

Gender-based interactional dynamics in EFL speaking anxiety: A mixed-methods study of lecturer interventions in vocational higher education

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Abstract:

Speaking anxiety in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms limits students' participation and oral proficiency, particularly in polytechnic English for Specific Purposes (ESP) contexts where communicative competence is closely linked to work readiness. This study aims to analyze gender differences in speaking anxiety and group preferences, the relationship between discomfort when speaking before the opposite gender and total anxiety, and lecturer interventions perceived as effective based on students' gender. The study employed a convergent mixed methods design by integrating a questionnaire adapted from the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale and open-ended questions. Quantitative analysis included Welch's independent samples t-test, chi-square test, and Pearson correlation, while qualitative analysis used inductive thematic coding with meta-inference at the integration stage. The findings indicate a moderate but statistically significant gender difference, with female students reporting higher levels of anxiety than male students. However, gender was not significantly associated with group preference. Anxiety was triggered by negative evaluation, mistakes, self-monitoring, and concerns about credibility, whereas group preference was shaped primarily by familiarity. Therefore, lecturer interventions should be adaptive: female students require a supportive learning atmosphere and linguistic scaffolding, while male students need sufficient preparation time and gradual participation. The study concludes that EFL speaking anxiety in vocational higher education is not determined solely by gender, but more dominantly by social mechanisms, fear of evaluation, ridicule, loss of credibility, and familiarity within classroom interaction. The study recommends normalizing mistakes, providing protected preparation time, prioritizing constructive feedback, expanding voluntary participation, and conducting longitudinal replications across institutions.

Keywords:

Speaking Anxiety;
English Foreign
Language (EFL); Gender
Differences; Teacher
Interventions;
Polytechnic Education.



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INTRODUCTION

Anxiety in foreign language learning, particularly in oral communication contexts, has long been recognized as a major barrier to active participation and effective performance. In English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom, speaking anxiety often manifests as nervousness, fear of negative evaluation, and a tendency to avoid communicative engagement (Mukminin et al., 2015; Alazeer & Ahmed, 2023). It is widely acknowledged that such anxiety can reduce students' willingness to communicate, limit opportunities to practice the target language, and disrupt the cognitive processes required for oral performance. This argument is supported by previous findings (Aida, 1994; Botes et al., 2020; Cheng et al., 1999; Horwitz et al., 1986; Liu & Jackson, 2008; MacIntyre & Gregersen, 2022; MacIntyre, 1999; Teimouri et al., 2019). In polytechnic contexts, English for Specific Purposes (ESP) makes oral communication essential for employability (Romadloni & Sari, 2025); however, students tend to experience increased anxiety during public presentations (Wei, 2022). Thus, speaking anxiety represents a serious obstacle that must be addressed to enable polytechnic students to participate actively and achieve optimal oral performance in line with professional demands.

Based on the authors' review, numerous studies have examined EFL speaking anxiety. This study classifies the existing literature into three major strands. First, EFL speaking anxiety is multidimensional, shaped by language proficiency, perceived competence, personality, motivation, classroom atmosphere, and audience composition (Kitano, 2001; Liu & Huang, 2011; Matsuda & Gobel, 2004; Sun et al., 2025; Hussain et al., 2025). Second, gender-based studies have produced inconsistent findings: female students are often reported to experience higher anxiety, whereas other studies have found no significant differences across educational and cultural contexts (Ch'ng, 2025; Hz, 2022; Park & French, 2013; Piniel & Zólyomi, 2022). Third, scaffolding, gradual exposure, feedback, reinforcement, tolerance of mistakes, and recasts have been shown to reduce anxiety, yet these studies have not sufficiently examined the gendered mediation of interaction among vocational students (Dewaele et al., 2018; Dewaele & Dewaele, 2020; Pishghadam et al., 2021, 2023; Rassaei, 2015; Toyama & Yamazaki, 2021; Young, 1991). Therefore, this study addresses three gaps: the limited empirical research on EFL speaking anxiety in polytechnic contexts, the dominance of quantitative approaches in gender-related studies that overlook students' lived classroom experiences, and the lack of gender-responsive evaluations of lecturer interventions linking statistical patterns with students' fear, perceived support, and classroom participation.

Furthermore, this study aims to analyze differences in EFL students' speaking anxiety and the relationship between gender-based interactional dynamics, lecturer interventions, and English-speaking anxiety in a polytechnic context. The study addresses the following research questions: (1) Is there a significant difference between male and female students in their overall level of English-speaking anxiety? (2) How is gender related to students' preferences for same-gender or mixed-gender speaking groups, and how is discomfort when speaking before the opposite gender associated with overall speaking anxiety? (3) What teaching interventions or strategies are perceived as most effective in reducing speaking anxiety? Theoretically, this study enriches gender-sensitive understandings of EFL speaking anxiety by emphasizing classroom interactional conditions. Pedagogically, it provides empirical evidence for inclusive speaking instruction in polytechnics through adequate preparation time, constructive feedback, and emotional support.

