

THE INFLUENCE OF GENDER ON SPEAKING ANXIETY IN ENGLISH CLASSES AT POLITEKNIK NEGERI CILACAP: A MIXED-METHODS STUDY AND PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

Annisa Romadloni^{1*}, Laura Sari², Linda Perdana Wanti³

Politeknik Negeri Cilacap^{1,2,3}

annisa.romadloni@pnc.ac.id

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Abstract

Speaking anxiety serves as a significant barrier to oral proficiency in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) courses. Yet, the influence of gender on this affective factor within Indonesian vocational education remains underexplored. This mixed-methods study investigated speaking anxiety patterns at Politeknik Negeri Cilacap. Data were collected from 90 students (45 male, 45 female) using a modified FLCAS questionnaire, written reflections, and classroom observations, complemented by in-depth interviews with twelve selected participants. Although aggregate anxiety scores did not differ significantly between genders, item-level analysis revealed distinct differences. Female students reported significantly higher anxiety when called upon without preparation (cold calls), when fearing negative evaluation, and when speaking before the whole class. At the same time, both genders experienced comparable anxiety levels during formal presentations. Qualitative data confirmed that the fear of making mistakes, sensitivity to lecturer and peer judgment, and a lack of preparation time were the primary drivers of these patterns. Based on these findings, the research advocates for the implementation of gender-responsive scaffolding. Suggested pedagogical strategies include providing structured "think time" before spontaneous questions, utilizing tiered speaking activities that progress from pair discussions to plenary reporting, and cultivating an error-friendly classroom culture. This approach aims to mitigate specific anxiety triggers for female students while building an inclusive environment that prepares all ESP learners for authentic professional communication.

Keywords: Gender; Speaking Anxiety; English for Specific Purposes; Vocational Education

Abstrak

Kecemasan berbicara merupakan hambatan signifikan bagi kemahiran lisan dalam mata kuliah English for Specific Purposes (ESP), namun pengaruh gender terhadap faktor afektif ini dalam pendidikan vokasi di Indonesia masih jarang diteliti. Studi mixed-methods ini menginvestigasi pola kecemasan berbicara di Politeknik Negeri Cilacap. Data dikumpulkan dari 90 mahasiswa (45 laki-laki, 45 perempuan) menggunakan kuesioner FLCAS yang dimodifikasi, refleksi tertulis, dan observasi kelas, dilengkapi dengan wawancara mendalam terhadap dua belas mahasiswa terpilih. Meskipun skor kecemasan agregat tidak berbeda signifikan antar-gender, analisis tingkat butir mengungkapkan perbedaan nyata. Mahasiswa perempuan melaporkan kecemasan yang jauh lebih tinggi saat dipanggil tanpa persiapan (cold calls), saat takut akan evaluasi negatif, dan ketika berbicara di depan seluruh kelas, sementara kedua gender memiliki tingkat kecemasan yang setara dalam presentasi formal. Data kualitatif mengonfirmasi bahwa ketakutan membuat kesalahan, sensitivitas terhadap penilaian dosen dan teman sebaya, serta kurangnya waktu persiapan merupakan pemicu utama pola tersebut. Berdasarkan temuan ini, penelitian merekomendasikan penerapan scaffolding responsif gender. Strategi pedagogis yang disarankan meliputi pemberian "waktu berpikir" terstruktur sebelum pertanyaan spontan, aktivitas berbicara berjenjang dari diskusi pasangan ke pelaporan pleno, serta penciptaan budaya kelas yang ramah terhadap kesalahan. Pendekatan ini bertujuan untuk memitigasi pemicu kecemasan spesifik pada mahasiswa perempuan sekaligus membangun lingkungan inklusif yang mempersiapkan seluruh pembelajar ESP untuk komunikasi profesional yang autentik.

Kata Kunci : Gender; Kecemasan Berbicara; English For Specific Purposes; Pendidikan Vokasi

INTRODUCTION

English for Specific Purposes (ESP) courses play a pivotal role in vocational education by equipping learners with the precise communicative competencies—

