

## Exploring EFL speaking anxiety among junior high school students: Levels, contributing factors, and coping strategies

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### ABSTRACT

While numerous studies have examined foreign language speaking anxiety at the university setting, research focusing on younger learners remains limited. This study addresses that gap by exploring the triggers and coping strategies to mitigate foreign language speaking anxiety among junior high school students. Exploring these two areas provides the avenue for wider opportunities of reaching higher proficiency levels at later stages, while allowing the identification of age- and gender-supportive coping strategies. Employing a mixed-method design, data were gleaned from questionnaires and semi-structured interviews involving six students—three male and three female—recruited after pondering their high rate of anxiety as measured by the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS). A content analysis revealed seven primary causes of anxiety: lack of vocabulary, performing in front of the class, fear of being laughed at, fear of making mistakes, fear of mispronouncing a word, fear of being the focus of attention, and fear of failure in English tests. Students adopted various coping strategies, including self-reassurance, calming techniques, and peer support. These findings highlight the need for teachers to recognize anxiety symptoms and implement fun and supportive strategies in the classroom. This study seeks to facilitate the students in overcoming and reducing the English-speaking anxiety they experienced during classroom practice. Due to the absence of in-depth investigation on the strategies to address anxiety, future researchers are advised to investigate the strategies that students engage in regulating their foreign language speaking anxiety and identify the coping mechanisms found most impactful in reducing anxiety levels.

**Keywords:** coping strategies; EFL classroom; foreign language speaking anxiety; junior high school students

| First Received:              | Revised:                       | Accepted:                      | Published:                     |
|------------------------------|--------------------------------|--------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| July 13 <sup>th</sup> , 2025 | August 19 <sup>th</sup> , 2025 | August 19 <sup>th</sup> , 2025 | August 29 <sup>th</sup> , 2025 |

### How to cite (in APA style):

Prameswari, N. P., Wahjuningsih, E., Imamyartha, D., & Puspa, A. (2025). Exploring EFL speaking anxiety among junior high school students: Levels, contributing factors, and coping strategies. *Journal of Research on English and Language Learning (J-REaLL)*, 6(2), 300–316. <https://doi.org/10.33474/j-reall.v6i2.23989>

## INTRODUCTION

Speaking anxiety is a widespread challenge to learning English, particularly in Indonesia, where anxiety about speaking in English prevails among learners. Horwitz (2001) differentiates between trait anxiety and state anxiety. The former is concerned with a person's common feeling of anxiety across various situations, making it a part of one's personality. In comparison, state anxiety is situation-specific and

temporary—foreign language speaking anxiety falls into this category (Suleimenova, 2013). It refers to the discomfort that students feel when speaking in an EFL class and is often indicative of physical and verbal signs such as stammering, fidgeting, or repeating words.

Horwitz et al. (1986) argue that learners of English commonly encounter three major elements of foreign language anxiety, which include fear of negative evaluation, test anxiety, and communication apprehension. The anxiety driven by negative evaluation stems from the concern about being judged by their peers or teachers (Shalehah & Rahmawati, 2025). Test anxiety involves the worry over classroom assessments, which can cause even well-prepared students to underperform. Furthermore, communication apprehension is the fear or discomfort that emerges during interactions with others, particularly in speaking situations. These have been reported to severely affect student confidence and participation prior to speaking tasks.

Among the various factors inducing language anxiety, gender has been widely acknowledged to be a significant determinant in the literature, though findings to date remain inconclusive. For example, Campbell and Shaw (1994), in a study at the Defense Language Institute in the U.S., found that male students experienced more intense levels of language anxiety as a result of academic pressure. However, more recent studies suggest the opposite. Ozturk and Gurbuz (2012) in Turkey, and Gerencheal (2016) in Ethiopia, have also reported that female students experienced more intensified speaking anxiety, primarily stemming from negative evaluation and low self-confidence. Similarly, Park and French (2013) reported the inclination to avoid social interaction among Korean female students in English learning contexts due to cultural and social norms. Karatas et al. (2016) also further emphasized that gender significantly determines speaking anxiety, noting that female students generally feel more affected.

Although these findings are documented across diverse EFL settings, not all studies agree. For example, Alamri and Qasem (2024), researching Saudi undergraduate students, affirmed no significant gender difference in speaking anxiety. These contrasting findings imply the need for further investigation, particularly in contexts like Indonesia, where inquiries into this topic remain sparse. Most prior studies have focused on university or high school students. However, research at the junior high school level is still scarce, even though this age group is undergoing important emotional and social development stages that can adversely affect the language learning process and eventually achievement. Additionally, only a few studies have explored the specific factors behind speaking anxiety between genders in the Indonesian context. This gap highlights the urgency for more localized and age-appropriate research. Therefore, the present study seeks to address the following questions:

1. Is there any significant difference in the extent of speaking anxiety between male and female students in junior high school?
2. What are the factors in English-speaking anxiety experienced by both male and female students in Indonesia? And what coping strategies do these students engage in?

By answering this question, this research aims to gain a fine-cut understanding of gender-specific speaking anxiety among young EFL learners and offer insights for more responsive teaching strategies.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### *Foreign language speaking anxiety and its factors*

Anxiety in the context of language learning pertains to the feelings of nervousness, fear, or worry that a student experiences. Generally, this is accompanied by physiological symptoms (Horwitz et al., 1986). Horwitz (2001) categorized anxiety into trait anxiety and state anxiety.

1. Trait anxiety is concerned with a stable personality trait, where individuals feel anxious across diverse situations as a result of their disposition.
2. State anxiety, in contrast, occurs only in specific contexts and is temporary. One form of state anxiety is foreign language anxiety. This anxiety emerges specifically during the process of learning or using a foreign language.

