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PSYCHOLOGICAL BARRIERS IN LEARNING ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE: SOURCES, MECHANISMS AND PEDAGOGICAL STRATEGIES

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Abstract: Although English language instruction has become more accessible, learners with sufficient linguistic knowledge may still avoid participation in communicative tasks. This conceptual review examines six closely related constructs relevant to English as a foreign language (EFL) learning: foreign language anxiety, fear of negative evaluation, low task-specific self-efficacy, willingness to communicate, beliefs about language ability, and motivational regulation. Rather than treating them as isolated personal deficits, the paper examines their interaction with classroom practices and proposes a participation-oriented explanatory pathway. Drawing on foundational scholarship and selected research syntheses, it distinguishes established findings from pedagogical inferences and introduces a barrier–response alignment matrix for classroom planning. The framework combines psychologically safer interaction, informative feedback, graduated opportunities to speak, evidence of progress, meaningful goals, and enjoyable participation. It also identifies observable indicators for evaluating these practices without presenting them as a validated intervention. Because the article is a selective integrative review and includes no new empirical data, the proposed framework is offered as a testable pedagogical synthesis rather than evidence of causal effectiveness.

Keywords: foreign language anxiety; fear of negative evaluation; self-efficacy; willingness to communicate; EFL; learner motivation; classroom participation

1. Introduction

English is widely used in research, education, work and international communication. Yet knowledge of grammatical forms and vocabulary does not necessarily translate into spontaneous classroom speech. A learner may perform well on written exercises but hesitate when invited to answer a question, initiate a conversation or express an unfamiliar idea. Such differences cannot be explained by linguistic proficiency alone.

Course design, access to practice, feedback practices and linguistic demands all shape participation. Emotional and motivational factors also matter because learners interpret communication tasks as opportunities, threats or both. Research on second language acquisition has consequently examined how anxiety, perceived capability and motivation relate to attention, language use and achievement (Krashen, 1982; Dörnyei, 2005; Papi & Khajavy, 2023). These relationships should not be reduced to a claim that learners simply need more confidence: classroom conditions and institutional norms can either amplify or reduce perceived risk.

This article has three objectives: first, to clarify major psychological constructs associated with EFL classroom participation; second, to explain their possible interaction without assuming an established causal sequence; and third, to offer a practical, theory-informed framework that teachers can adapt and evaluate. The article is a selective integrative review of influential theoretical works and relevant

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research syntheses, not a systematic review or a report of original field data. Its contribution is the explicit alignment of possible classroom signs, intervention choices and indicators of change.

2. Main Psychological Barriers

2.1. Foreign language anxiety

Foreign language classroom anxiety is a context-sensitive response to situations in which learners are expected to understand, perform or be evaluated in another language. Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986) connected this construct with communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation and test-related concerns. An individual can therefore be comfortable in other academic activities yet apprehensive during English-language interaction.

MacIntyre and Gardner (1994) investigated the association between anxiety and different stages of second-language cognitive processing. At the level of achievement, Teimouri, Goetze and Plonsky (2019) synthesized 97 reports representing 105 independent samples (N = 19,933) and estimated an overall correlation of r = −.36 between second-language anxiety and achievement. The association is educationally relevant, but correlation alone does not establish whether anxiety causes poorer performance, poorer performance increases anxiety, or both are influenced by other factors. More recent conceptual work also cautions against treating all anxiety as an identical state across learners and tasks (Papi & Khajavy, 2023).

2.2. Fear of negative evaluation and fear of mistakes

Fear of negative evaluation overlaps with language anxiety but warrants attention as a specific social concern. Students may anticipate ridicule, unfavorable comparison or a loss of status if they speak imperfectly. When correction is public, frequent or unpredictable, avoiding participation can become a short-term protective strategy. This response is understandable but may reduce opportunities to negotiate meaning and practice unfamiliar forms.

The teacher's response to errors and the behavior of peers shape this perceived risk. Importantly, correcting mistakes is not itself harmful: the relevant issues are the purpose, timing, specificity and social consequences of correction. Instructors should distinguish between feedback that clarifies meaning and feedback that publicly labels a learner as incapable.

2.3. Low self-efficacy

Self-efficacy concerns a person's judgment of their capability to carry out a particular activity (Bandura, 1997). In an EFL classroom, a student may feel confident reading an article but uncertain about explaining its main idea aloud. Consequently, self-efficacy is better considered at the task level than as a single global measure of confidence.

Repeated avoidance can deprive learners of the experience of completing manageable communication tasks. Conversely, achievable challenges accompanied by specific evidence of improvement may strengthen their judgment that future tasks are within reach. Teachers should therefore monitor what learners actually accomplish, not merely tell them to be confident.