technical vocabulary, genre conventions, and interactional skills—required in their future professions. At Politeknik Negeri Cilacap (PNC), ESP curricula are closely aligned with industry needs in mechanical engineering, business administration, and information systems, ensuring that classroom tasks mirror workplace realities. Globally, the fundamental goal of ESP teaching is to help learners acquire and use English to achieve academic and professional objectives, which necessitates a focus on authentic speaking tasks that simulate on-the-job interactions (Zhang & Ardasheva, 2019). For vocational students, the ability to speak English confidently in front of supervisors, clients, and colleagues is therefore not merely an academic target but a core employability skill. Despite curricular relevance, research in Indonesian vocational settings has documented that speaking remains the most anxiety-provoking skill: over 60 percent of ESP students report moderate to high levels of oral communication anxiety even with targeted instruction. In a study of out-of-class speaking anxiety among Indonesian tertiary EFL students, Daflizar (2024) found that female learners exhibited significantly higher anxiety, which correlated negatively with self-perceived speaking proficiency and vocabulary size (Daflizar, 2024). Likewise, Anzanni and Dewi observed a moderate level of speaking anxiety among SMK PGRI 3 Malang students and a weak but negative correlation ($r = -0.192$) between anxiety and performance, with communication apprehension emerging as the dominant anxiety type (Anzanni & Dewi, 2023). More recently, a quantitative study of Diploma IV ESP students revealed that self-efficacy significantly predicted speaking proficiency, though no gender differences were found in self-efficacy or proficiency levels (Hoesny et al., 2023). Taken together, these studies confirm that speaking anxiety is a persistent obstacle in Indonesian EFL and ESP contexts, and they hint at a complex relationship between gender, self-belief, and performance.

Speaking anxiety in vocational contexts often manifests as a cluster of cognitive load (worrying about accurate terminology), emotional distress (fear of negative evaluation), and behavioral inhibition (reluctance to volunteer), each capable of undermining performance despite adequate linguistic knowledge. Systematic reviews of oral presentation and speaking anxiety research highlight these dimensions as universal stressors, noting that impromptu tasks and high-stakes performances trigger the greatest anxiety among ESL/EFL students (Kho & Ting, n.d.). Moreover, analyses of Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety (FLSA) in non-English major contexts underscore similar patterns of cognitive interference and evaluative concerns (Ady & Mardiah, 2024). Across diverse EFL settings, gender has emerged not only as a background variable but as a consistent predictor of how intense and in which situations speaking anxiety is experienced. Saudi Arabian studies report that female undergraduates score significantly higher on impromptu-response and negative-evaluation subscales of the FLCAS, with effect sizes warranting gender-sensitive pedagogies (Erdiana et al., 2020). In Indonesian secondary schools, too, female learners display heightened self-consciousness about pronunciation errors and peer reactions, reflecting sociocultural norms around risk-taking and public performance that predate tertiary study (Utari et al., 2024).

However, several important gaps remain in the existing literature. First, most studies in Indonesian higher-education contexts examine gender differences using only overall scores of speaking or classroom anxiety, without exploring how anxiety varies at the level of specific items or classroom situations—for example, being cold-called, presenting alone, or speaking to mixed-gender audiences. Second, few studies systematically document the situational triggers of anxiety (such as task type, group

size, or type of evaluation) alongside students' own explanations and coping strategies. Third, there is a scarcity of research that combines quantitative survey data with qualitative evidence from observations and interviews in vocational ESP classrooms, even though such mixed-methods designs are well suited to capturing the complexity of affective experiences.

At PNC, classroom observations and informal reflections from ESP lecturers suggest that students' anxiety is not only widespread but also patterned by gender: female learners appear more hesitant to respond spontaneously and more sensitive to public correction, while male learners, although not free from anxiety, sometimes treat speaking tasks as competitive challenges. Yet these impressions have not been systematically documented or linked to item-level measures of anxiety. This lack of empirical evidence is problematic because speaking anxiety can undermine not only academic performance but also students' readiness for real-world professional communication—an urgent concern in vocational institutions whose graduates are expected to operate in English-medium workplace settings.

To address these gaps and respond to the practical needs of ESP teaching at PNC, this study specifically seeks to understand how gender shapes different forms and levels of speaking anxiety at both the overall and item levels, and how these patterns are manifested in concrete classroom situations. Using a mixed-methods design, we adapt and administer a 12-item version of the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS), collect open-ended reflections from students, observe ESP classes, and conduct semi-structured interviews with a purposive subsample of learners and lecturers. The following questions guide the study: (1) How do male and female ESP students differ in their overall and item-level speaking-anxiety scores? (2) What situational triggers and coping strategies characterize male and female students' speaking anxiety in ESP classrooms? (3) How can these findings inform gender-responsive pedagogical practices in vocational ESP contexts?

The novelty of this research lies in its focus on item-level anxiety differences, its attention to situational triggers in an Indonesian vocational ESP program, and its mixed-methods triangulation of quantitative and qualitative data. By foregrounding how gendered patterns of speaking anxiety emerge in specific classroom events, this study aims to contribute to both the theoretical understanding of foreign-language anxiety and the practical design of ESP instruction that is more inclusive and responsive to learners' affective needs.

RESEARCH METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a convergent mixed-methods design in which quantitative and qualitative data were collected in parallel, analyzed separately, and then integrated to provide a comprehensive picture of gender-based speaking anxiety in ESP classrooms at Politeknik Negeri Cilacap. The quantitative strand centered on an adapted 12-item FLCAS questionnaire, while the qualitative strand drew on open-ended written reflections, classroom observations, and semi-structured interviews.

