

Research Article

Cite this article: Du, T. T., Duc, L. V., The, N. H., & Dung, D. T. B. (2025). Non-Participation in Second Language Acquisition: An Investigation into Reticence among English-majored Students in EFL Classrooms at a Vietnamese University and Strategies for Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in Reducing Student Silence and Enhancing Verbal Participation. *Educational Process: International Journal*, 16, e2025280. <https://doi.org/10.22521/edupij.2025.16.280>

Received April 27, 2025

Accepted June 6, 2025

Published Online June 27, 2025

Keywords: Student reticence, EFL classrooms, language anxiety, oral communication, second language acquisition

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Non-Participation in Second Language Acquisition: An Investigation into Reticence among English-majored Students in EFL Classrooms at a Vietnamese University and Strategies for Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in Reducing Student Silence and Enhancing Verbal Participation

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Abstract

Background/purpose. Student reticence in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms remains a significant challenge, hindering both communication and language acquisition. The current study investigates the factors contributing to student reticence at Thu Dau Mot University (TDMU) and explores pedagogical interventions to enhance verbal participation.

Materials/methods. Employing a mixed-methods approach, data were collected from 60 English-majored students via questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. Statistical analyses, including chi-square tests and regression analysis, identified psychological barriers.

Results. Qualitative findings further revealed a disconnect between students' enjoyment of English learning and their willingness to engage in oral communication, emphasizing the role of confidence and classroom dynamics. The present research contributes to existing literature by offering a nuanced understanding of silence as a multidimensional phenomenon shaped by affective, cognitive, and contextual factors. Based on these insights, the current study proposes targeted strategies, including communicative language teaching (CLT), anxiety-reducing techniques, and interactive learning activities to foster a more engaging and participatory EFL environment. The findings have implications for EFL instructors, curriculum designers, and policymakers seeking to enhance student engagement and improve oral proficiency outcomes in second language learning contexts.

Conclusion. The present study examined the factors contributing to student silence in EFL classrooms at TDMU and identified strategies to enhance verbal participation using both quantitative and qualitative methods.

1. Introduction

The ability to communicate effectively in a foreign language is a fundamental objective of language education. However, in EFL classrooms, a persistent challenge that hinders language acquisition is students' reluctance to participate actively in oral communication. Student silence in EFL classrooms at Thu Dau Mot University (TDMU) is a phenomenon that has yet to be fully explored despite its potential impact on language learning outcomes. While silence in the classroom is often perceived as a communication breakdown or a barrier to active learning, some researchers argue that it can also serve a pedagogical function in specific contexts (Granger, 2004; Liu, 2005). Nevertheless, the general consensus in language education research is that a lack of verbal participation in EFL settings poses a significant challenge to language development (Tani, 2005; Tsui, 1996).

Students at TDMU face multiple challenges that contribute to their reluctance to speak in EFL classrooms. One major factor is language anxiety, which stems from the fear of making mistakes and receiving negative evaluations from peers or instructors. This anxiety often leads to self-censorship, preventing students from taking risks in spoken interactions. Additionally, linguistic limitations, such as restricted vocabulary and insufficient grammatical knowledge, hinder students from forming coherent responses, further exacerbating their hesitation to participate. Cultural influences may also play a role, as many students come from educational backgrounds where passive learning characterized by teacher-centered instruction and minimal student engagement is emphasized over active discussion.

Moreover, pedagogical approaches in some EFL classrooms may contribute to student reticence. Traditional teaching methodologies prioritize reading and writing over speaking and often fail to provide students with sufficient opportunities to develop their oral communication skills. A lack of interactive activities, such as discussions, debates, and role-playing exercises, may discourage students from practicing spoken language. Classroom dynamics, including large class sizes and limited student-teacher interaction, may also inhibit students from expressing themselves freely.

Given these challenges, it is crucial to investigate the underlying causes of student silence and identify strategies to foster a more communicative and supportive learning environment at TDMU. By addressing the factors that contribute to non-participation, educators can implement targeted interventions to enhance student engagement and improve language acquisition outcomes.

The present study aims to examine the underlying factors contributing to student reticence in EFL classrooms at TDMU. Specifically, it investigates the roles of psychological barriers (e.g., language anxiety, fear of negative evaluation), linguistic limitations (e.g., vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation), cultural influences, and pedagogical practices in shaping students' willingness to engage in oral communication. The study also seeks to capture both student and teacher perspectives on classroom silence and participation. Based on these insights, the research proposes pedagogical strategies to foster greater verbal engagement and improve oral proficiency outcomes.

The study seeks to answer the following key research questions:

- (1) What factors contribute to students' reluctance to speak in EFL classrooms at TDMU?
- (2) What teaching strategies can be implemented to reduce student silence and enhancing student verbal participation in EFL classrooms at TDMU?

The study offers practical implications for students, teachers, and educational administrators. For students, it identifies key psychological and linguistic barriers to oral participation. It suggests strategies to build confidence and improve speaking skills, thereby enhancing their academic performance and real-world communication. For teachers, the findings highlight the impact of

instructional methods and classroom dynamics on student reticence, supporting the adoption of more interactive, student-centered approaches. For administrators, the research informs curriculum design and teacher training programs, emphasizing the importance of communicative competence and supportive learning environment in EFL education.