This study is grounded in the argument that gender identity alone is insufficient to comprehensively explain speaking anxiety in EFL learning within polytechnic contexts, as contextual factors, social dynamics, and psychological conditions also play significant roles.

Discomfort in interacting with the opposite gender has stronger predictive capacity for speaking anxiety than merely classifying students dichotomously as male or female. Furthermore, pedagogical interventions implemented by lecturers are more likely to be effective when they focus on reducing performance pressure, providing adequate preparation time, and normalizing mistakes as a natural part of the language acquisition process, rather than merely increasing the frequency of speaking opportunities quantitatively without sufficient affective support.

METHOD

Research Approach

This study employed a convergent mixed-methods design because it required simultaneous attention to quantitatively measurable patterns of anxiety and students' subjective explanations of their classroom experiences (Dinour et al., 2018). This design was selected over an explanatory sequential design, which postpones qualitative interpretation until after statistical testing, and an exploratory sequential design, which requires qualitative findings to be obtained first before the development of research instruments. Therefore, the convergent design was considered the most appropriate because quantitative and qualitative data were collected during the same phase, analyzed separately, and then integrated to generate meta-inferences or a more comprehensive understanding of gender-based interaction, speaking anxiety, and lecturer interventions in the learning process.

Participants and Sampling

The research participants were recruited through voluntary convenience sampling from students enrolled in English courses across eight study programs at Politeknik Negeri Cilacap (Hossan et al., 2023; Hiratsuka, 2025). The final dataset analyzed consisted of 101 complete responses, comprising 52 male and 49 female students. Prior to analysis, the data were checked to ensure response completeness, and all included participants provided usable answers for the demographic section, Likert-scale items, and open-ended questions. Although this sampling strategy enabled the researchers to access students with direct experience of English language learning assessment, it also had limitations in terms of statistical representativeness because the overall population size and non-response rate could not be determined from the available dataset.

Data Collection

Data were collected through a structured online questionnaire consisting of three sections: demographic information, Likert-scale items on speaking anxiety, and open-ended questions. The demographic section recorded gender, study program, and lecturer identity. The quantitative items measured nervousness, fear of making mistakes, reluctance to participate voluntarily, discomfort when speaking with the opposite gender, and panic during presentations. The qualitative section asked students to describe anxiety-triggering situations, preferred group composition, and lecturer actions that could reduce anxiety. The Likert scale was adapted from the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) (Horwitz et al., 1986) for the polytechnic English for Specific Purposes (ESP) context. Of the twelve items, one item on confidence in group discussion was excluded, resulting in an eleven-item composite with high internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.876$). The KMO value of 0.872 and significant Bartlett's test, $\chi^2(55) = 415.71$, $p < .001$, supported factor suitability. The open-ended questions captured dimensions not represented by scale scores, including social, linguistic, and pedagogical conditions. Qualitative data served as an interpretive element to explain, clarify, and contextualize the statistical findings, rather than merely as anecdotal evidence.

Quantitative Data Analysis

Speaking anxiety scores were calculated by averaging the eleven anxiety-oriented Likert items, with higher scores indicating stronger speaking anxiety. The confidence item was treated separately because its positive direction differed from the other items. For the correlation analysis involving discomfort when speaking before the opposite gender, a conservative composite was used by excluding that item from the total score, ensuring that the predictor was not mechanically included in the outcome variable. Gender-based differences in speaking anxiety were tested using Welch's independent-samples t-test because it is robust to unequal variances and unequal sample sizes. Gender served as the independent variable, while the eleven-item anxiety score served as the dependent variable. Levene's test was used to examine assumptions, whereas Hedges' *g* with a 95% confidence interval was used to interpret the practical magnitude of gender differences.

The relationship between gender and group-composition preference was assessed from open-ended responses coded into same-gender, mixed/neutral, and other categories. The data were then analyzed using a chi-square test of independence after checking expected cell frequencies, with Cramer's *V* used to estimate the strength of association. Pearson product-moment correlation was used to examine the relationship between discomfort when speaking before the opposite gender as the predictor and the anxiety composite excluding that item as the outcome variable, to reduce part-whole inflation bias. All quantitative analyses were interpreted at $\alpha = 0.05$; however, conclusions were not based solely on p-values. Effect sizes, assumption checks, and consistency between quantitative and qualitative evidence were also considered to avoid overinterpreting gender differences when statistical evidence was weak or absent.