Participants and Sampling

Ninety-one ESP students (47 male, 44 female) from Politeknik Negeri Cilacap's D4 Teknik Pengendalian Pencemaran Lingkungan, D3 Teknik Informatika,

D4 Rekayasa Keamanan Siber, D3 Teknik Elektronika, D3 Teknik Mesin, D4 Teknologi Rekayasa Multimedia, D4 Akutansi Lembaga Keuangan Syariah, and D4 Pengembangan Produk Agroindustri study programs participated in this study. To ensure balanced representation across gender and field of study, we employed stratified random sampling, dividing the ESP-enrolled population into homogeneous strata by department and gender, then randomly selecting participants within each subgroup (Hayes, 2022; Iliyasu & Etikan, 2021). This approach minimizes sampling bias and allows for precise comparisons between male and female groups. All 90 students completed the FLCAS and open-ended questionnaire; from this pool, a purposive subsample of 12 students (6 male, 6 female) was later invited to participate in interviews based on their questionnaire scores and willingness to share their experiences.

Instruments

1. Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS)

This study adapted a 12-item version of the FLCAS (HORWITZ et al., 1986), which has been reliably used in ESP contexts to measure speaking anxiety along dimensions of impromptu responses, negative evaluation, and group-size comfort (Ab Manan et al., 2022; Abrar, 2022; Lee & Ye, 2023; Qurnia & Marlina, 2020). Items included statements such as “I get nervous when the lecturer asks me to speak English without preparation,” “I worry that others will laugh at me if I make mistakes,” and “I feel more comfortable speaking English in small groups than in front of the whole class.” One item—“I feel confident speaking English in group discussions”—was reverse-coded to control for acquiescence bias. Respondents rated each item on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree). A pilot test with a separate group of ESP students was conducted to ensure clarity of wording and internal consistency; minor lexical adjustments were made to reflect vocational topics more accurately.

2. Open-Ended Questionnaire & Interviews

To delve beneath the surface of students’ self-reported anxiety scores, we invited every participant to reflect in their own words on three core questions. First, they described the moments or situations that most consistently made their hearts race in English-speaking activities: Was it the sudden call to answer a question? The fear of mispronouncing technical terms? Or the prospect of presenting in front of peers? Next, the students are asked to compare their comfort levels when speaking with classmates of the same gender versus those of the opposite gender, probing whether shared identities or mixed groups influenced their sense of safety and willingness to volunteer. Finally, they are encouraged to suggest concrete actions their lecturers could take—such as allowing more preparation time or restructuring pair work—to ease the pressure they felt in the ESP classroom. All 90 students submitted written responses of approximately one to two paragraphs per question.

From the pool of written reflections, twelve students (an equal number of men and women) were purposely invited to take part in semi-structured interviews. This smaller group made it possible to follow up on intriguing or unexpected comments, asking participants to illustrate their experiences with examples, to unpack why certain prompts mattered more to them, and to explore the coping techniques they had found most effective—whether that meant rehearsing with a friend, mentally rehearsing vocabulary before speaking, or simply taking a deep breath before contributing. By combining broad written responses with in-depth

conversations, the analysis captured both the common threads running through the entire group and the nuanced, individual strategies students used to manage their speaking anxiety. Interviews lasted 20–30 minutes, were conducted in a mix of English and Indonesian depending on participants' comfort, were audio-recorded with permission, and later transcribed verbatim.

3. Classroom Observation.

Over two weeks of ESP sessions, this study used a structured checklist to document anxiety-related behaviors—hesitation before speaking, avoidant body language, and refusal to volunteer—triangulating self-reported data with observable indicators of speaking apprehension. (Alfiani et al., 2022; Fatimah Hidayahni Amin & Nur Masthurah, 2023; Suciati, 2020). Four ESP class meetings (every 90 minutes) representing different study programs were observed. The checklist captured, for each speaking task, the frequency of prolonged pauses, avoidance of eye contact, whispered consultation with peers, and explicit refusals to speak, disaggregated by gender where feasible.

4. Procedure

Following institutional ethics approval and informed consent, the FLCAS and open-ended questionnaires were administered during regular ESP class time. Observers recorded behavioral data unobtrusively. Interviews were conducted individually in private, audio-recorded with permission, and transcribed verbatim. Based on FLCAS scores (high, medium, low) and willingness indicated on the questionnaire, twelve students were then invited for interviews; these were scheduled outside class hours at mutually convenient times.