The current research focuses on undergraduate EFL learners at TDMU, examining linguistic, psychological, cultural, and pedagogical factors influencing classroom silence. Insights from students and teachers provide a deeper understanding of participation barriers in this specific academic setting. However, the findings may not be entirely applicable to other institutions with distinct educational or cultural contexts. Moreover, external factors, such as students' sociocultural backgrounds and out-of-class language experiences, are beyond the scope of this study.

Despite these limitations, the study offers important recommendations for promoting interactive EFL classrooms at TDMU. Future research could build on this by incorporating cross-institutional comparisons or conducting longitudinal analyses to examine changes in student participation over time.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Theoretical Framework

The present research adopts an integrated theoretical framework combining Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis, Sociocultural Theory, Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), Communication Apprehension Theory, and Classroom Interaction Theory to analyze student silence and propose strategies for fostering verbal participation in EFL classrooms.

Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis (1982) provides a foundation for understanding how anxiety, self-confidence, and motivation influence language acquisition. A high affective filter caused by fear of mistakes, peer judgment, and low linguistic confidence creates a barrier to communication. By examining how supportive learning environments lower the affective filter, the current study explores strategies for reducing anxiety-related silence and promoting greater participation.

Complementing this, Sociocultural Theory (Vygotsky, 1978) highlights the social dimensions of language learning, emphasizing peer influence, scaffolding, and teacher feedback as critical in shaping student behavior. From this perspective, silence is not merely individual reluctance but also a result of classroom interaction patterns and the availability of structured support.

To transform these insights into effective teaching strategies, Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and Classroom Interaction Theory (Long, 1983) advocate for learner-centered, interactive teaching methods. Excessive teacher dominance and passive learning structures can discourage students from speaking, whereas collaborative learning, real-world communication tasks, and peer discussions promote verbal engagement.

Communication Apprehension Theory (McCroskey, 1970) also helps contextualize the fear and anxiety associated with speaking in public or unfamiliar settings, offering practical solutions such as low-pressure speaking activities, confidence-building exercises, and anxiety-reducing classroom environments.

By integrating these theories, the current study provides a comprehensive framework to diagnose the root causes of student silence and propose evidence-based strategies to cultivate a more dynamic and communicative EFL learning environment at TDMU.

2.2. Previous Studies

Extensive research has explored student reticence in EFL classrooms, identifying cultural, psychological, linguistic, and pedagogical factors that influence participation. Liu (2005) argued that

cultural values and personality traits significantly affect students' willingness to engage in class discussions. In many Asian societies, students are socialized to value humility and deference to authority, which may discourage them from speaking in classroom settings. Similarly, Tsui (1996) highlighted fear of making mistakes, low confidence, and comprehension difficulties as key reasons for student silence in language learning. Liu and Jackson (2009) further examined psychological barriers to participation, finding that prior negative experiences, social anxiety, and fear of peer judgment play a crucial role in students' reluctance to speak. These findings align with Tani (2005), who suggested that rigid educational structures and exam-oriented learning environments often discourage spontaneous verbal engagement, further reinforcing students' preference for passive learning.

More recent research has emphasized the complexity and individualized nature of silence in EFL classrooms. Hanh (2020) investigated English-majored students in Vietnam and found that both internal factors (e.g., anxiety, motivation, self-perceived competence) and external factors (e.g., teaching style, classroom atmosphere, and peer interactions) shape students' willingness to participate. Nguyen (2025) challenged the traditional notion that silence is purely negative, proposing that it can also reflect cognitive processing, deep engagement, or strategic learning behavior rather than avoidance. This perspective suggests that silence may not always indicate disengagement but could be a meaningful aspect of the learning process.

In addition to psychological and cultural influences, classroom dynamics and teaching methodologies also impact student participation. Liu and Littlewood (1997) found that teacher-centered instruction, where educators dominate discussions and limit student agency, often discourages active engagement. Cheng (2000) investigated the impact of standardized testing, contending that high-stakes exams, which prioritize reading and writing, often marginalize speaking skills, leading to reduced student confidence in oral communication. Granger (2004) suggested that silence can also serve as an emotional defense mechanism, allowing students to avoid embarrassment or perceived failure in public speaking situations. Addressing these challenges, scholars have proposed various pedagogical interventions to encourage participation. Bao (2020) advocated for collaborative learning strategies, peer interactions, and student-centered teaching approaches as effective methods to foster engagement. Recent studies by Nguyen and Pham (2022) have emphasized the role of technology in language learning, where digital platforms and online discussions provide students with alternative, low-pressure environments to develop speaking skills.

Overall, the literature suggests that student silence in EFL classrooms results from a complex interplay of cultural norms, psychological barriers, instructional methods, and classroom dynamics. While some studies view silence as a challenge to be overcome, others recognize it as a potential form of engagement that requires more nuanced exploration. Existing research highlights the effectiveness of communicative language teaching (CLT), technology integration, and anxiety-reducing classroom environments in mitigating silence, yet there remains a need for context-specific studies to develop tailored solutions that address the unique institutional and student-related factors at TDMU.

2.3. Research Gaps

Although considerable research has been conducted on student silence in EFL classrooms, several significant gaps remain to be explored.

