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Identifying the Main Determinants of Low Student Interaction in English Speaking Classes as a Foreign Language in Ecuador

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ABSTRACT

Speaking skills in EFL classrooms are influenced by student interaction and in many cases, oral participation is minimal among students at the secondary level. The present quantitative inquiry aimed at the research question that investigated the reasons for which student interactions are low in EFL-speaking classes among Ecuadorian high school students. A structured Likert scale questionnaire was conducted for about 50 15–17-year-old public secondary school students of Manta, Ecuador. This instrument addressed affective, linguistic, pedagogical, environmental, and motivational variables, affecting students' willingness to speak. Reliability analysis was acceptable for internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.728$). Descriptive analysis suggested that affective variables, in particular anxiety, fear of making mistakes, and lack of confidence, had the most adverse effect on students' participation. Environmental factors including large class size and peer attitudes significantly predicted student motivation, accounting for 28.9% of its variation. Results demonstrate that barriers related to emotion and state of classroom climate are much more important than language as a determinant of limited spoken communication. Anxiety reduction and supportive, student-centered classroom environments are crucial variables for boosting speaking participation in EFL secondary education settings.

Keywords: *oral expression, student interaction, classroom environment, motivation, oral participation, secondary education*

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Identificación de los Principales Determinantes de la Baja Interacción Estudiantil en Clases de Inglés Como Lengua Extranjera en Ecuador

RESUMEN

Las habilidades de expresión oral en las clases de inglés como lengua extranjera (EFL) se ven influenciadas por las interacciones estudiantiles y, en muchos casos, la participación oral es mínima entre los estudiantes de secundaria. La presente investigación cuantitativa se centró en la pregunta de investigación que indaga las razones por las cuales las interacciones estudiantiles son bajas en las clases de inglés como lengua extranjera (EFL) entre estudiantes de secundaria ecuatorianos. Se aplicó un cuestionario estructurado de escala Likert a aproximadamente 50 estudiantes de entre 15 a 17 años de edad en una secundaria pública de Manta, Ecuador. Este instrumento abordó variables afectivas, lingüísticas, pedagógicas, ambientales y motivacionales que afectan la disposición de los estudiantes a hablar. El análisis de confiabilidad fue aceptable para la consistencia interna (α de Cronbach = 0,728). El análisis descriptivo sugirió que las variables afectivas; en particular la ansiedad, el miedo a cometer errores y la falta de confianza, tuvieron el efecto más adverso en la participación estudiantil. Los factores ambientales, como el gran tamaño de la clase y las actitudes de los compañeros, predijeron significativamente la motivación estudiantil, representando el 28,9% de su variación. Los resultados demuestran que las barreras relacionadas con la emoción y el estado del clima en el aula son mucho más importantes que el lenguaje como determinantes de la comunicación oral limitada. La reducción de la ansiedad y los entornos de clase que brindan apoyo y están centrados en el estudiante son variables cruciales para impulsar la participación en la expresión oral en entornos de educación secundaria de EFL.

Palabras claves: *expresión oral, interacción estudiantil, ambiente de clase, motivación, participación oral, educación secundaria*

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INTRODUCTION

Speaking can be hard even in required English classes for EFL learners. It is one of the most important skills for successful communication in a foreign language, yet it is one of the most challenging to teach and measure. Students in many classrooms in Ecuador seem unpleasingly reluctant to contribute to oral sessions, preferring to remain quiet or respond to the teacher with little effort. Learning the reasons behind this low frequency of interaction has been increasingly an issue for both teachers and researchers of English as an EFL.

This research aims to identify the affective, linguistic, pedagogical, motivational, and environmental determinants that contribute to low oral participation among Ecuadorian high school EFL students in public schools in Ecuador, and to determine the influence of these factors on learners' willingness to engage in speaking activities.