Tran and Moni (2015) point out that foreign language anxiety refers to the uneasiness that emerges when students learn to use a foreign language. Rajitha and Alamelu (2020) further clarified that foreign language speaking anxiety is accompanied by discomfort, nervousness, or fear when learners are required to engage in a spoken interaction mediated by a foreign language. These feelings, in large part, vary depending on individual psychological conditions, physical responses, and learning contexts. Several factors contribute to this anxiety, which can encompass fear of making mistakes, the dearth of vocabulary and pronunciation skills, low confidence, limited exposure to English in daily life, and unfamiliarity with speaking in front of others. Woodrow (2006) emphasized that speaking anxiety negatively affects students' language performance both inside and outside the classroom walls. Tanveer (2007) acknowledged this claim, noting that learners often feel anxious in real-life situations, particularly when required to use English communicatively.

Riasati (2018) observed that the majority of students hesitate to engage actively in classroom discussions because of their low speaking ability. Similarly, Liu (2007) found that students hesitate to speak because of the lack of sufficient vocabulary and limited practice. Suleimenova (2013) also found that many students fear being called on unexpectedly or being laughed at by their peers when they cannot answer questions, substantially declining their confidence and efficacy. Another prominent trigger of anxiety is performing in front of the class, such as giving presentations. Woodrow (2006), Al-Saraj (2014), and Aslan and Thompson (2018) corroborated those anxious students often forget what they have learned when asked to speak, making it difficult for them to respond effectively in class. Horwitz et al. (1986) highlighted three main triggers of foreign language anxiety:

1. Communication Apprehension – Anxiety or fear when trying to communicate with others. Students with this anxiety avoid speaking and feel embarrassed when interacting, especially in front of a group.
2. Test Anxiety – Anxiety linked to the fear of failure during exams or quizzes. Even well-prepared students may struggle under pressure.
3. Fear of Negative Evaluation – Worry that others (peers or teachers) will judge their language performance harshly, which can discourage students from speaking up.

Foreign language speaking anxiety manifests as a widely reported emotional challenge in EFL learning that stems from both internal and external factors. It is considered a form of state anxiety, situational, and initiated by the learning environment. The key drivers of anxiety include communication apprehension, test-related fear, and worry about being judged negatively. These anxieties can hinder language learning and student participation. As a corollary, understanding and addressing these issues is pivotal to fostering a more inviting as well as supportive language learning environment.

### ***Prior works on gender differences and speaking anxiety***

Several scholars have explored how gender influences foreign language speaking anxiety (FLSA), yet the results remain inconclusive. As Razak et al. (2017) pointed out, gender-related speaking anxiety is still a controversial issue, with research findings often reporting contrasting results. In their study involving 155 Yemeni university EFL students, they found that female students showed slightly more intense anxiety levels than males. Notwithstanding, the difference was not noteworthy from a statistical viewpoint, possibly due to the unequal sample sizes and the higher number of female participants. This may have allowed them to act more naturally in the classroom. The higher anxiety among females was also linked to shyness, instead of actual language ability.

In contrast, Debreli (2016) investigated speaking anxiety in 196 Turkish Cypriot EFL students and found no significant gender difference. Interestingly, the study also discovered that students with more advanced language proficiency suffered from more intense anxiety, possibly due to greater self-expectations and pressure to perform at the required level of proficiency. Additional sources of anxiety included not understanding questions, speaking in front of the class, lack of preparation, receiving unexpected questions, and pronunciation difficulties.

Other studies, however, have shown a stark contrast in anxiety levels between males and females, with females often experiencing higher levels of FLSA. For example, [Gerencheal \(2016\)](#) examined gender differences among third-year English students at Mizan-Tepi University in Ethiopia. Employing the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS), she reported higher rates of anxiety in female students, compared to males. Cultural expectations and gender stereotypes, which often discourage active participation from females in Ethiopian classrooms, were suggested as possible reasons.

Supporting this, [Stawiarska \(2014\)](#) conducted research at a public university in Poland and discovered higher anxiety among female students compared to male students, particularly when delivering presentations, performing role-plays, or even taking part in small-group discussions. She noted that small group interactions were not perceived as “safe” by female students, as they felt more pressure speaking to several people at once. A similar pattern was reported by [Ezzi \(2012\)](#) at Hodeidah University in Yemen, where female students exhibited more substantial rates of anxiety in comparison to their male counterparts. The study affirmed that gender plays a pivotal role in determining students’ experiences with language anxiety.

Additionally, [Mahmoodzadeh \(2013\)](#) investigated how classroom gender composition affects FLSA in Iran. Involving 96 lower-intermediate learners, the study revealed that students in mixed-gender classrooms experienced more anxiety than those in same-gender settings. This was attributed to cultural and religious norms, which can make speaking in front of the opposite sex uncomfortable or inappropriate, adding further emotional pressure.

Overall, the findings across various contexts suggest that gender can influence foreign language speaking anxiety, but the direction and strength of that influence may vary based on cultural norms, classroom dynamics, and learners’ backgrounds. While some studies report no significant difference, many others highlight that female students tend to be more anxious, often due to fear of negative evaluation, societal expectations, and classroom interaction settings.

These inconclusive reports point to the urgency for further research, particularly in underrepresented contexts like Indonesia. There is still limited investigation into how gender influences speaking anxiety among Indonesian EFL learners, especially at the junior high school level. Therefore, exploring this issue in local settings is essential to better understand the specific cultural, psychological, and educational factors that contribute to FLSA among male and female learners.