5. Data Analysis

For the quantitative analysis, all Likert-scale responses were compiled in Microsoft Excel, where the mean and standard deviation for each FLCAS item, as well as the overall anxiety score, were calculated and disaggregated by gender. Then, independent-samples t-tests were run to determine whether the differences in speaking anxiety between male and female students were statistically significant—a procedure consistent with prior research in larger vocational ESP groups. This mirrors analytic strategies in comparable studies with larger vocational ESP samples ($n = 171$) (Ayuningtyas et al., 2022). In addition to overall scores, we paid particular attention to item-level differences in order to identify “hot-spot” situations where gender gaps were most pronounced (e.g., cold calls, fear of ridicule, preference for small-group speaking).

The qualitative method was started by analyzing open-ended responses and interview transcripts via thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's six-phase model—familiarization, coding, theme development, review, definition, and write-up—as operationalized in recent ELT research to ensure methodological rigor and transparency (Dawadi, 2020). Initial codes focused on situational triggers (e.g., task type, group size, interlocutor gender), emotional reactions (e.g., fear, embarrassment, shame), and coping strategies (e.g., rehearsal, avoidance, peer support). Codes were then grouped into broader themes such as “impromptu speaking as threat,” “evaluation-sensitive learners,” and “safe spaces for practice,” which were compared across male and female participants. Observational data were used to corroborate or nuance self-reports, particularly regarding refusal to volunteer and non-verbal signs of anxiety.

Finally, quantitative and qualitative findings were integrated at the interpretation stage. Item-level score patterns were examined alongside thematic accounts and observed classroom behavior to construct a cohesive explanation of how gender shapes speaking anxiety in PNC’s vocational ESP context and to derive concrete pedagogical implications.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

A. Spontaneous Oral Responses

This study analyzes the item-level means, standard deviations, t-statistics, and p-values for each of the twelve FLCAS items, broken down by gender, using the results of the questionnaire as the data. It highlights where female students’ mean anxiety scores diverge significantly from their male peers, particularly in impromptu-speech and evaluative-fear contexts.

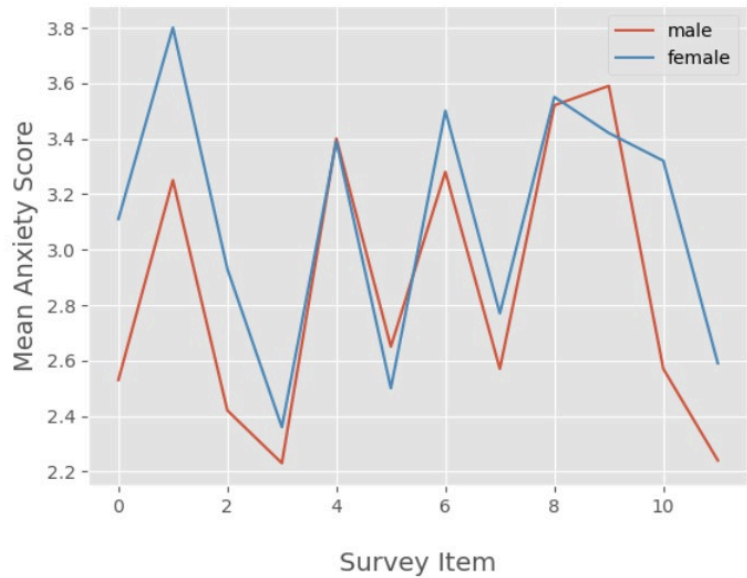
Table 1. Result of the T-test for significant difference in speaking anxiety between male and female students.

Item	Male Mean	Female Mean	Male SD	Female SD	t-statistic	p-value	Significance
Q4“I feel anxious when I have to speak English in class.”	2.53	3.11	0.81	0.74	-4.12	<0.001	Yes
Q5“I get nervous when the lecturer asks me to speak English without preparation.”	3.25	3.80	0.95	0.93	-3.10	0.002	Yes
Q6“I worry that others will laugh at me if I make mistakes when speaking English.”	2.42	2.93	0.88	0.85	-2.60	0.011	Yes
Q7“I feel uncomfortable speaking English in front of the opposite gender.”	2.23	2.36	0.77	0.79	-1.04	0.301	No
Q8“I feel confident speaking English in group discussions.”	3.40	3.39	0.82	0.88	0.08	0.938	No
Q9“I avoid raising my hand in English class, even if I know the answer.”	2.65	2.50	0.91	0.96	1.15	0.252	No
Q10“I feel more nervous speaking English than writing it.”	3.28	3.50	0.89	0.94	-1.21	0.227	No
Q11“I feel embarrassed when I can’t find the right words in English.”	2.57	2.77	0.83	0.85	-1.34	0.183	No
Q12“I would rather read or listen than speak in English class.”	3.52	3.55	0.89	1.13	-0.14	0.891	No
Q13“I panic when I have to give a presentation in English.”	3.59	3.42	0.79	1.01	1.12	0.264	No
Q14“I think about what others will think of my English more than focusing on what I want to say.”	2.57	3.32	0.85	1.01	-3.67	<0.001	Yes
Q15“I feel more comfortable speaking English in small groups than in front of the whole class.”	2.24	2.59	0.75	0.85	-2.18	0.031	Yes