Firstly, while numerous studies have examined the cultural and psychological influences on classroom participation, limited research has focused on the specific academic and pedagogical environment of TDMU. Institutional factors such as class size, teaching methodologies, and assessment practices may play a unique role in student reticence; however, they have been

insufficiently explored. Understanding these influences is essential for developing context-specific strategies to foster more active classroom participation.

Secondly, prior research on student silence in EFL settings predominantly relies on self-reported surveys and student reflections which may not fully capture the complex, dynamic nature of classroom interactions. The role of teacher perceptions, classroom discourse analysis, and observational studies has been insufficiently examined, limiting a holistic understanding of the interplay between student behavior and instructional practices. A more comprehensive approach, incorporating multiple perspectives and real-time classroom observations, is needed to fill this gap.

Thirdly, although previous studies have identified various psychological and linguistic causes of silence, there is a lack of empirical investigations into intervention strategies designed to mitigate student reticence. Few studies systematically test the effectiveness of pedagogical approaches, such as communicative language teaching (CLT), technology-enhanced learning, or anxiety-reducing techniques, in real classroom settings. Without empirical validation, which strategies are most effective in fostering verbal participation and overcoming silence in EFL learning environments remains unclear.

Furthermore, existing research suggests that silence in the classroom is not always indicative of disengagement but can serve various cognitive and strategic functions, such as deep processing of information or reflective thinking. However, the distinction between different types of silence namely reflective, strategic, or avoidance-driven remains insufficiently explored in EFL contexts. Investigating these variations could provide deeper insights into how silence functions as both a barrier and a potential learning strategy in second language acquisition.

To address these gaps, the present study contributes empirical data on student silence at TDMU through a mixed-methods approach, combining statistical analysis and qualitative insights. By offering a more nuanced understanding of silence in EFL classrooms, the study aims to inform pedagogical practices and propose tailored interventions that foster a more communicative and engaging language learning environment.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

The present research employed a mixed-method approach, integrating quantitative and qualitative methods to explore the psychological, linguistic, and pedagogical factors contributing to student silence in EFL classrooms at TDMU. This design's rationale lies in its ability to provide both breadth and depth of understanding by integrating quantitative and qualitative data in parallel.

The use of a questionnaire provided measurable insights into students' reluctance to speak, while semi-structured interviews allowed for a deeper understanding of their personal experiences and perspectives. Additionally, statistical analyses, including chi-square tests, correlation analysis, and regression analysis, were conducted to examine relationships between key variables such as confidence, vocabulary proficiency, classroom enjoyment, and participation frequency. This combination ensured a comprehensive examination of the issue by capturing both numerical trends and individual narratives.

The reliability and validity of the research instruments were ensured through expert validation and pilot testing. The interview protocols were reviewed by two experienced EFL educators, and a pilot study involving five students was conducted to refine both the questionnaire and interview items. Necessary modifications were made to improve clarity and relevance before full-scale data collection.

A concurrent triangulation design was employed, where both quantitative and qualitative data were collected simultaneously, analyzed separately, and then compared during interpretation. Equal priority was given to both strands, allowing for corroboration of findings across different types of data. This strategy strengthened the credibility and depth of the analysis.

A multiple linear regression model was used. Prior to analysis, all relevant statistical assumptions were checked. Linearity was assessed through scatterplots; homoscedasticity was evaluated using residual plots; multicollinearity was checked via VIF values; and normality of residuals was examined through histogram and Shapiro-Wilk test. These procedures ensured the robustness and reliability of the statistical results.

3.2. Sampling Method

The study was conducted at TDMU over a period of three months, involving 60 English majors during the 2024–2025 academic year. A purposive sampling strategy was applied to select participants currently enrolled in intermediate and advanced-level EFL courses, as these students were deemed to have sufficient language exposure and classroom experience to provide meaningful responses. To gain richer qualitative insights, 10 students from the initial 60 participants were randomly selected to participate in in-depth interviews. This sampling framework promoted both representation and variation in participant perspectives.

3.3. Research Instruments

Two primary instruments were utilized for data collection: a structured questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. The questionnaire was designed to collect quantitative data on students' reluctance to speak in EFL classrooms. It included Likert-scale items (ranging from 1 - Strongly Disagree to 5 - Strongly Agree) which were divided into thematic categories such as psychological barriers (anxiety, fear of judgment), linguistic challenges (vocabulary limitations, pronunciation concerns), and classroom-related influences (enjoyment, interaction opportunities). The items focused on the functions of silence in the classroom, perceived barriers to communication, and reasons for reluctance to participate. The Likert scale was chosen due to its effectiveness in assessing students' attitudes, perceptions, and emotional responses related to classroom silence.

For qualitative data collection, semi-structured interviews comprising open-ended questions tailored to elicit detailed narratives regarding students' emotional and cognitive experiences in EFL speaking contexts were conducted with 10 randomly selected participants. Each interview lasted for approximately 15 minutes and was audio-recorded for later transcription, coding and analysis. The interviews provided a deeper understanding of students' personal experiences and explored psychological, linguistic, and pedagogical factors contributing to their reluctance to speak. This qualitative approach enabled the researcher to gather rich, narrative data that contextualized the questionnaire findings.

