



Exploring EFL Students' Experiences of Learning Intensity in Speaking Practice

Aisyah Dita Zhaqila¹

Nurul Jadid University, Probolinggo,
Indonesia

Mochlis Ekowijayanto^{2*}

Nurul Jadid University, Probolinggo,
Indonesia

Article Info

Article history:

Received: May, 02, 2026

Revised: June, 04, 2026

Accepted: July, 05, 2026

Keywords:

Cognitive Load;
EFL Speaking Practice;
Learning Intensity;
Memorization Strategy;
Willingness to Communicate.

Abstract

This study explores how junior secondary EFL students experience learning intensity during speaking practice in the English Time program at MTsN 1 Probolinggo, Indonesia. Rather than treating intensity as task frequency or duration, the study conceptualizes it as a multidimensional experience shaped by cognitive effort, emotional pressure, social visibility, and strategic regulation. Using a qualitative case study design, data were collected over four weeks through classroom observations, semi-structured interviews with six focal participants, students' reflective journals, and researcher memos. The data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis. Four interrelated themes emerged. First, public performance intensified speaking practice because students felt exposed to peer gaze, teacher evaluation, and possible public mistakes. Second, cognitive overload occurred when students treated speaking as a fixed sequence of accurate words and sentences, while learners who used ideas and keywords showed greater flexibility. Third, intensity was emotionally framed either as a threat or as a productive challenge, depending on students' confidence and perceived classroom safety. Fourth, memorization functioned as the dominant regulation strategy. Full-script memorization reduced anxiety and prevented silence, but it also limited spontaneity when students forgot part of the script. In contrast, keyword-based preparation supported more flexible communication. This study extends EFL speaking, engagement, and willingness-to-communicate research by positioning learning intensity as a socially mediated, cognitively negotiated, emotionally filtered, and strategically managed classroom experience. Pedagogically, the findings suggest that speaking activities should be challenging yet emotionally safe, gradually guiding students from rigid memorization toward keyword planning, guided paraphrasing, peer-supported rehearsal, and spontaneous communication.

To cite this article: Zhaqila, A. D. and Ekowijayanto, M., (2026). Exploring EFL Students' Experiences of Learning Intensity in Speaking Practice. *Al Qodiri: Jurnal Pendidikan, Sosial dan Keagamaan*, 24 (2), 823-836.

INTRODUCTION

Speaking remains one of the most demanding skills in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning because it requires learners to produce language in real time while simultaneously managing ideas, vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, fluency, and interactional responses. Unlike receptive language skills, speaking makes learners' competence immediately visible to teachers and peers, which often turns oral practice into both a linguistic and social performance. In this study, learning intensity refers to students' perceived depth of cognitive effort, emotional pressure, social exposure, and strategic regulation during speaking practice. This definition is important because intensity should not be reduced merely to the number of speaking activities or the duration of practice. Recent EFL studies indicate that speaking participation is shaped by the interaction among enjoyment, engagement, anxiety, and willingness to communicate rather than by task exposure alone (Aubrey et al., 2022; C. Zhang et al., 2024). Therefore, understanding speaking development requires

* **Corresponding author:**

Mochlis Ekowijayanto, Nurul Jadid University, Probolinggo, Indonesia
mochliseko@unuja.ac.id

attention not only to what students do in speaking tasks, but also to how they experience, interpret, and regulate those tasks.

In many EFL classrooms, particularly in contexts where English is not widely used outside school, speaking practice often becomes a high-pressure classroom event. Students may be asked to perform storytelling, role-play, short presentations, or group reports while being evaluated for accuracy, pronunciation, vocabulary choice, and confidence. Such tasks can create productive engagement when learners feel supported, but they may also generate anxiety when students perceive the classroom as an evaluative space. Research on foreign language emotions has shown that anxiety, enjoyment, and boredom are closely related to language achievement and classroom participation (Li, 2025; Li & Wei, 2023). In speaking classes, this emotional dimension becomes more visible because students must expose their developing language ability in front of others. Thus, speaking intensity is not simply a matter of task difficulty; it is also shaped by peer presence, teacher evaluation, perceived competence, and the emotional climate of the classroom.

The urgency of examining learning intensity becomes clearer when speaking is viewed as a cognitively demanding activity. During oral production, learners must organize meaning, retrieve vocabulary, monitor grammar, pronounce words clearly, and maintain speech flow under time pressure. When these demands exceed students' perceived capacity, speaking practice may shift from a useful challenge into cognitive overload. Recent evidence from language learning research shows that cognitive load can mediate the relationship between learning activities, speaking anxiety, engagement, and achievement (Chen et al., 2022; Feng & Hong, 2022). At the same time, learners' emotional responses determine whether intensive speaking practice is interpreted as threatening or motivating. This explains why two students may face the same speaking task but experience it differently: one may become more focused and willing to communicate, while another may become silent, nervous, or dependent on memorized scripts.

The topic is also pedagogically important because teachers often assume that more frequent speaking practice will automatically improve oral proficiency. Although repeated exposure is necessary, frequency alone does not guarantee communicative development if students experience speaking tasks as unsafe, overly evaluative, or cognitively unmanageable. Studies on EFL speaking and positive psychology have shown that teacher support, enjoyment, grit, confidence, and classroom engagement can strengthen learners' willingness to communicate (Lee, 2022; Lee & Taylor, 2024). Similarly, speaking self-efficacy has been shown to influence how learners approach speaking tasks and manage classroom performance demands (Derakhshan & Fathi, 2024; Ma, 2022). These findings suggest that teachers need to design speaking activities that are intense enough to stimulate growth but safe enough to sustain participation. For this reason, exploring students' experiences of learning intensity can provide a deeper understanding of how speaking practice becomes either developmentally productive or emotionally inhibiting.