Source: Processed by Author

Table 1. shows female students at PNC reported significantly greater anxiety when called on to speak without warning: on Q4 (“I feel anxious when I have to speak English in class”), women averaged 3.11 compared to 2.53 for men, and on Q5 (“I get nervous when the lecturer asks me to speak English without preparation”), 3.80 versus 3.25—both differences highly significant ($p < 0.01$). This “on-the-spot” tension appears rooted in a blend of personal expectations, peer comparison, and classroom norms: many female learners, socialized to prepare and rehearse, feel blindsided by impromptu prompts, whereas male students often interpret cold calls as challenges. For instance, a student who meticulously drafts a lab-report summary may find it jarring to be asked, without notice, to recap the previous lecture. To ease this pressure, instructors can introduce brief “think time” (30–60 seconds for jotting down ideas) and pair-based warm-ups such as “think-pair-share,” ensuring that no one faces the whole class unprepared. Additionally, a “popcorn share” format—where one volunteer speaks and then selects the next—gradually acculturates all students to impromptu turns, while posting model responses on the board provides a cognitive scaffold that demystifies what a successful 30-second summary looks like. Together, these strategies diffuse the suddenness of questioning and help female learners approach spontaneous speech with greater confidence.

Figure 1. The Box Plot of Distribution of Item-Level Mean Anxiety Scores by Gender



Source: Processed by Author

The box plot above visualizes the distribution of item-level mean anxiety scores (Q4–Q15) for male and female ESP learners at PNC. Female students exhibited the largest anxiety gaps on five specific FLCAS items, all of which relate to spontaneous speech and evaluative concerns. On Q4 (“I feel anxious when I have to speak English in class”), women averaged 3.11 ($SD = 0.74$) compared to 2.53 ($SD = 0.81$) for men ($\Delta = 0.58$, $t = -4.12$, $p < .001$). Similarly, for Q5 (“I get nervous when the lecturer asks me to speak English without preparation”), the female mean was 3.80 ($SD = 0.93$) versus 3.25 ($SD = 0.95$) for males ($\Delta = 0.55$, $t = -3.10$, $p = .002$). Such pronounced gendered differences in impromptu speaking mirror findings from Saudi EFL undergraduates, where female learners reported significantly higher cold-call anxiety (Alrabai, 2015), as well as recent Indonesian studies showing female students’ heightened nervousness during unplanned oral tasks (Daflizar, 2024).

B. Fear of Negative Evaluation

Fear of ridicule (Q6) and over-monitoring of peer evaluation (Q14) also showed significant gender gaps of 0.51 ($t = -2.60$, $p = .011$) and 0.75 ($t = -3.67$, $p < .001$), respectively. These patterns echo Horwitz et al.’s (HORWITZ et al., 1986) original

FLCAS findings and Dewaele and MacIntyre’s (Dewaele & Macintyre, 2014) meta-analysis, which identifies evaluative fears as a core driver of foreign-language anxiety, particularly among women. In an Indonesian vocational context, Anzanni and Dewi similarly noted that female ESP learners rated fear of peer judgment and perfectionist self-monitoring as their most intense anxiety triggers (Anzanni & dewi, 2023) .

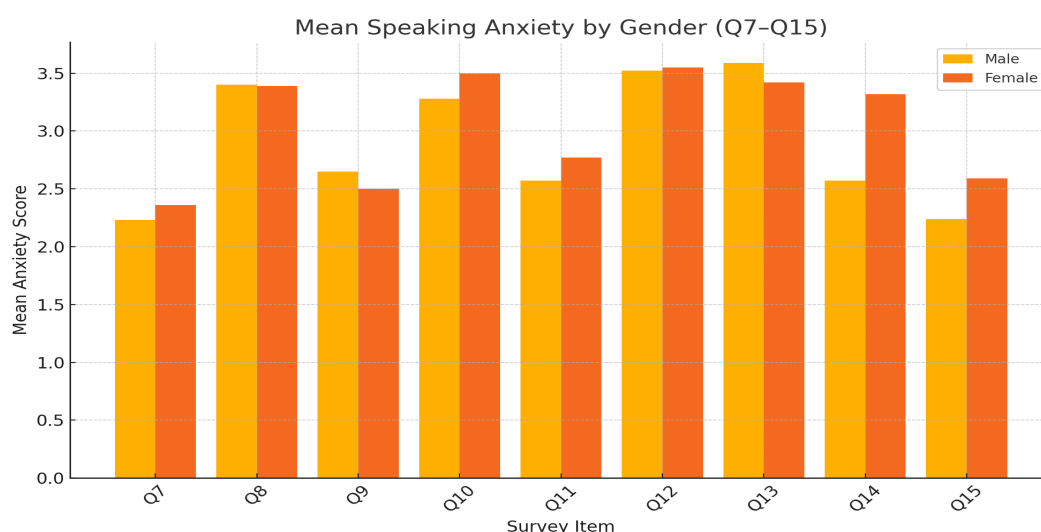
Items Q6 (“I worry that others will laugh at me if I make mistakes”) and Q14 (“I think about what others will think of my English more than focusing on what I want to say”) highlight female students’ deep-seated fear of negative evaluation: women averaged 2.93 on Q6 versus 2.42 for men ($p = .011$), and 3.32 on Q14 versus 2.57 ($p < .001$), revealing that they not only dread unprepared speaking but also expend considerable mental energy on monitoring peer reactions—an inward focus that disrupts fluency and stifles authentic communication. Similar patterns have been documented among Turkish EFL undergraduates, where fear of negative evaluation correlated strongly with speaking self-efficacy and overall anxiety, particularly for female learners (Okyar, 2023), and in Indonesian vocational contexts, where communication apprehension and concern about peer judgment rank among the top barriers to oral participation (Muktningrum et al., 2024).

