

Psychological Factors Affecting Oral Participation in EFL Upper Basic Students: A Literature Review

Factores psicológicos que afectan la participación oral en estudiantes de básica superior de EFL: una revisión de la literatura

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Abstract

The challenge that many EFL instructors encounter is how to get the learners to speak during English lessons. Despite the fact that adolescent students have adequate language competence, aspects such as their psychological state are what usually prevent them from speaking. The real issue is usually more personal. Several factors contribute to students' reluctance to participate such as uncertainty about the reaction of their peers, lack of motivation, or simple nervousness while speaking, even though their statements are correct. Psychological barriers have been studied for years, and the results show the impact of the psychological level on participation in the process of learning, particularly at schools. This paper aims to combine the facts extracted from empirical studies regarding psychological issues in oral speech of upper basic EFL students and explore the topics covered adequately and the areas that need investigation using the literature review of scientific databases and search on speaking anxiety, motivation, and participation in class. The goal is not only to present what already exists in the academic world but also to understand what makes some learners speak up while others keep silent.

Keywords: Adolescent learners; EFL; speaking anxiety; motivation; literature review; oral participation.

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Resumen

Uno de los principales desafíos que enfrentan muchos docentes de inglés como lengua extranjera (EFL) es lograr que los estudiantes participen oralmente durante las clases. Aunque los adolescentes pueden poseer una competencia lingüística adecuada, ciertos factores relacionados con su estado psicológico suelen impedirles expresarse oralmente. En muchos casos, el problema está vinculado con aspectos personales. Diversos factores contribuyen a la reticencia de los estudiantes a participar, entre ellos la incertidumbre respecto a la reacción de sus compañeros, la falta de motivación y el nerviosismo al hablar, incluso cuando sus intervenciones son correctas. Las barreras psicológicas han sido estudiadas durante años, y los resultados evidencian la influencia de estos factores en la participación dentro del proceso de aprendizaje, particularmente en contextos escolares. Este artículo tiene como objetivo sintetizar los hallazgos de estudios empíricos relacionados con los factores psicológicos que afectan la participación oral de estudiantes de Educación General Básica Superior que aprenden inglés como lengua extranjera, así como identificar los temas que han sido suficientemente estudiados y aquellos que requieren mayor investigación. Para ello, se realizó una revisión de la literatura científica centrada en la ansiedad al hablar, la motivación y la participación en clase. El propósito no es únicamente presentar el conocimiento existente en el ámbito académico, sino también comprender por qué algunos estudiantes participan oralmente mientras otros permanecen en silencio.

Palabras clave: Adolescentes; EFL; ansiedad al hablar; motivación; revisión de la literatura; participación oral.

Introduction

Over the years, EFL educators have increasingly stressed the need to teach students to speak in English instead of simply learning grammatical rules. According to Richards (2008) and Ur (2012), speaking a foreign language with confidence has now become one of the primary goals of EFL teaching. The importance of speaking is well justified since, as Bygate (2001) and Harmer (2007) state, it is through speaking that students interact with the new language, negotiate meaning, and build the confidence to communicate outside the classroom. Similarly, researchers Nation and Newton (2009) as well as Thornbury (2005), point out that a classroom environment in which learners will feel comfortable communicating spontaneously is necessary for the development of authentic speaking abilities.

However, EFL teachers know that speaking is easier said than done when it comes to teaching students to speak. In a number of situations, teachers have to deal with the students who do not want to speak even in the case when they possess the necessary linguistic tools (Littlewood, 2007; Tuan & Nhu, 2010).

Accordingly, the explorations into the reasons why students are often reluctant to speak have started. As a result of this, there was a growing interest in the study of the psychological components related to language learning during the past decades, which aimed at explaining the differences in the communicative behavior of students (Dörnyei, 2005; MacIntyre et al., 1998). One thing that is repeatedly mentioned in this regard is foreign language anxiety. As the authors note, a lot of students find it challenging to answer a question in a foreign language that they are learning (Horwitz et al., 1986). According to the subsequent research (Liu & Jackson, 2008; MacIntyre, 1999), many students tend to avoid participating in communication or only do it to the

bare minimum and doubt their skills. Another important aspect which has to be considered in this relation is motivation. Researchers, e.g. Gardner (1985) and Dörnyei (2001), have shown that students who are motivated tend to put in much more effort in order to accomplish the task even if it is challenging.

The subsequent studies conducted by Alrabai (2015) and Ushioda (2008), support the claim made by MacIntyre et al. (1998), that motivation is an important factor not only when it comes to performing speaking tasks but also when taking risks and making mistakes. Surprisingly enough, research on willingness to communicate (WTC) indicates that a student's readiness to communicate doesn't depend only on their knowledge of the language. As shown by MacIntyre et al. (1998), and later by Peng (2012), psychological factors in combination with a particular situation in the classroom are crucial for making the split-second decision to say something or remain silent. The findings presented above demonstrate how complicated participation in oral communication is, and how many factors need to be taken into account in order to grasp what is going on.* Yet, in spite of the numerous studies on anxiety, motivation and willingness to communicate, most of them analyzed these psychological factors separately and hence the knowledge of the combined impact of these factors on the oral communication of adolescents learning English as a foreign language in classroom situations is still limited (Peng & Woodrow, 2010; Zarrinabadi, 2014).

