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Students' Strategies for Managing Speaking Anxiety in English-Medium Science Classrooms

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Abstract

Speaking anxiety can still be considered one of the common challenges experienced by learners of English as a foreign language (EFL), especially in English-medium instruction (EMI) classrooms where students are required not only to understand subject content but also to express their ideas in English at the same time. Although many previous studies have discussed the causes of speaking anxiety, only a limited number of studies have explored how students actually manage this anxiety during classroom interaction. Therefore, this study attempts to explore students' experiences of speaking anxiety as well as the strategies they use in an English-medium science classroom. This study employed a qualitative descriptive approach involving ten eighth-grade students selected through purposive sampling. The data were collected through semi-structured interviews and then analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings indicate that students' speaking anxiety is influenced by several factors, which include language difficulties, challenges in explaining scientific concepts, and classroom conditions. At the same time, it was also found that students actively use various strategies to cope with these difficulties, such as preparation, simplifying explanations, self-correction, the use of gestures, code-switching, and self-regulation. Based on these findings, it can be understood that speaking anxiety in EMI science classrooms should not only be seen as a problem, but also as part of the learning process, since students do not simply experience anxiety but also respond to it in order to maintain their participation.

1. Introduction

Speaking can be considered one of the most important skills in everyday communication because it allows people to express ideas, respond to others, and participate in social interaction. However, speaking is not a simple skill. It requires learners to organize ideas, choose appropriate words, and respond within a limited time. In academic settings, this challenge can become even greater because speaking is not only used for interaction but also for demonstrating understanding.

For EFL learners, this situation is often more demanding because they must express ideas in a language that is still unfamiliar to them while they are still developing control over that language. Previous studies have shown that EFL learners frequently face difficulties such as limited vocabulary, uncertainty in grammar, and fear of making mistakes when speaking (Khafidhoh et al., 2023; Ajiza et al., 2024; Diana et al., 2024).

Language learning is also shaped by affective factors, including anxiety. Anxiety can interfere with learners' ability to process information and express ideas clearly, which may reduce their willingness to participate in classroom interaction. Learners' emotional experiences, such as anxiety and enjoyment, are closely related to their engagement in learning (Dewaele & Li, 2020). In EFL classrooms, speaking anxiety is often associated with fear of making mistakes, limited language ability, and concern about negative evaluation from teachers or peers. In the Indonesian EFL context, this issue remains one of the major barriers to participation and communication (Khafidhoh et al., 2023; Ajiza et al., 2024; Diana et al., 2024).

Similar patterns have also been reported in studies on public speaking anxiety, where communication apprehension and fear of evaluation affect learners' willingness to speak (Yunus et al., 2024). More broadly, language anxiety has been shown to be closely related to classroom interaction and learners' emotional responses (Gregersen & MacIntyre, 2020).

In English-Medium Instruction (EMI) contexts, this challenge can become even more complex. Students are expected to understand subject content and express their ideas in English at the same time, which creates both linguistic and cognitive demands. This may increase speaking anxiety, especially when learners are uncertain about their language ability or classroom performance (Dafouz & Smit, 2016; Macaro et al., 2018). In science classrooms, the challenge is often more visible because students must explain scientific concepts clearly while also dealing with technical vocabulary and subject-specific ideas. Therefore, EMI classrooms can be understood as demanding learning environments in which language use and content understanding are closely connected (Li & Ruan, 2023).

Speaking ability is closely related to communicative competence, which includes not only grammatical accuracy but also the ability to use language appropriately in different contexts (Canale & Swain, 1980). One important component of this competence is strategic competence, because it allows learners

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to use alternative strategies when communication difficulties occur (Teng & Zhang, 2020). In addition, learners' ability to regulate their own learning process is also important, since self-regulation involves planning, monitoring, and reflection during learning activities (Zimmerman, 2000).

Recent studies show that learners' strategic behaviour and emotional regulation are related to their participation in classroom interaction and their ability to maintain communication in EMI settings (Pun & Jin, 2021). From a sociocultural perspective, learning is shaped through social interaction within the Zone of Proximal Development, where teacher support, peer interaction, and scaffolding help learners participate more effectively (Vygotsky, 1978; Lantolf & Thorne, 2006).

Although many studies have examined speaking anxiety, most of them focus on measuring its level or identifying its causes rather than exploring how learners actually manage it during classroom interaction. In addition, qualitative research on students' coping strategies in junior secondary EMI contexts is still limited. This suggests a need to understand more deeply how students regulate their emotions and sustain participation while speaking in EMI classrooms.