Previous studies have made important contributions to EFL speaking research by examining willingness to communicate, foreign language enjoyment, anxiety, engagement, self-efficacy, teacher support, and technology-mediated speaking practice. Dewaele et al., (2023) examined the relationship between foreign language enjoyment, anxiety, and English achievement, while Dewaele, Botes, & Greiff, (2023) demonstrated the complex interaction among enjoyment, anxiety, boredom, teacher behavior, and achievement. Wang et al., (2024) showed that classroom environment influences willingness to communicate through learners' emotional experiences. Lee & Lu, (2023) further linked enjoyment, ideal L2 self, and intercultural communicative competence with willingness to communicate. Yang et al., (2024) found that teacher support and grit influence L2 WTC through the mediating role of foreign language enjoyment, while Hu & Wang, (2023) showed that behavioral engagement is closely associated with WTC in EFL speaking classes. In technology-enhanced contexts, Yan & Singh, (2026) reported that AI-supported speaking practice can increase enjoyment and WTC while reducing anxiety. Other recent studies have also highlighted the roles of speaking self-efficacy, cognitive load, task engagement, and classroom support in shaping learners' speaking behavior (H. Zhang, 2024).

Despite these contributions, the existing literature still leaves a critical gap. Most recent studies explain speaking participation through measurable psychological constructs such as anxiety, enjoyment, engagement, self-efficacy, and WTC, but they rarely investigate how students experience the intensity of speaking practice as a lived classroom phenomenon. Research on cognitive load has

clarified the processing burden involved in language learning, yet it has not sufficiently explained how students subjectively negotiate overload during public speaking performance. Studies on WTC have shown why students may choose to speak or remain silent, but they often overlook the immediate classroom conditions that make speaking feel socially risky, emotionally threatening, or cognitively overwhelming. In addition, memorization is frequently treated as a traditional or deficient speaking habit, whereas its role as an adaptive strategy for managing anxiety, cognitive pressure, and public exposure remains underexplored. This gap is particularly relevant in Indonesian junior secondary EFL contexts, where limited English exposure, accuracy-oriented classroom norms, and performance-based speaking activities may encourage students to rely on memorized scripts as a form of psychological and cognitive protection. Therefore, the present study does not merely ask whether students are anxious, engaged, or willing to communicate; it asks how they experience, interpret, and regulate learning intensity during speaking practice.

Based on this gap, this study aims to explore EFL students' experiences of learning intensity in speaking practice within the English Time program at MTsN 1 Probolinggo. Specifically, it investigates how students perceive intense speaking moments, what classroom conditions make intensity productive or inhibiting, and what strategies they use to cope with cognitive, emotional, and social demands during oral performance. The novelty of this study lies in its conceptualization of learning intensity as a multidimensional experiential construct that connects task demand, cognitive load, affective response, social visibility, memorization strategy, and willingness to communicate. The study also offers a new interpretation of memorization, not merely as a weakness in speaking competence, but as an adaptive regulatory strategy used by learners to stabilize uncertainty in high-visibility EFL speaking contexts. Theoretically, this study extends current discussions on EFL engagement and WTC by showing that communicative readiness is shaped by how students manage the intensity of speaking, not only by motivation or confidence. Practically, the findings are expected to help teachers design speaking activities that gradually transform rigid script memorization into flexible keyword-based preparation, guided paraphrasing, and more spontaneous communication. In this way, speaking practice can become challenging enough to promote development while remaining emotionally safe and pedagogically supportive for EFL learners.

METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative case study design to explore how EFL students experienced learning intensity during speaking practice in the English Time program at MTsN 1 Probolinggo. The design was selected because the study aimed to understand students' perceptions, emotional responses, cognitive challenges, and coping strategies in a natural classroom setting rather than to test statistical relationships among variables. Annamalah, (2024); Naeem & Thomas, (2025) explains that a case study is appropriate when a researcher examines a contemporary phenomenon within a bounded real-life context, especially when the boundary between the phenomenon and the context is closely connected. In this study, the bounded case was the English Time program, where students regularly participated in communicative speaking activities. Learning intensity was understood as students' perceived cognitive effort, emotional pressure, social exposure, and strategic regulation during speaking practice. This design enabled the researcher to examine speaking intensity as a lived classroom experience shaped by task demands, peer visibility, teacher evaluation, and students' own learning strategies.

Research Setting and Period

The research was conducted at MTsN 1 Probolinggo, East Java, Indonesia, during a four-week implementation of the English Time program. The program was selected because it provided regular speaking activities such as storytelling, group discussion, role-play, and short oral presentation. These activities were relevant to the purpose of the study because they required students to prepare, perform, interact, and manage speaking-related pressure in front of their classmates. The school context also represented an EFL learning environment where English was mainly practiced in formal classroom activities rather than used as a daily communicative language. Therefore, the setting offered an appropriate context for exploring how junior secondary students experienced learning intensity in speaking practice.

Participants and Sampling Technique

The participants were 30 students of Class VIII C who regularly joined the English Time program. All students in the class were involved in classroom observation and reflective journal writing to capture the general dynamics of speaking practice. From this class, six focal participants were selected for semi-structured interviews using purposive sampling with a maximum variation strategy. The selection considered differences in speaking confidence, classroom participation, perceived anxiety, reliance on memorization, and observed behavior during oral activities. The inclusion criteria were students who attended the English Time sessions, participated in speaking activities, completed reflective journals, and were willing to share their experiences through interviews. Students who were absent during the main observation period or did not provide sufficient reflection data were not selected as focal interview participants. This sampling strategy was used to obtain rich and varied accounts of learning intensity rather than to produce statistical generalization.

