

Factores emocionales y desarrollo de las habilidades orales en jóvenes aprendices de inglés como lengua extranjera

Emotional factors and the development of speaking skills in young EFL learners

Fatores emocionais e desenvolvimento das habilidades de fala em jovens aprendizes de inglês como língua estrangeira

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RESUMEN

La expresión oral en inglés exige coordinar recursos lingüísticos, cognitivos y socioemocionales, por lo que la ansiedad, el miedo al error, la motivación y la autoconfianza pueden modificar la disposición de los estudiantes a participar. Se desarrolló un estudio cualitativo, descriptivo y transversal en una institución educativa privada de Chone, Ecuador, con 37 estudiantes de séptimo grado y tres docentes de inglés seleccionados mediante muestreo por conveniencia. La información se obtuvo mediante observaciones de aula y entrevistas semiestructuradas; los datos se organizaron en categorías temáticas y se contrastaron mediante triangulación entre fuentes. El nerviosismo, el miedo a cometer errores y la inseguridad comunicativa se asociaron con vacilaciones, respuestas breves, silencio y evitación de tareas orales individuales. En contraste, el trabajo en parejas y grupos, las actividades interactivas, los juegos, el apoyo visual y la retroalimentación respetuosa estuvieron acompañados de una mayor disposición a comunicarse y de respuestas más espontáneas. Los patrones observados coinciden con la literatura sobre ansiedad lingüística, disposición a comunicarse y disfrute en el aprendizaje de lenguas, y sugieren que la participación oral varía según el grado de presión comunicativa y seguridad percibida en cada actividad. El desarrollo de la expresión oral en jóvenes aprendices de inglés se relaciona estrechamente con las condiciones emocionales construidas en la interacción de aula; por ello, conviene diseñar experiencias

comunicativas progresivas que normalicen el error, reduzcan la exposición innecesaria y fortalezcan la confianza para hablar.

Palabras clave: ansiedad lingüística; habilidades orales; autoconfianza; disposición a comunicarse; jóvenes aprendices.

ABSTRACT

Speaking in English requires the coordination of linguistic, cognitive, and socio-emotional resources; consequently, anxiety, fear of mistakes, motivation, and self-confidence can shape learners' readiness to participate. A qualitative, descriptive, cross-sectional study was conducted in a private educational institution in Chone, Ecuador, with 37 seventh-grade students and three English teachers selected through convenience sampling. Data were collected through classroom observations and semi-structured teacher interviews, organized into thematic categories, and contrasted through source triangulation. Nervousness, fear of making mistakes, and communicative insecurity were associated with hesitation, brief responses, silence, and avoidance of individual speaking tasks. In contrast, pair and group work, interactive activities, games, visual support, and respectful feedback were accompanied by greater willingness to communicate and more spontaneous oral responses. The observed patterns are consistent with research on foreign language anxiety, willingness to communicate, and foreign language enjoyment, suggesting that oral participation varies according to the degree of communicative pressure and perceived safety generated by specific classroom tasks. Speaking development among young EFL learners is closely related to the emotional conditions constructed through classroom interaction; therefore, speaking instruction should progressively normalize error, reduce unnecessary exposure, and strengthen learners' confidence to use English.

Keywords: foreign language anxiety; speaking skills; self-confidence; willingness to communicate; young learners.

RESUMO

A expressão oral em inglês exige a coordenação de recursos linguísticos, cognitivos e socioemocionais; por isso, a ansiedade, o medo de errar, a motivação e a autoconfiança podem influenciar a disposição dos estudantes para participar. Foi realizado um estudo qualitativo, descritivo e transversal em uma instituição educacional privada de Chone, Equador, com 37

estudantes do sétimo ano e três professores de inglês selecionados por amostragem de conveniência. Os dados foram obtidos por meio de observações de sala de aula e entrevistas semiestruturadas com os docentes, organizados em categorias temáticas e contrastados mediante triangulação entre as fontes. O nervosismo, o medo de cometer erros e a insegurança comunicativa estiveram associados a hesitações, respostas breves, silêncio e evitação de tarefas orais individuais. Em contraste, o trabalho em pares e grupos, as atividades interativas, os jogos, o apoio visual e o feedback respeitoso foram acompanhados por maior disposição para se comunicar e por respostas orais mais espontâneas. Os padrões observados são coerentes com a literatura sobre ansiedade em língua estrangeira, disposição para comunicar-se e prazer na aprendizagem de línguas, indicando que a participação oral varia conforme a pressão comunicativa e a segurança percebida em cada atividade. O desenvolvimento da fala em jovens aprendizes de inglês está estreitamente relacionado às condições emocionais construídas na interação em sala de aula; portanto, recomenda-se organizar experiências comunicativas progressivas que naturalizem o erro, reduzam a exposição desnecessária e fortaleçam a confiança para falar inglês.

Palavras-chave: ansiedade em língua estrangeira; habilidades de fala; autoconfiança; disposição para comunicar-se; jovens aprendizes.

INTRODUCTION

Speaking is one of the most visible manifestations of foreign language learning because it requires learners to mobilize linguistic knowledge in real time and in the presence of other people. Unlike receptive activities, oral interaction often makes performance immediately observable to teachers and peers. Young learners must retrieve words, organize grammar, attend to pronunciation, interpret interlocutors, and manage turn taking while simultaneously regulating the social exposure that accompanies speaking. For this reason, difficulties in oral production cannot be explained exclusively by insufficient vocabulary or grammatical knowledge. Emotional responses may determine whether learners use the linguistic resources they already possess, delay their response, restrict their message, or avoid speaking altogether (Horwitz et al., 1986; MacIntyre et al., 1998; Zuniga & Simard, 2022).