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2.4. Willingness to communicate

Willingness to communicate (WTC) refers to a learner's situated readiness to use a second language in interaction. In the model developed by MacIntyre, Clément, Dörnyei and Noels (1998), that readiness depends on a combination of relatively enduring dispositions and immediate interpersonal circumstances. It should not be confused with language proficiency itself: the same learner may volunteer in pair work but remain silent during a whole-class discussion.

WTC is best treated here as a proximal participation-related outcome, rather than a fixed psychological defect. This distinction matters pedagogically. A task may elicit few responses because its demands exceed learners' proficiency, because the audience feels threatening, because the topic is unfamiliar or because the interaction lacks a meaningful purpose. Before attributing silence to low motivation, teachers should examine these alternative explanations.

2.5. Fixed beliefs about language ability

Dweck (2006) differentiates beliefs that ability is largely unchangeable from beliefs that capability can develop through learning, strategies and practice. Applied cautiously to language classrooms, this distinction helps explain why some learners interpret early difficulty as a permanent limitation rather than as feedback about a particular task. Statements such as "I am not good at languages" may discourage further attempts.

However, a growth-oriented message is not a substitute for good instruction, appropriate difficulty or sufficient practice. Praise that focuses on effort alone can ring hollow when learners do not know how to improve. More useful feedback identifies effective strategies, illustrates progress and explains the next achievable step.

2.6. Motivation shaped by external demands

Motivation includes goals, expectations, identities and the perceived value of learning. Dörnyei's L2 Motivational Self System distinguishes an ideal L2 self, an ought-to L2 self and experiences associated with the immediate learning environment (Dörnyei, 2009). This framework helps explain why learners engage differently with tasks even when they face similar curricular requirements.

External obligations are not automatically detrimental: examinations, family expectations and professional requirements can support sustained effort. Difficulties are more likely when learners experience these demands as threatening or disconnected from personally meaningful uses of English. A practical response is to retain necessary academic expectations while helping students identify their own communicative goals and opportunities for choice.

3. How the Barriers May Interact

The constructs above are related but not interchangeable. Anxiety concerns an emotional response; self-efficacy concerns perceived task capability; ability beliefs concern interpretations of development; motivation concerns reasons for action; and WTC captures readiness to participate at a particular moment. For classroom planning, a useful hypothesis is that their relationships can form a feedback loop, influenced by the learning environment.

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1. A learner anticipates negative evaluation during a demanding speaking activity.
2. The anticipated social risk is accompanied by anxiety or narrowed attention.
3. Reduced participation or a difficult performance provides limited evidence of success.
4. The experience may weaken task-specific self-efficacy or strengthen a fixed interpretation of ability.
5. Lower readiness to communicate reduces subsequent opportunities to practice, potentially renewing the original concern.

This pathway is a conceptual synthesis, not a demonstrated universal sequence. In some classes, a linguistic knowledge gap, unfamiliar cultural norms or limited preparation may be the dominant cause of silence. Accordingly, the model is intended to generate diagnostic questions and intervention hypotheses, not to assign blame to students or make psychological diagnoses.

4. A Classroom Framework for Addressing Barriers

The proposed framework uses participation as a practical point of entry. Its components are drawn from existing work on anxiety, self-efficacy, WTC, motivation and classroom enjoyment; their integration into the classroom alignment matrix below is the author's pedagogical synthesis. Neither the sequence nor the matrix has been tested as a single intervention.

4.1. Establish predictable and respectful interaction

Teachers can make participation less socially risky by agreeing on discussion norms, refusing peer ridicule and explicitly presenting errors as information for learning. Transparent instructions help learners anticipate what will be evaluated and what will be practiced without grades. These measures should be supported by consistent behavior: an announced "safe environment" has little value if interruptions and public comparisons continue.

4.2. Match corrective feedback to the task purpose

During activities designed primarily for fluency, brief notes followed by delayed, anonymized feedback may preserve interaction. During accuracy-focused activities, immediate clarification can be appropriate. Feedback should identify one or two actionable improvements while acknowledging what the student communicated successfully. This approach avoids equating error tolerance with the absence of correction.

4.3. Graduate communicative demands

A sequence from individual preparation to pair exchange, small-group discussion and optional whole-class contribution can help students experience manageable increases in visibility. Teachers can scaffold each stage with planning time, topic knowledge, useful expressions and examples. Advancement should depend on observed readiness and task demands rather than a rigid timetable. The aim is repeated successful participation, not pressure to speak publicly at any cost (Bandura, 1997).

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4.4. Make learning progress observable

A short speaking portfolio can contain audio recordings, teacher feedback and learner reflections collected across several weeks. Students can compare a later attempt with an earlier one to identify improvements in comprehensibility, fluency or successful completion of communicative functions. This evidence-based discussion is more useful than generic assurances about talent or effort and offers a concrete basis for task-specific self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997; Dweck, 2006).