Existing studies have often examined these factors separately, which limits a complete understanding of why students choose not to participate in speaking activities (King, 2013). Such studies are unsatisfactory because they do not fully capture the multidimensional nature of oral participation, particularly in real classroom environments.

There has also been limited research on these concepts in secondary education contexts, particularly with regard to adolescents (Bashori et al., 2022; Tsui, 1996). Therefore, it is worthwhile to explore the combined effects of the psychological constructs on adolescent EFL learners' speaking behavior in the classroom. In addition, only a few existing works provide specific integration of these constructs to discuss student silence as a context- and situation-dependent phenomenon. Hence, addressing this gap may allow better understanding of the causes of low oral participation of learners and more efficient teaching. This literature review aims to summarize the current understanding of foreign language learning anxiety, motivation, and willingness to communicate, and explore the interplay between the three issues in terms of their effect on silence among adolescent learners.

The review provides insight into how different factors influence the attitude of an EFL (English as a Foreign Language) student towards speaking during the class. It uses systematically collected data from previous research studies to contribute to a better understanding of how a wide range of emotional and situational factors impact the overall situation within a classroom. It is planned that this review will provide some useful recommendations for teachers to create a more favorable atmosphere in the classroom so that students would feel more confident when using their spoken English.

The review raises two main questions:

- a. What psychological factors have been identified as influencing the oral participation of students learning English as a foreign language?
- b. How does foreign language anxiety affect students' willingness to speak during English class activities?

Theoretical Framework

The reason behind why a few students participate actively in the English classes while the rest stay silent is not merely because of their level of English proficiency (Juhana, 2012; Liu, 2007; Liu & Jackson, 2008). For decades, studies of second language acquisition have established that psychological factors related to teachers and nature of students have great impact on processes of learning and speaking (Bae, 2024; Khajavy et al., 2017; Lee & Lee, 2019). Among psychological factors mentioned above, concepts like foreign language anxiety, willingness to communicate, motivation, etc., can be used effectively in order to explain students' participation in EFL classes (Bae, 2024; Feng et al., 2023; Liu, 2007; Liu & Jackson, 2008; Yashima, 2002).

Foreign Language Anxiety

For a long time, foreign language anxiety has been regarded as one of the most important barriers to speaking (Gregersen & Horwitz, 2002). Horwitz et al. (1986), explain that this type of anxiety is specific to learning cases in which students are required to speak in that language and get evaluated based on their performances, which means that they do not have much experience doing this. It often occurs in conjunction with being afraid of negative evaluation, fear of speaking, and getting nervous because of exams and assessments.

However, anxiety does not only affect people psychologically. MacIntyre and Gardner (1994) have pointed out that anxious students are sometimes unable to remember words and rules they know because of their anxiety.

Willingness to Communicate (WTC)

While anxiety contributes to our understanding of why some students do not speak up, WTC is more relevant in explaining why they do participate. MacIntyre et al. (1998) defined the concept as the probability of someone engaging in communication. The level of willingness to communicate is basically not fixed, being dependent on several factors including the level of a student's confidence, their mood at the moment, and classroom environment (MacIntyre et al. 1998). Thus, it is evident that being willing to participate has more to do than just language acquisition; it is important for a student to feel comfortable in a chosen language as well. Another important aspect that has been added by Yashima (2002), is the notion of "international posture,"

meaning students' interest in the world's affairs that might also determine their willingness to communicate.

Motivation in Language Learning

Motivation is one of the major components of the process. Gardner (1985), using the socio-educational approach, examined this point revealing how attitudes toward the language and the people speaking it can affect learners' willingness to participate in the process. Thus, students with a sense of connection to the language tend to apply more efforts to learn it.

Dörnyei (2005), later put forward a more interactive understanding of motivation referring it to the self-perception of a learner and their aspirations. From this standpoint, students become more active in the classroom when they consider learning their language as part of their personal identity and desire. Conversely, the lack of motivation leads to lower participation in class.

Self-Confidence and Perceived Competence

Self-assurance is related to anxiety and motivation. In the context of language acquisition, it reflects students' belief in their proficiency in a given language. MacIntyre et al. (1998), made a so-called finding that students who see themselves as capable are active communicators. However, when confidence wanes, it may trigger anxiety problems preventing students from speaking even if they are knowledgeable already (Bensalem & Thompson, 2021). The relationship between confidence and anxiety indicates that psychological aspects do not work independently (Clément et al., 2003; MacIntyre et al., 1998).

