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Exploring students' perspectives on gender differences in speaking anxiety of EFL learners in an Indonesian junior high school

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ABSTRACT

Purpose — Although speaking anxiety has been widely investigated, limited attention has been given to junior high school students, particularly regarding gender differences. This study explores how learners of English as a foreign language (EFL) experience, express, and manage speaking anxiety during English learning.

Design/methodology/approach — This study employed a descriptive qualitative approach. Classroom observations, reflection questions, and semi-structured interviews were used to investigate students' experiences, emotional responses, and strategies for managing speaking anxiety. The data were analyzed to identify patterns related to anxiety, gender differences, and classroom factors influencing their speaking.

Findings — The findings indicate that many ninth-grade EFL learners reported feeling anxious when speaking publicly. Female students tended to express their anxiety, while male students often concealed their nervousness through humor or relaxed behavior. Furthermore, teacher support, frequent speaking practice, and a supportive environment were identified as important factors in reducing students' anxiety.

Originality/value — This study offers unique empirical evidence on how socio-emotional expressions of speaking anxiety are mediated by gender among early adolescents in an Indonesian EFL setting. By revealing the divergent behavioral adaptations between male and female students, this research provides researchers and practitioners with an authentic lens for designing emotionally safe, context-sensitive oral communicative interventions.

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Introduction

English proficiency has become essential for cross-cultural communication, and speaking is often regarded as the most important skill for achieving it. Shrishthy (2022) highlighted that

in today's globalized world, strong oral communication skills are increasingly important as they enhance confidence, social interaction, and career opportunities. However, for many EFL learners, speaking remains the most challenging skill to master. Speaking anxiety remains a major barrier to fluency, manifesting across psychological, social, and instructional dimensions that collectively hinder learners' development of oral communication (Tania et al., 2025; Arsalan et al., 2025). Students as an individual whose trait is anxious tends to feel anxious in a number of situations (Abrar, 2022).

This phenomenon can be explained through the concept of Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety (FLCA) proposed by Horwitz et al. (1986). FLCA refers to a specific form of anxiety related to language learning and includes communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation. These forms of anxiety frequently emerge during speaking activities and may significantly influence students' classroom participation and language performance. Previous research has also suggested that speaking anxiety may manifest differently among learners. Brown (2000) argued that gender is one of the psychological factors that can influence how students experience and respond to anxiety in language learning. Gender differences in education manifest not only in academic achievement but also in how male and female students approach the learning process (Efendi et al., 2025). This is particularly evident in learning speaking process, where gender influences not only individual confidence but also how students perceive social expectations and others' evaluations. Female students tend to report higher speaking anxiety driven by social pressure and the fear of being judged by others. In contrast, male students experience anxiety through different mechanisms, such as hegemonic masculinity and cultural expectations that discourage showing vulnerability (Ali & Habib, 2025). This pattern is consistent across multiple contexts: female learners generally experience higher speaking anxiety than their male counterparts (Okyar, 2023; Zulkiflee & Nimehchisalem, 2022; Yusuf et al., 2023), though Fauziah et al. (2022) found no statistically significant difference between male and female senior high school students despite females scoring higher on average, and Pristiyaputri et al. (2023) found significant differences only among sophomore university students, not freshmen.

Classroom dynamics further reinforce these gendered patterns; in co-educational settings, male and female students are often treated differently by teachers, creating unequal speaking opportunities and contributing to divergent anxiety levels (Zulkiflee & Nimehchisalem, 2022). At the junior high school level specifically, Mardhatilla et al. (2023) found a significant difference in speaking anxiety between male and female students at an Islamic boarding school, with female students exhibiting moderate anxiety driven primarily by fear of negative evaluation, while male students showed low anxiety with test anxiety as the dominant factor. In contrast, Simanungkalit and Likuayang (2023) found no significant gender difference among junior high school students in North Sulawesi, suggesting that contextual factors mediate gendered patterns. This suggests that gender does not operate in isolation but interacts with contextual variables such as proficiency level, school type, and cultural norms, making it a necessary variable to examine in specific educational settings.