Research Instruments

The study used four main instruments: a classroom observation protocol, a semi-structured interview guide, student reflective journals, and researcher memos. The classroom observation protocol focused on students' participation, hesitation, peer interaction, teacher feedback, visible anxiety, use of notes, memorization behavior, and responses to speaking tasks. The semi-structured interview guide explored students' perceptions of intense speaking moments, sources of cognitive difficulty, emotional responses, fear of making mistakes, memorization habits, peer influence, and willingness to communicate. Student reflective journals were used to record learners' immediate responses after speaking activities, including what they found difficult, how they prepared, how they felt during oral performance, and what strategies helped them continue speaking. Researcher memos were used to document contextual information, emerging interpretations, and reflexive considerations during data collection and analysis.

Table 1 presents the alignment between the research focus, data sources, and analytic emphasis.

Table 1. Alignment of Research Focus, Data Sources, and Analytic Emphasis

Research Focus	Data Sources	Analytic Emphasis
Students' perceptions of learning intensity	Interviews and reflective journals	How students described and interpreted intense speaking moments
Classroom conditions that generated intensity	Observation notes and interviews	Public performance, peer visibility, teacher evaluation, time pressure, and task demand
Cognitive and affective experiences during speaking	Interviews, journals, and observation notes	Vocabulary retrieval, idea organization, nervousness, fear of error, confidence, and enjoyment
Strategies for regulating intensity	Interviews, journals, and researcher memos	Memorization, repetition, keyword preparation, peer support, avoidance, and spontaneous reformulation

Table 1 clarifies how the research focus was connected to multiple sources of evidence. The use of interviews, observations, reflective journals, and researcher memos strengthened the methodological transparency of the study because the findings were not drawn from a single data source. The table may be retained in the method section to support replicability, or moved to an appendix if the target journal limits the length of the manuscript.

Instrument Quality and Trustworthiness

The quality of the instruments was strengthened through systematic alignment between the research questions, theoretical constructs, and data collection tools. The observation protocol, interview guide, and reflective journal prompts were developed to capture five central aspects of the study: learning intensity, cognitive load, affective response, memorization strategy, and willingness to communicate. The wording of the instruments was adjusted to the students' level so that participants could express their experiences clearly. The trustworthiness of the qualitative data was ensured through credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability procedures to strengthen the rigor, consistency, neutrality, and contextual relevance of the findings.. Credibility was

supported through triangulation by comparing observation notes, interview data, reflective journals, and researcher memos. Member checking was conducted by confirming selected interview summaries with focal participants to ensure that their experiences were represented accurately. Peer debriefing was used to discuss emerging codes and themes with a colleague familiar with EFL classroom research. Dependability and confirmability were maintained through an audit trail consisting of observation records, interview notes, journal responses, coding decisions, theme-development notes, and reflexive memos. Ahmed et al., (2025); Wright et al., (2024) emphasize that a clear audit trail and transparent thematic development are essential for strengthening rigor in qualitative thematic analysis.

Data Collection Procedure

Data collection was conducted in five stages. First, the researcher obtained permission from the school and coordinated with the English Time teacher to determine the observation schedule. Second, the researcher observed speaking activities during the four-week program without intervening in the teaching process. During observation, the researcher recorded students' participation patterns, hesitation, emotional responses, peer interaction, reliance on notes, use of memorized scripts, and strategies used during oral performance. Third, students completed reflective journals after speaking sessions to document their immediate perceptions of intensity, difficulty, confidence, anxiety, and coping strategies. Fourth, six focal participants were interviewed after the observation phase had provided sufficient contextual understanding of their classroom behavior. The interviews were semi-structured, allowing the researcher to ask core questions while also probing unexpected issues such as fear of peer judgment, dependence on memorization, and attempts to continue speaking when forgetting words. Fifth, all data were organized, anonymized, and prepared for thematic analysis.

Data Analysis Technique

The data were analyzed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis. Lim, (2025); Michelen et al., (2024) describe this approach as a flexible yet rigorous method for identifying, developing, and interpreting patterns of meaning across qualitative data. The analysis involved six recursive phases: data familiarization, initial coding, theme construction, theme review, theme definition, and analytic reporting. In the familiarization phase, interview data, reflective journals, observation notes, and researcher memos were read repeatedly to identify meaningful patterns related to learning intensity. In the coding phase, segments of data were coded inductively based on students' descriptions of pressure, nervousness, cognitive difficulty, memorization, preparation, peer visibility, and willingness to speak. The codes were then grouped into broader categories such as public performance pressure, cognitive overload, emotional framing, memorization dependence, and adaptive preparation. During theme construction, these categories were refined into interpretive themes that explained how learning intensity was socially mediated, cognitively negotiated, emotionally filtered, and strategically managed. The final themes were reviewed against the complete dataset to ensure that they were grounded in participants' accounts and supported by classroom observation.

Researcher Reflexivity

Researcher reflexivity was maintained throughout the study to reduce interpretive bias and strengthen analytic transparency. Byrne, (2022); Olmos-Vega et al., (2023) argue that reflexivity is central to qualitative analysis because themes are not simply discovered in the data, but actively developed through the researcher's interpretive engagement. In this study, reflexive memos were written after observations, interviews, and coding sessions to separate descriptive evidence from analytic interpretation. This process helped the researcher avoid treating memorization automatically as a negative learning habit. Instead, the analysis examined how students themselves understood memorization as a strategy for managing anxiety, cognitive load, and public performance pressure. Reflective bracketing was also used to prevent prior assumptions about speaking anxiety, student passivity, or low speaking competence from dominating the interpretation. This reflexive stance allowed the findings to present learning intensity as a complex classroom experience rather than as a simple consequence of task difficulty.