Affective Variables: Enjoyment and Emotional Factors

The first two decades of the 21st century have seen the emergence of a new trend in research where scholars have started to reevaluate the importance of negative emotions in language acquisition. The terms foreign language enjoyment (FLE) coined by Dewaele and MacIntyre (2014), is meant to describe positive feelings that learners experience during the process of learning. Unlike previous research, which has put emphasis on the negative aspects of emotion experienced by language learners, the emergence of this perspective evidences the crucial role played by positive emotions in foreign language acquisition.

The authors argue that enjoyment can emerge when students perceive the learning activities conducted in the classroom as valuable and enjoy the support of both their teachers and classmates. In turn, this will lead to a higher level of interest as well as increase the degree of engagement of students while at the same time increasing their confidence.

What is striking is that enjoyment and anxiety are not contrary phenomena. Indeed, studies show that they can occur at the same time (Bae, 2024; Dewaele and MacIntyre, 2014). Therefore,

although the learner might be nervous at the moment of speaking, they still enjoy the process of communication in the target language. While anxiety plays a role in deciding whether to participate in communication, positive emotions can ease this effect, as they encourage students to communicate (Bielak, 2025; Feng et al., 2023). Nevertheless, other factors, such as worrying about what people would think or getting laughed at, continue to affect students' willingness to speak in public (Barabadi et al., 2021; Juhana, 2012).

State of the Art

Over the past few decades, research on EFL learning has shown growing interest in the psychological side of classroom participation. Several studies have tried to understand why some students join in speaking activities while others stay silent, even when they seem to have the necessary language skills. Looking at this body of work helps to identify what we already know, what new trends are emerging, and where further research is still needed.

Research on Foreign Language Anxiety and Oral Participation

In second language acquisition, foreign language anxiety is known as a psychological factor, that has an important role in oral interaction (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014; Horwitz et al., 1986; MacIntyre and Gardner, 1994). Many studies have suggested that anxiety can limit students' willingness to speak and taking part in the class (Liu, 2007; Liu & Jackson, 2008; Woodrow, 2006).

Liu (2007) indicated that students who have anxiety often do not perform oral tasks, even though they realize its importance for language learning. Woodrow (2006) showed that anxiety negatively impacted oral performance and communication requiring spontaneous interaction. Liu and Jackson (2008), also showed that there is a link between anxiety and unwillingness to speak, accentuating that fear of negative evaluation is a main feature of this connection. Recent studies, including Juhana (2012) and Tahang et al. (2025), proved these findings, confirming that anxiety continues to be an obstacle for participation.

Research on Wtc

Anxiety is not the whole story. Researchers including Yashima (2002) and Peng and Woodrow (2010), have examined the role of willingness to communicate in explaining differences in student talkativeness. In this respect, one of the most cited models is the one presented by MacIntyre et al. (1998). The authors of this model indicate that a student's decision to speak is influenced not only by psychological factors but also by the context surrounding the student.

Recent studies show that WTC is not static. It can change from moment to moment depending on aspects such as classroom activities, task type, and different feelings that the person might experience. For example, Feng et al. (2023), found that factors such as student's goals and emo-

tions influence WTC. Furthermore, as shown by Li et al. (2024), WTC may change many times during communicative activities.

There is, however, more literature pointing to factors that need to be taken into account when interpreting WTC. For example, Barabadi et al. (2021), found out that reluctance to speak might not be caused by poor language skills.

Research on Motivation and Participation

Motivation is another factor that has attracted a great deal of attention from researchers in the context of a person's willingness to take part in oral tasks (Amoah & Yeboah, 2021; Feng et al., 2023; Khajavy et al., 2017). There is some evidence showing that a motivated person is more likely to participate in lessons and overcome any awkwardness related to language barriers than a person who lacks motivation and, as a result, usually avoids verbal tasks (Amoah & Yeboah, 2021; Feng et al., 2023). For instance, the authors of the study conducted by Amoah and Yeboah (2021), found that motivated individuals are more likely to cope with communicative difficulties they encounter, whereas unmotivated individuals tend to remain silent or withdraw from communication in the classroom. Similarly, researchers Khajavy et al. (2017), came to the conclusion that motivation has a significant and direct positive effect on oral participation in the classroom.

Recently, a study performed by Feng et al. (2023), has shown that students with mastery-oriented goals and positive emotions are more likely to engage in speaking activities.

Emerging Trends in Psychological Research

Recently, the field of study expanded from the traditional examination of foreign language anxiety and motivation in oral participation to encompass a variety of other emotional and psychological factors influencing students' willingness to speak (Barabadi et al., 2021; Bielak, 2025; Elov et al., 2025; Li et al., 2024). For example, Barabadi et al. (2021), identified gelotophobia defined as the fear of laughter as a psychological barrier to oral expression irrespective of the language proficiency. Meanwhile, Bielak (2025) and Elov et al. (2025), explored the impact of different emotions on fluency of speaking, revealing that anxiety results in hesitation and speech difficulties, while positive emotional background aids good oral performance. Conversely, Li et al. (2024) did a research project establishing that students' willingness to speak fluctuates depending on the situation and the mood they are in. All in all, the findings prove that the oral participation is a dynamic matter influenced by various positive and negative factors.