Research has consistently highlighted the role of gender in shaping students' experiences of speaking anxiety in EFL contexts. The significance of addressing speaking anxiety extends beyond educational settings (Hussain et al., 2025). Several studies reported that female students tend to experience stronger anxiety and are more affected by fear of

negative evaluation (Alamri & Qasem, 2024; Muktiningrum et al., 2024; Fauziah et al., 2022). Social and cultural expectations may also shape how students can express anxiety differently; Rahman (2022) found that male students often mask their nervousness through humor or casual behavior, whereas female students tend to express emotional tension more openly, a pattern similarly noted by Pabro-Maquidato (2021), who observed that female learners generally demonstrate stronger emotional responses while male learners tend to conceal their nervousness. However, gender differences are not always consistent. Saputra et al. (2023) and Alamri and Qasem (2024) observed that classroom environment, teacher attitudes, and cultural expectations can influence how gender-related patterns appear, while Wang et al. (2022) showed that both male and female students may experience reduced anxiety when they possess resilience and communication competence.

Previous studies have also identified several sources of speaking anxiety. Fear of negative evaluation, low self-confidence, and limited vocabulary are among the most common triggers (Khafidhoh et al., 2023; Nurilahi & Suhartono, 2022; Budayanti et al., 2023; Rahmadani & Etfita, 2022; Suparlan, 2021). In the Indonesian EFL context specifically, fear of negative evaluation, lack of confidence in language proficiency, and cultural influences on communication styles have been consistently identified as core contributors to speaking anxiety (Mustamir, 2024). Linguistic competence plays an important role, as students who perceive their vocabulary knowledge as stronger tend to experience lower anxiety (Daflizar, 2024). At the junior high school level, embarrassment has been identified as the strongest external factor (Saharani et al., 2023), while Rafiq (2023) found test anxiety to be the most dominant type, driven by cognitive, psychological, social, and physical factors. Fatmawati (2022) similarly found that speaking in front of the class, fear of being laughed at, and teacher personality contributed significantly to anxiety among seventh-grade students, while Marpaung and Fithriani (2023) identified lack of confidence, fear of mispronunciation, and lack of preparation as primary causes among ninth-grade learners. Suparlan (2021) further documented several contributing factors in the context of an Islamic junior high school, including fear of making mistakes, limited vocabulary, embarrassment, and language tests. Classroom conditions may further intensify anxiety; large classes can increase fear of embarrassment and limit opportunities for feedback (Tiana et al., 2024). Cultural and psychological factors also influence how anxiety develops, as cultural norms and language proficiency shape students' experiences of speaking anxiety (Quvanch et al., 2024). The effects of anxiety are well documented, as it can disrupt cognitive processing, reduce willingness to communicate, and hinder language development (Horwitz et al., 1986; Brown, 2000).

Language learning anxiety is linked to success and performance in a foreign language, because low levels of language anxiety lead to higher performance in the target language (Salameh, 2022). To manage speaking anxiety, students often employ various coping strategies. Preparation, relaxation techniques, and positive self-talk are commonly used to increase confidence in speaking situations (Muktiningrum et al., 2024; Khafidhoh et al., 2023). Among Indonesian junior high school learners, preparation has been identified as the most frequently used strategy, followed by relaxation and positive thinking (Nuraeni et al., 2023; Sulistyaningsih et al., 2024). Peer support also plays an important role, as students who feel anxious tend to seek reassurance from classmates facing similar difficulties (Nuraeni et al., 2023; Prameswari et al., 2025). Some students cope by focusing on the learning process and ignoring disruptive peer behavior during speaking performances (Hidayati et al., 2022),

while others rely on self-reassurance and calming techniques to manage anxiety as it arises (Prameswari et al., 2025). Continuing to practice speaking English, maintaining positive thinking, and seeking teacher support have also been reported as effective strategies (Marpaung & Fithriani, 2023). Teacher support and constructive feedback also play an important role in encouraging participation (Daflizar, 2024). Interactive classroom activities such as pair work and role-play can create a more relaxed speaking environment (Brown, 2000). In addition, Indonesian students have been found to rely on strategies such as repeated practice, peer support, and self-motivation (Nugroho & Hapsari, 2024), while other strategies include reading English materials, using dictionaries, and reflecting on learning experiences (Pabro-Maquidato, 2021).

