

Gendered Discourse in EFL Speaking Classrooms: Patterns of Participation and Response Among Pesantren University Students

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Abstract: *This study investigates whether tutor questioning mediates gendered participation of non-English-major students with pesantren educational backgrounds in mixed-gender EFL speaking classrooms in Indonesia. Previous studies have documented how classroom discourse and participation occur in different educational settings under gendered terms. Nonetheless, little research has examined how students' previous educational experiences – especially those of students from pesantren traditions, with teacher-centered authority, primarily single-sex education, and strong communal values – affect their participation in tutor–student interaction in the university EFL classroom. Based on Vygotsky's (1978) Sociocultural Theory, Norton's (2013) theory of learner investment, and gendered communication theories, this qualitative multiple-case study analyzed two mixed-gender EFL speaking classes within a university in Indonesia. Data were obtained through classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, and questionnaires administered to students. The results show tutor questioning served as a mediational tool, facilitating student participation through probing and follow-up questions, translanguaging, lexical assistance, and positive reinforcement. Although female students tended to volunteer more frequently and provide more elaborate responses, while male students were more likely to need tutor prompting before extending their contributions, these differences in responses seemed to rely on interactional tendencies rather than fixed gender characteristics. Students' lived experiences of learning contributed to their management of speaking anxiety, to their interpretation of tutor questioning, and to their participation in class. The study adds to the literature by illustrating the role of tutor questioning in promoting participation through interaction and showing that the correlation between gender and classroom discourse emerges from learners' sociocultural educational backgrounds rather than from gender alone.*

Keywords: *EFL speaking; gendered participation; learner investment; pesantren education; sociocultural mediation; tutor questioning*



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INTRODUCTION

Stepping into a mixed-gender university EFL speaking class can be a quietly disorienting experience for students who have spent years learning inside pesantren walls. Indonesian Islamic boarding schools—pesantren—are built around routines that prize collective discipline, deference to religious teachers, and, in many cases, strict separation of the sexes. When *santri* (pesantren students) leave those environments and enter the noisy, interactive reality of a communicative speaking course, they carry those habits with them (As-Sa'idah & Ismail, 2024; Pratiwi et al., 2023). Understanding how these educational experiences shape the classroom discourse and participation of male and female students is the central focus of the present study.

Gender differences in EFL classroom discourse have been widely investigated. Most studies have been conducted in Western educational settings or mainstream Asian EFL classrooms, examining learners' participation patterns, classroom interaction, and teacher–student communication (Holmes & Wilson, 2022; Sunderland, 2000; Tannen, 1990). Collectively, these studies suggest that gender influences participation patterns, response strategies, and opportunities for classroom interaction. However, these studies have generally examined educational environments in which mixed-gender interaction is a routine feature of classroom life.

Far less attention has been given to students whose communicative practices have been shaped by distinctive sociocultural and institutional traditions prior to entering higher education. One example is the Indonesian pesantren, where learning is commonly characterized by hierarchical teacher–student relationships, strong community discipline, and, in many institutions, single-sex educational environments. Such experiences may influence students' willingness to participate, their perceptions of classroom interaction, and strategies for responding in mixed-gender university EFL speaking classes. Existing studies have largely interpreted gendered classroom discourse in terms of participation patterns, communication styles, or classroom opportunities (Koyuncu et al., 2023; Liu et al., 2023; Wu et al., 2024). Such perspectives provide valuable insights but offer limited explanation of how learners' prior educational histories mediate their participation when they encounter new interactional norms in university EFL classrooms.

The significance of this gap extends beyond the pesantren context. Existing studies have shown that gender shapes classroom participation, yet they provide limited explanation of how learners' prior educational experiences mediate participation when they encounter new interactional norms. Addressing this limitation requires a sociocultural perspective that conceptualizes participation as emerging from the interaction among educational histories, learner identities, and classroom mediation, rather than from gender alone. The theoretical importance of this gap lies in the fact that gendered classroom discourse cannot simply be viewed through the lens of gender itself. Rather, it is mediated by learners' prior educational experiences and sociocultural identities. Understanding these interactional patterns, therefore, requires a perspective that recognizes participation as socially mediated rather than individually determined. Sociocultural Theory (Vygotsky, 1978) provides such a framework by explaining how learners' previous educational experiences continue to shape classroom interaction, while learner investment explains why learners choose to participate under particular social conditions. In doing so, it builds on previous research by illustrating how gendered interaction is constructed within a unique educational culture rather than assuming that patterns reported in mainstream EFL settings apply equally across contexts.

This study contributes to the literature in three ways. First of all, it contributes to research on gendered classroom discourse by focusing on pupils from pesantren backgrounds (a context that has received limited attention in EFL research). Second, it relates Sociocultural Theory and learner investment to account for how prior educational history mediates gendered participation in mixed-gender classrooms. Third, it employs qualitative accounts based on classroom observations, interviews, and student questionnaires that detail how gendered discourse is enacted in a unique sociocultural context and contributes to both theoretical and pedagogical insights. This paper focuses directly on those gendered patterns. Using Vygotsky's (1978) Sociocultural Theory, Norton's (2013) notion of learner investment, and gender-based communication frameworks (Holmes & Wilson, 2022; Sunderland, 2000), it asks three questions:

1. What gendered patterns of participation are evident among students with pesantren educational backgrounds in mixed-gender EFL speaking classrooms?
2. How are these gendered patterns reflected in students' discourse practices when responding to tutor questioning?
3. How do students' pesantren educational experiences help explain these participation and discourse patterns?

The aim is not to flatten these students into gender stereotypes but to take seriously the ways that institutional history—in this case, pesantren education—interacts with gender to produce the interactional patterns tutors actually encounter in the classroom.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Gendered Discourse in EFL Classrooms

Gendered classroom discourse is better viewed as an interactional and context-dependent phenomenon rather than a fixed difference between male and female learners. Gender may be associated with differences in participation, turn-taking, response elaboration, and interactional styles, but patterns differ across cultural and institutional settings (Sunderland, 2000; Holmes & Wilson, 2022). In EFL classrooms, some studies have found that female learners elaborate more or participate more continuously, whereas male learners may participate only briefly or respond selectively (Qodriani & Muti'ah, 2017; Akther, 2023). These findings should not, therefore, be taken as universal characteristics of either gender since classroom interaction and sociocultural expectations shape how participation is enacted.