3.4. Data Collection Procedures

The data collection process was systematically organized into two main phases. First, the researcher visited four different classes at TDMU to introduce the study, explain its purpose, and invite students to participate. Participants were then provided with a questionnaire and given enough time to complete it on-site to minimize external distractions and ensure focused responses. Following the questionnaire phase, 10 students were randomly selected for semi-structured interviews which were held in a private room within the university to create a quiet, non-threatening environment. Before each interview, participants were reminded that there were no right or wrong answers and were encouraged to share their thoughts freely. All interviews were audio-recorded to ensure accurate transcription and coding and facilitate later analysis.

3.5. Data Analysis Process

Data analysis was conducted using both quantitative and qualitative approaches to provide a comprehensive understanding of student silence in EFL classrooms. Quantitative data were entered into SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) and analyzed using both descriptive and inferential statistical techniques. Descriptive statistics such as means, standard deviations, and frequencies were used to identify patterns in students' reluctance to speak. Additionally, chi-square tests were employed to examine the association between psychological and linguistic barriers and participation frequency. To further investigate these relationships, correlation analysis was conducted to determine the strength of associations between confidence, vocabulary proficiency, classroom enjoyment, and participation frequency. Furthermore, multiple linear regression analysis was performed to identify the predictive power of these factors, with results indicating that confidence level, vocabulary proficiency, and classroom enjoyment collectively explained 91.8% of the variance in participation frequency ($R^2 = 0.918$), demonstrating their significant influence.

For qualitative analysis, interview transcripts were examined using thematic analysis to identify recurring themes related to psychological, linguistic, and pedagogical barriers to participation. Key themes included fear of judgment, anxiety, lack of vocabulary, pronunciation challenges, and the impact of teacher-centered instruction. These qualitative findings provided deeper insights into the statistical results, allowing for a more nuanced interpretation of the factors influencing student silence in EFL classrooms. By integrating both statistical analysis and thematic exploration, the study ensured a well-rounded understanding of the issue, addressing both numerical trends and individual student experiences.

3.6. Ethical Considerations

Ethical guidelines were strictly adhered to throughout the study to ensure the integrity and protection of participants. Informed consent was obtained from all participants after they were fully informed about the study's purpose and procedures. Confidentiality was maintained for participants' personal information and responses. Participants were assured of their right to withdraw at any stage without any negative consequences. During interviews, a non-judgmental approach was adopted to make students feel comfortable and encourage honest responses. Additionally, all collected data, including questionnaires and interview recordings, were securely stored and used solely for research purposes.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Results

4.1.1. Results of the Questionnaire

The questionnaire results revealed several key insights into students' reluctance to speak in EFL classrooms (see Figure 1). A significant majority of participants (68%) described the classroom atmosphere as enjoyable, using terms such as "fun," "interesting," and "relaxed." Despite this positive perception, only 25% of students identified speaking as their favorite activity, while 69% found listening tasks particularly challenging, suggesting a disconnect between the classroom environment and students' comfort with speaking activities.

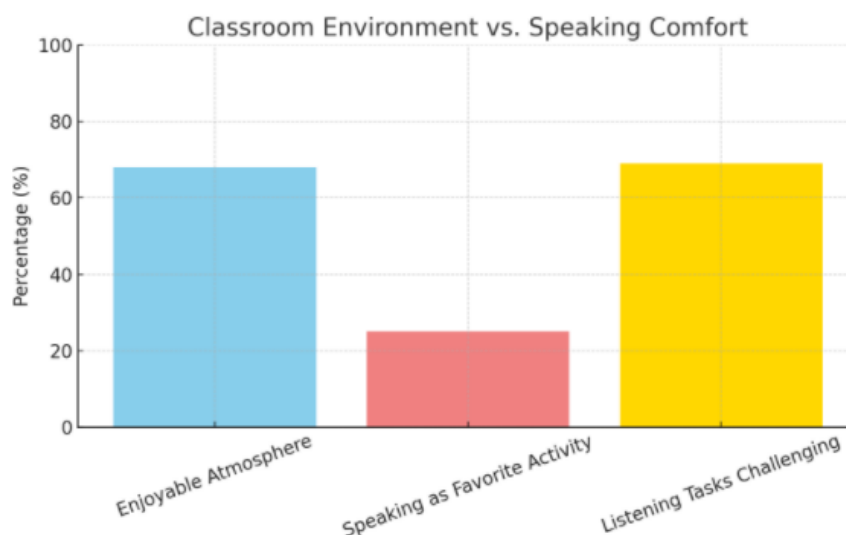


Figure 1. Key Insights into Students' Reluctance to Speak in EFL Classrooms

Confidence and speaking anxiety emerged as significant factors affecting participation. About 75% of students reported lacking confidence in their English-speaking skills, even though many expressed enjoyment in communicating in English. This highlights a notable gap between students' enthusiasm for the language and their hesitation to engage verbally. The frequency of oral participation further underscored this issue. Only 10 out of 60 students participated frequently in speaking activities, driven by motivations such as a desire for recognition, enjoyment of the learning process, and confidence-building. In contrast, 20 students only spoke when prompted by teachers or peers, and six students never participated voluntarily due to self-consciousness, fear of making mistakes, and an overall lack of confidence.

Linguistic and psychological barriers were prevalent among the participants (see Figure 2). Specifically, 58% of students reported difficulties due to a lack of vocabulary, while 42% experienced challenges with ungrammatical expression. Additionally, 35% faced pronunciation issues, and 46% struggled with articulating their ideas clearly in English. Psychological factors were equally significant, with 60% of students citing a lack of confidence and 48% expressing fear of judgment from their peers. These barriers highlight the complex interplay between language proficiency and psychological readiness in shaping classroom participation.