Ethical Considerations

The study followed ethical principles for educational research involving junior secondary students. Permission was obtained from the school before data collection. Students were informed about the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of their participation, and their right to withdraw from the interview process without academic consequences. Because the participants were minors, student assent and school-based approval were treated as essential ethical requirements, while parental or guardian consent should be secured according to institutional policy. Participants' identities were anonymized using codes such as P01, P02, and P03. All observation notes, reflective journals, interview records, and researcher memos were used only for research purposes and stored confidentially. The reporting of findings avoided personal information that could reveal students' identities or negatively affect their classroom relationships.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

This section presents the findings of the reflexive thematic analysis conducted on classroom observation notes, semi-structured interview data, student reflective journals, and researcher memos collected during the four-week implementation of the English Time program at MTsN 1 Probolinggo. The analysis generated four major themes that explain how EFL students experienced, interpreted, and regulated learning intensity during speaking practice: (1) public performance as a social amplifier of intensity, (2) cognitive sequencing and perceived overload, (3) emotional framing of intensity as threat or challenge, and (4) memorization as a dominant but constraining regulation strategy. These themes indicate that learning intensity was not experienced as a single form of task difficulty. Rather, it emerged through the interaction between social visibility, real-time cognitive processing, emotional interpretation, and students' strategies for managing speaking pressure. Interview excerpts are presented using participant codes, and reflective accounts are integrated to preserve students' intended meanings while maintaining anonymity.

Table 2 summarizes the main themes, supporting data sources, representative evidence, and analytic meanings.

Table 2. Thematic Summary of Students' Experiences of Learning Intensity in Speaking Practice

Theme	Supporting Data Sources	Representative Evidence	Analytic Meaning
Public performance as a social amplifier of intensity	Interviews, reflective journals, observation notes	Students described front-of-class speaking as the most intense moment because they felt watched, evaluated, and exposed to possible peer judgment.	Speaking intensity increased when oral practice became socially visible and evaluative.
Cognitive sequencing and perceived overload	Interviews and observation notes	Some students used ideas and keywords to continue speaking, while others stopped when they forgot exact words or sentence forms.	Intensity became overwhelming when students treated speaking as a fixed sequence of accurate words and sentences.
Emotional framing of intensity as threat or challenge	Interviews, reflective journals, observation notes	Less confident students associated speaking with fear and embarrassment, whereas more confident students interpreted it as a useful challenge.	The effect of intensity depended on whether students perceived the classroom situation as emotionally safe or threatening.
Memorization as a dominant but constraining regulation strategy	Interviews, reflective journals, observation notes	Students used full-script memorization, repetition, and keyword preparation to reduce anxiety and avoid silence during performance.	Memorization helped students feel secure, but rigid dependence on scripts limited spontaneity and flexible communication.

Table 2 shows that each theme was supported by more than one data source. This triangulation strengthened the interpretation because students' verbal accounts were examined alongside classroom behavior and reflective responses. The table also clarifies that learning intensity was not caused only by speaking-task difficulty, but by how students experienced the task in relation to peer visibility, cognitive demand, emotional safety, and coping strategy.

Public Performance as a Social Amplifier of Intensity

The first theme shows that students experienced front-of-class speaking as the most intense part of the English Time program. Although speaking tasks required vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, and fluency, students repeatedly emphasized that the strongest pressure emerged when they had to perform visibly in front of classmates. Classroom observation notes showed that storytelling and short oral presentation activities generated more hesitation, reduced voice volume, dependence on notes, and longer pauses than pair or small-group speaking activities. This pattern suggests that speaking intensity was amplified not only by linguistic demand, but also by the social exposure attached to public performance.

Several students described public speaking as emotionally demanding because they felt observed and judged by peers. P02 explained, "When I stand in front, I feel my mind suddenly blank. It's not only about vocabulary. I feel like all eyes are looking at me, and I don't want to disappoint my friends or be laughed at." This account shows that the student's difficulty was not merely linguistic. The pressure came from the possibility of making mistakes in a visible classroom space. Similarly, P01 reflected, "Even if I practiced before, when I see my friends watching, my heart beats fast. I think, 'What if I stop in the middle?' That makes it intense." This reflective account indicates that speaking intensity began before or during the performance because the student anticipated silence, interruption, or embarrassment.

Observation notes supported these accounts. During front-of-class performance, some students looked down at their notes repeatedly, avoided eye contact, paused before continuing, or restarted their utterances after losing their place. In several moments, peer reactions such as laughter, whispering, or visible attention appeared to increase the speaker's nervousness. These reactions were not always intentionally negative, but students often interpreted them as signs of evaluation. As a result, a speaking task that was pedagogically designed as oral practice became socially intensified through peer visibility and perceived judgment.

At the same time, public performance did not function only as a source of discomfort. Repeated exposure to front-of-class speaking gradually encouraged some students to develop small but meaningful coping strategies. Observation data showed that several students began preparing keywords, rehearsing with peers before performance, or seeking help with pronunciation. These strategies helped reduce nervousness and allowed students to maintain their performance more effectively. Therefore, public performance operated in two ways: it intensified emotional pressure, but it also created opportunities for students to develop confidence when adequate preparation and peer support were available.

Cognitive Sequencing and Perceived Overload

The second theme concerns how students organized their thoughts during speaking practice and how different processing patterns shaped their experience of intensity. Students did not experience cognitive demand in the same way. Some students began by organizing the main idea of their speech and then searched for vocabulary to express it. Others focused first on remembering exact words or complete sentences before attempting to speak. These different cognitive sequences influenced whether speaking intensity remained manageable or became overwhelming.

Students who used idea-first planning tended to show greater flexibility during oral performance. P06 explained, "I don't memorize everything. I prepare the theme and key vocabulary first. When I speak, I adjust the grammar naturally. If I forget one word, I try to change the sentence." This response shows that the student approached speaking as a flexible process of meaning-making. Instead of depending on a fixed sentence sequence, P06 relied on themes and keywords to maintain direction. Students with this pattern were more likely to continue speaking even when they experienced vocabulary gaps because they could replace words, simplify sentence structures, or adjust their message.