## METHODS

### *Research setting and participants*

This research employed descriptive research with a survey and semi-structured interview methods. [Creswell \(2014\)](#) stated that descriptive research aims to describe a phenomenon systematically, in detail, and accurately. The survey served as a quantitative tool to gather broad insights into students’ anxiety levels. Meanwhile, semi-structured interviews allowed in-depth exploration of students’ experiences, emotions, and perceptions of their speaking anxiety.

The study was carried out at a junior high school in Jember, East Java, with around 758 students across grades 7 to 9, each class averaging 33 students. English lessons lasted 45 minutes, using textbooks, videos, and digital platforms like Quizizz and Google Forms for learning and assessment. The teacher emphasized speaking skills, encouraging students to use English confidently in daily interactions, including classroom agreements requiring English for simple requests.

The researchers selected the class purposively by asking the English teacher which class had the most difficulty speaking English. There were 34 students in one seven-grade class chosen purposively. Prior to the research commencement, the researchers described the research purpose and procedure to the teacher and students, after which a formal research permit was issued by the school. The Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS), developed by [Horwitz et al. \(1986\)](#), was employed to select the participants. The instrument serves to assess students’ anxiety levels associated with foreign language learning in an EFL classroom context. By employing the FLCAS, we were able to

systematically investigate the degree and severity of foreign language anxiety among the participating students.

### ***Data collection***

We conducted interviews with 6 students who demonstrated high anxiety rates as proven by their FLCAS scores. This delved into the triggers and coping mechanisms to mitigate foreign language speaking anxiety via a semi-structured interview. This interview helped the researchers to dig deeper into insights and explore participants' answers regarding the drivers of foreign language speaking anxiety and its associated mitigation mechanisms. We adapted [Tanveer's \(2007\)](#) interview guideline to explore male and female students' foreign language speaking anxiety in junior high school. The interview guideline focused on exploring the factors that cause language anxiety in ESL/EFL students in greater depth, especially in the domain of spoken communication. These interviews were carried out in Bahasa Indonesia to ensure clarity at school during break time. The interview was recorded following the participant's consent. After that, the researchers transcribed the recordings using verbatim transcription to capture every detail of the conversation.

### ***Data analysis***

Upon data analysis, we operationalized content analysis to analyze the interview results. Content analysis, according to [Lune and Berg \(2007\)](#), involves multiple steps, beginning with collecting data to be analyzed. Second, creating relevant categories or themes to organize the data. Coding each unit of analysis according to predetermined categories. Third, arranging interrelated categories based on findings from the data. Fourth, analyzing data by identifying patterns or relationships between categories that emerge from the data. Fifth, interpreting the analysis results to understand the meaning and implications of the findings. Sixth, drawing conclusions based on the analysis results. We kept all of the records of data coding to allow an audit trail, enabling us to revisit the data multiple times to ensure accurate and consistent analysis. Peer debriefing was carried out after each interview data had been analyzed.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

### ***Findings from the questionnaire***

We developed and administered a questionnaire involving 33 items of FLCAS by [Horwitz et al. \(1986\)](#) to measure the foreign language speaking anxiety of 34 students in a class selected purposively. The lowest possible score is 33 if students give 1 point to each item, and the highest possible score is 165 if students give 5 points to each item. Descriptive statistics were employed to measure the students' speaking anxiety.

**Table 1**

*Frequencies and Percentages of Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety*

| Anxiety Levels | Frequency | Valid Percentage | Cumulative Percentage |
|----------------|-----------|------------------|-----------------------|
| Low            | 1         | 2.9              | 2.9                   |
| Moderate       | 17        | 50.0             | 52.9                  |
| High           | 16        | 47.1             | 100                   |
| Total          | 34        | 100              |                       |

[Table 1](#) indicates that, overall, the students experienced a moderate level of foreign language speaking anxiety. Specifically, the results show that 50% of the students obtained scores ranging from 90 to 108, reflecting a moderate degree of speaking anxiety in a foreign language context. Seventeen students experienced moderate foreign language speaking anxiety. Meanwhile, 47.1 % of them (16 students) scored higher than 109, which underscores a high level of foreign language speaking

anxiety. In addition, 2.9 % of them (1 student) scored less than 89, corresponding to a low level of foreign language speaking anxiety.

Furthermore, to examine the presence of a significant difference between male and female students related to the foreign language speaking anxiety, we administered a normality test first to determine if the data distribution was normal between the 2 genders. Thus, further analysis can be carried out related to differences between males and females in foreign language speaking anxiety. Based on the normality test results, a  $p$ -value = 0.027 was found in the male students, noting a non-normal data distribution. Consequently, the Mann-Whitney U test was employed to determine whether there was a significant difference in foreign language speaking anxiety between male and female students, with the results presented in Table 2.

**Table 2**

*Mann-Whitney U Test on Anxiety Score*

| Gender | N  | Mean Rank | Sum of Ranks | Mann-Whitney U | Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed) |
|--------|----|-----------|--------------|----------------|------------------------|
| Male   | 18 | 11.81     | 212.50       | 41.500         | 0.000                  |
| Female | 16 | 23.91     | 382.50       |                |                        |

The test results exhibit that female students have a higher level of foreign language speaking anxiety than male students. This is indicated by the mean rank value of female students (23.91), which was higher than male students (11.81). This result indicates that female students are more anxious than male students. Asymp. Sig. = 0.000 (the  $p$ -value < 0.05) marks a significant difference in terms of foreign language speaking anxiety between male and female students. Subsequently, the researchers compared the three main components of foreign language speaking anxiety experienced by male and female students. Table 3 shows the means of speaking anxiety between genders with respect to the three main components of foreign language speaking anxiety.