In this study, gendered discourse refers to recurring differences in how male and female students enter, construct, and sustain classroom interaction (turn-taking, response length, elaboration, hesitation, confirmation seeking, willingness to continue speaking). Gender is treated here as an interactional dimension rather than a causal or fixed characteristic. It is particularly relevant for students whose participation practices have been conditioned by a particular educational history (pesantren education).

Sociocultural Theory and Mediated Participation

Sociocultural Theory (SCT) views learning as socially mediated through interaction, language, and culturally organized activity (Vygotsky, 1978). Classroom participation does not come from ability or confidence alone. Tutors and peers can mediate classroom participation through questioning, prompting, reformulation, lexical assistance, etc., so that learners can extend what they can produce independently (Lantolf & Poehner, 2023). This perspective is especially useful for studying tutor questioning in speaking classrooms: a student's short or hesitant response may develop into a longer contribution if the tutor asks follow-up questions or linguistic support; participation can be understood as co-constructed through interaction. For the present study, SCT offers a framework to study how tutor questioning mediates students' opportunities to participate and sustain spoken interaction.

Learner Investment and Participation

Norton's (2013) concept of learner investment complements SCT by explaining why learners might choose to participate differently within particular social contexts. Investment refers to learners' identities, social positioning, and perceptions of value and consequences of participating in a language practice. Learners may be interested in improving their English but still hesitate to speak if participation entails linguistic or social risks (e.g., making errors or being evaluated publicly).

This perspective is relevant to mixed-gender speaking classrooms because students' decisions about whether to volunteer, wait for nomination, seek confirmation, or limit a response may depend on how they position themselves within the interaction. In the present study, SCT explains participation through classroom interaction, and learner investment helps explain situated decisions by learners as to whether to enter, sustain, or limit that interaction.

Pesantren Context and Research Gap

Pesantren provide an important sociocultural context for studying these processes. Previous research describes pesantren education as characterized by structured relationships, discipline, respect for authority, and communal educational practices (Dhian Marita Sari 2023; Elisya, 2023). Some students also experience gender segregated educational or residential settings. These experiences might influence expectations about teacher–student relations and interaction with peers when they enter university classrooms later on. These prior experiences should not be taken as deterministic explanations of gendered behavior but rather as context for how students participate in university EFL classrooms, which require spontaneous speaking, elaboration, and interaction across gender groups (this is especially true where students have few opportunities to use English outside the classroom).

Gendered classroom discourse has been studied extensively, but less so the interactional mediation of gendered participation tendencies among university EFL learners with pesantren educational backgrounds. Studies have shown that gender can influence classroom discourse, but the interaction among gender, prior educational experience, tutor mediation, and learner investment is less well understood here. The present study fills this gap by examining how male and female pesantren-background students participate in and construct responses to tutors' questions in mixed-gender university EFL speaking classrooms. Bringing SCT and learner investment together, the study views gendered participation not as a fixed learner characteristic but as a situated process shaped by interaction, social positioning, and educational history.

METHOD

Research Design

A qualitative multiple-case study design (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Yin, 2018) was employed to investigate how gendered participation and discourse practices were enacted in mixed-gender EFL speaking classrooms among students with pesantren educational backgrounds. Because of this, a qualitative case study was deemed suitable, as it allows the examination of complex social phenomena in their real-life contexts and enables the researcher to study classroom interaction as it naturally occurs, rather than as a numerical phenomenon.

Two cases were included in the study, with each mixed-gender class in which students spoke EFL considered a bounded case. Each classroom was a discrete instructional context in which tutor questioning, student participation, and gendered discourse developed in the everyday classroom interaction. Following Yin (2018), each classroom was treated as a bounded case because it represented a naturally occurring instructional setting in which gendered classroom discourse could be examined within its real-life context. The analysis of a pair of cases helped the scholars to recognize recurring patterns across classrooms and contextual variations in interactional practices. This cross-case comparison enhanced the study's analytical rigor by enabling analysis in the context of recurring patterns rather than from a single classroom observation.

Within each case, classroom discourse was examined through interactions between one tutor and students during EFL speaking activities. Because a different tutor taught each classroom, the two cases provided opportunities to examine whether gendered participation and discourse practices recurred across distinct instructional contexts rather than reflecting a single instructor's teaching style. Classroom observations, audio-video recordings, interviews, and questionnaires were used to capture multiple perspectives on classroom interaction. The integration of these data sources enabled methodological triangulation. It provided a comprehensive understanding of how students' pesantren educational backgrounds and gender shaped participation and discourse practices in mixed-gender EFL speaking classrooms.

Research Setting and Participants

The study was carried out at one of the Islamic universities in Madura, East Java, Indonesia, in two naturally occurring mixed-gender EFL speaking classes taught by two experienced tutors. The two classes were chosen to enable cross-case comparison of gendered participation and discourse across different instructional settings. Participants were 34 undergraduate students (18 female and 16 male) and two EFL speaking tutors. Students were purposively selected on three criteria: they had completed at least three years of pesantren education before entering university; were enrolled in the selected speaking courses; and voluntarily agreed to participate (some had attended a single-sex pesantren while others attended a coeducational one). Two tutors were chosen because they had experience teaching speaking and students from pesantren backgrounds. To protect confidentiality, students were coded S1–S34 and the tutors T1 and T2 throughout the analysis and reporting, with identifying information removed. Ethical approval was obtained from the university before data collection. All participants gave informed written consent and were told that participation was voluntary. To protect confidentiality, students were coded S1–S34 and the tutors T1 and T2 throughout the analysis and reporting, with identifying information removed.