In contrast, students who depended on vocabulary-first or sentence-first processing experienced intensity earlier and more strongly. P02 stated, "If I don't remember the exact word, I stop. I feel stuck. I can't continue because I think the sentence will be wrong." This account reveals that cognitive overload was closely related to accuracy-based thinking. When students believed that speaking required exact words and correct sentence order, a small memory failure could interrupt the entire performance. In this case, the problem was not only limited vocabulary, but also the belief that communication could not continue unless the planned sentence was produced correctly.

Classroom observations confirmed this distinction. Students who relied heavily on written notes or memorized scripts paused longer when they forgot a word, looked back repeatedly at their notebooks, or restarted their sentences from the beginning. Meanwhile, students who prepared keywords or main ideas were more willing to repair their utterances and continue speaking. This pattern shows that cognitive rigidity increased learning intensity, whereas flexible planning reduced the risk of breakdown. Thus, learning intensity was shaped not only by task complexity, but also by how students sequenced their thinking during oral production.

Emotional Framing of Intensity as Threat or Challenge

The third theme shows that students interpreted learning intensity through different emotional frames. For some students, intense speaking practice was experienced as a threat because it involved fear of making mistakes, embarrassment, and uncertainty. For others, the same activity was interpreted as a challenge that encouraged preparation, focus, and participation. This variation shows that intensity was not inherently negative or positive. Its effect depended on how students emotionally understood the speaking situation.

Students with lower confidence tended to describe speaking intensity through fear-oriented responses. They were concerned about pronunciation errors, grammar mistakes, forgetting vocabulary, and being laughed at by classmates. Reflective journals also showed that nervousness often appeared before students began speaking, especially when they knew that the task required individual front-of-class performance. These students were more likely to avoid volunteering, wait until being called by the teacher, or produce shorter responses to reduce the possibility of error. For them, intensity reduced willingness to communicate because speaking was perceived as socially risky.

By contrast, students with stronger confidence were more likely to frame intensity as a useful challenge. They still experienced nervousness, but they did not always interpret it as a reason to avoid speaking. Some students used the pressure of performance as a reason to prepare more seriously, focus more carefully, and pay closer attention to pronunciation and word choice. Observation notes showed that these students were more willing to continue after minor mistakes, maintain eye contact, use gestures, and participate again in later speaking activities. This suggests that the same classroom task could produce different responses depending on students' perceived competence and emotional readiness.

The difference between threat and challenge framing was closely related to classroom safety. Students who felt supported by peers and teachers were more able to tolerate mistakes and continue speaking. In contrast, students who perceived peer reactions as judgmental showed stronger hesitation and anxiety. This finding indicates that emotional safety was central to the way students experienced learning intensity. Intensity became productive when mistakes were viewed as acceptable and repairable. It became inhibiting when mistakes were interpreted as public failure.

Memorization as a Dominant but Constraining Regulation Strategy

The fourth theme was the most prominent pattern across the dataset. Most students used memorization and repetition as their main strategy for managing speaking intensity. Memorization was not used only by students with lower confidence; it also appeared among students who participated more actively. However, the form and function of memorization differed across participants. Some students memorized full sentences, while others memorized keywords, expressions, or the order of ideas.

For several students, memorization functioned as psychological security. P03 explained, "If I memorize, I feel safe. Even if I don't understand every word deeply, at least I can say something without stopping." This statement shows that memorization helped students reduce the fear of silence during public performance. In this sense, memorization was not merely a mechanical habit.

It worked as a protective strategy against uncertainty, especially when students had to speak in front of classmates.

Memorization was also connected to students' previous learning experiences. P04 stated, "Since elementary school, we usually memorize dialogue. So when speaking English, I think I must prepare full sentences." This account indicates that students' current speaking strategies were shaped by earlier classroom routines. If previous English learning emphasized correct sentence production, students tended to carry this expectation into the English Time program. As a result, speaking was often understood as the reproduction of prepared language rather than as spontaneous communication.

At the cognitive level, memorization helped students reduce the burden of managing several speaking components at the same time. P02 stated, "When I memorize, I don't need to think about grammar again. I just focus on remembering." This account shows that memorization simplified the task by reducing the need for real-time grammar monitoring, vocabulary search, and idea organization. However, this strategy also created a problem when the memorized sequence was interrupted. Observation notes recorded moments when students could not continue after forgetting one word because they depended too strongly on the fixed order of the script.

A more flexible form of memorization appeared among students who used keyword-based preparation. P05 explained, "I don't memorize all sentences, but I memorize the important keywords so I don't lose my direction." This strategy helped students maintain the structure of their speech without becoming fully dependent on a fixed script. Students who used keywords were more likely to continue speaking when they forgot a word because they still understood the main direction of their message. This distinction is important because memorization was not uniformly restrictive. Full-script memorization tended to limit spontaneity, whereas keyword-based preparation supported more flexible communication.

Cross-Theme Pattern: From Accuracy Performance to Communicative Flexibility

Across the four themes, the findings show that learning intensity was shaped by how students understood the purpose of speaking practice. When speaking was viewed as a public test of correctness, students became more dependent on memorization, more sensitive to peer evaluation, and more vulnerable to cognitive overload. In this orientation, the main goal was to avoid mistakes, prevent silence, and complete the performance without visible failure. As a result, learning intensity was experienced primarily as pressure.

When speaking was viewed as communicative meaning-making, students showed more flexible regulation. They used keywords rather than full scripts, continued speaking after mistakes, accepted pauses as part of communication, and used peer or teacher support to manage nervousness. In this orientation, intensity was still present, but it was experienced as a challenge that could support participation and confidence. Therefore, the findings suggest that the effect of learning intensity depends on whether the classroom frames speaking as accuracy-oriented performance or communicative development.