Therefore, this study aims to explore how Indonesian EFL students experience speaking anxiety in EMI science classrooms and the strategies they use to manage it during classroom interaction. This study uses a qualitative descriptive approach because it is suitable for examining learners' experiences, perceptions, and emotional responses in depth (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Nassaji, 2020).

2. Method

This study employed a qualitative descriptive design to explore students' speaking anxiety and the strategies they used to manage it in English-medium classrooms. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because it enables researchers to examine learners' experiences, perceptions, and emotional responses in greater depth within a natural classroom context (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Nassaji, 2020). Previous studies on speaking anxiety have also commonly used qualitative methods, particularly interviews and classroom observations, to capture students' perspectives more clearly and in detail (Khafidhoh et al., 2023; Diana et al., 2024).

The study was conducted in a private bilingual junior high school involving eighth-grade students from class 8A (boys) and class 8B (girls). The research focused on English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) in Science classrooms, where English was used as the primary language for delivering subject content. Science was selected because classroom activities frequently required students to explain concepts orally, respond to questions, and participate in discussions, which could potentially increase speaking anxiety.

A total of ten students participated in this study, consisting of five students from each class. The participants were Indonesian EFL learners aged approximately 13–14 years old who had been exposed to English since the early

grades. In general, the students demonstrated relatively good speaking ability, although several of them still experienced anxiety during classroom interaction. The participants were selected through purposive sampling because they were considered capable of providing relevant and meaningful information related to the research focus (Palinkas et al., 2015).

The interview questions were developed based on several theoretical perspectives and previous studies related to speaking anxiety, communicative competence, self-regulation, and sociocultural learning. Questions regarding students' emotional experiences and sources of anxiety were adapted from the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety framework (Horwitz et al., 1986; Botes et al., 2020). Questions concerning coping strategies were connected to strategic competence and self-regulation theory (Canale & Swain, 1980; Zimmerman, 2000). In addition, questions related to classroom environment and teacher support were linked to sociocultural theory, which emphasizes the role of interaction and scaffolding in learning (Vygotsky, 1978; Lantolf & Thorne, 2006).

Data were collected through semi-structured individual interviews conducted in Indonesian in order to reduce additional language pressure and allow participants to express their experiences more freely. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and later transcribed verbatim. To support the interview findings, limited classroom observations were also conducted before and during the data collection process. The observations focused on students' speaking behaviour, participation patterns, visible signs of anxiety, and classroom interaction during EMI Science lessons. Each observation lasted approximately one classroom session and was used as supporting contextual data rather than as the primary source of analysis.

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke (2006). First, the interview transcripts were read repeatedly to familiarize the researcher with the data. After that, important statements related to students' speaking anxiety and coping strategies were identified and coded. Similar codes were then grouped into broader categories and developed into themes based on recurring patterns across participants. The themes were continuously reviewed and refined in order to ensure their relevance to the research questions.

To improve the trustworthiness of the study, several strategies were applied during the research process. Interview responses were rechecked to ensure that participants' statements had been interpreted accurately. In addition, peer discussion was conducted during the coding process in order to reduce subjective interpretation and improve consistency in theme development. Participants' identities were also anonymized by using codes such as P1–P10 to maintain confidentiality. Before the interviews were conducted, participants were informed about the purpose of the study and gave their consent to participate voluntarily.

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3. Result

The main data in this study were obtained through semi-structured interviews with ten students (P1–P10) from an English-Medium Instruction (EMI) Science classroom. The findings show that students experienced speaking anxiety in different ways depending on the classroom situation, task difficulty, and level of preparation. At the same time, students also used various strategies to manage anxiety and maintain participation during classroom interaction. The findings are presented in three stages: before speaking, during speaking, and after speaking, including the influence of classroom environment on students' emotional experiences.

1. Students' Experiences of Anxiety and Preparation Before Speaking

The findings show that anxiety often appeared before students started speaking in class. Most participants said that they usually felt nervous, tense, or pressured when they realized they would need to explain something in English. One participant explained: *"Biasanya gugup karena takut nggak bisa jelasin materinya dengan jelas."* ("I usually feel nervous because I'm afraid, I cannot explain the material clearly.") (P3)

Another participant also shared a similar feeling: *"Kalau topiknya susah, biasanya langsung panik karena bingung jelasinnya pakai bahasa Inggris."* ("When the topic is difficult, I immediately panic because I get confused about how to explain it in English.") (P7)

These responses show that students' anxiety was not only related to English ability, but also to their concern about delivering the material correctly during classroom interaction.