Data Collection

Data were collected from four sources: classroom observations, audio-video recordings, semi-structured interviews, and student questionnaires. Each of the two classes was observed three times (6 sessions) for tutor questioning, participation, and gendered discourse during speaking activities. Field notes recorded turn-taking, response length, types of questions asked, and observable interactional behaviors (hesitation/willingness to participate). All sessions were audio-video-recorded to support subsequent discourse analysis through cross-checking with field notes.

Following the observations, semi-structured interviews were conducted with tutors and eight purposively selected students (four female and four male) at varying levels of classroom participation. The interview topics covered students' experiences in class, responses to tutor questions, mixed-gender interactions, and the relevance of pesantren educational backgrounds to participation. All 34 students also completed a questionnaire with Likert-scale and open-ended items about perceived involvement, speaking anxiety, confidence, and engagement. The questionnaire was used as supporting evidence; observations, recordings, and interviews provided a primary qualitative account. Combined, they triangulated findings.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted iteratively across classroom observations, audio-video recordings, semi-structured interviews, and questionnaires. The recordings were transcribed to capture tutor-student interaction, including responses, pauses, hesitation, and follow-up turns, and were compared with observation notes. Students were coded S1–S34 and tutors T1–T2 to maintain anonymity and consistency.

Classroom discourse was analyzed through a combination of deductive and inductive coding. Initial codes were informed by research on classroom interaction, gendered participation, and teacher questioning, particularly participation behavior, turn-taking, response elaboration, and interactional support (Qodriani & Muti'ah, 2017; Sunderland, 2000; Walsh, 2011). These categories served as sensitizing concepts rather than predetermined assumptions about gender. Through repeated reading and comparison of the transcripts, the coding was refined to capture patterns that emerged in the data. This process resulted in seven analytical dimensions: interactional engagement, articulation, participation pattern, speaking anxiety, response length, confirmation-seeking, and risk-taking.

The seven dimensions were used as analytical lenses rather than as fixed characteristics or independent measures of gender. Interactional engagement referred to students' volunteering, initiation, and sustained participation; articulation concerned clarity, fluency, fragmentation, and elaboration; participation pattern captured how students entered and maintained classroom interaction; speaking anxiety concerned

reported nervousness and observable hesitation; response length distinguished brief from elaborated responses; confirmation-seeking referred to requests for confirmation of language or answer accuracy; and risk-taking concerned students' willingness to continue speaking despite linguistic uncertainty or possible errors. The dimensions were compared across the two classrooms to identify recurring tendencies and differences between cases.

Interview data were thematically analyzed following Braun and Clarke (2006), focusing on students' and tutors' accounts of participation, tutor questioning, mixed-gender interaction, and pesantren educational experiences. Eight students (four female and four male), representing different observed participation levels, were interviewed. Questionnaire responses were used as supporting evidence rather than as a separate quantitative component. Likert-scale responses were descriptively reviewed, while open-ended responses were compared with interview and classroom data; no inferential statistical analysis was conducted.

Finally, findings from the four sources were compared to identify convergence and divergence. Classroom recordings provided evidence of interactional behavior; observation notes captured contextual and nonverbal features; interviews captured participants' perspectives; and questionnaires provided additional evidence of perceived participation, confidence, and anxiety. Trustworthiness was supported through member checking with four student interviewees, peer debriefing with a colleague not involved in the study, and a detailed contextual description.

To make the analytical procedure explicit, Table 1 shows how the seven dimensions identified through iterative coding were operationalized. The dimensions were chosen because they occurred across the classroom data and were relevant to the study's focus on gendered participation and responses to tutor questioning. They were not intended as quantitative measures or indicators of gender difference but rather a structured way of comparing how participation was enacted in the two classrooms.

Table 1.
Development and Operationalization of the Seven Analytical Dimensions

Analytical dimension	Operational focus on the data	Main evidence
Interactional Engagement	Volunteering, initiating responses, responding to tutor nomination, and sustaining interaction across turns	Classroom transcripts and observations
Articulation	Clarity, fluency, fragmentation, hesitation, and elaboration in spoken responses	Classroom transcripts
Participation Pattern	Frequency and manner of entering classroom interaction, including voluntary and tutor-elicited participation	Classroom observations and transcripts
Speaking Anxiety	Reported nervousness, fear of errors, public-speaking apprehension, and observable hesitation	Interviews, questionnaires, and observations

Response Length	Brief versus extended responses, including explanations, experiences, and supporting details	Classroom transcripts
Confirmation-Seeking	Explicit requests for confirmation concerning vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, or answer accuracy	Classroom transcripts and interviews
Risk-taking	Willingness to attempt, continue, or elaborate despite linguistic uncertainty or errors	Classroom observations and interviews

The seven analytical dimensions in Table 1 were not taken as fixed categories from a single previous study but rather emerged iteratively through analysis of classroom interaction data. Initial coding was guided by the study's focus on gendered classroom participation and tutor–student interaction (how students entered, responded to, and sustained classroom talk). Repeated examination and comparison of transcripts and observation notes from the two classrooms revealed recurring patterns which we refined into seven dimensions: interactional engagement; articulation; participation pattern; speaking anxiety; response length; confirmation-seeking and risk-taking. The dimensions were used as lenses for describing observable tendencies in interaction (not male or female characteristics) so that the categories could be compared across cases. At the same time, interpretations were grounded in what actually happened in the classroom.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

The study results about gendered participation and discourse practices in two mixed-gender EFL speaking classes attended by students with pesantren educational backgrounds are presented in this section. Findings were structured through the common interactional motifs derived from classroom observations, audio-video recordings, interviews, and questionnaire responses. Instead of treating participation as a discrete variable (gender), the analysis considers involvement as mediated by gender, prior pesantren educational experiences, and classroom interaction. The findings are described using evidence from various data sources and discussed in relation to the study's theoretical framing and prior work.