Figure 1 illustrates the integrated pattern of learning intensity found in this study.

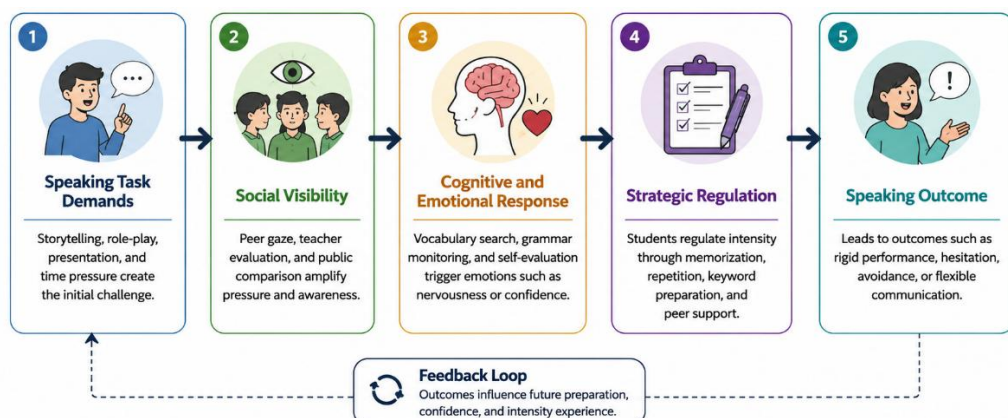


Figure 1. Integrated Pattern of Learning Intensity in EFL Speaking Practice

Figure 1 shows that learning intensity developed through a connected classroom process. Speaking task demands became more intense when they were combined with social visibility. This visibility triggered cognitive and emotional responses, which then shaped students' regulation strategies. The speaking outcome depended on the type of strategy used. Full-script memorization often led to rigid performance and hesitation when the script was disrupted, whereas keyword preparation and peer support enabled more flexible communication.

Synthesis of Findings

The findings indicate that learning intensity in EFL speaking practice was socially mediated, cognitively negotiated, emotionally filtered, and strategically managed. Public performance amplified intensity because students had to speak under peer visibility and teacher evaluation. Cognitive overload emerged when students treated speaking as a fixed sequence of correct words and sentences. Emotional framing determined whether intensity was experienced as a threat or as a challenge. Memorization became the dominant regulation strategy because it helped students manage three perceived risks: embarrassment, silence, and linguistic inaccuracy.

However, memorization had a dual function. It protected students from immediate pressure by providing a sense of readiness, but it also constrained spontaneous communication when used rigidly. Students who relied on full scripts were more vulnerable to breakdown when they forgot one word, whereas students who used keywords showed greater flexibility in maintaining speech flow. The most important finding is that learning intensity was not merely a result of task difficulty or speaking frequency. It was shaped by the interaction among classroom visibility, cognitive processing style, emotional safety, and students' chosen strategies for managing oral performance. These findings suggest that speaking practice becomes more developmentally meaningful when students are gradually guided from accuracy-oriented performance toward flexible communicative participation.

Discussion

The findings indicate that public performance intensified students' speaking experience because oral practice became socially visible, not merely linguistically demanding. This means that learning intensity in EFL speaking should be understood as a relational classroom phenomenon in which peer gaze, teacher evaluation, and public comparison transform speaking tasks into emotionally charged events. From the perspective of language learner engagement, speaking requires behavioral participation, cognitive effort, emotional investment, and social involvement, which explains why students' readiness to speak changed when tasks shifted from small-group interaction to front-of-class performance (Aubrey et al., 2022; Hu & Wang, 2023). This finding is consistent with studies showing that teacher immediacy, classroom interaction, and supportive learning environments influence students' engagement and willingness to communicate (Hu & Wang, 2023; Lee & Taylor, 2024). However, the present study extends this literature by showing that the pressure of speaking is not located only in individual anxiety, but also in the social visibility structure of the classroom. Students did not simply fear using English; they feared being publicly seen making mistakes in English. This implies that speaking pedagogy should not only increase speaking opportunities, but also regulate the social conditions in which those opportunities take place.

The second finding shows that cognitive sequencing shaped whether learning intensity became manageable or overwhelming. Students who organized ideas first and used keywords were more able to continue speaking, whereas students who depended on exact vocabulary or memorized sentence order became stuck when one linguistic element was forgotten. This pattern supports cognitive load perspectives, which explain that learners may experience overload when they must simultaneously manage idea generation, lexical retrieval, grammar monitoring, pronunciation, and performance pressure (Chen et al., 2022; Zhang, 2024). It also corresponds with recent work on self-efficacy and self-regulation in L2 speaking, where learners' ability to regulate performance demands is associated with stronger speaking outcomes (Derakhshan & Fathi, 2024; Ma, 2022). The present study adds a more situated explanation: cognitive overload was not caused only by task complexity, but also by students' accuracy-oriented belief that speaking must follow a fixed and correct sequence. This finding differs from studies that treat cognitive load mainly as a measurable processing burden because it reveals how students' beliefs about correctness intensify that burden. Therefore, reducing

cognitive load in EFL speaking requires more than simplifying tasks; it also requires helping students reconceptualize speaking as flexible meaning-making rather than perfect sentence reproduction.