Research Gaps

While there is an abundance of research on the topic, there are still some gaps. To begin with, most of the papers on this topic focus on anxiety (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014; MacIntyre

et al., 1998; Snyder, 2019). Researchers pay little attention to positive emotions while, for instance, enjoyment can be equally important (Bielak, 2025; Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014). Moreover, the majority of research has been conducted in Asian contexts (Juhana, 2012; Li et al., 2024; Liu, 2007; Liu & Jackson, 2008; Yashima, 2002). Despite providing valuable information, this does not necessarily mean that such findings can be applied to the other parts of the world, especially Latin America. Furthermore, most studies analyze the psychological factors separately instead of investigating how they function together in the classroom. This limits the possibility of receiving the whole picture. Finally, there are almost no studies that focus on adolescents in the last years of their primary education. It seems rather surprising as social and psychological factors are crucial for such students' classroom behavior.

Methodology

The current research paper aims to provide an overview of the existing studies and literature regarding the role of psychology in relation to participation in foreign language classrooms. The report will take the form of literature reviews – one of the widely used tools in educational research (Snyder, 2019). The intention of conducting literature reviews is to consolidate the findings of various studies and establish correlations that exist across various contexts. The current research will investigate the impact of anxiety, motivation, and other psychological aspects on whether individuals actively participate in the classes. The importance of psychological factors in the second language learning process has been acknowledged by scholars (Dörnyei, 2005).

Data Sources and Search Strategy

In order to obtain relevant studies, an investigation was conducted with the help of three databases: Google Scholar, ERIC, and Scopus. The mentioned databases are among the most popular sources of information in the area of education and applied linguistics and offer access to both local and international researches. The utilized search terms were such as foreign language anxiety, speaking anxiety, oral participation, willingness to communicate, motivation in learning EFL, and some and “EFL classrooms.” Boolean operators (AND, OR) were used to construct the following search string: (“foreign language anxiety” OR “speaking anxiety”) AND (“willingness to communicate” OR “oral participation”) AND (“motivation in EFL”) AND (“adolescent students” OR “secondary school learners”) AND (“EFL classrooms”).

Research on learning EFL often focuses on how students' emotions influence their willingness to speak. This is especially true inside the classroom, where anxiety and confidence play a significant role in students' opportunities to communicate (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014).

Selection of Articles

Some studies found for the review were not included. In order to narrow the scope and achieve the desired quality, only empirical studies that investigate various psychological factors which affect oral communication in EFL classes were considered for inclusion. Peer-reviewed works dealing with EFL students and reporting variables such as anxiety and motivation regarding oral communication were selected (e.g. Liu, 2007; Liu & Jackson, 2008; Woodrow, 2006). The criteria of inclusion/exclusion used for selection of the sources are found in Table 1. Initially, 35 articles were recognized in the course of database research. After that, the duplicates and irrelevant publications were removed reaching the number of 9 articles excluded from further investigation due to absence of relevance to EFL students, topics chosen for study or peer-review process. After finishing the filtering, 26 articles appeared to suit the requirements for inclusion into the current literature review.

Table 1. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria for Article Selection

Criteria	Inclusion	Exclusion
Focus on the study	Studies addressing psychological factors affecting oral participation in EFL contexts	Studies not related to speaking participation or psychological variables
Publication date	Articles published between 2000 – 2025	Articles published before 2000
Publication type	Peer-reviewed journal articles	Theses, conference papers, reports, or non-peer reviewed publications
Research methodology	Quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-method studies	Opinion papers without empirical data
Language	English	Article written in other languages.

Source: own elaboration.

Research Topics

Answering two questions about psychological aspects of language learning, the studies reviewed here have been structured according to different aspects that the results of the studies generally bring attention to. These include student's anxiety about learning foreign languages, student's motivation, and student's willingness to communicate. All these aspects help understand why certain students participate while others do not.

Review Protocol and Data Analysis

After the selection of studies, it has been followed by research in order to bring together all the aspects analyzed in various different conditions and by different student groups. All the

studies selected for the review have been organized by topic and almost every research contained information about where it was conducted, who the subjects were, what kind of experiment was carried out, and what results have been achieved. Based on this analysis the final stage of research has been done and some descriptive summaries and simple frequency tables have been drawn up.

Results

This literature review aimed to explore the psychological factors affecting oral participation among upper basic EFL students. Two research questions guided the analysis: (a) What psychological factors have researchers already identified as influencing the oral participation of students learning English as a foreign language? (b) How does foreign language anxiety affect students' willingness to speak during English class activities?

The results are presented through a narrative and descriptive analysis, which is appropriate for a semi-systematic literature review (Snyder, 2019).