4.5. Link tasks to personally meaningful goals

Students can choose an authentic communicative aim, such as explaining a scientific idea, interviewing a visitor or presenting a workplace scenario. The teacher can then map routine classroom activities to the language functions required by that aim. Such choices operationalize part of the ideal L2 self without assuming that every student wants the same future identity or has access to the same opportunities (Dörnyei, 2009).

4.6. Support enjoyment without ignoring anxiety

In a study of 1,746 foreign language learners, Dewaele and MacIntyre (2014) found that reported foreign language enjoyment was, on average, higher than classroom anxiety and that experiences of enjoyment were linked to teachers and supportive peers. Enjoyment should therefore be considered alongside, rather than simply as the opposite of, anxiety. Collaborative problem-solving, purposeful games and creative tasks can provide opportunities for positive participation, provided that competition and public performance do not recreate evaluative pressure.

4.7. Align classroom signs, responses and evaluation

Table 1 turns the preceding synthesis into a planning aid. The behaviors listed are possible signals, not diagnostic criteria; each should be interpreted together with language proficiency, task difficulty and local classroom norms.

Construct / possible barrier	Observable classroom sign	First instructional response
Fear of evaluation / anxiety	Avoids public answers despite preparation	Use rehearsal in pairs; make correction criteria explicit; monitor participation across settings.
Low task-specific self-efficacy	Gives up after a demanding speaking attempt	Break tasks into attainable steps; retain short recordings to document progress.
Low situational WTC	Speaks in pairs but not with a new partner or audience	Vary interlocutors gradually; give planning time; check interest and task clarity.
Fixed ability beliefs	Describes one mistake as proof of permanent inability	Compare successive attempts; give strategy-

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Construct / possible barrier	Observable classroom sign	First instructional response
		specific feedback rather than labels.
Obligation-dominated motivation	Completes tasks solely for marks, rarely initiates use	Offer bounded topic choice and connect activities to authentic personal goals.
Limited classroom enjoyment	Participates minimally even when task demands are manageable	Use collaborative, purposeful tasks; ask which activities feel useful and engaging.

A feasible evaluation cycle would document baseline participation, introduce one or two clearly specified practices, and collect the same indicators afterward. Potential outcomes include the proportion of students initiating a turn, number of voluntary contributions, short task-specific self-ratings and independently scored communicative performance. These measures should be examined together: more speaking turns alone do not necessarily demonstrate better language learning. When possible, comparisons should account for task difficulty, proficiency and instructor effects.

5. Implications for Teachers and Institutions

Teacher education should include practical work on identifying performance pressure, designing low-stakes interaction and giving accurate, non-humiliating feedback. Assessment systems can balance formal oral evaluation with repeated formative opportunities to prepare, attempt and revise spoken work. Institutions may also create conversation groups and peer-learning activities that allow varied levels of participation without making public performance the sole indicator of engagement.

Psychological explanations must remain sensitive to context. Silence can reflect language proficiency, accessibility needs, culturally shaped turn-taking expectations or a legitimate preference to listen. Teachers should avoid interpreting observable behavior as clinical anxiety and should protect privacy when collecting self-reports or recordings. Supporting communicative participation is a shared instructional responsibility, not a demand that every learner conform to one style of interaction.

6. Limitations and Directions for Future Research

This is a selective conceptual review. It does not use a preregistered search strategy, formal study-quality appraisal, meta-analytic synthesis or original participant data. Consequently, it cannot estimate the prevalence of individual barriers, rank the effectiveness of the proposed strategies or establish that the pathway described in Section 3 operates causally. Much of the evidence on anxiety and achievement is correlational, and results may vary according to context, task type and measurement (Teimouri et al., 2019; Papi & Khajavy, 2023).

Future research could test the proposed barrier–response alignment with a prespecified classroom protocol, suitable comparison conditions and measures collected over time. Studies should examine whether changes in task-specific self-efficacy or situational WTC precede changes in participation and

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achievement. Researchers should also explore the roles of online interaction, culturally diverse classrooms and learner choice, while reporting possible unintended effects of increased speaking demands. The table is offered as a set of hypotheses for evaluation, not as an empirically established program.

7. Conclusion

EFL learners' participation is shaped by an interaction of linguistic resources, classroom conditions and affective-motivational processes. Anxiety, concerns about evaluation, perceived capability, ability beliefs and motivation may contribute to a cycle of avoidance, but these constructs should not be collapsed into a single deficit of confidence. Willingness to communicate helps connect them to a concrete classroom outcome: whether a learner is prepared to take part in a particular interaction.

The framework developed in this paper makes a modest, testable proposal: teachers should identify the likely source of participation difficulties, match instructional responses to that source and observe both communication and learning over time. Its value lies in making theory more explicit for classroom decision-making. Its effectiveness remains a question for empirical research.

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