The third finding demonstrates that learning intensity was emotionally filtered through students' perception of threat or challenge. Less confident students interpreted intense speaking tasks as risky because mistakes could lead to embarrassment, while more confident students viewed the same pressure as a reason to prepare, focus, and participate more actively. This finding supports research on foreign language emotions showing that anxiety, enjoyment, and boredom are closely connected to classroom participation and language achievement (Dewaele, Botes, & Greiff, 2023; Li & Wei, 2023; Li, 2025). It also aligns with WTC-oriented studies suggesting that willingness to communicate is shaped by enjoyment, confidence, teacher support, grit, and perceived classroom safety (Lee, 2022; Yang et al., 2024). Nevertheless, the present study provides a critical extension by showing that intensity itself is not inherently productive or harmful. Its effect depends on whether students perceive the classroom as a space where mistakes are repairable or as a public arena where errors become personal failure. Pedagogically, this finding suggests that teachers should not remove intensity from speaking practice, but should regulate it through emotional scaffolding, peer support, gradual exposure, and feedback that normalizes repair.

The fourth finding reveals that memorization functioned as both an adaptive and restrictive strategy for managing learning intensity. Students used full-script memorization to reduce anxiety, avoid silence, and lower real-time processing demands, which means that memorization cannot be dismissed simply as a weak or outdated speaking habit. In high-visibility EFL contexts, memorization served as a rational response to public performance pressure, limited exposure to spontaneous English use, and classroom norms that equated successful speaking with accuracy. Recent studies on AI-supported and technology-mediated speaking practice show that learning support can influence anxiety, enjoyment, and willingness to communicate, but they do not fully explain why learners still rely on pre-scripted language when speaking becomes socially risky (Wang et al., 2024; Zhang et al., 2024; Yan & Singh, 2026). The present study fills this gap by showing that memorization became a protective strategy because it helped students stabilize uncertainty before public performance. At the same time, rigid memorization constrained communicative flexibility because students who depended on fixed scripts were more likely to stop when the sequence collapsed. Thus, the issue is not memorization itself, but whether memorization remains a rigid script or develops into keyword-based planning, guided paraphrasing, and spontaneous reformulation.

Taken together, the findings position learning intensity as a multidimensional construct that links social visibility, cognitive load, emotional interpretation, and strategic regulation in EFL speaking practice. This conceptualization contributes to the global literature by moving beyond dominant quantitative explanations of anxiety, enjoyment, engagement, and WTC, and by showing how these constructs operate as lived classroom experiences (Dewaele, Botes, & Meftah, 2023; Feng & Hong, 2022; Lee & Lu, 2023). The study modifies existing engagement and WTC discussions by arguing that communicative readiness is shaped not only by motivation, confidence, or teacher support, but also by how learners regulate the intensity of being publicly visible while speaking a foreign language. The Indonesian junior secondary context further explains why memorization became dominant: limited English exposure, accuracy-oriented learning histories, and evaluative speaking norms made scripted preparation feel safer than spontaneous interaction. This does not make the findings merely local; rather, it offers a contextual lens for understanding similar EFL environments where speaking practice remains performance-centered. Theoretically, the study advances the concept of learning intensity as a socially mediated, cognitively negotiated, emotionally filtered, and strategically managed experience. Practically, it suggests that effective speaking pedagogy should design tasks that are intense enough to stimulate development but safe enough to support risk-taking, repair, and communicative flexibility.

CONCLUSION

This study explored how EFL students experienced learning intensity during speaking practice in the English Time program at MTsN 1 Probolinggo. The findings show that learning intensity was not simply determined by the frequency of speaking tasks or the difficulty of classroom activities. Instead, it emerged as a multidimensional experience shaped by social visibility, cognitive

processing, emotional interpretation, and strategic regulation. Public performance intensified students' speaking experience because learners had to manage not only vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation, but also peer gaze, teacher evaluation, and the possibility of public mistakes. Cognitive overload became more visible when students treated speaking as a fixed sequence of accurate words and sentences, while emotional responses determined whether the same task was experienced as a threat or as a productive challenge.

The most important contribution of this study lies in its interpretation of memorization as a dual-function strategy in EFL speaking practice. Memorization helped students reduce anxiety, avoid silence, and stabilize their performance in socially visible speaking situations. However, rigid dependence on full-script memorization limited spontaneity and made students vulnerable to breakdown when they forgot one word or lost the planned sentence sequence. In contrast, keyword-based preparation enabled more flexible communication because it allowed students to maintain the direction of their speech while still adjusting their language during performance. This finding suggests that memorization should not be viewed only as a weakness, but as a transitional regulatory strategy that can either constrain or support speaking development depending on how it is used.

Theoretically, this study contributes to EFL speaking research by conceptualizing learning intensity as a socially mediated, cognitively negotiated, emotionally filtered, and strategically managed classroom experience. It extends discussions on engagement and willingness to communicate by showing that students' readiness to speak is shaped not only by motivation, confidence, or language proficiency, but also by how they regulate the pressure of being publicly visible while speaking English. Practically, the findings suggest that teachers need to design speaking activities that are challenging but emotionally safe. Speaking practice should gradually move students from full-script memorization toward keyword planning, guided paraphrasing, peer-supported rehearsal, and spontaneous communication. Future studies may examine how such scaffolding strategies influence students' speaking development over time, particularly in different EFL contexts, proficiency levels, and classroom cultures.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS STATEMENT

Aisyah Dita Zhaqila and Mochlis Ekowijayanto contributed collaboratively to the development and completion of this study. Aisyah Dita Zhaqila was responsible for conceptualization, research design, methodological supervision, data interpretation, manuscript drafting, critical revision, and final approval of the article. Mochlis Ekowijayanto contributed to data collection, classroom observation, interview organization, reflective journal documentation, initial data coding, and preparation of the manuscript draft. Both authors participated in analyzing the findings, refining the discussion, ensuring the coherence of the manuscript, and approving the final version for publication.