However, students did not experience anxiety in exactly the same way. A few participants showed lower anxiety, especially when they felt prepared before speaking activities. One participant explained that nervousness was usually stronger during presentations or assessment situations than during ordinary classroom discussions. This suggests that preparation and classroom situation both influenced students' emotional responses before speaking.

Task difficulty also became an important factor influencing anxiety. Most participants reported that explaining scientific concepts was more stressful than answering short classroom questions. In EMI Science classrooms, students were expected not only to speak in English but also to explain concepts accurately. One participant stated: *"Aku lebih takut salah konsep daripada salah grammar."* ("I'm more afraid of explaining the wrong concept than making grammar mistakes.") (P5).

This response appeared repeatedly across participants. Most students seemed more concerned about misunderstanding scientific concepts than producing grammatically inaccurate sentences. Meanwhile, only a few participants focused more on grammar because they worried it could affect understanding.

To reduce anxiety before speaking, students reported using several preparation strategies. These included reviewing learning materials, writing important notes, memorizing key points, and practicing explanations before classroom activities. Some participants also mentioned psychological preparation, such as trying to calm themselves down or giving positive suggestions to themselves before speaking. This indicates that preparation involved both cognitive and emotional readiness.

The main findings related to students' experiences before speaking are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Results of Students' Anxiety Before Speaking

No	Interview Focus	Summary of Participant Responses
Q1	Initial feelings	Most students felt nervous, tense, or panicked; a few showed lower anxiety depending on preparation or situation
Q2	Task difficulty	Explaining complex topics caused higher anxiety than answering short questions.
Q3	Preparation strategies	Reviewing material, writing notes, memorizing, practicing explanations.
Q4	Primary source of fear	Majority feared incorrect concepts; only a small number focused on grammar.

2. Students' Responses and Strategies During Speaking

During speaking activities, anxiety became more visible through both emotional and physical reactions. Several participants reported experiencing trembling hands, sweating, rapid heartbeat, and feelings of pressure while speaking in front of the class. One student stated: "Jantungku biasanya jadi cepat banget kalau harus jelasin di depan kelas." ("My heart beats very fast when I have to explain something in front of the class.") (P2)

Another participant explained: "Kadang tanganku gemetar karena terlalu gugup." ("Sometimes my hands shake because I'm too nervous.") (P6)

These findings show that speaking anxiety was experienced not only emotionally but also physically, especially when students became the center of classroom attention.

When students experienced "blank" moments, where they suddenly forgot what they wanted to say, they showed different reactions. Some students paused temporarily, remained silent for a moment, or checked their notes before continuing. Others tried to maintain communication by using fillers such as "eee" or "uhm."

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One participant explained: "Kalau tiba-tiba blank, biasanya aku putar-putar dulu di materi yang bisa aku jelasin sambil mikir." ("When I suddenly go blank, I usually explain the parts I still understand while thinking about what to say next.") (P1)

This response shows that students did not simply stop speaking when difficulties appeared. Instead, they tried to maintain participation while thinking about how to continue their explanation.

Students also used different communication strategies during speaking activities. Some participants corrected themselves immediately after making mistakes, while others preferred continuing their explanation as long as the message could still be understood. When students forgot certain vocabulary, most of them tried to simplify their explanations by using easier words instead of stopping completely. One participant stated: "Kalau lupa kosakata Inggrisnya, biasanya aku jelasin pakai kata yang lebih gampang." ("If I forget the English word, I usually explain it using easier words.") (P8)

The use of Indonesian (L1) also appeared as one of the communication strategies. Most participants said they occasionally switched to Indonesian when they had difficulty explaining scientific concepts or forgot certain vocabulary. However, some participants rarely used Indonesian because they preferred maintaining English during classroom interaction. This suggests that code-switching functioned as a flexible strategy to maintain communication rather than simply showing language weakness.

In addition, students also relied on non-verbal strategies such as hand gestures, pointing, and body movement to support their explanations. Several participants explained that gestures helped them communicate ideas more clearly and reduced nervousness while speaking. This indicates that students used both verbal and non-verbal resources to sustain communication during EMI classroom interaction.

The major findings related to students' experiences during speaking are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. Results of Students' Anxiety During Speaking

No	Interview Focus	Summary of Participant Responses
Q5	Somatic symptoms	Trembling, rapid heartbeat, sweating, internal pressure.
Q6	Reaction to "blank" moments	Silence, pausing, skipping parts, checking notes, and the use of fillers.
Q7	Self-monitoring	Some corrected immediately, others continued speaking without correction.
Q8	Managing difficult terms	Most used simpler explanations; a few skipped difficult parts.