Overview of the Literature

The studies analyzed in this paper come from a variety of geographic contexts. Understanding where research on the psychological factors influencing oral participation has been conducted helps identify patterns, cultural particularities, and gaps in the existing literature. The following table presents the distribution of the 26 articles included in this review according to their geographic location.

As shown in Table 2, the majority of empirical studies on psychological factors affecting oral participation have been conducted in Asian contexts, with China accounting for the largest number of articles (six). This concentration reflects the expansion of English language education in the region and the particular challenges that learners face when speaking in class. On the other hand, Indonesia, Iran, Turkey, Japan, and South Korea provide one or two studies, indicating a growing, though still limited, body of research in these areas. This highlights the necessity of researching the psychological factors affecting oral participation among EFL students in other contexts, particularly in regions like Latin America.

Table 2. Geographical Distribution of Selected Empirical Studies

Country	Author / Year	Number
Australia	Woodrow (2006)	1
Canada / Multinational	Bensalem & Thompson (2021); Clément et al. (2003); Dewaele & MacIntyre (2014)	3
China	Amoah & Yeboah (2021); Cai (2021); Feng et al. (2023); Li et al. (2024); Liu (2007); Liu & Jackson (2008); Mai & Fan (2021); Peng & Woodrow (2010)	8

Country	Author / Year	Number
Indonesia	Giantari et al. (2023); Juhana (2012); Tahang et al. (2025)	3
Iran	Barabadi et al. (2021); Khajavy et al. (2017); Zarrinabadi (2014)	3
Japan	King (2013); Yashima (2002)	2
Poland	Bielak (2025)	1
South Korea	Bae (2024); Lee & Lee (2019)	2
Turkey	Aslan & Şahin (2020)	1
United States	Gregersen & Horwitz (2002)	1
Uzbekistan	Elov et al. (2025)	1
Total		26

Source: own elaboration.

Note. Geographic classification is based on the context where empirical studies were conducted or the institutional affiliation of the authors at the time of publication

The availability of empirical studies from multiple countries suggests that even though the fundamental concepts were developed primarily in Western academic contexts, their applicability has been tested and confirmed in a wide range of cultural settings. This cross-cultural validation strengthens the relevance of these psychological concepts for understanding oral participation among upper basic EFL students worldwide.

Psychological Factors Affecting Oral Participation

Across the studies reviewed, three interconnected factors appear consistently: foreign language anxiety, willingness to communicate, and motivation. The data showed that multiple factors were present simultaneously and appeared to be associated with variations in students' willingness to speak. Table 3 synthesizes the key studies and their findings, organized by these psychological factors.

Table 3. Psychological Factors Affecting Oral Participation: Key Studies and Findings

Psychological Factor	Author (s) / Year	Key Findings
Foreign Language Anxiety	Bae (2024)	Confirmed that speaking anxiety remains a significant psychological barrier affecting oral participation in contemporary EFL classrooms.
	Elov et al. (2025)	Observed that anxiety negatively affected fluency, increasing hesitation, pauses, and speech breakdown during oral interaction.
	Gregersen & Horwitz (2002)	Identified perfectionism and fear of making mistakes as psychological traits closely associated with elevated language anxiety in oral production.
	Lee & Lee (2019)	Found that anxiety in oral communication contexts reduced learners' confidence and limited spontaneous classroom participation.
	Liu (2007)	Found that Chinese EFL students with high speaking anxiety tended to avoid oral participation despite recognizing the importance of speaking practice.
	Liu & Jackson (2008)	Reported a strong negative relationship between foreign language anxiety and willingness to communicate, with fear of negative evaluation as a major predictor of silence.
	Mai & Fan (2021)	Reported that speaking anxiety significantly predicted avoidance of classroom participation and lower communicative engagement.
	Tahang et al. (2025)	Found that students with lower perceived speaking competence experienced greater anxiety and participated less frequently in oral tasks.
	Woodrow (2006)	Showed that anxiety directly reduced oral performance and increased communication apprehension among ESL learners.
WTC	Aslan & Şahin (2020)	Reported that classroom atmosphere and learner self-perception strongly predicted willingness to communicate.
	Barabadi et al. (2021)	Introduced gelotophobia (fear of being laughed at) as a significant predictor of WTC, independent of language proficiency.
	Cai (2021)	Demonstrated that willingness to communicate is dynamic and fluctuates according to task type, emotional state, and classroom interaction.
	Feng et al. (2023)	Showed that mastery-oriented goals are associated with higher WTC, mediated by positive emotions in the classroom.
	Giantari et al. (2023)	Found that positive classroom interaction and teacher support increased students' communicative participation.
	Juhana (2012)	Found that fear of mistakes, low confidence, and peer judgment were major barriers to students' oral participation.