Despite the growing body of research on speaking anxiety, studies examining gender differences have predominantly relied on quantitative approaches at the university level (Pristiyaputri et al., 2023; Rahmadani & Etfita, 2022; Budayanti et al., 2023), with a broader systematic trend confirming this quantitative dominance across the field (Tania et al., 2025; Arsalan et al., 2025). A quantitative study by Istiqomah (2024) comparing the percentages of speaking anxiety experienced by male and female of high school students greatly affects speaking performance. While qualitative studies in Indonesian junior high school contexts do exist (Hidayati et al., 2022; Prameswari et al., 2025; Pohan & Kusumawardany, 2023), they have focused on general anxiety factors rather than gendered experiences. The few studies that have examined gender differences at the junior high school level, such as Mardhatilla et al. (2023), have relied on quantitative instruments without exploring the underlying experiences and perceptions that explain why these differences exist. As Prameswari et al. (2025) explicitly noted, only a few studies have explored the specific factors behind speaking anxiety between genders in the Indonesian context. Thus, qualitative exploration of how male and female junior high school students perceive and experience speaking anxiety from their own perspectives remains limited.

Although many studies have examined foreign language speaking anxiety, limited attention has been directed toward how gender dynamics influence these experiences among junior high school students. To address this gap, this study explores the gendered experiences of speaking anxiety among ninth-grade EFL learners at one junior high school in Karawang, West Java, Indonesia, using a descriptive qualitative approach. Specifically, the research questions guiding this study are: (1) How male and female students experience speaking anxiety in the classroom, (2) What factors contribute to its emergence, and (3) How they cope with it during English learning activities. This research contributes to advance a deeper understanding of students' emotional and behavioral responses to speaking anxiety and to offer practical and pedagogical insights for developing more supportive speaking activities in EFL classrooms.

Method

Research design

This study employed a descriptive qualitative approach to explore gendered experiences of speaking anxiety among ninth-grade EFL students at one junior high school in Karawang, West Java, Indonesia. A qualitative design was chosen because it enables the researcher to understand students' experiences, perceptions, factors contributing to their emergence, and

coping strategies as they occur in their natural learning environment. According to Creswell & Creswell (2018), qualitative research is an approach aimed at exploring and understanding the meanings that individuals or groups attribute to social or human issues. This type of research collects participants' experiences, perceptions, and behaviors, focusing on the hows and whys rather than the how many or how much (Tenny et al., 2022). Therefore, this study focused on capturing students' authentic behaviors and emotional responses during English-speaking activities, particularly those related to communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and coping strategies.

Research setting and participants

The participants were 32 ninth-grade students at one junior high school in Karawang, West Java, Indonesia. This school was purposively selected based on the researcher's prior field experience during a teaching practicum (PLP), in which preliminary observations revealed that students had limited oral English proficiency. Specifically, students were observed to struggle with basic English pronunciation, often applying Indonesian phonological patterns when reading English texts, and tended to speak in notably low voices during speaking activities, indicating significant discomfort with oral English production. This context implies that speaking anxiety is likely to be prominent among these learners. Additionally, as an Islamic boarding school-based institution, male and female students are seated separately, which restricts cross-gender interaction in the classroom. This gender-segregated setting provides a distinctive context for examining how gendered dynamics shape students' speaking anxiety experiences.

Data collection

Three instruments were used to collect the data: classroom observation, reflection questions, and semi-structured interviews. First, a classroom observation was conducted during a role-play speaking activity. All students participated in the classroom observation during a role-play speaking activity and completed reflection questions afterwards, describing their feelings, factors contributing to its emergence, and coping strategies. These observations and reflection responses provided a general overview of students' speaking anxiety in the classroom. The researcher acted as a non-participant observer and recorded students' behaviors through field notes. The observation focused on students' verbal performance, nonverbal signs of nervousness (e.g., hesitation, avoiding eye contact), emotional expressions, and peer interactions during the speaking task.