**Table 3**

*Main Components of Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety*

| Factors of Speaking Anxiety | Gender | N  | Mean Rank | Sum of Ranks | Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed) |
|-----------------------------|--------|----|-----------|--------------|------------------------|
| Communication Apprehension  | Male   | 18 | 12.47     | 224.50       | .002                   |
|                             | Female | 16 | 23.16     | 370.50       |                        |
|                             | Total  | 34 |           |              |                        |
| Test Anxiety                | Male   | 18 | 14.58     | 262.50       | .069                   |
|                             | Female | 16 | 20.78     | 332.50       |                        |
|                             | Total  | 34 |           |              |                        |
| Fear of Negative Evaluation | Male   | 18 | 10.72     | 193.00       | .000                   |
|                             | Female | 16 | 25.13     | 402.00       |                        |
|                             | Total  | 34 |           |              |                        |

Table 3 above reports the average scores of communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation, 23.16, 20.78, and 25.13 (for female students), respectively. In contrast, male students reported anxiety scores of 12.47, 14.58, and 10.72 in the same factors aforementioned. Seeking whether the difference between males and females is noteworthy, we checked the Asymp. Sig, noting that only communication apprehension and fear of negative evaluation are found to vary significantly. This is indicative of confidence intervals 0.002 and 0.000 ( $p < 0.005$ ) for both components. Nevertheless, no noteworthy difference is identified in the test anxiety component, confirmed by  $p = 0.069$  ( $p > 0.005$ ).

***Findings from the interview***

To explore the factors of students' foreign language speaking anxiety more deeply, six students who reported high rates of speaking anxiety were interviewed. Underneath are the anxiety levels of students taking part in our interview, with their pseudonyms.

**Table 4***List of Interviewed Students' High Levels*

| Pseudonym | Total Anxiety Score | Anxiety Level |
|-----------|---------------------|---------------|
| Ayu       | 140                 | High          |
| Rina      | 134                 | High          |
| Sari      | 133                 | High          |
| Budi      | 128                 | High          |
| Dika      | 125                 | High          |
| Rafi      | 110                 | High          |

Moreover, the researchers adapted [Tanveer's \(2007\)](#) interview guideline to explore junior high school male and female students' foreign language speaking anxiety. We reported the students' reviews according to the interview questions. Unique responses are included below, excluding similar responses to ensure alignment with the word limit required by the journal.

**Table 5***Question 1: How long have you been learning to speak English? How do you feel about your experience of learning to speak English?*

| Interviewee | Answers                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
|-------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Rina        | "I have been learning English since the 6th grade, so it has been about 2 years since I learned English. I find it difficult, don't understand, and even anxious when learning to speak English."                                                                            |
| Sari        | "I started learning English in junior high school. I never learned English in elementary school because there were no English lessons at my school. I felt nervous when learning English because it was my first time. I also felt scared because I couldn't speak English." |
| Budi        | "I have been learning English since grade 1 until now it has been approximately 8 years. I was a bit anxious and nervous while learning English and being asked to read a text in front of the class."                                                                       |
| Rafi        | "I have had English lessons from the 6th grade until now, so it's been about 3 years learning English. I find it difficult and nervous while learning English."                                                                                                              |

From the first question, we can see that students have spent different amounts of time learning English. Some have been learning English since elementary school, while others only started when they were in junior high school. With these different lengths of study, students must also have diverse experiences related to learning English. There are some students who feel that learning English is very enjoyable. However, it cannot be denied that most of them also find it difficult when they have to speak English. Despite their length of learning experiences, some affirm that they experience anxiety, fear, and nervousness when learning English. Following this question, the interviewer went on to probe into the causes of their speaking anxiety.

**Table 6***Question 2: What disturbs you the most about speaking English?*

| Interviewee | Answers                                                                                                                                                      |
|-------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Sari        | "When the teacher asked me to present something. Also, when I come forward and am given the task of reading a text and recording it using a voice recorder," |

| Interviewee | Answers                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
|-------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Budi        | "English vocabulary is a bit difficult to pronounce. What bothers me the most is when I have to come forward in the class."                                                                                                        |
| Dika        | "There are complicated and difficult-to-read vocabularies. Sometimes I don't know how to read a full sentence in English."                                                                                                         |
| Ayu         | "It's easy, but I often have difficulty when I have to do a presentation in front of the class in English."                                                                                                                        |
| Budi        | "Learning English has its easy and difficult sides. The difficulty is when I'm asked to do a presentation individually in front of the class. I feel embarrassed, nervous, and afraid of making mistakes during the presentation." |
| Dika        | "It's a bit difficult. The difficulty is when I'm asked to come forward to do a presentation and read aloud an English story in a book."                                                                                           |
| Rafi        | "Learning English makes me feel difficult and nervous. What makes it difficult is when I'm asked to do a presentation or when I'm given a task of reading a story and being recorded."                                             |

Reported in Table 6, the interview data portray a general tendency among the students to feel difficulty in engaging in spoken communication. The difficulties encompass the challenges to delivering presentations in front of the class, making English content videos, and reading texts out loud. Another concern they highlight is that they are afraid of making mistakes during the presentation. Most students voiced that a lack of vocabulary is a major issue that compounds the challenges to speaking tasks. In addition, pronouncing the words correctly also comes into play. This partly accounts for why presentations and reading texts are found laborious by the students. In the following table, we report the students' views on situations in which stress or anxiety emerges.