Psychological Factor	Author (s) / Year	Key Findings
WTC	King (2013)	Showed that silence in Japanese EFL classrooms was often linked to social pressure, fear of embarrassment, and low communicative readiness.
	Peng & Woodrow (2010)	Showed that supportive classroom climate and teacher encouragement significantly increased students' willingness to speak.
	Yashima (2002)	Found that international posture and confidence positively influenced learners' willingness to communicate in English.
	Zarrinabadi (2014)	Demonstrated that teacher wait-time, responsiveness, and supportive feedback positively shaped learners' willingness to communicate.
Motivation	Amoah & Yeboah (2021)	Found that motivated learners persisted in speaking tasks despite communication difficulties, while low motivation was associated with withdrawal.
	Bensalem & Thompson (2021)	Reported that multilingual learners displayed greater engagement and stronger motivational orientation toward speaking tasks.
	Khajavy et al. (2017)	Showed that motivation positively influenced oral participation both directly and indirectly through increased confidence and reduced anxiety.
Self-Confidence / Perceived Competence	Bielak (2025)	Reported that anxiety was associated with hesitation and fluency disruptions, whereas enjoyment was linked to smoother and more effortless speech.
	Clément et al. (2003)	Proposed linguistic self-confidence as a key determinant of communicative behavior, positively influencing classroom oral participation.
	Dewaele & MacIntyre (2014)	Showed that positive emotions and self-confidence jointly enhanced learners' willingness to communicate and classroom engagement.
	Li et al. (2024)	Reported that students' perceived communicative competence significantly predicted active oral participation in classroom interaction.

Source: own elaboration.

If we look at the data presented in Table 3, a pattern emerges consistently: anxiety about the foreign language is, by far, the most widely studied psychological factor in relation to oral participation in EFL contexts. This finding is unsurprising given the consistent evidence. Empirical studies have long shown that anxiety inhibits the willingness to speak, affects oral performance, and reduces student engagement in the classroom. For example, the work of Liu (2007) and Liu and Jackson (2008), already indicated that those with higher levels of speaking anxiety tended to avoid participating, even though they were aware of how important it is to practice. Woodrow (2006) found something similar: anxiety directly affected the quality of oral production. More recent research, such as that by Tahang and colleagues (2025) or Elov and colleagues (2025), has gone further, showing how anxiety interacts with students' perceptions of their own competence, and how it causes mental blocks, hesitations, long pauses, and stumbling while speaking. Taken together, these studies suggest that many students do not withdraw from conversation because

they know little English, but because fear of being judged negatively and insecurity get in the way just when they most need fluency.

Another thing that can be noted as an important factor in oral participation is the WTC, which is not a stable phenomenon. It depends on both the student's personality and the environment of the classroom. According to research, a person who is open to other cultures and is confident in the language is more likely to participate in discussions (Yashima, 2002). However, the second thing to mention is gelotophobia, or fear of ridicule, which mentioned in Bielak's (2025) research. The students with a high level of English may not express themselves in class. It is important to note that the teacher's role is essential in this process. The results of studies by Peng and Woodrow (2010), Zarrinabadi (2014) or Giantari et al. (2023), demonstrate how important it is. The students are more willing to speak if a teacher is positive and the atmosphere is benevolent. Additionally, we should understand that the willingness may change depending on the exercise, student's mood, or the situation in the class (Cai, 2021).

Motivation and self-confidence also play a decisive role. They help students take the It is also important that motivation and self-confidence are decisive. They motivate learners to act, ignoring anxiety. As an example, Amoah and Yeboah (2021) showed that motivated students persisted in oral activities, despite difficulties, whereas unmotivated learners tended to avoid participation. Additionally, Khajavy et al. (2017), stated that motivation has a positive effect on oral participation directly and through self-confidence and anxiety reduction. This finding is supported by what we know about linguistic self-confidence. Clement et al. (2003) have already mentioned that confidence in language usage is a strong indicator of communicative behavior. Later Barabadi et al. (2021) and Li et al. (2024), claimed that people who see themselves as good communicators participate more actively in classes. Interestingly, Bensalem and Thompson (2021), proved that knowing several languages makes students more confident and reduces their anxiety, which implies that prior experience makes students more prepared for speaking.

How Foreign Language Anxiety Affects Willingness to Speak

The studies reviewed suggest that anxiety affects willingness to speak in at least three interconnected ways: through cognitive interference, through emotional and motivational withdrawal, and through social-evaluative concerns. Table 4 summarizes the key studies and findings related to these mechanisms.

Table 4. Mechanisms Through Which Foreign Language Anxiety Affects Willingness to Speak