Second, reflection questions were distributed to all 32 students after the speaking activity to capture their personal experiences. The reflection sheet contained three open-ended questions asking students about their feelings when speaking English, factors that caused anxiety, and strategies they used to cope with nervousness. Finally, semi-structured interviews were conducted with six purposively selected students to gain deeper insights into their experiences. The selection comprised three achievement levels (high, middle, and low) with a balanced gender distribution (three males and three females). This sampling allowed the researcher to explore diverse perspectives and compare how students with different proficiency levels and genders experienced speaking anxiety in the EFL classroom

The interview guide was adapted from the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) developed by Horwitz et al. (1986). Since the original instrument used Likert-scale items, several questions were modified into age-appropriate open-ended forms suitable for qualitative inquiry. The interviews explored three main aspects: communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and coping strategies related to speaking anxiety.

Data analysis

The data were analyzed using the interactive model proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), which consists of three interconnected and iterative phases: data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. During the data condensation stage, the researcher selected, simplified, and organized the data based on themes relevant to speaking anxiety. The initial coding framework was guided by Horwitz et al.'s (1986) theory of Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety, including communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation. However, during the analysis process, many participants described how they attempted to manage their anxiety. Therefore, an additional theme, coping strategies, emerged inductively from the data.

In the data display stage, students' responses from observations, reflections, and interviews were organized and presented narratively to identify patterns of anxiety across gender and achievement levels. Finally, in the conclusion and verification stage, the researcher interpreted the findings, compared them with previous studies, and confirmed their consistency across multiple data sources through triangulation.

Findings and discussion

This section presents the research findings based on data collected through observations, reflections, and interviews. The results are categorized into three main themes: male and female students' experiences of speaking anxiety in the classroom, factors contributing to its emergence, students' coping strategies during English learning activities, and gendered patterns of speaking anxiety.

Male and female students' experiences of speaking anxiety in the classroom.

Based on the classroom observation, this research revealed several behavioral indicators of speaking anxiety when students were required to perform role-play activities in English. Many students spoke in noticeably low voices and avoided eye contact with their partners or the audience. Some students covered their faces with books while speaking, suggesting discomfort when producing English in front of their peers. Physical signs of nervousness were also observed, including trembling hands, rigid body posture, and hesitation before speaking. In several instances, students paused briefly before beginning their dialogue, resulting in fragmented speech and reduced fluency.

Some students relied heavily on reading directly from their dialogue scripts and rarely looked at their partners while speaking, suggesting they were more focused on avoiding mistakes than on maintaining natural interaction. These behaviors correspond to the concept of communication apprehension proposed by Horwitz et al. (1986), which refers to the fear or anxiety associated with real or anticipated communication in a foreign language, and

reflect patterns documented among Indonesian EFL learners who commonly report feeling unconfident and embarrassed when required to speak in class (Budayanti et al., 2023; Mustamir, 2024).

The classroom context also appeared to intensify students' speaking anxiety. When students were asked to perform in front of the whole class, several displayed visible signs of discomfort, such as shifting their posture, lowering their voices further, or speaking rapidly to finish their performance as quickly as possible, consistent with findings from Fatmawati (2022) and Rafiq (2023), who identified performing in front of the class as one of the primary sources of speaking anxiety among junior high school students in Indonesia.

Table 1

Students' Reflection Themes and Frequency

Themes	Examples of students' responses	Frequency (n = 32)
Emotional reaction	"I get nervous when I have to speak in front of my friends." / "Sometimes I tremble and am afraid of mispronouncing words."	26 expressed strong nervousness; 4 reported mild anxiety; 2 reported no anxiety
Source of anxiety	"I'm afraid of mispronouncing words." / "I'm afraid my friends will laugh at me." / "I'm not used to it yet, so I need more practice."	14 mentioned pronunciations fear; 13 mentioned peer judgment; 2 mentioned lack of habit; 3 mentioned no anxiety
Coping strategies	"Take a deep breath." / "Pretend that my friends in front of me don't exist." / "Practicing the reading first."	14 mentioned avoidances (not looking at others); 10 mentioned preparation/practice; reported no coping ability; 1 mentioned positive reframing, "It's nice to see my friends laughing"

Informed in Table 1, most participants experienced noticeable anxiety during speaking activities. The reflections reveal that nervousness was a common emotional response during classroom speaking tasks, particularly when students were required to perform publicly. Communication apprehension was particularly pronounced among students with lower speaking confidence, where nervousness was frequently associated with physical symptoms such as trembling and difficulty remembering what to say. Taken together, the observational and reflection data suggest that communication apprehension played a significant role in shaping students' participation in EFL speaking activities, particularly among learners who were still developing confidence in speaking English.

