components are often insufficiently integrated into the learning process. As a result, participants may experience temporary inspiration without acquiring practical strategies that can be directly applied in academic speaking contexts. In response to this condition, the present community service program was designed to integrate concise theoretical input, guided speaking practice, participant interaction, and reflective evaluation within a systematically organized activity. The involvement of university students from IAIN Takengon and senior high school students in Central Aceh created a collaborative cross-level learning environment that enabled participants to observe diverse speaking approaches and strengthen their confidence through mutual support. By incorporating experiential tasks and digital reflection tools in an efficient instructional format, the program demonstrates that meaningful soft skills strengthening can be facilitated when pedagogical structure and reflection are intentionally embedded in the training design.

Based on the identified conditions, the central issue addressed in this community service program concerns how to facilitate meaningful soft skills development, particularly communication competence and self-confidence through a structured public speaking training activity. Many students experience anxiety, lack systematic presentation skills, and have limited opportunities to engage in guided speaking practice accompanied by reflection. This program is conceptually grounded in experiential learning principles, which emphasize the integration of action, reflection, and feedback as key components in developing practical communication skills. Accordingly, this community service program aims to strengthen students' soft skills through the implementation of a structured public speaking training activity. Specifically, the program seeks to improve participants' self-confidence in speaking before an audience, enhance their verbal and nonverbal communication abilities, develop clearer and more systematic speech organization, and encourage collaborative learning between university and senior high school students. Through the integration of guided practice and reflective activities, the program aspires to provide participants with practical communication strategies that can be directly applied in academic and social contexts.

2. METHOD

This community service program was implemented in the form of a structured public speaking training workshop designed to strengthen students' soft skills, particularly communication competence and self-confidence. The activity was conducted in a single session with a total duration of three hours. The workshop combined theoretical explanation, guided practice, participant interaction, and reflective evaluation within a systematically organized learning sequence. The participants consisted of 41 individuals, including university students from IAIN Takengon and senior high school students from Central Aceh. The mixed composition of participants was intentionally designed to foster a collaborative learning environment that enabled cross-level interaction and peer learning.

The training materials were carefully prepared by the facilitator, Julia Noviani, M.Pd., and were developed using Canva as a visual presentation platform. The use of Canva-supported materials aimed to enhance clarity, visual engagement, and structured content delivery. The materials covered fundamental concepts of public speaking, including speech organization (introduction, body, and conclusion), techniques

for managing anxiety, vocal projection and intonation, body language awareness, and audience engagement strategies. The visual design of the instructional slides was intended to facilitate comprehension and maintain participants' attention throughout the session. The implementation phase consisted of interactive explanation, demonstration of effective speaking techniques, and guided speaking practice. Participants were given opportunities to deliver short presentations, apply structured speech frameworks, and receive feedback from both the facilitator and peers. This practice-oriented approach was designed to ensure that participants actively engaged in experiential learning rather than passively receiving information.

At the beginning of the session, participants' readiness and confidence in speaking before an audience were explored using Mentimeter, an interactive digital platform. Participants responded anonymously to questions regarding their comfort level, perceived challenges, and prior experiences in public speaking. This initial activity served as a needs identification step, allowing the facilitator to understand participants' baseline perceptions and adjust the instructional emphasis accordingly. The core implementation phase combined interactive explanation, demonstration of effective speaking techniques, and guided speaking practice. Participants were provided opportunities to deliver short presentations using structured frameworks and received feedback from both the facilitator and peers. This practice-oriented approach ensured active engagement and experiential learning throughout the session.

At the end of the workshop, a reflection activity was conducted using Mentimeter to capture participants' learning experiences and perceived improvements. The digital reflection allowed anonymous responses and real-time visualization of feedback, facilitating honest self-assessment and collective insight into the learning outcomes. Program evaluation was conducted through observation of participants' performance during practice sessions and analysis of their reflective responses. Through the integration of structured instructional design, guided practice, interactive digital tools, and reflective evaluation, the workshop aimed to provide a meaningful and practice-oriented learning experience within a limited timeframe.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The public speaking training workshop was successfully conducted with 41 participants consisting of university students from IAIN Takengon and senior high school students from Central Aceh. The session was implemented according to the planned instructional sequence, integrating conceptual explanation, guided practice, interactive participation, and reflective evaluation. Participants demonstrated active engagement throughout the session, particularly during discussion and speaking practice activities.