Mechanism	Author(s) / Year	Key Findings
Cognitive Interference	Aslan & Şahin (2020)	Reported that anxiety often produced mental blocks during oral participation, limiting students' ability to retrieve language under pressure
	Elov et al. (2025)	Found that anxiety disrupted fluency through increased hesitation, pauses, and speech breakdowns during oral production.
	Liu (2007)	Found that anxious learners frequently knew the answer but were unable to express it orally when required to speak.
	Tahang et al. (2025)	Reported that lower perceived communicative competence intensified anxiety and reduced cognitive readiness to speak.
Emotional and Motivational Withdrawal	Amoah & Yeboah (2021)	Found that anxiety reduced learners' motivation to participate, increasing avoidance of speaking tasks.
	Dewaele & MacIntyre (2014)	Showed that anxiety and enjoyment function independently, suggesting that reducing anxiety alone may not be sufficient to foster active participation.
	Khajavy et al. (2017)	Reported that anxiety indirectly lowered oral participation by reducing confidence and weakening motivational engagement.
	Woodrow (2006)	Found that speaking anxiety reduced communicative confidence and willingness to engage in oral classroom interaction.
Social- Evaluative Concerns	Bielak (2025)	Found that anxiety disrupted oral fluency through increased hesitation and speech breakdowns, while enjoyment supported smoother speech production.
	Barabadi et al. (2021)	Identified gelotophobia as a significant psychological barrier to oral participation, independent of language proficiency.
	Giantari et al. (2023)	Found that fear of peer correction and embarrassment contributed to learners' reluctance to speak in class.
	Juhana (2012)	Reported that fear of making mistakes and concern about peers' judgments were major causes of classroom silence.
	Liu & Jackson (2008)	Found that fear of negative evaluation strongly predicted learners' unwillingness to communicate orally.
	Zarrinabadi (2014)	Reported that supportive teacher feedback reduced evaluative pressure and encouraged oral participation.

Source: own elaboration.

According to Table 4, cognitive interference is one of the most important effects of anxiety on speaking. For example, Aslan and Şahin (2020) wrote about this process in detail and explained that students find it difficult to think when they are required to talk in class. Liu (2007) noted this trend as well and reported that students tended to claim that they knew the answer but couldn't produce it verbally due to nervousness. Newer studies confirm that anxiety decreases both the desire to speak and the fluency of speech, causing pauses and hesitations (Elov et al., 2025).

Emotional and motivational withdrawal is another mechanism in which anxiety diminishes the willingness to speak. According to Dewaele and MacIntyre (2014), anxiety and enjoyment are two independent dimensions, rather than two ends of the same continuum. This is significant because it means that reducing anxiety alone does not result in students' greater willingness to speak; it is also important to promote positive emotions such as enjoyment. Bielak (2025) confirmed the difference between anxiety and enjoyment in his research findings. He proved that there is a correlation between anxiety and frequency of pauses in speech and being highly correlated with fluency. In a like manner, the findings from other studies appear to show that anxiety acts as a crucial influencer of learner motivation. In particular, the studies, which have been used, show that anxiety can gradually reduce students' willingness to communicate orally within the classroom (Amoah and Yeboah, 2021; Khajavy et al., 2017; Woodrow, 2006). Nevertheless, it is without any doubts that in the context of EFL learners' learning process social and assessment-related factors take the first place among anxiety-related problems. For instance, Liu and Jackson (2008) found out that fear of being judged negatively is one of the most important predictors of students' willingness to communicate. Juhana (2012) investigated a case of Indonesian students and described the continuous fear the students experienced, thinking of their peers' negative evaluations in the case of making speaking mistakes. Moreover, the fear was so great that the learners were even not willing to provide the answers that they had prepared earlier. Giantari et al. (2023) reported on similar results, showing that fear of being laughed at and corrected was observed in many cases. Lastly, Barabadi et al. (2021) supported this assumption by proving the negative correlation between gelotophobia and willingness to communicate.

Nevertheless, the classroom environment should not be neglected as it also plays a crucial role in shaping oral participation. A positive teacher-student relationship was found to be a strong predictor of learners' willingness to communicate by Cai (2021), and the dynamics of the classroom also significantly impact students' willingness to speak in EFL classes (Mai & Fan, 2021). Peng and Woodrow (2010) further found that the supportive conditions in the classroom can increase students' willingness to participate in speaking activities orally by alleviating communication anxiety and supporting risk-taking in speaking activities.

Discussion

This literature review aimed to examine the psychological factors that influence students' participation in oral activities in EFL classes. The review was guided by two research questions: (a) what psychological factors have been identified as influencing the oral participation of EFL students, and (b) how foreign language anxiety affects students' willingness to speak during English class activities. The investigation of the twenty-six studies reviewed in this paper reveals that oral participation is closely related to three psychological factors: foreign language anxiety, willingness to communicate (WTC), and motivation. Although these conclusions are not entirely new, they correspond to the most frequently observed phenomena in the EFL context. The first question posed in the introduction to the study asked what psychological factors have been researched by

scholars. The answer to this question is as follows: anxiety is the strongest barrier to speaking, whereas WTC and motivation serve as bridges that make speaking possible.

The researched articles under discussion vary considerably in terms of the significance of the influences determined. One can say that numerous scholars regard anxiety as the most prominent obstacle that prevents students from speaking in a foreign language (Horwitz et al., 1986; Woodrow, 2006). Some researchers, in contrast, suggest that motivation and positive environment in the classroom may have the same effect as anxiety (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014; Yashima, 2002). On a whole, it can be stated that this paper shows that speaking cannot be described using just one psychological variable.