**Table 7**

*Question 3: What kinds of situations cause more stress or anxiety for you?*

| Interviewee | Answers                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
|-------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Ayu         | "For example, when I am asked to do a presentation in front of the class, I am afraid of making mistakes that will eventually be laughed at by my friends. Sometimes, my friends also underestimate me when I make mistakes." |
| Rina        | "When I have to come forward in front of the class, I am embarrassed to be seen by many people. I am also anxious and afraid of making mistakes and being laughed at by my friends."                                          |
| Sari        | "When I have to do a presentation in English. For example, I was once assigned to create a cooking tutorial. From the opening, the content, to the closing, it had to be in English."                                         |
| Dika        | "When I had to do a presentation in front of the class, I felt anxious and nervous. Especially if there were friends who laughed at me."                                                                                      |
| Rafi        | "When I had to do a presentation or read the text individually and practice making something in groups, I felt anxious because I had to explain in English."                                                                  |

Situations that make students anxious include giving presentations in front of the class. They admit to being afraid of making mistakes during presentations and being laughed at by their friends. Students admit to being anxious because they have to explain something in front of the class in English. Being the center of attention also sparked substantial anxiety, and many pairs of eyes were on them. The data from questions 3 and 4 acknowledge that speaking tasks, especially those performed in front of the class, exert substantial anxiety on the students. Following these questions on anxiety-inducing situations, we delved into what students did during these anxiety-triggering moments.

**Table 8**

*Question 4: What happens to you when you are in a stressful situation while speaking English? What do you do in these kinds of situations?*

| Interviewee | Answers                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |
|-------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Ayu         | "I feel nervous. However, usually, even though I'm nervous, I try to be normal. Try to be quiet for a moment, then continue the presentation."                                                                                       |
| Rina        | "I calm myself down and motivate myself, so I can do it."                                                                                                                                                                            |
| Sari        | "When I'm in a situation that makes me anxious, I often share stories with my friends. After I tell the story, my friends can calm me down. It can reduce my anxiety."                                                               |
| Budi        | "Even though I feel anxious and nervous when I am asked to do a presentation in front of the class, I still dare to go forward. I calm myself down during the presentation by reading the text slowly and not in a hurry."           |
| Dika        | "I stutter when reading the text in front of the class because I feel anxious and nervous. However, I try to calm myself down by learning to understand the meaning of vocabulary by translating difficult words using a cellphone." |

Table 8 above demonstrates that usually, in situations that make students anxious, they try to calm themselves down and try to be more confident. They also dare to go forward to present in front of the class despite the high amount of anxiety. They always try to motivate themselves so that they can do it. One student admitted that by sharing his feelings with his friends, he could reduce the anxiety he was experiencing.

**Table 9**

*Question 5: In which kinds of situations do you not feel anxiety or feel less anxiety while speaking English?*

| Interviewee | Answers                                                                                                                                                                              |
|-------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Ayu         | "For example, during the presentation, all my friends were quiet and paid close attention without laughing at me."                                                                   |
| Rina        | "A quiet situation, when my friends are not in the class, and all of them wait outside. Then, we were called by the teacher to present the text one by one in front of the teacher." |
| Sari        | "A situation that makes me not anxious is when playing games in English lessons. So, my anxiety decreases when learning English using games."                                        |
| Budi        | "My anxiety decreases when the teacher assigns me to read the text from my seat without going to the front of the class. And also, when doing assignments or quizzes via cellphone." |
| Dika        | "A situation that makes me not or less anxious is when I am not asked to go in front of the class. Also, I can open my cellphone to translate difficult words."                      |
| Rafi        | "When doing assignments in books independently, and not asked to present or read texts in front of the class."                                                                       |

Students felt their anxiety reduced when the teacher used games as a medium for learning English. Students also admitted that working on assignments individually at their desks without having to do presentations was a situation where they were not or less anxious. These moments are associated with a safe zone where students do not feel the pressure of performing well under the scrutiny of their peers. The absence of demand for stage performance, be it simply reading aloud or speaking, is identified as a key factor in nullifying the students' anxiety. Afterward, we asked them whether they experienced the fear of committing mistakes during their spoken performance in English.

**Table 10**

*Question 6: Are you afraid of making errors while speaking English? How do you think people will react if you make mistakes?*

| Interviewee | Answers                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
|-------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Ayu         | "I'm afraid of making mistakes in speaking English. I'm afraid my answer will be wrong. My friends' reactions will be laughing, even belittling and bullying me. The teacher's reaction is usually to correct my wrong answer."                                            |
| Sari        | "Afraid... I'm afraid of making mistakes when speaking English, and of course, I'm embarrassed if I make a mistake. Because I'm not very fluent in English. My friends will laugh at me, but the teacher usually immediately corrects me or calls me to be taught better." |
| Budi        | "Sometimes I'm afraid, sometimes I'm not. I'm afraid that when I read the English text wrongly, I stutter when reading a text. My friends will definitely laugh and make fun of me. If my teacher's reaction is okay, I'm told to fix it again."                           |
| Dika        | "I feel anxious about speaking English, and I'm afraid of making mistakes when speaking English. My friends' reactions are usually laughing because I made a mistake. The teacher's reaction is asking me to repeat the wrong word to make it perfect."                    |

Again, all of the participants admitted unbearable fear of committing mistakes when they had to go to the front of the class and deliver a presentation or read a text. They were afraid of being judged negatively by their friends. This is particularly the case when they assume that their friends would laugh at them if they made a mistake. In addition to laughing, their friends occasionally belittled and made fun of them. To a large extent, these responses made explicit why the students voiced a tremendous amount of anxiety when the need to perform in front of their peers arose. Following the inquiry on peer influence on the speaking anxiety, we inquired about the students' views on the teacher's role in addressing the anxiety.