In non-English speaking EFL contexts, particularly in high schools, the situation is complex because students face multiple obstacles that inhibit speech. Psychological factors such as fear of making mistakes, low confidence, and speaking anxiety reduce students' willingness to participate in communicative tasks. Likewise, linguistic limitations such as restricted vocabulary and pronunciation difficulties affect fluency and make communication more difficult. In addition, teaching methods that prioritize grammar accuracy over interaction, limited use of interactive tasks, and classroom environments that generate fear of negative judgment from peers or teachers also decrease oral participation and increase avoidance of speaking activities.

Although there is evidence in the literature on the subject, little is known about the factors that influence students' participation in speaking activities among secondary students, especially in public education contexts in Ecuador. Previous studies have often focused on single domains, such as psychological inhibitions, language-related constraints, or classroom

practices, rather than analyzing how these variables interact to influence participation levels. To address this gap, this study attempts to investigate the main determinants of low student participation in speaking activities within the EFL classroom. It is hoped that understanding these aspects will help teachers foster more communicative and student-centered approaches so that students can use English more effectively to express themselves.

Research Questions:

- 1.What are the main causes of low student interaction in EFL speaking classes?
- 2.How do affective factors (e.g., anxiety, confidence, emotional state) influence students' willingness to participate in EFL speaking activities?
- 3.To what extent do environmental conditions (e.g., classroom atmosphere, peer relationships, physical setting) affect the level of student interaction in EFL speaking classes?

Finally, this article is framed within the research project “Innovaciones pedagógicas e internacionalización de la formación de docentes para el desarrollo humano y sostenible” (Pedagogical Innovations and Internationalization of Teacher Training for Human and Sustainable Development) at the National and Foreign Language Pedagogy program of the Universidad Laica Eloy Alfaro de Manabí (ULEAM). which supports the development of this study by promoting research focused on innovative teaching practices and the improvement of English language learning processes in educational contexts.

Speaking is one of the key competences for successful communication in a foreign language, but it is still one of the main problems experienced by EFL learners. Although class-based interaction is critically important to foster active learning and oral proficiency (Bicha, 2016), students tend to participate poorly in speaking lessons, which negatively affects fluency, accuracy, self-confidence, and overall language development.

According to some recent research, emotional factors like anxiety, boredom, and

demotivation significantly undermine the willingness of learners to communicate and perform oral activities (Solhi, 2024; Zhang, 2024). Moreover, studies in Latin American context have indicated that high schools EFL students tend to not speak because their fear of being negatively evaluated and lack of self-confidence in their abilities (Pérez-Sánchez et al., 2022a; Vargas & Mejía, 2023).

This research attempts to explore the most significant reasons for low level of communication between students in EFL speaking classes of Ecuadorian high-school students. Student interaction refers to the communication that goes on between and among students and students and between students and teachers during lessons (Brown, 2007). High interaction is believed to enhance language fluency, confidence, and communicative competence. However, a low interaction level reduces opportunities for speaking practice which impacts on students' oral proficiency. A foreign language anxiety is the sense of tension and fear of learning or using a foreign language (Horwitz et al., 1986). Motivation is an internal drive that motivates the student to learn; it can be intrinsic (learning for fun) or extrinsic (learning for the sake of rewards external to the learner) (Deci & Ryan, 1985).

This research was built on the premise of the Socio-Cultural Theory of learning (Vygotsky, 1978) that stresses social interaction as crucial for learning. According to this view, development of language occurs through interaction and cooperation. As such, knowing the elements that limit student interaction helps instructors to establish a supportive environment conducive to participation and language acquisition.

Recent quantitative studies point out the role of emotions and motivation in how English is spoken among student interaction in EFL speaking contexts. Wang, Wang and Shi (2022), for instance, found that “low anxious learners are more willing to communicate” and gifted or grittier learners in particular “have higher willingness to speak up more in foreign-language

contexts.” Similarly, Solhi (2024) supported negative emotional orientations such as anxiety, boredom and demotivation negatively impact EFL learners’ willingness to engage with spoken interaction.