To counteract this evaluative apprehension, classrooms must actively normalize and celebrate mistakes rather than merely tolerate them. Lecturers can model self-correction—voicing errors openly (“Oops—‘founded’ not ‘found!’”)—to demonstrate that slips are natural learning moments, a practice shown to enhance engagement and error resilience. Incorporating structured peer-feedback routines like “two stars and a wish”, where classmates first identify two strengths and then offer one constructive suggestion, ensures every student receives encouragement before critique, fostering a more positive error culture. Experimental studies of positive error climates confirm that such strategies reduce performance anxiety and promote adaptive beliefs about errors (Soncini et al., 2020).

C. Preference for Small-Group over Whole-Class Speaking and Other Factors

Women’s stronger preference for small-group speaking (Q15) emerged with a difference of 0.35 points ($t = -2.18$, $p = .031$). These hot spots indicate that being “put on the spot,” worrying about peers’ judgments, and facing the whole class without support are especially challenging for female ESP learners at PNC.

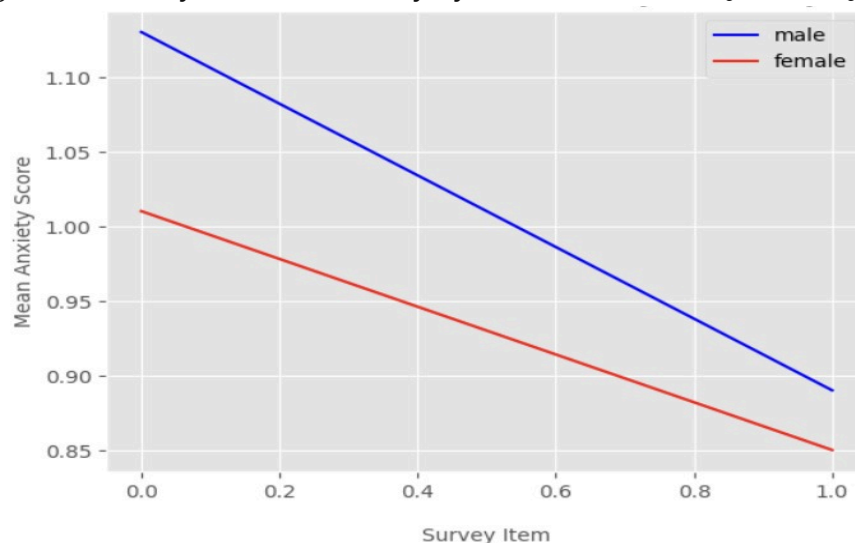
Figure 2. Mean Speaking Anxiety By Gender based on Q7 – Q15



Source: Processed by Author

In contrast, seven items revealed little to no gender disparity, suggesting that certain speaking contexts provoke similar anxiety levels across the group. Confidence in group discussions (Q8) yielded nearly identical means—3.40 for men and 3.39 for women—while preferences for receptive tasks (Q12) were uniformly high, with both genders favoring reading or listening over speaking. This uniformity aligns with (Fitriana SMKN, 2023) study in vocational high schools, where both male and female students reported comparable anxiety in structured cooperative activities, and suggests that collaborative, well-scaffolded tasks mitigate gender gaps in speaking apprehension. As shown in Figure 2, items assessing nervousness about opposite-gender audiences (Q7), reluctance to volunteer despite knowing the answer (Q9), greater nervousness speaking than writing (Q10), embarrassment at missing words (Q11), and panic during formal presentations (Q13) all produced non-significant differences ($p > .05$). These results imply that collaborative, structured activities and high-stakes presentations generate comparable levels of tension for both male and female students.