**Table 11**

*Question 7: How do you think your English teacher plays a role in reducing speaking anxiety in the classroom?*

| Interviewee | Answers                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
|-------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Ayu         | "If there's something that can reduce my anxiety, it's when the teacher corrects my answers or my wrong pronunciation. I like it when the teacher calls me personally and teaches me about my mistakes that need to be corrected. " |
| Rina        | "The teacher's role in reducing my anxiety is that the teacher always gives positive affirmation and motivation when I make a mistake."                                                                                             |
| Sari        | " The teacher's role in reducing anxiety when using games for learning. I feel less anxious when learning to speak English using games."                                                                                            |
| Budi        | "The teacher's role in reducing my anxiety is like giving me easy-to-do questions and always encouraging me."                                                                                                                       |
| Dika        | "When the teacher allows me to open my cellphone or understand the text in the book independently, it reduces my anxiety."                                                                                                          |
| Rafi        | "When the teacher assigned me to answer the questions in the textbook, I felt less anxious because I did not need to come forward in front of the classroom."                                                                       |

From question number 7, it can be seen that teachers also play a role in creating and reducing students' anxiety. Students admitted that if teachers continue to provide positive affirmations even though students make mistakes, then students can reduce their anxiety. The teacher usually anticipated the speaking anxiety by assigning simple comprehension tasks or simply reading texts individually. Having the freedom to resort to a mobile device for seeking help is also known to be helpful in mitigating anxiety. On the contrary, as confirmed, when teachers asked them to present in front of the class, anxiety instantly rose. Although the factors driving student speaking anxiety were rather complex, encompassing not only linguistic but also social determinants, students remained confident that these issues can be addressed mainly through psychological measures.

**Table 12***Question 8: What would you like to suggest to reduce speaking anxiety in the learners?*

| Interviewee | Answers                                                                                                                         |
|-------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Ayu         | "Never make fun of friends who make mistakes during presentations, because we are all learning, so we must respect each other." |
| Rina        | "Don't think too much about it. We can learn to speak English well and correctly."                                              |
| Sari        | "Don't overthink and worry too much, because later you can immediately go blank and forget everything you have learned."        |
| Budi        | "Don't be too hasty in reading English texts to minimize mistakes. Stay enthusiastic about learning English."                   |
| Dika        | "We must keep trying and doing assignments even though they are difficult."                                                     |
| Rafi        | "Stay confident, and try to calm yourself down when you feel anxious. Keep the spirit about learning English."                  |

These students held a strong belief in the importance of building on their confidence and positive mindset when experiencing speaking anxiety. They believed that doing so would aid in mitigating the anxiety and thus help them to stay calm prior to a speaking performance. Another suggestion they highlighted was concerned with the growth mindset. While the linguistic and social factors in speaking anxiety were deemed strongly influential, these students had faith in their ability to develop, noting that they would eventually be able to nullify the anxiety and achieve satisfactory performance. Finally, they emphasized the importance of co-constructing a respectful environment where making mistakes is treated as a part of learning and support is encouraged to support one another, rather than ridiculing their peers. These findings underscore the recognition of psychological strategies in spheres of language learning and emphasize the perceived values of building a positive mindset, self-regulation, and peer support pivotal for managing speaking anxiety.

Based on student perspectives, several interrelated factors contribute to their English-speaking anxiety in the classroom. The most prominent issue is a lack of vocabulary, which all participants identified as a primary source of their anxiety. Students reported that unfamiliar or difficult vocabulary led to uncertainty in both understanding and pronunciation, gradually lowering their confidence. This challenge is closely tied to another major anxiety trigger: performing in front of the class. Students mentioned heightened fear when asked to speak or present publicly, largely stemming from their perceived low English proficiency, which made them fear making mistakes.

Fear of making mistakes emerged as a critical factor that compounded their anxiety. Students were not only worried about being incorrect but also about the potential social consequences, specifically, being laughed at by peers. This social pressure amplified their reluctance to participate. Additionally, many students reported discomfort with being the center of attention, feeling exposed, and overwhelmed when all eyes were on them during presentations or simply reading aloud. Fear of mispronunciation further exacerbated their anxiety, especially when reading aloud or delivering prepared texts, due to their unfamiliarity with English phonetics. Lastly, anxiety around English language tests was also commonly reported.

Despite these challenges, students also described coping strategies to manage their anxiety. Most commonly, they mentioned taking a moment to calm themselves before continuing a presentation. Positive self-talk—reminding themselves that everything would be fine and encouraging self-confidence—was another recurring strategy. Peer support also played a valuable role; discussing anxiety with classmates helped students feel less isolated and fostered a supportive classroom environment. These findings suggest that student anxiety stems not only from linguistic factors but also from emotional and social concerns. Issues surrounding potential social consequences reinforce the importance of classroom strategies that build confidence, peer support, and language competence simultaneously.

## DISCUSSIONS

### *Higher levels of speaking anxiety and triggering factors among female students*

To measure students' foreign language speaking anxiety levels, this study used the FLCAS questionnaire by Horwitz et al. (1986), consisting of 33 items. Since the questionnaire was a 5-point Likert scale, the total score ranged from 33 to 165. A total score of more than 109 demonstrates a high level of foreign language speaking anxiety, while a total score ranging from 90-108 indicates a moderate level of foreign language speaking anxiety, and a total score less than 89 indicates a low level of foreign language speaking anxiety (Alshahrani & Alandal, 2015).