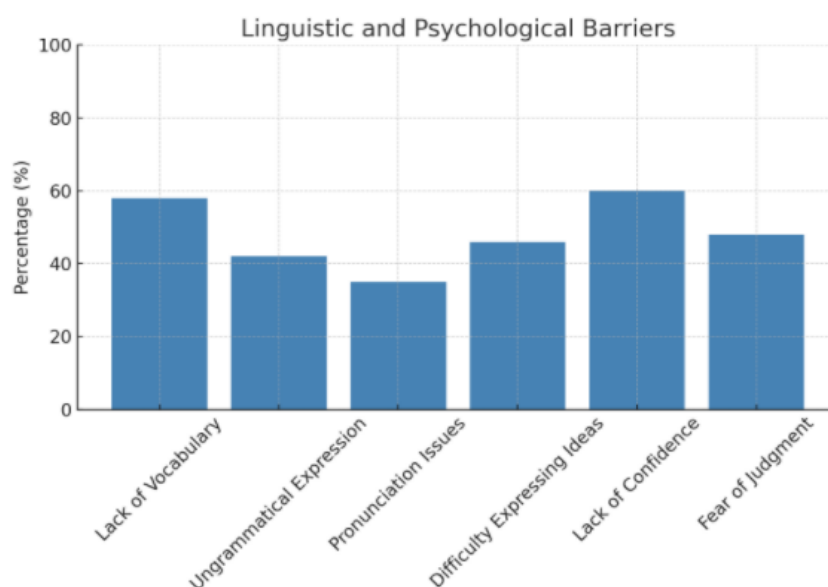


Figure 2. Linguistic and Psychological Barriers Contributing to Student Silence

To strengthen the quantitative findings, a chi-square analysis was conducted to explore the associations between various barriers and students' participation levels in EFL classrooms. The results revealed several statistically significant relationships, highlighting the complex factors that influence students' willingness to engage in speaking activities (see Table 1).

Table 1. Chi-Square Test Results of Factors Influencing Students' Speaking Willingness

Factor	Chi-Square Value	p-value	Significance
Confidence vs. Participation	7.27	0.026	Significant
Vocabulary Issues vs. Participation	11.69	0.003	Highly Significant
Classroom Enjoyment vs. Participation	10.11	0.006	Significant

One of the most notable findings was the association between confidence levels and participation. The chi-square value of 7.27, with a p-value of 0.026, indicates a statistically significant relationship, suggesting that students with low confidence were considerably less likely to participate in classroom discussions. This finding underscores the critical role of self-assurance in encouraging verbal engagement, as students who doubted their English-speaking abilities often refrained from speaking due to fear of making mistakes or being judged.

Another significant association was observed between vocabulary issues and participation, with a chi-square value of 11.69 and a p-value of 0.003, demonstrating a strong connection between linguistic limitations and reduced participation. Students who struggled with the vocabulary found it challenging to express their ideas effectively, leading to reluctance to join classroom conversations. This highlights how language proficiency, particularly a robust vocabulary base, is essential for fostering active participation in EFL settings. Without adequate vocabulary, students may feel intimidated or embarrassed, further deepening their silence during speaking activities.

Additionally, the analysis revealed a significant association between classroom enjoyment and participation, evidenced by a chi-square value of 10.11 and a p-value of 0.006. This suggests that students who perceived the classroom atmosphere as enjoyable characterized by feelings of fun, relaxation, and interest were more likely to engage actively in speaking activities. A positive classroom environment can alleviate anxiety and create a supportive space that encourages students to take risks with language use, thereby increasing participation. This finding emphasizes the importance of fostering an engaging and supportive classroom atmosphere, as enjoyment and comfort can motivate students to overcome hesitation and participate in oral activities more frequently.

Overall, these chi-square test results highlight the multifaceted nature of student silence in EFL classrooms, revealing that both psychological factors, such as confidence and enjoyment, and linguistic barriers, such as vocabulary difficulties, play significant roles in shaping students' willingness to engage. Addressing these factors through targeted interventions such as confidence-building activities, vocabulary enhancement exercises, and creating a supportive classroom environment could lead to increased student participation and reduced silence, ultimately fostering more effective language learning experiences.

Figure 3. Regression and Correlation Analysis of Variables Affecting Student Participation

Statistical Measure	Value
R ² (Variance Explained)	0.918
F-statistic	59.41
p-value	< 0.0001
Confidence & Participation (r)	0.95
Vocabulary & Participation (r)	0.93
Classroom Enjoyment & Participation (r)	0.88

To further strengthen the findings, a correlation and regression analysis was conducted to examine the relationships between key variables affecting student participation (see Figure 3). The correlation analysis demonstrated a strong connection between confidence level and participation frequency ($r = 0.95$), indicating that students with higher confidence were significantly more likely to engage in classroom discussions. Similarly, vocabulary proficiency was strongly correlated with participation frequency ($r = 0.93$), suggesting that students with a richer vocabulary base were more inclined to participate actively. Classroom enjoyment also showed a positive correlation with participation frequency ($r = 0.88$), implying that students who found the classroom environment enjoyable tended to participate more, though this factor was slightly less predictive than confidence and vocabulary proficiency.