Students' written reflections further confirmed these observations. The majority of students reported feeling nervous when required to speak English in front of the class, with concerns about forgetting their dialogue, mispronouncing words, or being laughed at by their classmates. Interview data further revealed that several participants reported feeling more comfortable speaking in small groups than performing in front of the whole class. Female students, particularly those in the middle and low achievement groups, tended to express stronger nervousness, while male students more often described their anxiety as mild or manageable, reflecting gendered patterns documented at the junior high school level by Mardhatilla et al. (2023) and explained by Ali and Habib (2025) through the lens of societal expectations and hegemonic masculinity.

Factors contributing to its emergence

Another prominent source of anxiety was students' fear of negative evaluation from peers and teachers. Classroom observations indicated that many students hesitated to perform speaking tasks because they were concerned about making mistakes in front of others. In some instances, when a student mispronounced a word or paused for too long, a few classmates responded with laughter or whispered comments, which appeared to increase tension and contributed to students' reluctance to participate orally.

Students' written reflections further emphasized this concern. Many students reported feeling worried about mispronunciation and the possibility of being judged negatively by peers, with some preferring to remain silent rather than risk embarrassment. Students who believed their English pronunciation or vocabulary knowledge was limited tended to anticipate negative judgments from others, choosing to avoid speaking opportunities even when they understood the lesson content. This pattern indicates that fear of negative evaluation reduces students' participation in communicative activities and limits their opportunities to practice speaking in the target language (Horwitz et al., 1986; Okyar, 2023).

Table 2

Interview Themes and Representative Quotes

Themes	Examples of students' responses	Frequency (n = 32)
Communication apprehension	"I get nervous when I have to speak in front of all my friends. It's not so bad in small groups." (F2) / "Sometimes I tremble, afraid I'll forget what to say." (F3)	Most students experienced moderate to high communication apprehension, especially in whole-class situations.
Fear of negative evaluation	"I'm afraid of mispronouncing words and being ridiculed." (F2) / "When my friends laugh, I feel embarrassed and lose focus." (F3) / "I'm not afraid of being mocked; it's fine. Everyone has strengths and weaknesses." (M1)	Fear of negative evaluation was more intense among female students, who were emotionally affected by peers' reactions.
Coping strategies	"I like to take a deep breath and pretend I don't see my friends." (F1) / "I read through it first before performing." (M1)	The most common coping strategies were relaxation (deep breathing, ignoring the audience), preparation (practicing or memorizing lines).

Table 2 demonstrates that the interview data suggest that fear of negative evaluation was experienced by many participants, although the intensity varied across individuals. Several female students reported feeling particularly embarrassed when classmates laughed at their mistakes, making them more cautious in subsequent activities. Some participants also described feeling anxious when asked to speak spontaneously, as they were afraid that any error would immediately be noticed by others. Male students, especially those in the higher achievement group, appeared less affected by peer reactions and were more concerned about teacher feedback and linguistic accuracy. These gender-related tendencies are consistent with findings from Khafidhoh et al. (2023) and Muktiningrum et al. (2024), which suggest that female learners tend to be more sensitive to social evaluation, while Mardhatilla et al. (2023) similarly found that fear of negative evaluation was the dominant

anxiety factor among female junior high school students. Overall, fear of negative evaluation operates as an important psychological barrier to speaking participation, limiting practice opportunities and ultimately affecting the development of speaking competence in the foreign language classroom (Pristiyaputri et al., 2023; Zulkiflee & Nimehchisalem, 2022).

Students' coping strategies during English learning activities

Despite experiencing anxiety during speaking activities, students employed a variety of coping strategies to manage their emotional responses and complete the assigned tasks. The most common strategies reported in the reflection responses included taking deep breaths, avoiding direct eye contact with the audience, and practicing repeatedly before performing. These behaviors suggest that many students relied primarily on basic emotional regulation and preparation techniques to reduce nervousness during speaking activities, consistent with findings from Nuraeni et al. (2023) and Sulistyaningsih et al. (2024), who identified preparation as the most frequently used coping strategy among Indonesian junior high school learners. Such strategies allowed them to regain a sense of control over their emotions, even though they did not necessarily eliminate the underlying anxiety associated with public speaking in a foreign language.