Qualitative Data Analysis

The qualitative data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analytic procedure, namely familiarization, initial coding, theme searching, reviewing, defining, and reporting. An inductive strategy was applied so that codes emerged from students' experiences, while remaining guided by the study's focus on gender-based interaction and lecturer interventions. In the first coding cycle, text segments were assigned descriptive labels such as fear of being ridiculed, lack of preparation, intimidation, and positive reinforcement. The second cycle grouped related codes into themes and compared them across male and female responses. The frequency of each theme was calculated as a descriptive indicator, not as evidence of statistically significant differences. Trustworthiness was strengthened through repeated reading, an audit trail, comparison with quantitative findings, and peer debriefing when coding decisions were ambiguous. The limitation of member checking was acknowledged due to anonymity. Responses containing multiple ideas were coded into several themes to ensure that the complexity of anxiety experiences was not reduced to a single category.

Integration of Quantitative and Qualitative Strands

Data integration was conducted after the quantitative and qualitative analyses had been completed separately, using a joint display logic that compared each statistical finding with relevant themes and then combined the evidence to formulate meta-inferences regarding conditions that may increase or reduce speaking anxiety. This strategy enabled the study to distinguish gender differences in mean scores from gender-based interaction in classroom experiences. For example, the absence of a significant mean difference between male and female students was interpreted alongside qualitative findings on ridicule, embarrassment, and lecturer pressure, whereas the significant correlation involving opposite-gender

discomfort was explained through narratives of self-monitoring in mixed-gender audiences. Thus, this design combined breadth, depth, and caution: quantitative data measured the strength of associations, qualitative data interpreted the context, and integration prevented excessive claims about gender because the evidence pointed more strongly to interactional dynamics.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

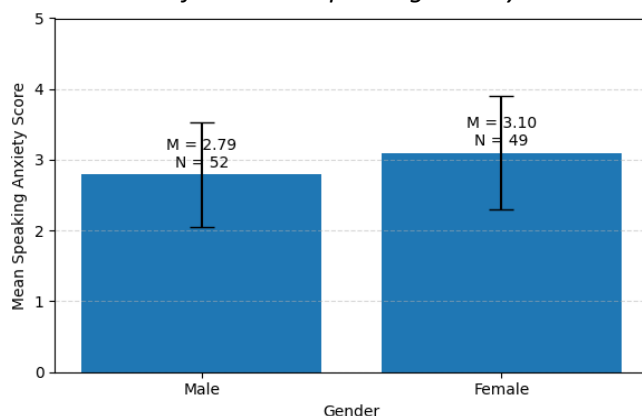
Results

Gender-based differences in students' speaking anxiety

The analysis of speaking anxiety based on gender was conducted using both descriptive and inferential approaches. The data were first presented in terms of means and standard deviations to describe score tendencies within each group. Subsequently, gender differences were tested using Welch's independent-samples t-test, supported by Levene's test to examine the assumption of homogeneity of variance. In addition, Hedges' *g* was used to assess the substantive magnitude of the difference within a quantitative research context that emphasizes accurate data interpretation and the systematic, measurable, and scientifically grounded drawing of conclusions.

Figure 1

Mean Scores of Students' Speaking Anxiety Based on Gender



Source: Authors' data processing, 2026.

Figure 1 shows the data on students' speaking anxiety by gender, involving a total of 101 participants, consisting of 52 male and 49 female students. Male students obtained a mean speaking anxiety score of 2.79, whereas female students recorded a higher mean score of 3.10. The result of Welch's independent-samples t-test indicated that this difference was statistically significant. Levene's test also showed that the assumption of homogeneity of variance was not seriously violated. The mean difference of 0.31 points, with a small-to-moderate effect size, indicates a gender-based difference in speaking anxiety within the student sample examined. In percentage terms, female students' scores were also higher than those of male students on the maximum scale used in this study, both descriptively and inferentially.

Based on the findings, female students tended to have higher levels of speaking anxiety than male students. This difference was reflected in the higher mean score among female students and was supported by Welch's test, which indicated statistical significance. However, the small-to-moderate effect size suggests that the influence of gender on speaking anxiety was not dominant. In other words, gender can be understood as one factor associated with variations in anxiety, but it is not the sole explanatory factor. Other factors, such as self-confidence, speaking experience, academic pressure, classroom environment, lecturer