Overview of Gendered Participation Pattern

Analysis of the three sessions observed in each of the two classrooms showed that female and male students had recurring differences in how they entered, maintained, and managed participation during EFL speaking activities. Differences were found between the two tutor-led cases, but not in the same way across all interactions. Seven dimensions relevant to the study were identified (interactional engagement, articulation, participation pattern, speaking anxiety, response length, confirmation seeking, and risk taking). These

dimensions are treated as interactional tendencies rather than fixed characteristics of female or male learners.

In both classrooms, female students volunteered responses more often and sustained turns with explanations, personal experiences, or additional details; male students also participated actively but more often followed tutor nominations or prompting before extending their responses. The two groups were also very similar in many ways: both were nervous about speaking English, and both received support from tutors when constructing or extending their responses. So the data do not show that there was simply a difference in the level of participation each group had (although they do). They show differences in how participation was initiated, sustained, and negotiated during classroom interaction.

Table 2.
Summary of Gendered Participation Patterns During Tutor Questioning

Analytical Dimension	Female Students	Male Students	Primary Evidence
Interactional Engagement	More frequently volunteered responses and sustained interaction across successive tutor-student turns.	More often entered interaction following tutor nomination or additional prompting, although they also sustained interaction when supported.	Classroom observations; T1 & T2 transcripts
Articulation	Often produced relatively elaborate responses, although grammatical and pronunciation difficulties were still evident.	Responses were often shorter or fragmented and were sometimes extended through tutor follow-up questions.	Classroom transcripts
Participation Pattern	Frequently participated voluntarily in discussions, vocabulary activities, and speaking tasks.	Participated actively when invited but showed fewer voluntary responses during whole-class interaction.	Classroom observations; classroom transcripts
Speaking Anxiety	Reported nervousness and concern about grammatical or pronunciation errors, but often continued speaking following tutor encouragement.	Also reported anxiety related to pronunciation and public speaking, which was sometimes accompanied by hesitation before responding.	Student interviews; questionnaire
Response Length	Responses more often contained explanations, personal experiences, or supporting details beyond the immediate answer.	Responses were more often brief and were sometimes extended following tutor probing or follow-up questions.	Classroom transcripts
Confirmation-Seeking	More frequently used explicit confirmation-seeking moves concerning vocabulary, grammar, or answer accuracy while remaining engaged in the interaction.	More often displayed hesitation or waited for tutor assistance rather than explicitly requesting confirmation.	Classroom transcripts; interviews

Risk-Taking	Often continued attempting to communicate despite linguistic uncertainty or errors, particularly when tutor support was available.	Participation was sometimes more cautious when linguistic difficulties became apparent, with continued engagement facilitated by tutor prompting and scaffolding.	Classroom observations; interviews
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Table 2 gives the recurring patterns we found across the two cases. The most consistent difference was how students entered and continued interaction. Female students more often started participating on their own and extended their turns, whereas male students more often came in after tutor nomination or further prompting; but this was not that male students were unwilling or unable to participate: when tutors continued to ask questions or gave lexical support or prompted students to elaborate, male students also extended their responses.

The similarity between the groups is also important. Female and male students reported nervousness about speaking English (pronunciation, grammar, and making mistakes in public). Classroom data also showed that tutor support could alter the interactional trajectories of students in both groups. So the findings suggest that gendered participation in these classrooms was better understood as different interactional tendencies within shared classroom conditions than as unequal opportunities or stable differences in speaking ability.

Interactional Engagement Through Tutor Questioning

Classroom observations in each of the two cases showed that interactional engagement was not driven by individual willingness to speak alone, rather, it was co-constructed through successive tutor questioning. Instead of asking isolated questions, both tutors developed questioning sequences that encouraged learners to elaborate, clarify, and refine their responses. Such sequences were often marked by probing questions, translanguaging, lexical support, and positive reinforcement to keep students engaged despite limited English proficiency. While female students tended to produce longer responses, male and female participants both expanded their contributions when the tutors provided continuous interactional support.

Excerpt 1. Probing questions supporting response elaboration (Tutor 1)

Tutor : What is hometown actually?
Student : Because I *lahir di Cirebon*. [was born in Cirebon].
Tutor : Okay, you were born in Cirebon. What does it mean?
Student : Tidak ngerti bu [I don't understand, Ma'am].
Tutor : Maybe you can explain what hometown actually is.
Student : Beda kota [a different city].
Tutor : Different city? What does it mean?

...

Tutor : Hometown here is the place where you were born.

In excerpt 1, instead of correcting the student's first response, the tutor continued the conversation with probing questions and rephrasing. Rather than providing the answer immediately, she kept encouraging the student to re-engage with the concept, allowed partial responses, and permitted the use of Indonesian ("*Tidak ngerti bu*"; "*Beda kota*") before gradually reconstructing the meaning in English. Interaction techniques like these served as support by fostering collaborative development of understanding of the concept rather than through direct correction.

Excerpt 2. Follow-up questioning extending participation (Tutor 2)

Tutor : Please tell me about your family.
Student : My family is the best.
Tutor : Do you love them?
Student : Yes.
Tutor : Why?
Student : Because my family is very important for me.
Tutor : Why are they so important for you?
Student : Because there is my family.
Tutor : *Apa?* [What?] That's okay *dicampur* [mixed].

In excerpt 2, the tutor transformed a brief presentation into a prolonged interaction with follow-up questions that followed a series of inquiries. Each time, the learner was required to elaborate rather than confirm something. By doing this, when the student struggled to explain the reason in English, the tutor explicitly allowed the use of Indonesian ("*That's okay dicampur*") to reduce linguistic pressure and ensure participation. This sequence emphasizes how questioning acted as a mediation tool that promoted interaction, rather than simply assessing language accuracy. Another excerpt for follow-up questioning from Tutor 1,

Excerpt 3

Tutor : Have you ever been there?
Student : Yes.
Tutor : With whom?
Student : With my friend.
Tutor : How many friends?
Student : *Dua* [two].
Tutor : What do you think about this place?
Student : *Pantai* [beach] .
Tutor : I know this is a beach. I need your opinion about this place.
Student : Calm.
Tutor : Only that?