Napiórkowska and Barrios (2024) in another study of 2,608 secondary-school EFL learners in Poland and Spain found that affective factors and classroom contexts were related to their willingness to communicate. The authors argued that “there are more similarities than differences” in the two environments. Zhang (2024) also observed that fear of negative evaluation and foreign language anxiety remain strong obstacles to oral participation in high schools. Furthermore, Napiórkowska and Barrios (2024) indicated that the degree of willingness to communicate is highly influenced by the climate in classroom, teacher encouragement and peer cooperation.

Pérez-Sánchez et al. in the Ecuadorian context (2022) studied communicative activities in public schools and observed that teachers suggested speaking tasks but that students “would stay silent for fear of making mistakes and because of low self-esteem” (p. 45). Vargas and Mejía (2023) noted that classroom interaction tended to be teacher-centered with little peer engagement, indicating that emotional and motivational challenges remained.

Nevertheless, few studies have quantitatively examined the reasons behind low interaction levels among Ecuadorian high school EFL students in speaking classes, regarding the factors that contribute to these key factors, such as anxiety, self-efficacy, motivation, and teacher feedback style. This gap limits a comprehensive understanding of how these variables influence students’ oral participation.

METHODS AND MATERIALS

Research Design:

This study adopted a quantitative research design to identify the main causes of low student

interaction in EFL speaking classes. A survey method was implemented to gather quantitative data, which related to students' attitudes, perceptions and experiences concerning oral classroom interaction. This procedure was suitable for the identification of general tendencies and patterns of the target population, as opposed to individual learners as a cohort

Participants:

The research deployed a convenience sampling technique to select 50 Ecuadorian high school EFL students ($N = 50$) aged 15–17 from the public education sector in Manta. Research was carried out at a public high school in Manta, Ecuador. The high school is in compliance with the Ecuadorian national curriculum and carries out English language programs in order to enhance communicative competence. The class usually accommodates 25–30 students per classroom.

This method was chosen because it allowed the researcher direct access to participants within the school context, facilitating efficient data collection. This sampling was in line with the quantitative study as the emphasis was given to capturing general phenomena and trends in low levels of interaction in EFL speaking classes, rather than making generalized population observations. The final sample consisted of 50 students.

Research Instruments:

A structured questionnaire was developed to collect quantitative data. The instrument used a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree) to measure students' attitudes, perceptions, and experiences related to classroom interaction in speaking activities. The content validity of the instrument was established through a systematic expert review process. First, a table of specifications was created to ensure alignment between the research variables (causes of low student interaction and level of student interaction), their corresponding dimensions, indicators, and Likert-scale items.

The questionnaire was then evaluated by three experts in EFL teaching. Based on their feedback, minor revisions were made to improve wording and eliminate ambiguity, ensuring items were appropriate for Ecuadorian high school EFL students aged 15–17. Additionally, internal consistency reliability was examined using Cronbach's alpha, which measures the extent to which items within a scale are interrelated (Cronbach, 1951). Consistent with established methodological standards, alpha coefficients of .70 or higher were considered acceptable for research purposes (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994). This process confirmed that the instrument demonstrated adequate content validity and reliability for the study.

Data Collection Procedures:

Permission to carry out the study was acquired from the school director during the first week, and informed consent was obtained for data collection including parental authorization due to participants' minor status. During the second week, surveys were administered during their regular English classes and each session lasted between 25 to 30 minutes. During weeks three and four, completed questionnaires were thoroughly examined, data were organized and entered, and the relevant statistical analyses were performed to interpret the results.

Ethical Considerations:

All ethical standards were obeyed throughout the study. Prior to participation, participants were made aware of the purpose, procedures, and duration of the research. Parental consent was obtained as all participants were minors. Participation was voluntary, and students were told they could withdraw their participation at any point without academic penalty or negative repercussions. Anonymity was maintained through the removal of identifying information and the substitution of the school name with a pseudonym. All data were safely stored on a password-protected device and only applied for research.