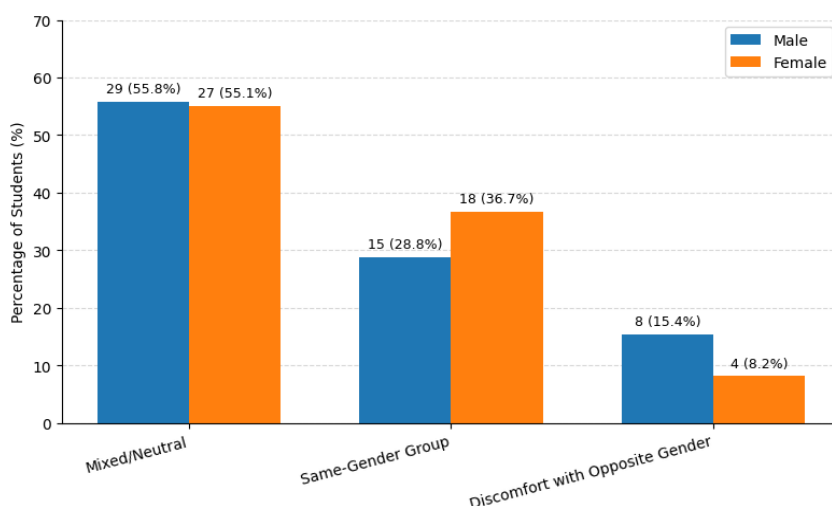
communication patterns, and peer support, may also influence students' speaking anxiety. Therefore, this finding should be interpreted proportionally as an indication of difference, rather than as an absolute generalization within the complex academic and psychological context of students' language learning.

Gender, group-composition preferences, and opposite-gender discomfort

This section analyzes students' preferences for learning group composition and discomfort when speaking before the opposite gender based on students' gender. Because the two main variables, gender and group preference, are categorical, a chi-square test of independence was employed, with Cramer's V used to assess the strength of association. Open-ended responses were also manually coded into three categories, namely same-gender, opposite-gender, and mixed/neutral groups, to capture students' preferences in greater depth.

Figure 2

Group-Composition Preferences and Opposite-Gender Discomfort



Source: Authors' data processing, 2026.

Figure 2 shows that the chi-square test of independence indicated no significant relationship between gender and students' group-composition preferences, $\chi^2(2, N = 101) = 1.59$, $p = 0.452$. The effect size, indicated by Cramer's V of 0.13, suggests a weak association between the two variables. Based on manual coding, mixed or neutral group preference was the most dominant choice among both male students, with 29 out of 52 students (55.8%), and female students, with 27 out of 49 students (55.1%). Preference for same-gender groups was reported by 15 male students (28.8%) and 18 female students (36.7%). Meanwhile, opposite-gender discomfort was found among 8 male students (15.4%) and 4 female students (8.2%). Thus, most students tended to accept mixed-gender groups, while differences in group preferences by gender were relatively small and not statistically significant.

Based on the findings, students' preferences for learning group composition were not strongly determined by gender. The dominance of mixed or neutral preferences among both male and female students indicates acceptance of cross-gender collaboration in learning activities. Although female students were slightly more likely to prefer same-gender groups, the difference was not large enough to form a significant pattern of association. Opposite-gender discomfort also appeared in a small proportion of responses, suggesting that it is more appropriately understood as an individual experience rather than a general group tendency. The low Cramer's V value further confirms that the influence of gender was weak. Therefore,

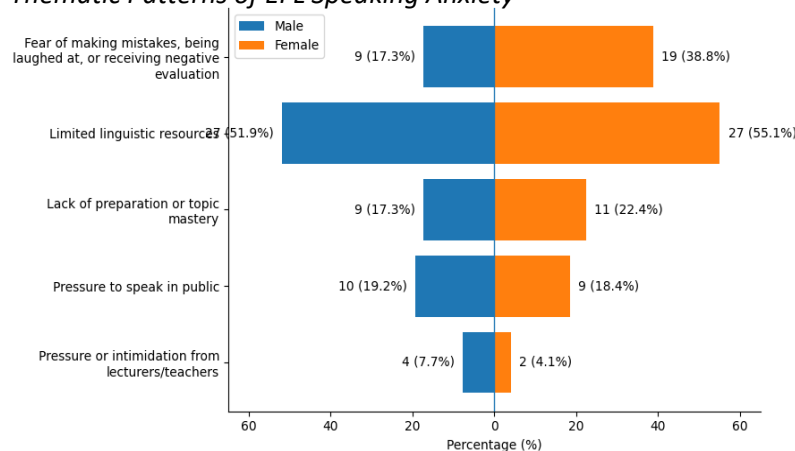
learning group formation should not consider gender alone, but also communication comfort, academic ability, participation, and students' social dynamics to ensure more inclusive and effective classroom collaboration.