The instructional materials were designed using Canva to ensure visual clarity, structured content delivery, and sustained participant attention. The slides emphasized key elements of public speaking, including gradual skill development, body language awareness, and voice control techniques. The structured visual presentation supported participants in understanding speech organization and practical strategies for reducing anxiety.



Figure 1. Example of Training Material Designed Using Canva

The workshop was delivered in an interactive classroom setting, where participants were seated in a collaborative arrangement that facilitated peer interaction and discussion. The facilitator provided demonstrations of effective speaking techniques and encouraged participants to actively engage during the practice sessions.



Figure 4. Participants' Short Speech Responses During Practice Session



Figure 5. Participants' Short Speech Responses During Practice Session

The responses demonstrated that participants were able to articulate structured ideas related to academic aspirations, self-development, social contribution, and personal growth. Although some statements were still brief and general, the activity provided an opportunity for participants to organize thoughts, practice delivery, and build initial confidence. Practice-oriented activities such as short speaking tasks are known to support gradual confidence development and skill acquisition. The use of a digital platform also facilitated inclusive participation by allowing students to contribute without immediate performance pressure.

At the end of the workshop, participants were asked to reflect on what new knowledge or insights they had gained during the session. The reflective responses collected via Mentimeter indicated increased awareness of public speaking strategies. Frequently mentioned reflections included learning how to manage nervousness, understanding the importance of tempo and delivery techniques, maintaining eye contact, improving body language, and becoming more confident when speaking before an audience.



Figure 6. Reflection on Learning Outcomes



Figure 7. Reflection on Learning Outcomes

Several participants explicitly stated that they now better understood how to control anxiety and structure their messages effectively. Others expressed that public speaking was not as intimidating as previously perceived. Reflective activities play a significant role in consolidating experiential learning, as they allow participants to internalize strategies and recognize personal improvement. The reflection responses suggest that the workshop facilitated cognitive and affective shifts in participants’ perceptions toward public speaking.

To further explore perceived improvement, participants were asked to rate their level of confidence in speaking before an audience after the session. The majority of participants reported feeling fairly confident and very confident, while only a small proportion indicated lower confidence levels.



Figure 8. Participants’ Self-Confidence Level After the Workshop

The distribution of responses suggests a positive shift in participants’ perceived self-confidence following the training. Most participants reported feeling fairly confident and very confident, indicating a positive shift in perceived self-confidence. Although this evaluation reflects self-reported perception rather than longitudinal

measurement, the findings indicate that structured explanation, guided practice, and reflective activities can contribute to immediate improvements in confidence levels. Previous studies have emphasized that active participation and supportive feedback mechanisms significantly enhance communication competence and reduce anxiety. The observed outcomes in this workshop align with those findings.

The initial Mentimeter responses indicating nervousness, fear of making mistakes, and lack of confidence reflect common psychological barriers in public speaking contexts. Previous studies have identified public speaking anxiety and fear of negative evaluation as major factors influencing students' reluctance to speak before an audience (Dewi, 2024; Grieve et al., 2021; Yunus et al., 2025). Studies show that public speaking anxiety negatively impacts academic performance, particularly in oral presentations, with fear of negative evaluation mediating this effect (Huda et al., 2024). The baseline responses in this workshop are consistent with these findings, particularly regarding the prevalence of nervousness, fear of making mistakes, and low self-confidence among participants prior to structured intervention. Such conditions reflect common psychological and performance-related barriers that frequently hinder students' willingness to engage in public speaking activities. The implementation of structured instructional materials and guided practice during this training provided participants with clear and systematic frameworks for organizing their speeches, managing delivery techniques, and developing greater control over their verbal and non-verbal communication. Research indicates that workshops grounded in structured practice and targeted feedback significantly enhance multiple dimensions of public speaking competence, including speech organization, vocal clarity, body language, and audience engagement (Kazanskaia, 2025a, 2025b; Pushpam, 2025). Deliberate and repeated practice opportunities allow learners to internalize speaking frameworks, while structured feedback mechanisms help them identify specific areas for improvement. Moreover, practice-oriented approaches that combine theoretical explanation with guided exercises create a balanced learning experience that supports both cognitive understanding and performance-based skill development. Such integrated strategies have been shown to strengthen learners' confidence and communication mastery in diverse educational contexts (Kazanskaia, 2025a, 2025b; Pushpam, 2025).