Data Analysis:

The quantitative data were analyzed in statistical software (R) used in Google Colaboratory. Responses were first converted to numerical values on the Likert scale to enable statistical processing. The reliability of the instrument was evaluated in both descriptive and inferential analyses and relationships among factors influencing student interactions.

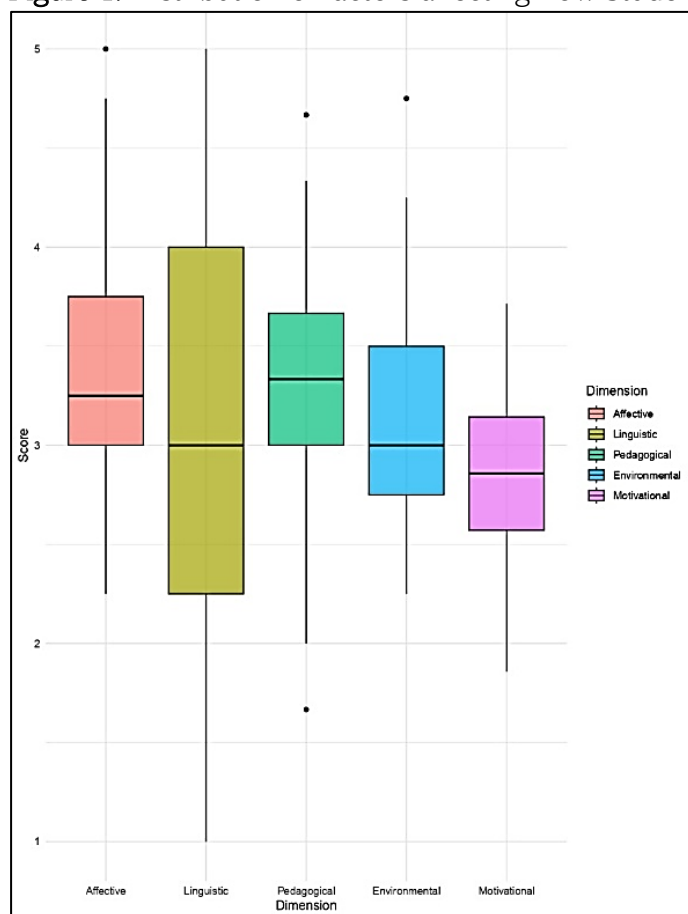
Cronbach's alpha was calculated to evaluate the internal consistency of the questionnaire. It concluded that the overall reliability coefficient was $\alpha = 0.728$, which denotes an acceptable internal consistency level to measure of instrument. For the reliability process, it automatically reversed certain items in questionnaires because of negative correlations with the principal component; this is the traditional method used to provide reliable estimates of reliability. After reliability testing, a multiple linear regression analysis was conducted to see how affective, pedagogical, environmental, and motivational factors predicted the linguistic dimension that determined whether students perceived speaking difficulties.

RESULTS

The research examined perceptions from about 50 students aged 15–17 through 19 items on a five-point Likert scale, organized into five dimensions (affective, linguistic, pedagogical, environmental, and motivational). The instrument's internal consistency was acceptable in reliability testing (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.728$), so it is an adequate tool for measuring the results. Descriptive statistics showed that the Affective Dimension achieved the highest mean score ($M = 3.40$) meaning anxiety and low self-confidence are major impediments to oral engagement. By contrast, the Motivational Dimension had the lowest mean ($M = 2.81$), suggesting that students find speaking topics to be less appropriate to their needs compared to the real world. Several regression analyses indicated that the overall model predicting linguistic difficulty explained 11.7% of the variance ($R^2 = 0.117$) but was not statistically