Thematic patterns of students' EFL speaking anxiety

This section presents an overview of students' speaking anxiety patterns in EFL learning. The data were analyzed through thematic coding of students' responses to identify forms of anxiety, sources of pressure, and learning support needs. Because a single response could contain multiple themes, frequency was understood as the number of code occurrences. This approach provides a more systematic, contextual, academic, and contemporary understanding of the linguistic, affective, and pedagogical dimensions of English-speaking practices in higher education classrooms.

Figure 3

Thematic Patterns of EFL Speaking Anxiety



Source: Authors' data processing, 2026.

Figure 3 shows that the triggers of EFL speaking anxiety among male and female students varied across categories. Linguistic resource difficulties emerged as the most dominant trigger in both groups, reported by 27 of 52 male students (51.9%) and 27 of 49 female students (55.1%). Fear of making mistakes, being ridiculed, or receiving negative evaluation was reported by 9 male students (17.3%) and 19 female students (38.8%). Lack of preparation or insufficient mastery of the topic was experienced by 9 male students (17.3%) and 11 female students (22.4%). Pressure to speak in public was reported by 10 male students (19.2%) and 9 female students (18.4%). Meanwhile, pressure or intimidation from lecturers/teachers represented the least frequently reported trigger, involving 4 male students (7.7%) and 2 female students (4.1%). Thus, EFL speaking anxiety was predominantly triggered by linguistic difficulties in both gender groups, while a notable difference emerged in female students' greater fear of negative evaluation. However, situational pressure appeared relatively similar across the two groups.

Based on the findings, EFL speaking anxiety was shaped mainly by linguistic difficulties rather than affective or situational factors, as both male and female students reported high levels of language-related problems. A clear gender difference, however, appeared in the affective dimension: female students expressed greater fear of making mistakes and receiving negative evaluation, suggesting stronger sensitivity to social judgment. Male students showed slightly higher anxiety related to lecturer pressure, although this factor remained minor and may indicate a specific response to authority. In contrast, pressure to speak in public was relatively balanced, indicating that situational anxiety affects both groups similarly. Therefore,

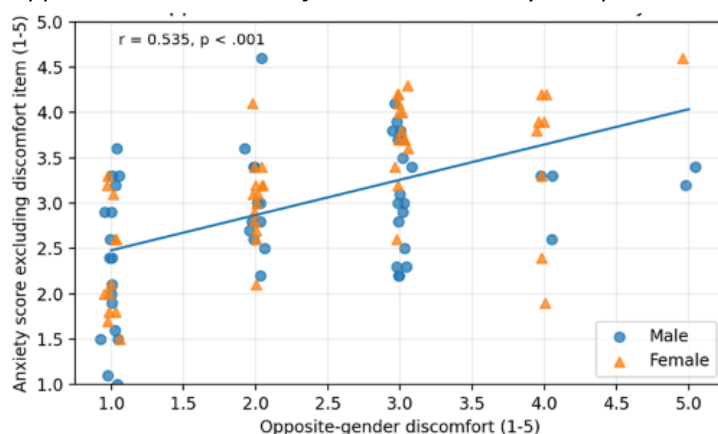
interventions should combine linguistic support, emotional scaffolding, confidence-building, content preparation, and topic mastery through adaptive, holistic, and socially responsive pedagogy.

Gender-Based interactional analysis of speaking anxiety among EFL students

The integrated analysis indicates that the article should be framed from the perspective of gender-based interactional dynamics, supported by moderate statistical gender differences. The quantitative findings show that female students' anxiety was significantly higher than that of male students. However, the chi-square results indicate that gender did not determine students' preferences for group composition. The qualitative findings further explain that gender becomes most meaningful when it intersects with fear of making mistakes, audience evaluation, speaking readiness, and classroom pressure mediated by lecturers.

Figure 4

Opposite-Gender Discomfort and the Anxiety Composite Excluding Related Items



Source: Authors' data processing, 2026.

Figure 4 shows that the strongest relational finding was associated with discomfort in interacting with the opposite gender. Statistically, this variable was positively correlated with broader speaking anxiety, even after the discomfort item was removed from the anxiety composite ($r = 0.535$; $p < .001$). When the item was retained, the correlation became stronger ($r = 0.623$; $p < .001$), although the conservative estimate is more appropriate for interpretation. Qualitatively, students explained that mixed-gender groups increased self-monitoring due to the anticipation of laughter, judgment, or loss of credibility. Therefore, lecturer intervention is important for reshaping the social conditions of speaking through preparation time, constructive feedback, voluntary participation, and the normalization of mistakes. The integrated evidence indicates that anxiety is not determined by gender alone, but by social evaluation, linguistic insecurity, and lecturer-mediated classroom pressure within gender-based interactional dynamics in English speaking instruction.