In excerpt 3, the interaction demonstrates that the tutor repeatedly extended the conversational sequence instead of accepting brief responses as complete answers. Questions moved from factual recall ("Have you ever been there?") toward personal

evaluation ("What do you think about this place?"), gradually increasing the cognitive and linguistic demands placed on the learner. Even when responses remained minimal, the tutor continued to prompt elaboration, indicating that interactional engagement was viewed as an ongoing collaborative process rather than a series of isolated question-and-answer exchanges. Comparable interactional support was evident in Tutor 2's classroom, although it was organized differently.

Excerpt 4

Tutor : Please tell me about your family.
Student : My family is the best.
Tutor : Do you love them?
Student : Yes.
Tutor : Why? What is the reason?
Student : Because my family is very important for me.
Tutor : Why are they so important for you?
Student : Because there is my family.
Tutor : *Apa?* [What?] That's okay *dicampur* [mixed]. That's okay.

In this excerpt 4, Tutor 2's questioning appeared more structured than Tutor 1's, though it performed the same mediational task. Instead of judging the initial statement, the tutor used successive questions to prompt explanation and justification. Translanguaging in this context meant that when a learner had difficulty fully expressing an idea in English, it was explicitly legitimized, enabling the interaction to continue without interrupting participation. The tutor's response also underscores that getting learners involved mattered more than achieving instant linguistic accuracy.

Questioning thus served as a mediational practice as learners progressively integrated participation across both classrooms. In Tutor 1's case, engagement was generally promoted through exploratory questioning, repeated probing, and negotiated meaning. In contrast, in Tutor 2's case, structured elicitation was combined with vocabulary and grammatical support before prolonged oral production was needed. Despite these stylistic contrasts, both tutors were able to transform even brief learner responses into lengthy interactional sequences by sustaining dialogue with prompt and follow-up questions, rather than concluding conversations after initial responses.

Such interactional patterns also offer insight into the gendered participation we found in this study. Female students more frequently initiated voluntary responses and sustained longer turns, and male students required further prompting before developing their ideas. But in the group excerpts, participants' involvement increased whenever the tutors provided continuous scaffolding through questioning. Thus, participation should be seen as an interactionally mediated process that took place through classroom discussion, rather than a mere expression of gender on its own.

Interactional engagement in both classrooms manifested in sustained sequences of questioning rather than isolated teacher questions. While the tutors exhibited different

interactional styles (Tutor 1 emphasizing exploratory questioning and Tutor 2 combining structured elicitation with vocabulary support), they both facilitated opportunities for extended response through scaffolded interaction.

Response Construction During Tutor Questioning

In classroom activities, students' responses rarely manifested as single utterances following a specific tutor's question. Instead, responses were gradually built through interactional sequences in which tutors would employ probing questions, translanguaging, lexical assistance, reformulation, and positive reinforcement. Rather than basing their judgments solely on grammatical accuracy, both instructors treated students' initial answers as starting points for further interaction. This was an interactional process that helped learners put their ideas together, access words, and expand their responses despite their lack of proficiency in English.

Excerpt 3. Constructing responses through probing and translanguaging (Tutor 1)

- Tutor : What do you think about this place?
Student : *Pantai* [beach].
Tutor : I know this is a beach. I need your opinion about this place because you have said you have ever been there.
Student : Mmmmm...
Tutor : What do you think?
Student : Calm.
Tutor : Only that?

In excerpt 3, however, in contrast to a typical Initiation–Response–Evaluation (IRE) pattern, the tutor did not end the interaction after receiving the student's minimal response. Instead, she changed the task by separating factual identification ("This is a beach") from opinion expression, regularly prompting the learner to elaborate. For example, the student's hesitant responses, "Mmmmm" and "Calm," were seen as resources for continued interaction, not failures. The multiple prompts inspired the learner to move beyond single-word answers, indicating that tutor questioning was not merely a matter of knowledge checking but of interactional scaffolding. A similar mediational strategy appeared when students experienced lexical difficulties. Instead of demanding the exclusive use of English, the tutor explicitly permitted translanguaging to maintain interaction.

Excerpt 4. Translanguaging as interactional mediation (Tutor 2)

- Tutor : Why are they so important for you?
Student : Because there is my family.
Tutor : *Apa?* [What?] That's okay *dicampur* [mixed]. That's okay.

In excerpt 4, rather than address the learner's incomplete English response, the tutor legitimized the use of Indonesian by explicitly stating that mixed-language responses were

acceptable. This exchange reduced communicative tension while enabling the learner to continue discussing ideas. Translanguaging thus was a kind of mediational tool that allowed participation at points of linguistic difficulty, rather than a sign that they had failed to communicate. Lexical help was also embedded in questioning sequences. Instead of providing vocabulary information before interaction began, tutors offered students lexical support only when it was necessary to keep speaking.

Excerpt 5. Lexical scaffolding during questioning (Tutor 2)

Tutor : How to say orang tua in English?
Students : Parents.
Tutor : How to say parents? *Hurufnya apa saja?* [What are the letters?]
Student : P... A... R... E... N... T... S.
Tutor : Good job guys. Please come forward first and tell about your family in English.

In excerpt 5, it shows that vocabulary instruction came within communicative interaction, not in isolation as drilling. Then, in an extended speaking task, the tutor asked students to use the lexical item they had constructed together. Vocabulary support thus acted as a bridge to spontaneous production rather than an end in itself. Both tutors employed positive reinforcement and reformulation simultaneously to sustain learner engagement in both classrooms. Responses that followed hesitant or partly correct answers — "Great," "Good," "Okay," "That's okay" — often came before prompts or clarification requests were added later on by tutors. By focusing on maintaining the interactional flow, both tutors allowed students time to revise and expand their responses, and they did not interrupt the process with immediate correction. It can be inferred that response construction was a collaborative process in which tutors gradually guided learners toward more complete and meaningful utterances through successive interactional support.