One of the most important and consistent conclusions of the research is that anxiety is seldom present alone. According to MacIntyre and Gardner (1994), immediately after his/her appearance, anxiety causes troubles with processing language. This can explain why in class one can see a student who has done well in a written grammar task but has not been able to speak. This review corresponds to the findings of the studies mentioned above but also encompasses one more important conclusion. The relationship between anxiety and the fear of negative evaluation was recognized by Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope (1986) back in time and is stunningly confirmed by research undertaken a few decades after it (i.e. Juhana (2012)).

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When we analyze the presented findings and compare them with other researchers' experiments, we see similarities. Yashima (2002) as well as Feng, Wang, and King (2023) showed that when children develop a feeling of trust in their teacher, they enjoy attending classes and have a positive attitude toward the whole process, this motivates them to be willing to speak up. WTC in its turn is in the focus of the article we are writing. The works examined in our paper use different definitions of WTC. Some older studies, including those of Yashima (2002) and Clément et al.

(2003), claim that WTC is relatively constant and is dependent on students' trust and emotions towards the language they learn. However, more contemporary research conducted by Li et al. (2024) claims that WTC can shift within a single lesson depending on the mood of learners, people they communicate with, and their perceived proficiency. WTC is an important variable, one that can change from one moment of time to another.

Nevertheless, like most literature reviews, this one has its limitations. Firstly, since this is a review of literature, its findings depend on the research done by others. If most research studies focus on certain Asian countries, conclusions drawn would be incomplete. Secondly, many of the studies evaluated were cross-sectional, meaning they captured data from one point in time. For example, it remains unknown whether student anxiety or motivation changes as the years go by and how the same student behaves during the course of his/her studies. Thirdly, many empirical studies in this review (24 out of 26) were conducted using self-report questionnaires, so the data gathered may not necessarily reflect the truth about the students.

Despite the above-mentioned shortcomings of the literature review, its findings can be helpful in teaching practice. For EFL teachers dealing with upper basic students, the conclusion is that creating a safe classroom environment is not something one might do for pleasure, but rather something that can influence speaking behavior. This interpretation corresponds with that of Peng and Woodrow (2010), who proved that the supportive classroom environment and teacher support increases students' willingness to participate. Although it may seem simple, it is not easy to Looking ahead, future research could take several directions. First, researchers should examine these psychological factors within the context of TEFL in Latin America. The cultural dynamic surrounding peer assessment and teacher authority may differ. Second, longitudinal studies would help us understand how anxiety, WTC, and motivation evolve. Do students become more or less anxious as they progress? In fact, this is something that remains unknown. Third, intervention studies could test whether specific classroom strategies, such as using pair work more frequently, actually reduce anxiety and increase participation. This type of research would be very useful for practicing teachers.

Conclusion

In summary, the anxiety regarding a foreign language, a desire to communicate, and motivation can be identified as the key determinants of upper-intermediate EFL learners' engagement in classroom communication.

The current literature review aimed to answer two research questions: which psychological aspects are presented in the literature, and in what way foreign language anxiety influences students' willingness to speak. The analysis of 26 published studies reveals a more profound, though still limited, understanding of the reasons for students' silence in an English class.

As for the first research question, the findings suggest that there are three aspects, namely the foreign language anxiety, willingness to communicate, and motivation that are always present in literature. The most widely explored and debilitating factor is anxiety. Students experience it in both emotional and cognitive aspects, and it limits greatly the students' ability to use the language they already know when the need arises. The willingness to communicate is a psychologic barrier that prevents students from speaking. Personal confidence, relations with peers, and the atmosphere of the classroom affect the level of willingness to communicate. Motivation is the source of energy that keeps students going despite any anxiety they may experience. The interaction of these

Referring to the second question, the literature outlines three main pathways in which the experience of anxiety lowers an individual's willingness to speak. The first is cognitive interference whereby students with heightened anxiety encounter a mental block and hesitancy which make them unable to express their ideas, even if they know how to do so. The second is emotional withdrawal whereby high anxiety makes the students retreat and avoid any speaking tasks. The third mechanism, especially relevant for adolescents, concerns social evaluation. The fear of being criticized, mocked, or corrected by peers is an important barrier in primary school classrooms where the opinions of peers mean a lot to kids under the influence of their age-specific issues. These mechanisms of anxiety make it clear that the feeling of anxiety complicates speaking processes. The practice carried out has implications for EFL teachers working with this group of students. They should create a low-anxiety environment in the classroom in order to make students speak. To achieve this there is a need to normalize mistakes, avoid public corrections, and create tasks that will not seem difficult but easy to perform.

Despite the fact that studies have more or less come. By conducting research in different settings and using different methods, such as observing what happens throughout the course of time, we can learn more about how teachers can help their students improve their speaking skills in the classroom. This will help teachers support their students' communicative development, which is especially important for foreign language learners, such as upper-basic EFL students, as well as their willingness to communicate and their motivation to keep going.

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