Figure 3. Anxiety Score Variability by Gender based on Q12 and Q14

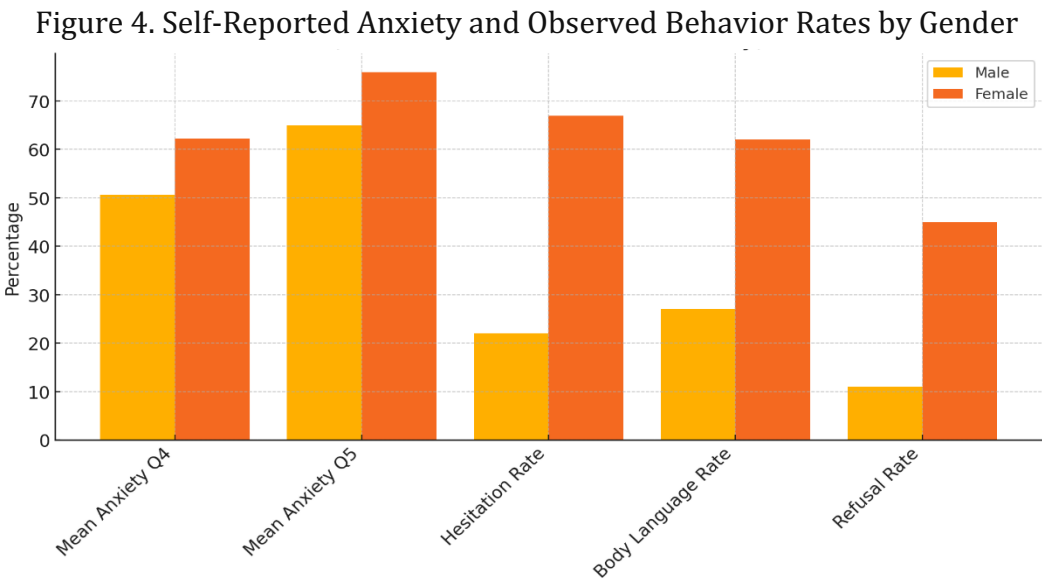


Source: Processed by Author

Beyond average differences, female responses also showed greater variability: their standard deviations exceeded those of males on nine of the twelve items, particularly on Q12 (SD = 1.13 vs. 0.89) and Q14 (SD = 1.01 vs. 0.85). As shown in Figure 3, this wider spread—visible in the longer whiskers and broader interquartile range for women—signals a heterogeneous female group, with some students experiencing very high anxiety and others only mild discomfort. Such dispersion suggests that blanket interventions may overlook those at the extremes; instead, tailored support measures—such as one-on-one coaching or targeted confidence-building exercises—could better address the needs of highly anxious individuals. Another study similarly found broad dispersion in female learners' self-reported anxiety levels, underscoring the need for tailored support—such as individual coaching or targeted confidence-building workshops—to address the needs of those at the extremes (Anzanni & dewi, 2023).

Taken together, these nuanced patterns point to clear, context-specific pedagogical strategies. To ease impromptu-speech anxiety (Q4–Q5), lecturers might embed “think time” and model short summaries before cold-calling. Addressing evaluative fears (Q6, Q14) calls for an error-friendly culture, where lecturer and peer feedback foregrounds effort and normalizes mistakes. Finally, leveraging women's comfort in smaller settings (Q15), tiered speaking activities—moving from pairs and triads to whole-class sharing—can build confidence gradually. At the same time,

collaborative discussions and presentation rehearsals remain valuable for all students, given the uniform anxiety profiles on those items.



Source: Processed by Author

During unannounced, whole-class speaking drills, female students—who rated their anxiety at 3.11 on Q4 (“anxious when I have to speak in class”) and 3.80 on Q5 (“nervous when asked to speak without preparation”)—routinely froze for over 15 seconds, avoided eye contact, folded their arms, and in 45 % of cases refused to volunteer outright as shown in Figure 4. By contrast, male peers—with lower self-reported means of 2.53 and 3.25—hesitated for less than five seconds, adopted more open postures, and declined to speak in only 11% of cases. When the same task was shifted to small-group discussions, refusal rates among women decreased by nearly 70%, reflecting their greater comfort in pairs or trios (Q15 mean = 2.59) compared to whole-class settings (men’s Q15 mean = 2.24). Yet even in these breakouts, participants who scored high on fear-of-judgment items (Q6 M = 2.93; Q14 M = 3.32) continued to slouch, gesture minimally, and avert their gaze, mirroring their self-monitored evaluative anxieties.

These precisely observed behaviours—prolonged pauses, protective body language, and opting out—correspond directly to the “hot-spot” FLCAS items for impromptu speech and negative evaluation, confirming that self-reported scores translate into real-time classroom dynamics. Together, these data underscore the need for targeted scaffolds: providing “think time” before cold calls, modelling brief summaries, and structuring tiered speaking exercises that progress from small groups to full-class presentations. By aligning instructional design with the specific triggers revealed in both surveys and observations, ESP instructors at PNC can create a more supportive environment that validates students’ experiences while gradually building their speaking confidence.