The descriptive statistics have shown that 50% (17 students) of the total number of students experience foreign language speaking anxiety at a moderate level. 47.1% (16 students) experienced high levels of anxiety, and 2.9% (1 student) experienced low levels of anxiety. This is in line with research conducted by Gerencheal (2016), who found that most students experienced a moderate level of anxiety. Alnahidh and Atalhab (2020) also found that participants in their study were moderately anxious about speaking in an EFL class. However, some studies also reported that students experience high anxiety. Liu and Jackson (2008) found that many Chinese students experience high English-speaking anxiety. This greatly affects students' participation and willingness to speak English in class. In the same vein, Arabai (2014) also documented high anxiety among EFL learners, significantly inducing negative impacts on their spoken performance.

Moving forward, we also sought any significant difference between male and female students in terms of foreign language speaking anxiety. Using the Mann-Whitney U Test, we discovered that female students generally experienced a higher rate of speaking anxiety than their male counterparts, as evinced by their mean ranks of 23.91 and 11.81, respectively. Likewise, the mean score among the female students is found to be higher, 95.40, compared to males, reaching only 89.33. The test further affirmed this difference to be significant, with a  $p$ -value  $< 0.005$ , reinforcing the significant difference between male and female students in foreign language speaking anxiety, noting that gender differences play a role in speaking anxiety.

This research is supported by other findings. For example, Razak et al. (2017) found that female students experienced higher anxiety than male students ( $M=139.782$  for female students and  $M=135.735$  for male students). Similarly, Ezzi (2012) found that female students were more anxious than male students. Similar trends, noting high anxiety among female learners, were also reported by Stawiarska (2014), especially in the case of being under the demand of speaking in front of the class. Gerencheal (2016) found similar results that the two groups (females and males) had significant differences in their levels of English classroom anxiety, where female students experienced higher anxiety than male students. However, it should be noted that other researchers found conflicting findings. For example, Razak et al. (2017) found no significant difference between male and female students in terms of English-speaking anxiety, as evinced by  $p=0.228$ .

Delving into the causes of students' speaking anxiety, the researchers administer further analysis on the three pre-determined factors to the anxiety, *inter alia*, communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation (Horwitz et al., 1986). We put the differences between male and female students in these three respects under analysis of variance. Again, our findings reassured that female students expressed higher anxiety than their counterparts in each of the main anxiety factors. We only found significant differences between male and female students in communication apprehension ( $p$ -value  $< 0.005$ ) and fear of negative evaluation ( $p$ -value  $< 0.005$ ). Nevertheless, we found no significant difference between genders in test anxiety ( $p$ -value  $> 0.005$ ). These findings largely indicate that gender plays a role in students' foreign language speaking anxiety, particularly triggering communication apprehension and fear of negative evaluation. This coheres with Gerencheal (2016), who also found that female students have higher anxiety levels than male students in each of the main anxiety factors.

### ***Multifaceted factors in speaking anxiety and students' coping strategies***

The findings revealed that several factors may contribute to foreign language speaking anxiety among male and female junior high school students in Indonesia. Our interviews discovered the multifaceted nature of speaking anxiety among junior high school students, encompassing linguistic and social factors. In response, the students also voiced the importance of coping strategies in these two dimensions. They uphold the belief that these anxiety issues can be addressed and nullified through practices and a positive mindset, within a respectful environment jointly constructed between students and teachers.

One of the primary contributors to students' speaking anxiety is a limited vocabulary repertoire, which directly undermines their confidence in using English orally. Many students expressed frustration over their inability to recall or pronounce English words accurately, describing English vocabulary as "complicated and difficult to read." As Dika put it, "There are complicated and difficult-to-read vocabularies. Sometimes I don't know how to read a full sentence in English." This demonstrates both linguistic gaps and psychological hurdles can spark fear of mispronunciation, which eventually discourages attempts at speaking tasks. This evidence confirms [Liu's \(2007\)](#) claim, highlighting that limited vocabulary repertoires intensify the anxiety in speaking tasks among EFL learners. Resonating with [Shalehah and Rahmawati \(2025\)](#), our study affirms that the students find these linguistic and psychological barriers inaccessible and intimidating, subsequently perpetuating a cycle of avoidance and low self-esteem in oral communication.

The findings further highlight the anxiety-inducing nature of performing in front of peers. The students agreed that they are afraid of delivering a speaking presentation or reading a text in front of their peers. This supports a previous study noting that speaking anxiety can arise even prior to performing in front of the class ([Woodrow, 2006](#)). Being the center of attention during presentations elevates students' fear of making mistakes. They express that this fear substantially leads to feelings of embarrassment and nervousness. As Rina mentioned, "I find it difficult when I'm assigned to do a presentation in front of the class," while in resonance, Budi echoed, "The difficulty is when I'm assigned to do a presentation individually in front of the class. I feel embarrassed, nervous, and afraid of making mistakes during the presentation." These highlight how performance-based tasks can exert high levels of anxiety, which can be seriously discouraging, especially among students who already struggle with language proficiency. This has been confirmed by another study in an Ethiopian setting ([Firissa & Gebremariam, 2024](#)), which confirms anxiety as a construct not merely associated with speaking but also with the public nature of speaking-finding evident in our study. Our findings further exhibit that linguistically demanding tasks coupled with potentially intimidating task settings are seen as major causes of anxiety that is strongly linked to negative judgment from peers. This reinforces the argument that classroom speaking tasks need to be structured with scaffolding and emotional support to reduce anxiety and foster a more inclusive learning environment.