Table 1

A Meta-Inference Model of Gender-Based Interactional Dynamics in EFL Speaking Anxiety

Dynamic Component	Quantitative Pattern	Qualitative Interactional Mechanism	Meta-Inference	Pedagogical Implication
Gender-based differences in anxiety	Female students reported higher overall anxiety	Female students' responses more frequently emphasized	Gender is relevant, but its influence is moderate and	Provide gender-responsive support without assuming

	levels than male students.	fear of making mistakes, being ridiculed, and receiving negative evaluation, while both groups reported linguistic difficulties.	operates through socially constructed anxiety mechanisms.	that all students of one gender require the same intervention.
Group composition preferences	No significant relationship was found between gender and group preference.	Many students preferred mixed-gender or neutral groups, or based their comfort on familiarity rather than gender alone.	Group composition is not determined simply by gender identity.	Offer flexible grouping options and prepare mixed-gender groups through low-risk speaking activities.
Discomfort in opposite-gender interaction	A positive correlation was found between discomfort with the opposite gender and broader speaking anxiety.	Mixed-gender audiences increased self-monitoring when students anticipated laughter, judgment, or loss of credibility.	Gender-based interactional discomfort is an important anxiety mechanism beyond mean differences by gender.	Provide preparation time, small-group practice, and supportive feedback before public speaking tasks.

Source: Authors' data processing, 2026.

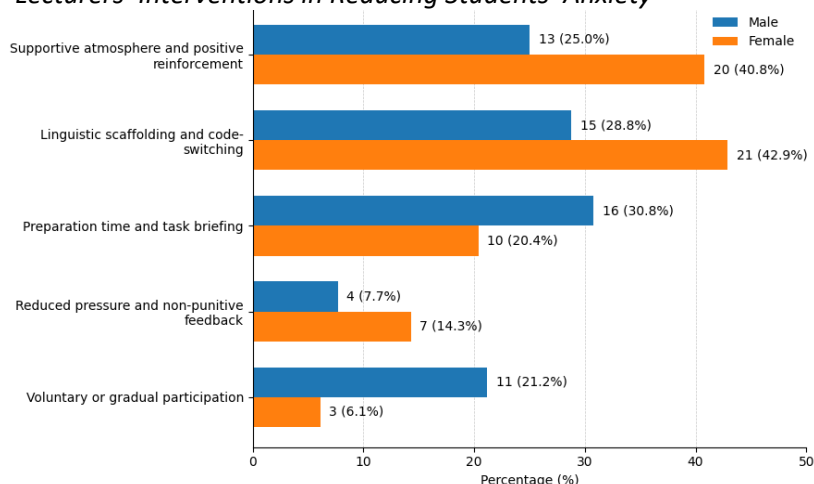
Table 1 shows that female students reported higher levels of EFL speaking anxiety than male students, particularly in relation to fear of negative evaluation and making mistakes. Nevertheless, the influence of gender was moderate and socially constructed. Interestingly, no significant relationship was found between gender and group composition preferences; students' comfort was more strongly shaped by familiarity than by gender. The key finding concerns the positive correlation between discomfort with the opposite gender and broader anxiety, in which mixed-gender audiences increased self-monitoring due to the anticipation of judgment or loss of credibility. Overall, gender influences anxiety through complex interactional mechanisms rather than merely through mean differences, thereby requiring responsive and flexible pedagogical approaches.

Based on the findings, the dynamics of EFL speaking anxiety are not solely determined by gender identity, but by deeper social mechanisms. The quantitative difference, in which female students reported higher anxiety, is supported by qualitative responses indicating concerns about ridicule and negative evaluation, a pattern that reflects socially constructed gender expectations. The finding that group preference was not significantly associated with gender suggests that contextual factors, such as familiarity, are more dominant, thereby challenging assumptions about gender-based grouping. In addition, the positive correlation between discomfort in opposite-gender interaction and overall anxiety indicates that mixed-gender audiences may trigger excessive self-monitoring. Overall, gender operates as an anxiety trigger through interactional mechanisms rather than as a direct predictor. Therefore, the pedagogical implications emphasize responsive support, flexible grouping options, and risk-reduction strategies before public speaking activities.

Lecturers' interventions in reducing students' anxiety

In the context of foreign language speaking instruction, lecturers' role as facilitators is not limited to delivering core materials but also includes systematic efforts to manage students' psychological dynamics. Pedagogical interventions that are responsive to diverse learning needs are a key factor in reducing barriers to oral communication. Therefore, mapping the types of support perceived by students as effective is essential for designing more adaptive, contextual, and learner-centered instruction.

Figure 5

Lecturers' Interventions in Reducing Students' Anxiety

Source: Authors' data processing, 2026.