Pesantren Experiences and Sociocultural Mediation of Participation

Based on interview data and classroom observation, students' participation was closely linked to their previous educational experiences in pesantren. Rather than directly determining participation, such experiences conditioned students' initial confidence, interactional expectations, and willingness to respond during English-speaking activities. Across both classrooms, tutors mediated these previous experiences via questioning sequences that gradually reduced hesitation and encouraged learners to participate. From a sociocultural perspective, participation emerged as a function of the relationship between learners' educational histories and the mediational support provided during classroom discourse.

Excerpt 6. Encouraging participation through supportive questioning (Tutor 2)

- Tutor : Please tell me about your grandparents.
Student : Grandparents is the best.
Tutor : Okay. As I told you, don't make me bad mood in the class. So, please tell me about your grandparents.
Student : Enough, *ibu* [Ma'am].
Tutor : No, come on. More, more.
Student : *Udah bu itu saja* [That's enough, Ma'am. That's all].
Tutor : The best, why you say that they are the best for you?

In excerpt 6, this interaction demonstrates that students' unwillingness to elaborate further did not end the interaction. Instead of accepting the brief response or substituting it with her own explanation, the tutor continued to ask the learner to elaborate on what she had just said, narrowing the question and requesting justification. The tutor did not focus on linguistic accuracy so much as sustaining the participants' participation so that the learner developed ideas over time and through dialogue.

The interviews also helped shed light on the recurrent interactional patterns. Many students reported arriving to university classrooms with limited experience expressing their thoughts in English, especially in mixed-gender speaking activities. One participant explained:

"At the beginning I was afraid of making mistakes because in pesantren we usually listened to the teacher more than speaking ourselves. When the tutor kept asking questions, I became more confident to continue." (S7-F, student interview)

Another student reflected:

"If the tutor immediately corrected us, I became nervous. But when she asked another question or allowed us to explain in Indonesian first, it became easier to answer." (S12-F, student interview)

These statements from interviews add to the classroom observations by showing that students were not acting shyly as a unique trait of the individual, but as part of interactional expectations they had evolved through previous schooling. Tutor questioning was thus a form of mediational support that, over time, changed how learners participated rather than just recording their speaking ability.

Similar patterns occurred in Tutor 1's classroom when students experienced difficulty responding to conceptual questions. Instead of stopping the interaction when students showed uncertainty, the tutor revised questions, accepted partial responses, and urged learners to integrate Indonesian and English until they could construct more complete responses. The gradual transition and transformation from hesitation to participation exemplifies the dynamic scaffolding process proposed in Sociocultural Theory, in which learning is undertaken through interaction and assistance from others until the task is completed independently.

Crucially, these results also explain the gendered patterns of participation found earlier in the research. Female students' responses tended to be longer and more complex, and male students' responses were more likely to require extra prompting to continue. However, the interactional sequence of these differences indicated that these discrepancies are not fixed or deterministic. It was found in both classrooms that continuing tutor questioning, translanguaging, and positive reinforcers allowed learners from both groups to participate more fully at each point in the interaction. Accordingly, gendered participation should be interpreted as an interactional propensity facilitated by learning experiences and classroom support, rather than a trait shared by male or female students.

Taken together, it seems that tutor questioning served as a sociocultural tool that linked students' prior educational experiences to novel opportunities to engage in university EFL classrooms. Thus, by prompting elaboration, legitimizing translanguaging, and granting contingent support, tutors established interactional conditions that enabled learners to negotiate meaning, develop confidence, and engage more fully in English-speaking activities. These findings provide additional support for the notion that participation is co-constructed through classroom engagement rather than determined by one's gender or prior education.

Discussion

This research examined tutor questioning as a mediator for the participation of non-English-major students with pesantren educational backgrounds in mixed-gender EFL speaking classrooms. The results indicated that student participation was shaped by the types of questions posed by tutors, as well as by the interactional processes through which questioning, scaffolding, and sociocultural experiences were negotiated during classroom discourse. Instead of seeing participation as a static individual trait, the findings indicate participation arose from dynamic interaction between tutors and students in specific sociocultural situations. This article analyses these results in consideration of Sociocultural Theory, learner investment, and prior studies on classroom interaction and EFL speaking instruction. Tutor questioning emerged as a sociocultural mediational tool that facilitated students with pesantren educational backgrounds to engage more actively in EFL speaking classrooms. Even when female and male students had different tendencies toward interaction, these differences were mediated by tutor questioning rather than determined by gender itself.

Tutor Questioning as Sociocultural Mediation of Participation

The present research demonstrates that tutor questioning contributed to a phenomenon beyond pedagogical practice for stimulating responses, as it mediated a sociocultural process in which students actively co-constructed their participation in EFL speaking classes. In both cases, questioning practices such as probing, follow-up

questioning, translanguaging, lexical assistance, and positive reinforcement enabled the students to move from short responses to longer, more meaningful interactions. Rather than viewing participation as something an individual could attain if he or she had linguistic skills or self-confidence, the results demonstrate that students' engagement stemmed from cooperating with tutors and peers. Participation in this sense was socially mediated rather than individually produced.

This formulation is based on Vygotsky's (1978) Sociocultural Theory, in which learning is understood as a socially mediated phenomenon in which cognitive development occurs through interactions with more knowledgeable others. In the observed classrooms, tutors continuously adapted their questions to students' immediate interactional needs. When students hesitated, tutors reframed questions, offered lexical support, encouraged translanguaging, or asked probing questions that guided learners toward more elaborated responses. These interactional shifts suggest scaffolding mechanisms in which instructional support enables students to do more than they could independently (Koyuncu et al., 2023; Lantolf & Thorne, 2007; Nguyen, 2012). Therefore, students' oral participation should not simply be seen as proof of existing speaking ability but as the product of mediated interaction in the classroom.