A third key factor contributing to students' speaking anxiety is the fear of making mistakes, which consistently emerges as a major psychological barrier in EFL contexts. This fear often arises from the anticipation of negative judgment from peers, which students believe as the determinants to a strong emotional deterrent to task completion. These concepts are clearly grounded in our findings, as evinced by Sari, who stated, "I'm afraid of making mistakes when speaking English, and of course, I'm embarrassed if I make a mistake. Because I'm not very fluent in English. My friends will laugh at me." This account exemplifies how mistake-related anxiety strongly connects with how students perceive their efficacy and confidence as a result of anticipating peer dynamics in class. This further elevates the urgency for structuring a supportive and empowering learning environment in which students and teachers encourage risk-taking and view mistakes as normal and critical parts of language learning. This is well aligned with previous works. [Liu \(2007\)](#) reported student reluctance to speak in English due to fear of committing mistakes and being laughed at. In harmony, [Alnahidh and Althahab \(2020\)](#) found that nearly half of their participants were anxious about making mistakes, fearing ridicule or negative evaluations from peers.

Students' speaking anxiety is the fear of being ridiculed by peers, a fourth prominent factor driving. Several students reported that making mistakes during presentations oftentimes sparked negative consequences, stemming from teasing, mockery, or belittling from classmates. This peer-driven social pressure escalates anxiety and ruins their confidence. As Dika explained, "I feel anxious about speaking English. I'm afraid of making mistakes... My friends' reactions are usually laughing because I made a mistake." Similarly, Ayu shared, "I'm afraid my answer will be wrong. My friends' reactions will definitely be laughing, even belittling and booing me," while Rafi expressed concern that his classmates would "make fun of [him] for not knowing how to speak English." These voices are in coherence with [Liu's \(2007\)](#) findings, which document students' fear of peer ridicule as a major source of speaking anxiety. Riasati (2018) further supports this claim by reporting negative evaluations from both peers as a key deterrent to classroom participation. Our findings affirm previous works, noting that the emotional outcomes stemming from peers' negative evaluation constitute a detrimental factor to emergent attempts at speaking tasks. By implication, these findings collectively acknowledge the need for nurturing an empathetic and empowering classroom culture.

Finally, our findings highlight the nature of the speaking task commonly performed in front of the class as the major contributing factor to anxiety. Many of the students express the feeling of being uncomfortable and self-conscious due to the pressure of being the center of attention, which is also reported even in higher education settings ([Rahman et al., 2024](#)). As Rina expressed, "When I go to the front of the class, I am embarrassed to be seen by many people." This fear elevates performance pressure that often results in stronger anxiety, especially in situations involving public speaking or presentations. Closely linked to this pressure is the fear of mispronunciation. The students consistently admitted that they struggle with pronouncing English words accurately, subsequently exacerbating their reluctance to perform speaking or even reading aloud tasks. For example, Ayu noted, "I feel nervous when reading texts in front of the class because I am afraid of mispronouncing the text," while Sari added, "I am also anxious when I have to imitate the words the teacher says because I don't know how to pronounce them correctly." Our study resonates with [Woodrow's \(2006\)](#) and [Tanveer's \(2007\)](#) studies, which document pronunciation difficulties as a critical hurdle to oral participation in English class.

Although the students reported high speaking anxiety, they also expressed several coping strategies to tackle anxiety. It is quite appealing that these young learners are aware of strategies beyond linguistic improvement. Our findings are in resonance with similar works reporting the coping psychological mechanism among tertiary-level students, noting that maintaining a positive mindset and sustaining positive self-talk can mitigate speaking anxiety ([Quvanch et al., 2024](#)). Initiating peer talk to share the triggering factors to their anxiety can be a precursor to emergent confidence to engage in speaking performance. Our studies contribute to the line of literature that appreciates the emotional and social concerns of speaking tasks. It further substantiates the shared perceptions between male and female English learners with regard to the drivers and coping mechanisms of anxiety ([Alamri & Qasem, 2024](#)). EFL learners, regardless of their age and gender, report similar causes and coping strategies for dealing with speaking anxiety, embracing linguistic, social, and psychological dimensions of speaking anxiety. This notion, however, does not apply to the rate of speaking anxiety between genders, since female learners tend to experience more intensified anxiety than their male peers.

## CONCLUSION

This study revealed the causes that contribute to foreign language speaking anxiety among junior high school students in Indonesia from the interview data. Based on the findings obtained, there are seven causes that influence English-speaking anxiety: students' lack of vocabulary, performing in front of the class, fear of making mistakes, fear of being laughed at by their friends, fear of being the focus of attention, fear of mispronouncing a word or a text, and fear of failure in the English test. Moreover, this study also found how students cope with their foreign language speaking anxiety. The coping strategies are students try to calm themselves down when anxiety arises, they try to instill in their minds that everything will be fine, and they talk with their classmates about the anxiety and support

each other. Although language ability factors such as lacking vocabulary and mispronouncing words play a role in creating students' foreign language speaking anxiety, the dominant factors causing students' foreign language speaking anxiety are contextual factors, such as fear of being judged or laughed at, performing in front of the class, fear of being the focus of attention, and fear of failure in English tests.

The researchers suggest English teachers should be aware of the existence of foreign language speaking anxiety experienced by the students. Teachers can use a variety of teaching strategies, such as playing games or other fun activities. By implementing these strategies, teachers can help students reduce and overcome their foreign language speaking anxiety. Due to the absence of in-depth investigation on the coping strategies to address anxiety, especially given the time constraints, we highly suggest that future researchers investigate the strategies that students use to cope with their foreign language speaking anxiety and identify which strategies are most effective in reducing anxiety levels. We warrant careful generalization of our findings as the data are based only on a small number of participants. Recruiting a higher number of students across different school contexts will allow more nuanced insights into the linguistic, psychological, and social dimensions of speaking anxiety in EFL classrooms.

## FUNDING STATEMENT

The authors received no financial support for the research and/or authorship of this article.

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#### CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT:

There is no conflict of interest reported by the authors.

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