Figure 5 shows the forms of lecturer intervention perceived to reduce students' speaking anxiety by gender. A supportive atmosphere and positive reinforcement were reported by 13 male students (25.0%) and 20 female students (40.8%). Linguistic scaffolding and code-switching were mentioned by 15 male students (28.8%) and 21 female students (42.9%). Preparation time and task guidance were more frequently reported by male students, involving 16 respondents (30.8%), compared with 10 female students (20.4%). Pressure reduction and non-punitive feedback were reported by 4 male students (7.7%) and 7 female students (14.3%). Voluntary or gradual participation was mentioned by 11 male students (21.2%) and 3 female students (6.1%). These data indicate variations in pedagogical support needs between male and female students in EFL speaking instruction.

Based on the findings, lecturer interventions need to be designed adaptively according to students' needs. Female students placed greater emphasis on the importance of a supportive atmosphere, positive reinforcement, linguistic scaffolding, and code-switching. This indicates that affective support and language assistance play an important role in reducing fear, evaluative pressure, and lack of confidence during speaking activities. In contrast, male students more frequently highlighted the need for preparation time, task guidance, and voluntary or gradual participation. This pattern suggests that reducing anxiety cannot be achieved through language correction alone, but also requires classroom climate management, clear instruction, and the creation of safe speaking spaces. Thus, lecturer interventions should integrate linguistic, affective, and procedural strategies to gradually enhance students' willingness to speak in EFL contexts with confidence and without feeling threatened by classroom-based social evaluation.

Discussion

This study on gender-based interactional dynamics in EFL speaking anxiety in vocational higher education found three main results. First, female students' speaking anxiety reached 62.0% of the maximum scale score, whereas male students reached 55.8%, indicating a difference of 6.2 percentage points, or 11.1% higher anxiety among female students than among male students. Second, female students were more anxious in EFL speaking due to fear of negative evaluation and mistakes, although the influence of gender was moderate. Group preferences were shaped more by familiarity, while discomfort with the opposite gender mainly triggered self-monitoring and concerns about credibility. Third, preferred lecturer

interventions differed by gender. Female students preferred a supportive atmosphere and linguistic scaffolding, whereas male students preferred preparation time and gradual participation. These findings reflect varied needs for adaptive pedagogy. Thus, EFL speaking anxiety is not determined by gender alone, but is shaped by social interaction, classroom evaluation, and lecturer support that should be designed adaptively and responsively to the context of vocational students.

The findings of this study have social relevance to global and national awareness of gender equality. The gap in EFL speaking anxiety experienced by female students, particularly their fear of negative evaluation and mistakes, is not a reflection of ability but a manifestation of persistent social norms and gender stereotypes in Indonesia (Moreau et al., 2021; Palimbunga, 2024). Barriers to women's participation are shaped more by social bias and stereotypes than by limitations in individual capacity or competence (Ojwala et al., 2024; Ghundol & Muthanna, 2025). In vocational education, which serves as a bridge to the workplace, the inability to manage speaking anxiety may reinforce inequalities in women's access to and participation in sectors that require public communication (Jandevi, 2019; Widiastuti et al., 2024). The finding that female students require a supportive atmosphere and linguistic scaffolding, whereas male students need preparation time and gradual participation, indicates that uniform pedagogical approaches may perpetuate inequality. Without intervention in the "hidden curriculum" that shapes social expectations about who is entitled to speak, the rhetoric of gender equality in education remains an illusion.

The theoretical relevance of this study lies in its affirmation that speaking anxiety is relational and interactional, rather than merely an individual psychological issue. Within the framework of the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale, which conceptualizes language anxiety through communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation (Horwitz et al., 1986), students' experiences of ridicule, public correction, and self-monitoring in mixed-gender situations are most directly related to the component of fear of negative evaluation. The findings are also consistent with the cognitive processing perspective of MacIntyre and Gardner (1999), as anxiety appears to disrupt language production when students lack vocabulary, preparation time, or resources for constructing sentences. In addition, drawing on Darwin & Norton (2023) poststructural perspective, classroom participation is understood as being shaped by learners' identities, investment, power relations, and the ways they are positioned and recognized within classroom interactions, rather than by gender identity alone.

This study provides an understanding that students' EFL speaking anxiety is not merely a personal weakness, but a learning experience shaped by social relations, gender, psychological safety, and pedagogical support (Kasap & Power, 2019; Goodarzi & Namaziandost, 2025). Differences in anxiety between male and female students suggest that educators need to interpret the data carefully: gender does matter, but it should not be used as a basis for absolute generalization. Fear of negative evaluation, mistakes, and opposite-gender interaction indicates that the language classroom is both an emotional and academic space (Downing et al., 2020; Altamimi, 2023). Therefore, the development of EFL scholarship needs to integrate linguistic, psychological, and socio-interactional dimensions. For lecturers' professional development, these findings highlight the importance of empathy, flexibility, and adaptive instructional design to help students speak with courage, build credibility, and grow as confident global communicators (Liu et al., 2024; Sultan & Khan, 2025).