significant, $F(4, 45) = 1.494$, $p = .22$. None of the individual predictors was significant ($p > .05$), although the pattern of coefficients indicated an association between affective and environmental factors and linguistic difficulty, and negative association with pedagogical and motivational factors respectively. These tendencies suggest ways in which emotion and classroom conditions could shape the difficulties students experience in speaking out, despite the lack of statistical significance in this sample. Residual normality was confirmed by assumption testing, for both Motivation ($p = .352$) and Linguistic ($p = .357$) models. Further analysis confirmed that the Environmental Dimension was a significant predictor of Motivation ($\beta = 0.557$, $p < .001$). By contrast, path analysis showed Environmental Dimension had a significant effect on Motivation ($\beta = 0.456$, $p < .001$). However, Motivation did not meaningfully predict linguistic competence ($\beta = -0.163$, $p = .633$).

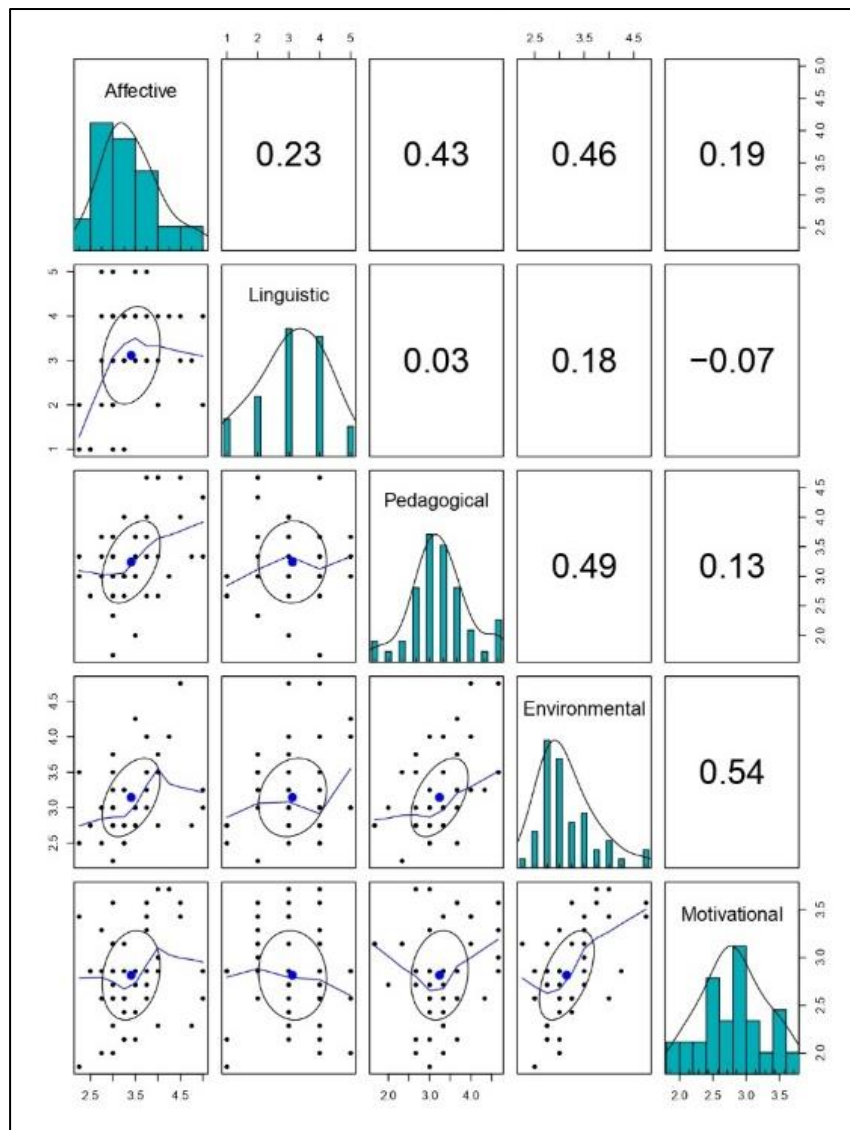
Figure 1. Distribution of factors affecting Low Student Interaction in EFL Speaking Classes



Source: Own elaboration

Figure 1 shows the distribution of scores for each of the five dimensions of analysis; the Affective sector has the highest central tendency while Motivation has the lowest median and a relatively narrower spread.