This study has been echoed in research that also underscores the role of classroom interaction in language learning. Walsh (2011) argues that effective classroom interaction depends not only on the quantity of teacher talk but also on teachers' ability to shape interaction in ways that maximize learning opportunities. Similarly, Hansen & Broekhuizen (2020) and Mercer & Howe (2012) highlight that productive dialogue emerges when teachers encourage learners to explain, justify, and elaborate their thinking rather than simply provide correct answers. These interactional strategies were exemplified in the current research, in which tutors repeatedly augmented students' responses with probing and follow-up questions, rather than halting the exchange when students provided few responses. Such continued interaction also provided opportunities for learners to organize ideas, negotiate meaning, and gradually develop confidence in speaking English (Koyuncu et al., 2023; Mageira et al., 2022).

One key contribution of this study is its demonstration that tutor questioning functioned as a mediation within the specific sociocultural context of students with pesantren educational backgrounds. Previous research has often focused on how teacher questioning might affect student engagement or speaking performance, often examining question types or response frequencies. More specifically, the present results suggest that the power of tutor questioning cannot be defined solely by the classification of questions. Rather, its efficacy depended on how questioning was practiced as an interactional act that responded to students' linguistic, cognitive, and affective needs in classroom communication (Mageira et al., 2022; Mahmud & Mohd Drus, 2023). To this end, questioning

emerged as a process of mediation whereby tutors and students collaborated to construct participation.

This understanding also helps to explain why the same questioning approaches elicited distinct interactional paths for diverse learners. All students came to the classroom with varied perspectives and confidence levels based on their prior educational backgrounds. However, the tutors' questioning methods consistently created space for participation: they reduced communicative pressure, elicited elaboration of responses, and maintained interaction despite linguistic limitations (Essel et al., 2022). Hence, successful questioning is not so much about good questions as sustaining interaction through responsive mediation, the study implies. This viewpoint extends our understanding of tutor questioning to recognize it as an interactional mechanism for the collaborative development of participation, confidence, and language learning in EFL classrooms.

Gendered Participation as Interactional Tendencies

Another key finding concerns gendered participation in the tutor questioning process. Despite differences in classroom behavior between female and male students, these differences could be interpreted as interactional tendencies rather than inherent gender characteristics. Classroom observations have indicated that female students tended to volunteer more readily; they sustained interaction through extended responses and elaborated their ideas with less prompting. The male students, on the other hand, were more likely to enter interaction after tutor nomination, and to need more prompting or encouragement for extended explanation before expanding their responses. These patterns, however, did not show unequal opportunities for participation. Rather, they represented varied patterns in how students responded to the same interactional environment elicited by tutor questioning.

This framing builds on previous studies examining gender and classroom discourse. Previous research often describes female students making greater contributions in language classrooms, while male students make fewer or shorter verbal contributions (Azhar & Iqbal, 2018; Ridayani et al., 2025; Saleem & Khan, 2025). To explain that, though, one concerns the risks of perceiving participation as an intrinsic quality of the gender. The present study suggests this interpretation takes on a greater nuance. In both identified classrooms, both male and female students actively participated when tutors used supportive questioning techniques, such as probing, follow-up questions, lexical assistance, and translanguaging. The distinctions were fundamentally about the interactive mechanisms through which participation emerged, rather than about students' propensity or ability to communicate.

This would be in line with Sociocultural Theory's contention that participation is socially mediated rather than determined by the individual (Vygotsky, 1978). In this light, the respondents' responses resulted from conversations with tutors who continuously

adjusted their questioning based on what the learner presented as an immediate need. When the interactional prompts were delivered to female students, their engagement was sustained more quickly. In male students, it could be extended only later with a good amount of scaffolding. These divergent trajectories demonstrate how participation emerged as co-constructed through classroom interaction, rather than being predicted by gender itself (Aguillon et al., 2020; Mundelsee & Reschke, 2025).

These findings also align with Norton's notion of learner investment by indicating that students' involvement in class is directly correlated with how they view classroom interaction and avenues for authentic engagement. Interview data indicated that both male and female students experienced speaking anxiety and concerns about making mistakes. However, tutor questioning, encouragement, and opportunities to negotiate meaning created environments where learners gradually invested more in classroom communication. Instead of reducing participation to a biological or psychological difference between male and female learners, these findings underscore a role for understanding gender in sociocultural and interactional terms.

Taken together, these findings contribute to the growing body of research that views gender as one factor shaping classroom interaction rather than a deterministic predictor of language-learning behavior. In the context of students with pesantren educational backgrounds, gendered participation was closely intertwined with previous educational experiences, classroom expectations, and the interactional support provided by tutors (As-Sa'idah & Ismail, 2024; Ayu et al., 2024; Soraya et al., 2025). Consequently, effective questioning practices should aim not to differentiate instruction based on gender stereotypes but to create equitable opportunities for all learners to participate, elaborate on their ideas, and develop confidence through collaborative classroom interaction.

Pesantren Educational Experiences and Learner Investment

The results also indicate that student involvement in tutor questioning is inseparable from the sociocultural environment in which their prior learning experiences were developed. While all respondents had a pesantren educational history, the interview data revealed that these experiences influenced how students interpreted classroom interactions, responded to tutors' questions, and negotiated opportunities to speak English in mixed-gender classrooms. The pesantren experiences did not directly motivate participation but shaped the conditions under which students invested in classroom communication.

An overriding theme in the interviews was students' high respect for their teachers and their concern about getting the correct answers before they could speak in public. This orientation mirrors the nature of educational culture commonly associated with pesantren. Educators occupy positions of academic and moral authority, encouraging followers to show respect through attentive listening and thoughtful responses. Such experiences help

explain why these people frequently sought confirmation, slowed down before responding, or hesitated before speaking altogether, as they were uncertain about their English. These behaviors should not be seen by socioculturally oriented participants as low or lacking confidence, but rather as culturally appropriate ways of interacting in teaching and learning in school environments (Chung, 2021; Meyers, 2023; Yates & Nguyen, 2012). Tutor questioning took on extra significance since tutors provided supportive opportunities for students to bypass these novice hesitations by leading, supporting, prompting, and scaffolding students to overcome these first moments of doubt.