Classroom observations also revealed several behavioral indicators of these coping strategies. For example, some students were observed quietly rehearsing their sentences before being called upon to speak, while others looked down at their notes or avoided looking at their classmates while presenting. In a few cases, students spoke in noticeably softer voices or covered part of their faces while talking, which appeared to function as a protective mechanism against potential embarrassment. These observable behaviors suggest that students actively attempted to manage their anxiety in real time, even if their strategies were relatively simple and spontaneous rather than formally taught learning techniques.

The reflection responses further indicated that preparation played a particularly important role in helping students cope with anxiety. Many students mentioned that practicing their lines several times before performing helped them feel more confident and reduced the likelihood of forgetting what they wanted to say. Some participants explained that memorizing key sentences or vocabulary allowed them to focus more on delivering their speech rather than worrying about constructing sentences during the performance. This reliance on rehearsal and memorization reflects a common coping mechanism among foreign language learners who lack confidence in their spontaneous speaking abilities (Marpaung & Fithriani, 2023; Prameswari et al., 2025).

Interview data provided additional insights into how students attempted to regulate their anxiety during speaking tasks. Several participants reported reading or memorizing their dialogue before performing, which helped them feel more prepared and less afraid of making mistakes. Others described using mental strategies, such as imagining that their classmates were not present or focusing their attention on the teacher instead of the audience. These techniques appear to function as psychological distancing strategies that allow students to temporarily reduce the perceived pressure of public performance, similar to the self-reassurance and calming techniques documented by Prameswari et al. (2025) and Hidayati et al. (2022).

Interestingly, some gender-related differences in coping strategies were also observed. Male students occasionally reported using humor or joking behavior to mask their discomfort, a pattern consistent with findings from Rahman (2022) and Ali and Habib (2025), who noted that male learners tend to adopt outwardly relaxed or humorous behaviors as a mechanism to conceal internal anxiety. Female students, on the other hand, tended to rely more on internal regulation strategies, such as calming themselves, taking deep breaths, or mentally preparing before speaking, reflecting the tendency of female learners to demonstrate more overt emotional regulation responses when confronted with speaking anxiety (Pabro-Maquidato, 2021; Muktiningrum et al., 2024). These differences suggest that male and female students may adopt different emotional regulation approaches when confronted with speaking anxiety.

Teacher encouragement also emerged as an important factor in helping students cope with anxiety. Several participants noted that supportive feedback from the teacher made them feel more comfortable participating in speaking activities. In particular, students appreciated when the teacher emphasized that making mistakes is a natural part of the language learning process. Such reassurance appeared to reduce students' fear of being judged negatively and encouraged them to participate more actively in classroom discussions, supporting findings from Daflizar (2024) and Nurilahi and Suhartono (2022), who highlighted the importance of supportive teaching practices in lowering foreign language anxiety, as well as Mustamir (2024) and Tania et al. (2025), who identified teacher support and constructive feedback as key factors in reducing speaking anxiety among EFL learners.

Gendered patterns of speaking anxiety

Although both male and female students experienced speaking anxiety, the findings indicate that gender influenced how anxiety was expressed and managed rather than whether it occurred. Female students generally reported stronger emotional reactions to peer judgment, particularly in mixed-gender classroom situations. Many female participants expressed concerns about embarrassment and negative comments from male classmates, which increased their reluctance to speak publicly in front of the class. For some participants, the possibility of being laughed at or criticized by peers created a strong psychological barrier that discouraged them from volunteering answers or participating in spontaneous speaking activities.

Classroom observations appeared to support these perceptions. Female students were often more hesitant to raise their hands or initiate speaking turns during classroom discussions. When they were asked to perform in front of the class, several female students displayed visible signs of nervousness, such as lowering their voices, pausing frequently, or looking down while speaking. These behaviors suggest that social evaluation from peers plays a significant role in shaping female students' speaking participation.