REFERENCES

- Ahmed, S. K., Mohammed, R. A., Nashwan, A. J., Ibrahim, R. H., Abdalla, A. Q., Ameen, B. M. M., & Khahir, R. M. (2025). Using thematic analysis in qualitative research. *Journal of Medicine, Surgery, and Public Health*, 6, Article 100198. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.glmedi.2025.100198>
- Annamalah, S. (2024). The value of case study research in practice: A methodological review with practical insights from organisational studies. *Journal of Applied Economic Sciences*, 19(4[86]), 485–498.
- Aubrey, S., King, J., & Almukhailid, H. (2022). Language learner engagement during speaking tasks: A longitudinal study. *RELC Journal*, 53(3), 519–533. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0033688220945418>
- Byrne, D. (2022). A worked example of Braun and Clarke's approach to reflexive thematic analysis. *Quality & Quantity*, 56(3), 1391–1412. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11135-021-01182-y>
- Chen, C.-H., Koong, C.-S., & Liao, C. (2022). Influences of integrating dynamic assessment into a speech recognition learning design to support students' English speaking skills, learning anxiety and cognitive load. *Educational Technology & Society*, 25(1), 1–14.
- Derakhshan, A., & Fathi, J. (2024). Growth mindset, self-efficacy, and self-regulation: A symphony of success in L2 speaking. *System*, 123, Article 103320. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.system.2024.103320>

- Dewaele, J.-M., Botes, E., & Greiff, S. (2023a). Sources and effects of foreign language enjoyment, anxiety, and boredom: A structural equation modeling approach. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 45(2), 461–479. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0272263122000328>
- Dewaele, J.-M., Botes, E., & Meftah, R. (2023b). A three-body problem: The effects of foreign language anxiety, enjoyment, and boredom on academic achievement. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, 43, 7–22. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0267190523000016>
- Feng, E., & Hong, G. (2022). Engagement mediates the relationship between emotion and achievement of Chinese EFL learners. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 13, Article 895594. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.895594>
- Hu, L., & Wang, Y. (2023). The predicting role of EFL teachers' immediacy behaviors in students' willingness to communicate and academic engagement. *BMC Psychology*, 11(1), Article 318. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40359-023-01378-x>
- Lee, J. S. (2022). The role of grit and classroom enjoyment in EFL learners' willingness to communicate. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, 43(5), 452–468. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01434632.2020.1746319>
- Lee, J. S., & Lu, Y. (2023). L2 motivational self system and willingness to communicate in the classroom and extramural digital contexts. *Computer Assisted Language Learning*, 36(1–2), 126–148. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09588221.2021.1901746>
- Lee, J. S., & Taylor, T. (2024). Positive psychology constructs and extramural English as predictors of primary school students' willingness to communicate. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, 45(7), 2898–2916. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01434632.2022.2079650>
- Li, C. (2025). Foreign language learning boredom and enjoyment: The effects of learner variables and teacher variables. *Language Teaching Research*, 29(4), 1499–1524. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13621688221090324>
- Li, C., & Wei, L. (2023). Anxiety, enjoyment, and boredom in language learning amongst junior secondary students in rural China: How do they contribute to L2 achievement? *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 45(1), 93–108. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0272263122000031>
- Lim, W. M. (2025). What is qualitative research? An overview and guidelines. *Australasian Marketing Journal*, 33(2), 199–229. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14413582241264619>
- Ma, Y. (2022). The triarchy of L2 learners' emotion, cognition, and language performance: Anxiety, self-efficacy, and speaking skill in lights of the emerging theories in SLA. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 13, Article 1002492. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.1002492>
- Michelen, M., Phan, M., Zimmer, A., Coury, N., Morey, B., Montiel Hernandez, G., Cantero, P., Zarate, S., Foo, M. A., Tanjasiri, S., Billimek, J., & LeBrón, A. M. W. (2024). Practical qualitative data analysis for public health research: A guide to a team-based approach with flexible coding. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 23. <https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069241289279>
- Naeem, M., & Thomas, L. (2025). Case study research and artificial intelligence: A step-by-step process to using ChatGPT in the development of case studies in qualitative research. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 24. <https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069251371478>
- Olmos-Vega, F. M., Stalmeijer, R. E., Varpio, L., & Kahlke, R. (2023). A practical guide to reflexivity in qualitative research: AMEE guide No. 149. *Medical Teacher*, 45(3), 241–251. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0142159X.2022.2057287>
- Wang, C., Zou, B., Du, Y., & Wang, Z. (2024). The impact of different conversational generative AI chatbots on EFL learners: An analysis of willingness to communicate, foreign language speaking anxiety, and self-perceived communicative competence. *System*, 127, Article 103533. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.system.2024.103533>
- Wright, R., Chapla, K., Booth, A., Nelson, K. E., Peeler, A., Swain, C., Won, S., & Wu, D. S. (2024). Enhancing rigor, quality, and patient engagement in qualitative research: A step-by-step guide to applying reflexive thematic analysis to the experience-based co-design methodology. *Qualitative Health Research*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10497323241291798>

- Yan, H., & Singh, M. K. S. (2026). The impact of AI-mediated instruction on speaking proficiency, enjoyment, anxiety, and emotional engagement: A mixed-methods approach. *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications*, 13(1), Article 568. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-026-06705-2>
- Yang, Y., Cui, Y., & Yao, S. (2024). Teacher support, grit and L2 willingness to communicate: The mediating effect of foreign language enjoyment. *BMC Psychology*, 12(1), Article 383. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40359-024-01877-5>
- Zhang, C., Meng, Y., & Ma, X. (2024). Artificial intelligence in EFL speaking: Impact on enjoyment, anxiety, and willingness to communicate. *System*, 121, Article 103259. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.system.2024.103259>
- Zhang, H. (2024). Cognitive load as a mediator in self-efficacy and English learning motivation among vocational college students. *PLOS ONE*, 19(11), Article e0314088. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0314088>