The reflective responses indicating improved awareness of speech structure and anxiety management highlight the central role of reflection in consolidating experiential learning. Reflection is not merely a closing activity, but a critical pedagogical component that transforms experience into meaningful knowledge. Within experiential learning theory, reflection functions as a bridge between concrete experience and conceptual understanding, allowing learners to critically examine their performance and reconstruct their strategies for future improvement (Cheng et al., 2025; Morris, 2019). Although the evaluation relied on self-reported perceptions rather than longitudinal measurement, the observed shift in confidence levels aligns with substantial empirical evidence indicating that structured, practice-based training combined with systematic feedback mechanisms can effectively reduce communication anxiety and strengthen overall speaking competence (Bock et al., 2024; Gold et al., 2024; Hosseini et al., 2024; Ignacio et al., 2025). Training environments that integrate guided performance opportunities with constructive feedback enable participants to gradually confront and manage their anxiety within a supportive instructional setting. Such structured exposure reduces fear of negative evaluation and enhances willingness to communicate. Research further demonstrates that positive and specific feedback plays a crucial role in fostering confidence while mitigating stress-related avoidance behaviors (Ignacio et al., 2025). Moreover, structured communication training programs incorporating reflection and feedback have been shown to produce measurable gains in perceived communication competence across diverse educational contexts (Gold et al., 2024; Hosseini et al., 2024). The findings of this workshop therefore suggest that even a single structured intervention, when carefully designed and pedagogically grounded, can influence participants' perceptions of their own communicative readiness. Although the study does not claim long-term behavioral change, the immediate perceptual shift observed among participants indicates that short-duration but systematically implemented training can serve as an effective entry point for strengthening public speaking confidence and reducing anxiety in educational settings (Bock et al., 2024; Gold et al., 2024; Hosseini et al., 2024; Ignacio et al., 2025). These results underscore the importance of designing community-based training programs that prioritize structured practice, supportive feedback, and reflective engagement. Future initiatives may build upon this model by incorporating follow-up sessions or longitudinal evaluation to examine the sustainability of confidence development and communication competence over time.

4. CONCLUSION

This community service initiative demonstrates that a structured public speaking workshop integrating conceptual explanation, guided practice, interactive digital participation, and reflective evaluation can positively influence participants' perceptions of their communicative readiness. The findings indicate a noticeable shift from initial anxiety and low self-confidence toward greater awareness of speech organization, anxiety management strategies, and improved confidence levels. Although the intervention was conducted within a limited timeframe, the structured and pedagogically grounded design contributed to meaningful perceptual changes among university and senior high school participants. The results suggest that short-

duration but systematically designed training programs can serve as effective entry points for strengthening soft skills, particularly public speaking competence, in educational contexts. The integration of visually structured instructional media and interactive digital platforms enhances participant engagement and supports inclusive participation. Educational institutions may adopt similar structured workshop models to address communication anxiety and confidence issues among students. Additionally, combining theoretical explanation with guided performance and reflection appears to be a practical and feasible strategy for soft skills development within community service programs.

This initiative has several limitations. First, the evaluation relied on self-reported perceptions rather than objective performance assessments or longitudinal measurement, which limits the ability to determine sustained behavioral change. Second, the intervention was conducted in a single-session format, restricting deeper skill reinforcement and follow-up observation. Third, the participant group was limited to a specific regional context, which may influence the generalizability of the findings to broader educational settings. Future community service programs may incorporate follow-up sessions or extended training cycles to examine long-term impacts on communication competence. The inclusion of pre- and post-performance assessments, peer evaluation, or rubric-based speaking analysis could provide more comprehensive evidence of skill development. The program also highlights the potential for integrating structured public speaking training into formal educational curricula to support continuous soft skills development. Further research may also explore comparative models involving multi-session training, mentorship approaches, or integration into formal curriculum structures to strengthen sustainable public speaking competence among students.

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