The regression analysis further reinforced these findings, revealing that the model accounted for 91.8% of the variability in participation frequency ($R^2 = 0.918$), indicating a strong predictive relationship. The results confirmed that confidence level, vocabulary proficiency, and classroom enjoyment were significant predictors of student participation. The F-statistic (59.41, $p < 0.0001$) provided robust statistical evidence, highlighting a strong overall relationship between these independent variables and participation. Notably, confidence and vocabulary proficiency emerged as the most critical factors in encouraging participation, reinforcing the importance of fostering student self-assurance and expanding their lexical resources. Although classroom enjoyment positively influenced participation, its effect was less pronounced compared to confidence and vocabulary proficiency, suggesting that psychological and linguistic factors play a more direct role in shaping students' willingness to speak.

These findings suggest that targeted interventions, such as confidence-building activities and structured vocabulary development programs could be the most effective strategies for enhancing student participation in EFL classrooms. Additionally, creating an engaging and supportive classroom atmosphere remains important, but it should be complemented with direct efforts to improve students' linguistic competence and reduce anxiety-related barriers to speaking tasks. Addressing these issues holistically can help create an optimal environment for improving oral communication skills and fostering greater student engagement.

4.1.2. Results from Semi-structured Interviews

The semi-structured interviews offered deeper insights into the emotional and experiential aspects of student silence in EFL classrooms. A recurring theme throughout the interviews was anxiety about being judged by peers or making mistakes during speaking activities. Many participants expressed feelings of insecurity that hindered their willingness to engage in classroom discussions. One participant admitted, *"I worry about what my friends think of me when I speak,"* while another

shared, *"I don't have confidence in my answers and fear being judged."* These sentiments vividly illustrate how fear of negative evaluation can significantly inhibit classroom engagement, aligning with Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis, which posits that heightened anxiety can act as a barrier to language acquisition.

Further interviews revealed how deeply linguistic challenges impacted students' participation. One student explained, *"Sometimes, I know what I want to say, but I can't find the right words in English, so I stay silent"*. This difficulty with vocabulary recalls often compounded other challenges, such as forming grammatically correct sentences or pronouncing words accurately. Another participant reflected, *"I often hesitate because I'm afraid of mispronouncing words, and my classmates will laugh"*. This underscores the interplay between linguistic barriers and psychological factors, reinforcing students' reluctance to speak.

In addition to psychological and linguistic barriers, pedagogical factors emerged as significant contributors to classroom silence. Several students criticized the traditional, teacher-centered approach that limited opportunities for creating meaningful interaction. One participant noted, *"Most of the time, we just listen to the teacher. There are few chances to speak unless the teacher asks a question"*. Another student stated, *"The lessons are repetitive, and we don't get many activities that allow us to practice speaking"*. This lack of interactive opportunities diminished students' motivation and comfort in participating actively in oral communication.

Interestingly, several students suggested practical solutions to enhance classroom engagement. Many advocated for incorporating more interactive activities, such as debates, role-playing, and language games. One student recommended, *"It would be helpful if we had more group discussions or activities that encourage us to speak freely without worrying about being wrong"*. Another participant emphasized the importance of peer collaboration, stating, *"Working in pairs or small groups makes me feel more comfortable speaking because it's less intimidating than speaking in front of the whole class"*.

These qualitative insights reveal the complex interplay of psychological, linguistic, and pedagogical factors contributing to student silence. They also highlight a gap between students' desire for a supportive, interactive classroom environment and their actual experiences of teacher-centered instruction. The interviews suggest that fostering a more dynamic learning atmosphere through varied, interactive activities and a supportive environment that reduces fear of judgment could significantly enhance student participation and reduce classroom silence in EFL settings at TDMU.

4.2. Discussion

This section interprets the findings in the context of the study's research questions and theoretical framework while drawing comparisons with previous research. Rather than revisiting the results, this discussion emphasizes the broader significance of the findings, their alignment with existing theories, and their implications for teaching practices and future research. The analysis centers on the psychological, linguistic, and pedagogical dimensions of student silence in EFL classrooms at TDMU and explores how these insights can inform strategies to enhance student participation.

4.2.1. Psychological Factors and Student Silence

The current research affirms and extends the findings of Tsui (1996), Tani (2005), and Liu and Jackson (2009), all of whom emphasized the negative impact of psychological barriers particularly fear of negative evaluation and low self-confidence on oral participation in EFL contexts. Drawing on Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis, the current study corroborates that heightened anxiety significantly disrupts language acquisition by raising learners' emotional defenses and inhibiting

spontaneous verbal output. However, the research adds a new dimension by revealing a paradoxical dynamic: students who report enjoying their English classes often remain silent, not because of disinterest or disengagement, but because of unresolved internal anxieties. This finding points to a deeper psychological complexity not fully addressed in prior studies, which tend to associate non-participation primarily with negative classroom experiences or teacher behaviors.