Male students, on the other hand, often appeared more relaxed during speaking tasks, although observation suggested that this apparent confidence sometimes masked underlying nervousness. Some male students used humor or joking behavior to reduce tension, while others attempted to appear confident even when they struggled to express their ideas in English. In several cases, male students laughed at their own mistakes or made playful comments after mispronouncing a word, which seemed to reduce the perceived

seriousness of the error. These behaviors may function as a social strategy for managing anxiety without openly displaying vulnerability.

Achievement level also interacted with gender in shaping students' anxiety experiences. High-achieving students generally demonstrated greater confidence during speaking activities and were more likely to view these tasks as opportunities to practice their language skills. They tended to prepare more thoroughly and were less discouraged by occasional mistakes. In contrast, low-achieving students often displayed stronger physical symptoms of anxiety, including trembling, long pauses, and difficulty maintaining eye contact with the audience. These students frequently reported worrying that their limited vocabulary or pronunciation ability would lead to negative evaluation from others.

Overall, the findings indicate that speaking anxiety among junior high school EFL learners is a multidimensional phenomenon shaped by communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and coping strategies, consistent with the framework proposed by Horwitz et al. (1986). Students' anxiety mainly stemmed from fear of making mistakes, low confidence in their language abilities, and emotional discomfort when performing in front of peers. These patterns support the findings reported by Tiana et al. (2024), Wang et al. (2022), Mustamir (2024), and Budayanti et al. (2023), who also identified similar sources of anxiety among foreign language learners. At the junior high school level specifically, Marpaung and Fithriani (2023) similarly found that ninth-grade learners experienced anxiety stemming from lack of confidence, fear of mispronunciation, and lack of preparation, reinforcing the multidimensional nature of speaking anxiety at this age group.

Observable classroom behaviors, such as avoiding eye contact, lowering voices, hesitating before speaking, and covering parts of the face during presentations, reflect the characteristics of communication apprehension described by Horwitz et al. (1986). These behaviors illustrate how psychological anxiety can manifest in visible physical actions that influence students' participation in speaking activities.

Gender appeared to function as a moderating factor in how anxiety was expressed. Female students, particularly those with middle and low achievement levels, reported greater discomfort in mixed-gender classroom situations due to concerns about peer judgment. This pattern aligns with findings reported by Muktiningrum et al. (2024) and Rahman (2022), which indicate that female learners often demonstrate higher sensitivity to social evaluation in classroom interactions. These findings are further supported by Ali and Habib (2025), who found that female students experience higher anxiety driven by social pressure and the fear of being judged by others, and by Zulkiflee and Nimehchisalem (2022), who found that female students in co-educational settings reported significantly higher speaking anxiety than their male counterparts. At the junior high school level, Mardhatilla et al. (2023) similarly found that female students at an Islamic boarding school exhibited moderate anxiety, with fear of negative evaluation as the dominant factor.

In contrast, male students often appeared calmer and sometimes masked anxiety through humor or relaxed behavior. These tendencies are consistent with findings from Alamri and Qasem (2024) and Quvanch et al. (2024), who reported that male learners may adopt outwardly confident behaviors even when experiencing internal anxiety. Ali and Habib (2025) further explained this pattern through the lens of hegemonic masculinity, noting that cultural expectations discourage male students from displaying vulnerability. Mardhatilla et al. (2023) similarly found that male students at the junior high school level showed low

anxiety levels, with test anxiety rather than fear of negative evaluation as their dominant concern.

Fear of negative evaluation emerged as the strongest contributor to speaking anxiety in this study. Female students were generally more emotionally affected by peer laughter or ridicule, whereas male students were more concerned about teacher correction and academic assessment. This pattern reflects observations reported by Khafidhoh et al. (2023), Horwitz et al. (1986), and Pabro-Maquidato (2021), who emphasized the central role of social evaluation in foreign language anxiety. Okyar (2023) further identified fear of negative evaluation as a significant predictor of EFL speaking anxiety, while Pristiyaputri et al. (2023) found that female university students consistently scored higher on anxiety measures linked to negative evaluation than their male peers.