This study is partly consistent with previous research reporting higher anxiety levels among female learners (Hz, 2022; Park & French, 2013) but differs from studies and meta-analytic evidence showing no statistically significant gender differences (Ch'ng, 2025; Piniel &

Zólyomi, 2022). This divergence positions the present study between two strands of prior research: it confirms that higher anxiety patterns among female students may emerge in specific classroom datasets, while emphasizing that such differences are small and should be interpreted through contextual evidence. The findings also support studies showing that speaking anxiety affects performance, communicative competence, and willingness to communicate (Liu & Jackson, 2008; Wei, 2022; Woodrow, 2006). They are further aligned with research highlighting the role of teachers, emotional climate, feedback, and structured interventions (Dewaele et al., 2018; Dewaele & Dewaele, 2020; Rassaei, 2015; Saito et al., 2018; Toyama & Yamazaki, 2021). Thus, the novelty of this study lies in its gender-interactional framework, which links social evaluation and lecturer support in vocational EFL contexts, moving beyond gender differences alone.

Based on the findings, this study recommends concrete instructional actions in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) speaking classes. First, lecturers should provide a brief preparation phase before speaking activities, including topic clarification, key vocabulary, sentence starters, and practice time. Second, low-risk practice should be conducted through pairs or small groups before students perform in the larger classroom, particularly when mixed-gender audiences increase self-monitoring. Third, feedback should be constructive and non-punitive; lecturers may note errors during performance and then discuss general patterns without embarrassing individual students. Fourth, grouping should be flexible and not automatically separated by gender, but rotated among same-gender, mixed-gender, familiar, and unfamiliar groups under clear anti-ridicule norms. Fifth, lecturers should implement a participation ladder, progressing from voluntary answers, guided questions, short responses, to longer presentations. At the program level, polytechnics need to train lecturers in anxiety-sensitive feedback and gender-responsive classroom interaction.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that EFL speaking anxiety in vocational higher education cannot be explained simply through gender categories. Female students did report higher anxiety levels, reaching 62.0% compared with 55.8% among male students, with a difference of 6.2 percentage points or 11.1% higher anxiety. However, this difference should be interpreted critically because gender operates through social mechanisms rather than as a single determinant. Fear of negative evaluation, mistakes, ridicule, and loss of credibility indicates that anxiety emerges within classroom interactional spaces. Group preferences, which were shaped more by familiarity than by gender, also show that students are not merely representatives of gender categories. Thus, speaking anxiety results from the intersection of linguistic ability, social relations, emotional safety, and lecturer support. These findings reject a biological reading of gender and emphasize the importance of learning contexts.

This study contributes to expanding the understanding of EFL speaking anxiety from an individual psychological issue to a relational, interactional, and contextual phenomenon. Gender is not positioned as a fixed variable that directly determines anxiety, but as a social experience mediated by classroom evaluation, audience relations, and a sense of safety when speaking. Practically, this study emphasizes that lecturer interventions need to be adaptive rather than uniform. Female students require a more supportive atmosphere and linguistic scaffolding, whereas male students require more preparation time and gradual participation. Therefore, EFL speaking instruction in vocational education should integrate emotional support, progressive practice, constructive feedback, and flexible grouping strategies.

This study has several limitations. The sample was obtained through voluntary convenience sampling from a single state polytechnic; therefore, the findings cannot yet be

generalized to all EFL or ESP contexts. The analysis relied on self-reported Likert-scale data and open-ended written responses, rather than interviews, observations, or speaking performance scores. Group preference categories were also coded from brief responses; although an audit trail was used, future research should involve multiple independent coders and report inter-coder agreement. Further studies need to replicate this research across various polytechnic or vocational institutions using longitudinal or intervention-based designs, integrating questionnaires, interviews, observations, and speaking performance measures, while also examining the effects of preparation time, supportive feedback, linguistic scaffolding, pressure reduction, and gradual exposure.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION STATEMENT

Annisa Romadloni: Conceptualization; Data Curation; Formal Analysis; Methodology; Software; Visualization; Writing Original Draft; Validation; Writing Review & Editing. **Laura Sari:** Conceptualization; Data Curation; Formal Analysis; Methodology; Software; Visualization; Writing Original Draft; Writing Review & Editing. **Linda Perdana Wanti:** Data Curation; Formal Analysis; Methodology; Software; Visualization; Writing Original Draft; Validation. **Abdul Karim:** Formal Analysis; Visualization; Writing Review & Editing.

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