What distinguishes the present study is its illumination of how emotional vulnerability can persist even in seemingly positive learning environments. Enjoyment, while important, does not automatically translate into participation if students lack the emotional resilience or confidence to speak. In this sense, the study challenges the assumption that a pleasant classroom atmosphere is sufficient to promote engagement. Instead, it underscores the need for a dual approach that combines affective support with cognitive and linguistic scaffolding. To reduce student silence, educators must go beyond creating an enjoyable environment and implement targeted interventions that address the roots of communication apprehension. These include normalizing errors, encouraging risk-taking, providing consistent positive reinforcement, and designing classroom structures that reduce the fear of judgment. Such measures are essential not only for improving participation but also for nurturing a psychologically safe space where students feel empowered to use the target language.

4.2.2. Linguistic Barriers to Communication

The present findings resonate with Liu's (2005) observation that deficiencies in language skills can lead to withdrawal from participation. Yet, unlike prior research that often treats linguistic shortcomings as isolated obstacles, the present study reveals a more intricate relationship: vocabulary gaps are deeply intertwined with psychological fears, especially the anxiety of peer judgment. This interplay adds a vital layer of complexity to understanding how language ability influences emotional readiness to engage.

While earlier studies by Liu (2005) and Hanh (2020) primarily highlight language proficiency as a straightforward barrier to communication, the current research extends this perspective by demonstrating that linguistic challenges are frequently exacerbated by internal psychological struggles. Specifically, the apprehension about committing linguistic errors can intensify self-doubt and feelings of inadequacy, which in turn inhibit verbal participation even among students who are eager to communicate.

These insights suggest that linguistic competence transcends mere technical mastery; it also functions as a crucial foundation for psychological confidence. Consequently, language instruction must move beyond focusing solely on vocabulary or grammar acquisition. Effective pedagogical approaches should integrate confidence-building strategies alongside targeted linguistic support. Implementing vocabulary enhancement exercises, pronunciation drills, and structured speaking activities within a low-anxiety, supportive environment can help alleviate both the linguistic and emotional obstacles that hinder student participation.

4.2.3. Pedagogical Influences on Student Participation

The findings of the study corroborate earlier research by Bao (2020) and Liu and Littlewood (1997), which emphasize the importance of student-centered pedagogy in fostering learner engagement. However, the present research advances the conversation by demonstrating that mere classroom enjoyment is valuable but insufficient to stimulate meaningful participation if it is not accompanied by genuine opportunities for verbal interaction. This distinction between passive enjoyment and active engagement represents a nuanced yet significant contribution, underscoring that positive affect alone does not automatically translate into communicative practice.

Grounded in Sociocultural Theory and Classroom Interaction Theory, the pedagogical implications of these findings reaffirm the central role of purposeful interaction in language acquisition. The participants expressed preference for interactive, learner-focused activities substantiates the notion that engagement thrives in environments where collaboration and communication are actively encouraged and systematically guided.

Importantly, while Bao (2020) and Liu and Littlewood (1997) advocate broadly for student-centered learning, the present research identifies a critical disconnect at TDMU: students report classroom enjoyment, yet this does not consistently result in increased verbal participation. This gap points to the persistence of teacher-centered instructional methods that, despite creating a pleasant atmosphere, inadvertently constrain authentic communicative opportunities. To bridge this divide, educators should adopt more dynamic and participatory teaching approaches such as group discussions, debates, and role-playing that explicitly promote student interaction. Such strategies can help cultivate a classroom culture that is not only enjoyable but also actively engaging and supportive of language development.

4.2.4. Strategies for Reducing Student Silence and Enhancing Student Verbal Participation

The strategies proposed to reduce student silence and foster verbal participation in EFL classrooms at TDMU are primarily derived from the semi-structured interviews conducted in the current study, supported by the questionnaire findings and theoretical framework. The interviews offered rich, qualitative insights into students' personal experiences, shedding light on psychological, linguistic, and pedagogical barriers to participation. These findings were reinforced by the questionnaire data, which quantitatively validated the widespread presence of issues such as lack of confidence, vocabulary challenges, and limited classroom interaction opportunities.

One key strategy focuses on boosting student confidence, based on Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis, which suggests that reducing anxiety can improve language acquisition. Interview responses highlighted that students often feared peer judgment, suggesting the need for low-pressure speaking activities, consistent positive reinforcement, and fostering an environment where mistakes are viewed as opportunities for learning.

Another essential approach involves enhancing linguistic competence through targeted vocabulary and pronunciation exercises, supported speaking tasks, and authentic communicative opportunities. The interviews revealed that many students hesitated due to difficulties recalling words or constructing grammatically correct sentences, underlining the importance of structured linguistic support.

Encouraging interactive learning emerged as a pivotal strategy from both the interviews and questionnaire data, supported by Classroom Interaction Theory and Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). Students expressed a strong preference for more engaging and collaborative activities, such as debates, group discussions, and role-playing, which can help shift classroom dynamics from teacher-centered to student-centered learning.

In alignment with Communication Apprehension Theory, strategies aimed at reducing communication apprehension were also considered critical. Suggestions from the interviews included creating small-group speaking opportunities and incorporating relaxation techniques to help manage anxiety before speaking tasks.

Lastly, creating a harmonious classroom atmosphere was emphasized by students as essential for encouraging participation. A supportive environment, where teachers act as facilitators rather than controllers and empathy among peers is promoted, can empower students to speak without

fear of criticism. Allowing more autonomy and processing time for responses was also highlighted as beneficial.