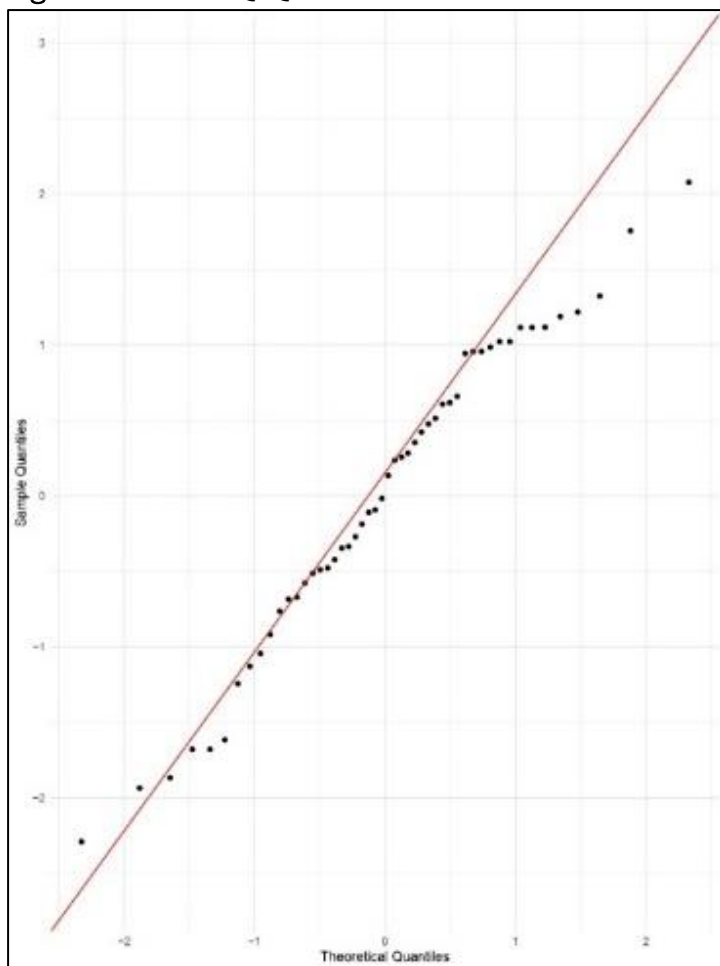
Figure 2. Correlation of factors that affect Low Student Interaction in EFL Speaking Classes



Source: Own elaboration

Correlation matrices with scatterplots, density curves, and coefficients in Figure 2 indicate that relationships are weak to moderate; most strongly observed between Environmental and Motivational factors.

Figure 3. Normal Q-Q Plot



Source: Own elaboration

A normal Q–Q plot in Figure 3 displays data points close to the reference line, visually confirming that residuals approximate a normal distribution and confirming the validity of the regression assumptions.

Inferential Statistics and Path Analysis

Multiple linear regression models were used to determine the most relevant predictors of student behavior. To ensure validity, a Shapiro-Wilk test was conducted on the residuals, confirming normality for both the Motivation ($p = .352$) and Linguistic ($p = .357$) models.

In terms of student motivation, only the Environmental Dimension was found to be the most significant predictor ($\beta=0.557$, $p<.001$), highlighting the influence of class size and peer opinion; explaining 28.9% of the variance. The model for linguistic competence was not

statistically significant ($F = 1.494$, $p = .22$), which means that in this sample technical proficiency is affected by elements outside the current affective and motivational variables. While the Environment has a significant effect on Motivation ($\beta=0.456$, $p < .001$), the subsequent path from Motivation to Linguistic Competence did not show a significant effect ($\beta=-0.163$, $p = .633$).