The interviews also indicated the impact of students' prior experiences in predominantly single-gender learning settings. The university speaking classroom was, for several participants, the first sustained experience of communicating in English with both male and female classmates. Multiple male students stated they were afraid to speak at first, worrying their responses would be mistakes in front of female classmates, and female students reported preparing vocabulary and rehearsing possible responses before class to build their confidence. The results suggest that participation has been contingent upon the learners' negotiation of identity within a new interactional context, alongside their linguistic proficiency (Lee & Ahn, 2024; Nan, 2020; Taylor, 2024).

These experiences can be understood using Norton's idea of learner investment, a notion of engagement in which language learners who perceive that classroom interaction is meaningful, supportive, and aligned with their emerging identities play an active role. Tutor questioning seemed to enhance this investment in the current investigation by allowing students to participate freely, without anxiety about language appropriateness. Through probing questions, translanguaging, lexical support, and positive feedback, tutors minimized the interactional risks of speaking English and encouraged students to stay engaged and participate in classroom exchanges. Once students demonstrated successful participation, they were more likely to elaborate on their responses and contribute to subsequent interactions.

Accordingly, these results also seem to indicate that learner investment is not only an individual psychological predisposition but also an ongoing mechanism through which learners, tutors, and the broader sociocultural context interact. Students' pesantren educational experiences shaped their initial attitudes towards participation, while tutor questioning offered the mediation necessary to transform hesitation into active engagement. The interplay between prior educational experiences and classroom mediation builds on the existing literature on learner investment by showing how investment arises through responsive pedagogical practices in culturally specific EFL contexts (Dao & Iwashita, 2018; Guan, 2025).

Altogether, participation in EFL speaking classrooms, according to the research, is shaped by the synergy among sociocultural experience, learner identity, and interactional support. Thus, knowing students' educational backgrounds is essential to explain their

behavior in class and to develop questioning methods for effective involvement. Instead of believing that all learners develop the same ways of responding when asked, tutors would better understand that students bring different histories of learning and communication into the classroom and that these histories shape how they engage with opportunities to speak English.

Pedagogical Implication

The findings offer several implications for EFL teaching in pesantren-background contexts. First, tutor questioning should function not only to check understanding but also to mediate classroom participation. Strategic questioning can sustain engagement, elicit responses, and help learners develop more meaningful spoken contributions. Second, tutors should employ responsive questioning and scaffolding to elicit more detailed or complete responses. Probing questions, follow-up prompts, lexical assistance, and positive feedback can support learners in developing both linguistic resources and communicative confidence, particularly when interaction moves beyond short question-and-answer exchanges (Hansen & Broekhuizen, 2020; Leslie, 2021; Mackey et al., 2000).

Third, flexible scaffolding is particularly relevant for students who experience linguistic or performance concerns in mixed-gender speaking classrooms. Translanguaging, adequate wait time, vocabulary support, and constructive feedback can reduce communicative pressure while maintaining opportunities for English use (Alsagoafi, 2025; Assasaki, 2026). Such support should be viewed as temporary mediation rather than reduced expectations. Finally, tutors should treat gendered participation as interactional tendencies rather than fixed learner characteristics. Although female students tended to sustain interaction more readily and male students sometimes benefited from additional prompting, both groups participated when appropriate support was provided. Instruction should therefore respond to students' immediate interactional needs rather than gender stereotypes. This requires tutor preparation not only in questioning techniques but also in scaffolding, interactional competence, and culturally responsive pedagogy (Mamnoun & Nfissi, 2023; Mhewa, 2025).

CONCLUSION

This study explored how tutor questioning mediated the participation of non-English-major students with pesantren educational backgrounds in mixed-gender EFL speaking classrooms. Building on a qualitative multiple-case study design, the findings demonstrated that tutor questioning served as a sociocultural mediational tool, enabling students to engage more actively in classroom interaction. Instead of simply eliciting responses, tutors employed probing questions, follow-up questioning, translanguaging, lexical assistance, and positive reinforcement to scaffold students' participation and support the development of more sustained oral interaction.

The study has further revealed that female and male students display different interactional tendencies when tutor questions are asked. Female students tended to volunteer their responses more readily. They used fewer prompts to elaborate, while male students more often responded verbally after a tutor nomination and needed a little extra support to get their thoughts around. However, those differences should not be taken as fixed gender characteristics or as unequal opportunities for participation. They showed different interactional trajectories that developed within the same supportive classroom environment. The results also underlined the significance of students' pesantren educational experiences on classroom engagement. Previous learning experiences shaped the way students responded to tutors' questioning, managed speaking anxiety, and negotiated participation in mixed-gender EFL classes. Through responsive questioning strategies, tutors mediated these sociocultural impacts by providing students with the space to develop confidence, negotiate meaning, and contribute more actively to classroom communication.

Theoretically, this study contributes to the literature by extending the understanding of tutor questioning from its traditional role as an instructional tool. From these research findings, we may see that questioning serves a mediational function through which participation is collaboratively constructed within classroom interaction. The integration of Sociocultural Theory, in conjunction with the concept of learner investment, gives greater insight into how interactional support, learner identity, and sociocultural background intersect to shape participation in EFL speaking classrooms. From an educational perspective, the study implies that effective tutor questioning should put interactional support, rather than evaluation alone, at the center. In response, the teachers are invited to use probing questions, follow-up prompts, translanguaging, and other scaffolding strategies to facilitate inclusive participation and to respond to the diverse sociocultural backgrounds and interactional needs of the students. This research has limitations. The study was conducted in two EFL speaking classes at a single university, where students with similar educational backgrounds also participated, which may limit the transferability of the findings. The research, moreover, primarily emphasized classroom interaction and students' experiences; future research may apply more frequently across a varied array of institutional contexts, extend horizons of classroom observation, and place greater focus on tutors' reflective practices. Comparative research among learners of different educational backgrounds may also help to shed light on how sociocultural experiences influence participation in classroom interaction.

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Declaration of AI Use

ChatGPT (OpenAI) was used during manuscript preparation for language editing, proofreading, and improving clarity. The authors independently conducted and verified the research, analysis, interpretation, and final manuscript content and remain fully responsible for the work.

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