D. How Gender Shapes Speaking Anxiety in ESP Classrooms

Across the quantitative and qualitative strands, a coherent picture emerges of how gender shapes speaking anxiety in PNC’s ESP classrooms. Female students’ higher scores on items related to impromptu speaking, fear of negative evaluation, and whole-class performance are mirrored by observable behaviors such as longer hesitation, reduced eye contact, and more frequent refusal to volunteer. Male students, by contrast, tend to experience lower—but still meaningful—anxiety in these same situations and sometimes frame speaking tasks as opportunities to “prove” their ability. These patterns suggest that gender does not merely influence the amount of

anxiety experienced, but also the situations in which anxiety is most salient and the interpretations learners attach to those situations.

From a pedagogical perspective, impromptu whole-class speaking appears to be the most anxiety-intense context for female learners, especially when evaluation is perceived as public and performance-oriented. This resonates with the FLCAS conceptualization of foreign-language anxiety as a combination of communication apprehension and fear of negative evaluation (HORWITZ et al., 1986) and with studies showing that female learners are more likely to engage in self-monitoring and perfectionism during public performance (Dewaele & Macintyre, 2014; Okyar, 2023). At the same time, the absence of gender differences in structured group discussions and formal presentations indicates that when tasks are well scaffolded, expectations are clear, and preparation time is sufficient, both male and female students can participate with similar levels of comfort.

The greater variability in female responses further underscores that “female students” are not a homogeneous group: some exhibit extremely high anxiety across items, while others report relatively low levels. One implication is that one-size-fits-all interventions are unlikely to be effective; instead, lecturers need a repertoire of strategies that can be selectively applied, ranging from universal design features (e.g., error-friendly norms) to targeted support for those who show persistent, high-intensity anxiety.

E. Pedagogical Implications for Gender-Responsive ESP Teaching

Based on the study's findings, practical implications for ESP teaching at PNC and similar vocational institutions suggest a shift toward pedagogical strategies that actively mitigate anxiety while maintaining workplace relevance. To address the pressure of impromptu speaking, instructors should design “soft landings” rather than eliminating cold calls. By integrating structured think time, pair rehearsals, and clear response frames, educators can simulate workplace spontaneity without forcing students—particularly female learners—to speak without preparation. This approach must be supported by an error-friendly classroom culture where mistakes are normalized through modelled self-correction and constructive peer feedback. Establishing an environment where errors are viewed as an expected part of learning reduces the fear of ridicule, a change that is particularly beneficial for students who habitually over-monitor their language use.

Furthermore, the curriculum should leverage small-group interactions and transparent assessment to build confidence incrementally. Instructors can treat small groups as “confidence incubators” by using tiered activities that transition from safe pair discussions to whole-class reporting, allowing students to rehearse content before facing a larger audience. To further reduce anxiety, evaluation criteria should be transparent and process-oriented, emphasizing communicative effort and strategy over strict grammatical accuracy. Finally, for students who remain highly anxious despite these general interventions, instructors should offer individualized support such as private practice sessions or one-on-one conferences. By adopting these targeted measures, ESP pedagogy can move beyond generic anxiety reduction toward a nuanced, gender-responsive approach that accommodates distinct affective needs. By aligning ESP pedagogy with the specific anxiety triggers and gendered patterns identified in this study, lecturers can move from a generic “lowering anxiety” approach toward a more nuanced, gender-responsive orientation that recognizes both shared and distinct affective needs.

CONCLUSION

This mixed-methods investigation at Politeknik Negeri Cilacap reveals that although aggregate speaking-anxiety levels are similar between genders, distinct situational patterns exist. Female ESP students experience significantly greater distress during impromptu speaking, worry more about peer judgment, and feel anxious addressing the whole class, yet they report feeling noticeably safer in small-group settings. Conversely, male students tend to view speaking tasks as challenges, often using humor or risk-taking to cope, though both genders share comparable anxiety regarding formal presentations. These insights necessitate a shift toward gender-responsive scaffolding. To support vulnerable learners without neglecting collective practice, instructors should design "soft landings" into impromptu tasks—such as providing brief think-time before cold calls—and implement tiered activities that transition from safe pair discussions to plenary reporting. Furthermore, cultivating an error-friendly culture through transparent, process-oriented evaluation helps mitigate the fear of negative evaluation. Future research should extend this framework to other vocational contexts in Indonesia and evaluate the long-term impact of such interventions. By aligning pedagogy with these specific anxiety triggers, ESP practitioners can create inclusive, confidence-building environments that empower all students to participate fully in professional communication.

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