DISCUSSION

Findings of the present study illustrate the diverse obstacles that high school students in the city of Manta, Ecuador, face in using EFL speaking activities. It is worth emphasizing that results are exploratory in nature and, therefore, may not be generalizable to the broader national population. The most noticeable result was the score ($M = 3.40$) on the Affective Dimension, also suggesting that affective factors in particular, anxiety, fear of making mistakes and low self-confidence are a key barrier to oral participation.

This outcome is consistent with the findings of Pérez-Sánchez et al. (2022b) who revealed that the English language learning process among Ecuadorian learners is mostly silent in consequence of fear of negative evaluation and lack of confidence. International research has found similar patterns in which affective variables are the main determinants of oral production (Horwitz et al., 1986; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994; Oxford, 2011). These results are also well supportive of Krashen's (1982) Affective Filter Hypothesis which suggests emotional experiences may act as a psychological burden, blocking the efficient receiving of language input.

When anxiety or embarrassment is experienced by learners, their affective filter increases which means participation and learning are decreased. In fact, evidence for the importance of more supportive emotional climates in communication teaching is also substantial, and it has

been demonstrated that this type of environment encourages willingness to communicate and oral risk-taking (Dörnyei, 2001; Lightbown & Spada, 2013; Ellis, 2008).

Other than affective variables the Environmental Dimension was found that it was a good (significant) predictor for motivation ($\beta = 0.557$), emphasizing the role of classroom climate in predicting whether learners would participate. This result aligns with Vygotsky's (1978) Sociocultural Theory, which postulates that learning is created through interaction and collaboration. Drawing from empirical research, the views of Bandura (1997), Dörnyei and Murphey (2003), and Wentzel (2010) are underpinned by the strong impact of classroom climate, peer support, and teacher immediacy on student engagement and motivation in general.

Large classrooms are commonly cited as obstacles toward communicative practice due to a decrease in individual speaking time and a greater performance stressor (Harmer, 2007; Ur, 2012; Richards, 2006). Speaking becomes more of a hazard and less of a learning experience when we see that the environment is not conducive to our learning, resulting in a fall in motivation and engagement.

Effects from affective and environment-related variables are relevant, but Linguistic Dimension ($M = 3.12$) results suggest that students experience linguistic-related problems in general, especially, students have limited vocabulary and grammar.

This supports the idea that motivation will not make up for lack of linguistic resources. Even highly motivated learners could be reluctant to speak if they don't have the language toolbox to communicate their thoughts effectively. This observation is backed up by interactionist and output-based theories of language development: these positions stress that the production of language needs exposure to inputs and structured output to be effective (Swain, 1985; Long, 1996; Gass & Mackey, 2015).

Furthermore, one of the best predictors of speaking avoidance and breakdown have been found to be low lexical knowledge (Nation, 2001; Schmitt, 2010; Levelt, 1989). Hence, there is still a need for pedagogical intervention. Explicit vocabulary instruction has to be offered by teachers, alongside structured speaking scaffolds as well as corrective feedback in order to support learners' linguistic development. Without such focused instructional guidance, the gain in motivation is unlikely to be converted into measurable improvements in speaking performance (Ellis, 2008; Lightbown & Spada, 2013; Ur, 2012).

There is also a clear implication for the non-significant regression model that predicted the level of linguistic competence ($R^2 = 0.117$, $p = .22$). While the model accounted for slight proportion of the variance, it was not statistically significant indicating that factors other than those actually measured may play a role in students' speaking errors. This result is consistent with multidimensional models of language learning, which highlight that performance may be determined by cognitive and social and instructional and contextual variables at the same time (Dörnyei, 2005; Ellis, 2008; Larsen-Freeman & Cameron, 2008).