Integrating student feedback, questionnaire findings, and theoretical frameworks provides a comprehensive approach to reducing student silence and enhancing verbal participation in EFL classrooms at TDMU. Implementing these approaches can help educators create a more inclusive, dynamic, and supportive learning environment, addressing the root causes of student reticence and encouraging students' active engagement.

4.2.5. New Contributions of the Current Study

In contrast to earlier studies that examined psychological or linguistic issues in isolation, this study illustrates their intertwined effect on student silence, contributing a more integrative model. Furthermore, by combining mixed-method data and emphasizing local context, the study offers empirical evidence often missing in broader reviews and expands the theoretical application of CLT and Affective Filter models to Vietnamese university classrooms.

The present study makes several contributions to the existing body of research on student silence in EFL classrooms:

Bridging the Gap Between Classroom Enjoyment and Speaking Participation

These findings also resonate with those of Tsui, 1996 who examined similar issues in East Asian EFL contexts, suggesting that while some challenges are context-specific, others reflect broader trends in EFL education.

Unlike previous research that primarily links low participation to negative classroom experiences, this study finds that even students who enjoy their English classes may remain silent due to psychological barriers. This insight suggests that interventions should focus not only on making classrooms engaging but also on addressing anxiety and self-confidence issues.

Integrating Psychological and Linguistic Barriers

While prior studies have examined anxiety and vocabulary limitations separately, this study demonstrates how these factors interact. The fear of negative evaluation often stems from perceived linguistic inadequacy, highlighting the need for a dual approach that strengthens both emotional resilience and language competence.

Student-Driven Pedagogical Recommendations

By directly incorporating student perspectives, this study presents practical teaching strategies aligned with their needs, such as integrating more speaking-oriented activities, using peer collaboration, and providing structured vocabulary support.

5. Conclusion

The present research investigated the phenomenon of student silence in EFL classrooms at TDMU, with the dual aims of identifying the underlying causes of students' reluctance to speak and proposing effective strategies to enhance verbal participation. Through a mixed-methods approach combining statistical analysis and qualitative interviews, the study provided a comprehensive understanding of how psychological, linguistic, and pedagogical factors intersect to shape classroom reticence.

In response to the first research question, the findings revealed that psychological barriers, particularly low self-confidence and fear of negative evaluation from peers, were central to students' unwillingness to speak. Notably, many students who reported enjoying their English classes still refrained from participating due to persistent internal anxieties. This paradox underscores the fact

that enjoyment alone does not guarantee engagement, as emotional vulnerabilities can outweigh positive perceptions of the learning environment. In addition to psychological barriers, linguistic challenges also played a critical role. Students cited limited vocabulary, grammatical uncertainty, and pronunciation difficulties as major obstacles that hindered their ability to express themselves effectively. These linguistic shortcomings often compounded their anxiety, further reducing their willingness to participate. Moreover, pedagogical practices, particularly teacher-centered instruction and the limited use of interactive learning activities, contributed to a lack of authentic opportunities for oral communication, reinforcing silence as a default mode of classroom behavior.

To address the second research question, the study identified a range of pedagogical strategies rooted in established theoretical frameworks such as Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis, Sociocultural Theory, and Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). These strategies involve cultivating students' confidence by creating low-pressure speaking environments, offering consistent encouragement, and presenting mistakes as opportunities for learning. They also include enhancing students' linguistic competence through structured vocabulary development and guided speaking tasks designed to build fluency and accuracy. Furthermore, the findings emphasize the importance of fostering student-centered learning environments in which verbal interaction is actively encouraged through group discussions, role-playing, and collaborative projects. These changes require a shift away from traditional, lecture-based teaching models toward more dynamic, communicative settings that empower students to take linguistic risks in a supportive context.

By combining empirical data with student voices and theoretical insights, the present study offers a nuanced and locally grounded perspective on EFL classroom silence. One of the study's key contributions lies in highlighting the disconnect between classroom enjoyment and actual participation, thereby challenging the assumption that a pleasant atmosphere alone is sufficient to promote engagement. Instead, the findings point to the need for holistic interventions that address both emotional readiness and linguistic capability. The results have important implications for teachers, curriculum designers, and institutional leaders seeking to foster inclusive and engaging language learning environments. They suggest that reducing silence and increasing verbal participation require a deliberate effort to integrate psychological support with pedagogical innovation.

While the study is limited to the specific institutional and cultural context of TDMU, its methodological approach and practical insights offer broader relevance for similar EFL settings. Future research could extend these findings through cross-institutional comparisons, longitudinal tracking of student engagement over time, and the inclusion of classroom observation data to capture real-time interaction dynamics. Ultimately, addressing the root causes of student silence through responsive and reflective teaching practices can contribute not only to improved language acquisition but also to the development of learners' confidence and communicative competence in real-world contexts.

Declarations

Author Contributions. 1st Author: problem identification, research design, supervision, conceptualization, overall quality assurance; 2nd Author: literature review, data collection, and interpretation, dissertation writing; 3rd and 4th Authors: guidance on data analysis, final manuscript review, and revision.

Conflicts of Interest. The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Ethical Approvals. The study was conducted in accordance with the principles of ethical considerations. Participants were informed about the objectives of the study and participated voluntarily, providing their informed consent. Measures were taken to ensure data anonymity, privacy, and confidentiality.

Funding. The authors received no funding for this project.

Acknowledgements. The authors wish to thank the university authorities for their support and all the students who voluntarily participated in this study.

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