Q9	Use of Indonesian (L1)	Mostly occasional use; some rarely used it, and one participant used it frequently depending on difficulty and vocabulary limitations
Q10	Non-verbal support	Hand gestures used for both explanation and calming down.

3. Students' Reflections and Classroom Environment

After completing speaking activities, students showed different reflective responses. Most participants reported feeling relieved or satisfied after finishing their performance, although several students still thought about mistakes they had made. One participant explained: "Kalau sudah selesai biasanya lega, tapi kadang masih kepikiran salahnya." ("After finishing, I usually feel relieved, but sometimes I still think about my mistakes.") (P4)

This finding suggests that reflection became part of students' learning experience after classroom interaction.

Regarding the strategies they considered most helpful, participants frequently mentioned preparation, practicing before class, pausing during speaking, and simplifying explanations. Some students also mentioned trying to calm themselves mentally before speaking. One participant stated:

"Kadang aku anggap audiensnya nggak ada biar nggak terlalu gugup."
("Sometimes I pretend the audience is not there so I don't get too nervous.") (P6)

This response shows that students not only used communication strategies, but also emotional strategies to manage anxiety during speaking activities.

The classroom environment was also found to influence students' emotional experiences. Most participants preferred small-group discussions because they felt less pressured and more comfortable speaking with classmates. One participant explained:

"Kalau kelompok kecil rasanya lebih aman karena nggak semua orang lihat."
("In small groups, it feels safer because not everyone is looking at me.") (P9)

However, a few participants preferred speaking in front of the whole class because they felt it helped them focus more seriously.

Teacher and peer support were also considered important in reducing anxiety. Participants explained that supportive teachers, clear explanations, and helpful classmates helped them feel more confident during classroom interaction. Some students also mentioned that active classrooms made them feel more

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comfortable, while classrooms that became too quiet sometimes increased nervousness. One participant explained:

> "Kalau kelasnya terlalu hening malah tambah gugup."
> ("When the classroom becomes too quiet, I get even more nervous.") (P7)

Overall, the findings show that students continuously experienced anxiety, adjusted their communication strategies, and reflected on their speaking performance afterward. Rather than remaining passive, students actively tried to maintain participation during EMI Science classroom interaction.

The findings related to reflection and classroom environment are summarized in Table 3.

Table 3. Results of Reflections and Classroom Environment

No	Interview Focus	Summary of Participant Responses
Q11	Post-performance feelings	Relief and satisfaction, with some continued reflection.
Q12	Most helpful strategy	Using preparation strategies, pausing, simplifying explanations, speech practice, psychological suggestion, and code-mixing.
Q13	Audience preference	Majority preferred small groups; some preferred whole class.
Q14	Perception of support	Supportive teachers and helpful peers reduced anxiety.
Q15	Preferred atmosphere	Lively and active classrooms provided a sense of safety.

4. Discussion

The findings of this study show that students' speaking anxiety in English-Medium Instruction (EMI) Science classrooms was influenced by several interconnected factors, especially language ability, conceptual understanding, and classroom situation. Students were not only required to speak in English, but also expected to explain scientific concepts correctly during classroom interaction. Because of this, anxiety in EMI classrooms became more complex than ordinary speaking activities. This finding is in line with previous studies which explain that EMI students often experience pressure from both language and academic content at the same time (Dafouz & Smit, 2016; Macaro et al., 2018).

Similar findings were also reported by Li and Ruan (2023), who found that anxiety in EMI classrooms is closely connected to the challenge of understanding and explaining subject content through English. More broadly, language anxiety has also been linked to classroom interaction and learners' emotional experiences

during communication (Gregersen & MacIntyre, 2020).

One of the main findings in this study is that many students were more afraid of explaining scientific concepts incorrectly than making grammar mistakes. This suggests that conceptual understanding became more important for students than grammatical perfection during EMI classroom interaction. Unlike many traditional EFL speaking contexts where grammar is often seen as the main source of anxiety, students in EMI Science classrooms appeared to focus more on whether their explanation was scientifically correct. In the Indonesian context, this challenge may become stronger because students are still developing both English proficiency and academic understanding at the same time (Alam et al., 2024). Therefore, speaking anxiety in EMI classrooms cannot only be understood as a language problem, but also as pressure related to content understanding and classroom performance.