Students used several coping strategies to manage their nervousness, including taking deep breaths, avoiding eye contact, practicing beforehand, memorizing dialogue, and occasionally using humor to reduce tension. These strategies correspond with findings reported by Nugroho and Hapsari (2024), Khafidhoh et al. (2023), and Muktiningrum et al. (2024). Among Indonesian junior high school learners specifically, preparation has been identified as the most frequently used strategy, followed by relaxation and positive thinking (Nuraeni et al., 2023; Sulistyaningsih et al., 2024), while peer support and self-reassurance have also been reported as effective coping mechanisms (Prameswari et al., 2025). Some students managed anxiety by focusing on the learning process and ignoring disruptive peer behavior during speaking performances (Hidayati et al., 2022). Teacher support also played a significant role in reducing anxiety, as encouragement and reassurance helped students feel safer when participating in speaking activities. Similar results were reported by Daflizar (2024) and Nurilahi and Suhartono (2022), who highlighted the importance of supportive teaching practices in lowering foreign language anxiety.

Taken together, the findings suggest that gender influences how speaking anxiety is expressed and managed rather than whether it occurs. Both male and female students experience anxiety when speaking English, but they respond to this anxiety in different ways depending on social expectations, confidence levels, and classroom dynamics. While some studies found no significant gender difference in speaking anxiety levels (Simanungkalit & Likuayang, 2023), the present study demonstrates that gendered differences are visible in how anxiety manifests behaviorally and emotionally in the classroom. This study contributes to previous research by demonstrating that gendered patterns of speaking anxiety are already visible at the junior high school level, supporting findings from Prameswari et al. (2025), who explicitly noted the limited exploration of gender-specific anxiety factors in the Indonesian junior high school context. These results support the call for age-sensitive and context-specific analyses proposed by Tiana et al. (2024) and Daflizar (2024).

Ultimately, the findings highlight the importance of creating supportive, equitable, and gender-responsive classroom environments to promote students' participation and emotional well-being in EFL learning contexts. Teachers may help reduce speaking anxiety by encouraging respectful peer interactions, normalizing mistakes as part of the learning process, and providing opportunities for gradual exposure to speaking tasks. Such practices can help students develop greater confidence and willingness to communicate in English.

Conclusion

This study explored the experiences of junior high school students facing speaking anxiety in an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom from a gender perspective. The findings demonstrate that speaking anxiety is a complex and multidimensional phenomenon shaped by internal psychological factors, such as fear of making mistakes, low self-confidence, and emotional discomfort, and social dynamics, including peer judgment and teacher responses. While speaking anxiety affects both male and female students, its behavioral expressions differ by gender: female students show greater sensitivity to peer reactions and embarrassment, whereas male students tend to mask their anxiety through humor or outwardly relaxed behavior. Contextually, these qualitative insights enrich the literature on gendered dynamics in speaking anxiety within Indonesian junior high schools—an area where qualitative research remains limited—while emphasizing the practical necessity of creating a supportive, psychologically safe, inclusive classroom where teachers utilize communicative methods, constructive feedback, and emotional awareness to foster student confidence.

Despite these contributions, this study has two primary limitations regarding its scope and setting. First, the research focused on ninth-grade students, meaning the results may not fully capture the speaking anxiety profiles or developmental experiences of students in lower grade levels. Second, the study was conducted within an Islamic boarding school featuring gender-segregated classroom seating, which means that the findings are specific to this institutional context and may not apply to students in conventional co-educational schools. To build upon these insights, future researchers are encouraged to expand the scope and methodology of this inquiry. Subsequent studies should examine speaking anxiety across multiple grade levels and educational tiers to observe how gender differentiated anxiety evolves.

Declaration of the use of AI

The authors used ChatGPT for text refinement to enhance clarity and readability. No AI-generated content was involved in the conceptualization, data analysis, or research findings. After using this tool, the authors reviewed and edited the content as needed and take full responsibility for the final publication.

Credit authorship contribution statement

Firda Aisyah: Writing – Original draft, Visualization, Methodology, Analysis, Conceptualization. Fela Dafitri: Writing – Review and editing, Investigation, Formal analysis.

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Declaration of competing interests

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Ethics approval and consent to participate

The authors declare that the research was conducted in accordance with the code of ethics of the Institute for Research and Community Services, Universitas Singaperbangsa Karawang, Indonesia. The participants were informed about the objectives of the research and agreed to participate. All personal data were anonymized.

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