Additional variables could be existing exposure to English, instruction methods, assessments, and sociocultural norms to language learning (Richards, 2006; Harmer, 2007; Oxford, 2011). The limited explanatory ability of the model highlights the difficulty in constructing oral participation and calls for future research to include larger number of predictors and mixed-methods approaches. However, the acceptable reliability ($\alpha = 0.728$) for the instrument and the normality of residuals supports the validity of the findings, and that the dataset had proper interpretability.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this research aimed to identify the fundamental reasons for low student interaction in EFL speaking classes, and to test the impact of affective and environmental

factors on learners' attitudes (willingness) to participate. The results indicate that low interaction is not likely the result of a single interacting variable but rather influenced by multiple interacting variables. Out of those, affective variables were the most significant barrier, with anxiety (fear of making mistakes), and low confidence receiving the highest mean scores.

These findings indicate that emotional circumstances play a significant influence on language students' motivation to speak, and they show how psychological obstacles can limit participation in the presence of instructional opportunities. Therefore, the first research question is addressed by showing that the two key reasons behind low interaction are affective restrictions and the situational classroom context, not just linguistic restriction. About the second research question, the findings show that affective influences have an effect on students' willingness to join speaking interactions. The high levels of anxiety and fear of negative evaluation were associated with reduced oral engagement, which also indicates that emotional readiness is the necessary step towards communicative performance.

Research Question 3 Lastly, the third research question investigated the extent to which environmental conditions influence interaction. Classroom context was the greatest predictor of motivation; thus, contextual factors such as class size, peer attitudes and classroom climate influence learners' engagement quite directly. To this end, motivation alone failed to predict linguistic competence and participation is contingent upon a balance of supportive contexts and linguistic resources. In conclusion, the study suggests that to enhance the quality of learner interaction in EFL speaking classes should be integrated with learning approach that combines a strategy of lowering the level of anxiety, strengthening classroom support systems and providing structured linguistic scaffolding.

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ANNEX

1. Research Variables:

Independent Variable: Causes of Low Student Interaction in EFL Speaking Classes

Dependent Variable: Level of Student Interaction in EFL Speaking Classes

Variable 1: Causes of Low Student Interaction (Independent Variable)

Dimension	Indicator	Sample Questionnaire Items (Likert Scale)
Affective Factors	Anxiety level	I feel nervous when I have to speak English in class.
	Fear of making mistakes	I avoid speaking because I am afraid of making grammar or pronunciation mistakes.
	Lack of confidence	I do not feel confident speaking English in front of my classmates.
Linguistic Factors	Vocabulary limitations	I do not have enough vocabulary to express my ideas orally.
	Grammar difficulties	Grammar problems make it hard for me to speak fluently.
	Pronunciation problems	My pronunciation difficulties prevent me from participating orally.
Pedagogical Factors	Teaching strategies	Speaking activities used in class do not motivate me to participate.
	Opportunities to speak	There are few opportunities for students to speak during English lessons.
	Feedback practices	The teacher's feedback discourages me from speaking.
Classroom Environment Factors	Class size	The number of students in the class limits speaking opportunities.
	Peer attitudes	I feel uncomfortable speaking because of my classmates' reactions.
	Classroom atmosphere	The classroom environment is not supportive for speaking English.
Motivational Factors	Interest in topics	Speaking topics are not interesting or relevant to me.
	Purpose for learning English	I do not see the usefulness of speaking English in real life.
	Participation incentives	There are no incentives that encourage speaking participation.

Source: Own elaboration

Variable 2: Level of Student Interaction (Dependent Variable)

Dimension	Indicator	Sample Questionnaire Items (Likert Scale)
Frequency of Interaction	Oral participation rate	I frequently participate in speaking activities in English class.
	Voluntary participation	I speak English without being asked by the teacher.
Quality of Interaction	Use of target language	I try to use English when interacting with classmates.
	Length of responses	I can give extended oral responses in class.
Type of Interaction	Student–teacher interaction	I actively interact with the teacher in English.
	Student–student interaction	I interact with my classmates in English during activities.

Source: Own elaboration