The findings also show that students did not respond to anxiety passively. Instead, they actively used different strategies to maintain participation during speaking activities. When students forgot vocabulary or experienced difficulties while speaking, many of them tried to simplify explanations, pause temporarily, use gestures, check notes, or switch to Indonesian before continuing their explanation. These findings show that students attempted to keep communication going even when they experienced difficulty. These strategies can be related to the concept of strategic competence proposed by Canale and Swain (1980), which emphasizes learners' ability to maintain communication despite language limitations.

In this study, communication strategies such as code-switching, simplification, and gestures were not merely signs of weakness, but functioned as adaptive resources that helped students continue participating during EMI interaction. Similar patterns have also been found in EMI research showing that students often rely on multilingual and non-verbal resources to maintain communication during classroom interaction (Rose & McKinley, 2018; Sato & Loewen, 2019). Recent EMI research also shows that adaptive communication strategies help students sustain participation despite language difficulties (Xu & Pan, 2025).

Another important finding is related to self-regulation during speaking activities. Before speaking, many students prepared themselves by reviewing materials, writing notes, practicing explanations, and trying to calm themselves mentally. During speaking, they monitored their performance and adjusted their strategies depending on the situation. After speaking, several participants still reflected on mistakes they had made. These patterns are closely related to Zimmerman's (2000) concept of self-regulated learning, which involves planning, monitoring, and reflection.

The findings indicate that students' anxiety management involved not only communication strategies, but also emotional regulation and self-monitoring processes. Similar findings have also been reported in studies showing that

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students who are able to regulate their emotions and strategies tend to participate more confidently in speaking activities (Teng & Zhang, 2020; Zhang & Zhang, 2019). In addition, systematic reviews on coping strategies also show that students commonly use cognitive and emotional regulation strategies to manage speaking anxiety in academic settings (Tee et al., 2020).

The classroom environment also influenced students' speaking experiences. Most participants felt more comfortable speaking in small-group discussions because they experienced less pressure compared to speaking in front of the whole class. In addition, supportive teachers and classmates helped students feel more confident during classroom activities. Some students also mentioned that classrooms which were active and interactive made them feel more relaxed, while classrooms that became too quiet increased nervousness. This finding supports sociocultural perspectives which emphasize the importance of interaction and social support in the learning process (Vygotsky, 1978; Lantolf & Thorne, 2006).

Similar patterns were also found in previous EMI studies showing that supportive classroom environments can help students participate more actively and reduce anxiety during communication (Galloway & Ruegg, 2020; Pun & Jin, 2021). Other EMI studies also suggest that classroom interaction and instructional support strongly influence students' willingness to communicate and participate during learning activities (Li & Dewaele, 2021; Hu & Wu, 2020).

Overall, the findings suggest that speaking anxiety in EMI Science classrooms should not only be viewed as a negative barrier. Although students experienced nervousness, pressure, and fear during speaking activities, they also continuously adjusted their strategies in order to maintain participation. In other words, students did not simply experience anxiety passively but actively negotiated communication difficulties during classroom interaction. This study therefore shows that speaking anxiety, strategic competence, self-regulation, and classroom support were closely connected in shaping students' participation in EMI classrooms.

5. Conclusion

This study examined how students experience and manage speaking anxiety in English-Medium Instruction (EMI) Science classrooms. The findings show that students' anxiety was influenced by several interconnected factors, including language difficulties, challenges in explaining scientific concepts, and classroom conditions. In this context, students were generally more concerned about explaining concepts correctly than producing grammatically perfect sentences. This suggests that conceptual understanding became more important than grammatical accuracy during EMI classroom interaction.

The findings also show that students did not simply experience anxiety passively. Instead, they actively used different strategies to maintain participation during speaking activities, such as preparation, simplifying explanations, self-correction, gestures, code-switching, pausing, and emotional regulation. In

addition, supportive teachers, peer interaction, and active classroom environments also helped reduce students' anxiety and encouraged them to participate more confidently during classroom interaction.

Overall, the findings indicate that speaking anxiety in EMI Science classrooms should not only be viewed as a learning barrier, but also as part of a learning process in which students continuously adjust their strategies in order to sustain participation. This study also highlights how speaking anxiety, strategic competence, self-regulation, and classroom support are closely connected in shaping students' speaking experiences in EMI classrooms.

However, this study was still limited to a relatively small number of participants within one school context, so the findings may not fully represent wider EMI settings. Therefore, future studies are encouraged to examine similar issues in different educational levels, subjects, or classroom contexts, as well as explore more deeply how classroom interaction and instructional support influence students' anxiety management and participation during EMI learning.

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