The relationship between emotion and language learning has become a central concern in second language acquisition. Early affective work focused strongly on anxiety, especially after Horwitz et al. (1986) conceptualized foreign language classroom anxiety as a situation-specific construct

involving communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and test-related concerns. Subsequent research has repeatedly associated foreign language anxiety with reduced performance and participation, although the strength and expression of anxiety vary according to the learner, skill, task, and classroom context. A meta-analytic perspective has reinforced the general negative association between foreign language anxiety and performance, while more skill-specific studies show that speaking is particularly sensitive because it combines time pressure with public evaluation (Zhang, 2019; Dewaele et al., 2023; Zuniga & Simard, 2022).

Speaking anxiety becomes pedagogically important when apprehension changes observable classroom behavior. Learners may avoid volunteering, speak more quietly, produce very short answers, over-monitor linguistic form, or remain silent even when they appear to understand the content. In a study of speaking-in-class anxiety, Mak (2011) identified fear of negative evaluation, unprepared public speaking, correction during performance, and insufficient response time as important anxiety-provoking conditions. More recent research likewise shows that anxiety can interfere with the allocation of attention during L2 speech and increase discourse-level self-repair, suggesting that anxious speakers may struggle to access and organize language efficiently under communicative pressure (Zuniga & Simard, 2022). Evidence from neurocognitive research also supports the view that foreign language speaking anxiety has behavioral and somatic correlates rather than being merely a subjective classroom complaint (Kelsen & Liang, 2024).

The problem is especially relevant for children and early adolescents because the affective conditions surrounding foreign language use are still developing. Research with primary-school learners remains smaller than the literature on university populations, yet available evidence shows that anxiety is already present at young ages. Yim (2014), in a path analysis with Korean primary-school EFL learners, found that self-perceived English proficiency played a central role in explaining anxiety. This result is important because it suggests that children's reactions depend not only on objective language knowledge but also on how competent they believe themselves to be. A learner who expects failure or embarrassment may enter an oral task with a lower sense of communicative security before speaking begins.

Recent research with young learners adds a more differentiated picture. Aramaki (2024) examined collaborative oral task repetition among elementary-school EFL learners and showed that the organization of oral tasks can be used as an anxiety-reduction strategy. Buckingham and Alpaslan (2017) similarly demonstrated that additional speaking practice with young learners can support

both oral proficiency and willingness to communicate. These studies are relevant to classroom practice because they move beyond describing anxiety as an individual deficit and instead ask how task design can create conditions in which learners feel prepared enough to attempt communication. In other words, emotional responses are partly situated in the pedagogical ecology of the lesson. This situated interpretation connects foreign language anxiety with willingness to communicate (WTC). MacIntyre et al. (1998) defined L2 WTC as a learner's readiness to enter into discourse at a particular time with a particular interlocutor. The model is valuable because it explains why linguistic competence does not automatically translate into actual communication. A learner may know enough English to respond but still choose silence if situational confidence is low. Reviews of classroom WTC research have since shown that topic, interlocutor, task, classroom environment, teacher behavior, perceived competence, anxiety, and motivation can produce moment-to-moment variation in readiness to speak (Zuniga & Simard, 2022; Feng et al., 2025; Zhang et al., 2026). The dynamic nature of WTC is particularly relevant in school settings. A student may participate comfortably with one peer but withdraw when asked to speak in front of the whole class. The same student may speak more during a game than during a formal oral presentation, even when both activities require similar vocabulary. Longitudinal evidence with young EFL learners supports the importance of WTC as a meaningful developmental construct. Feng et al. (2025), studying seventh-grade learners over three semesters, found a positive longitudinal relationship between language attitudes and WTC. Although their design differs from the present qualitative study, their findings reinforce the idea that readiness to communicate is not simply a reflection of language level; it is connected with attitudes, affect, and the learner's evolving relationship with English. Classroom environment is one of the situational layers capable of shaping WTC. Recent research similarly shows that classroom environment, learner emotion, and perceived competence operate together in shaping willingness to communicate and actual oral engagement (Zuniga & Simard, 2022; Feng et al., 2025; Zhang et al., 2026). When oral participation is framed as high-stakes public performance, students may interpret mistakes as social risks. When the same linguistic content is embedded in pair work, games, collaborative problem solving, or scaffolded rehearsal, the perceived cost of error can decrease. The pedagogical implication is not to eliminate challenge, but to calibrate communicative demand so that learners can take increasingly independent speaking turns without being overwhelmed by social evaluation.

Evidence from secondary-school EFL research further demonstrates that classroom environment, emotion, and communicative readiness operate as an interdependent system. Khajavy et al. (2018), analyzing 1,528 secondary-school learners across 65 classrooms, found that a positive classroom environment was associated with greater foreign language enjoyment and willingness to communicate, while anxiety was negatively related to WTC at the student level. Similarly, Peng and Woodrow (2010) showed that communication confidence, motivation, learner beliefs, and classroom environment contribute to WTC in EFL settings. Dewaele (2019) subsequently identified foreign language classroom anxiety as the strongest negative predictor of WTC in a sample of EFL learners, whereas enjoyment and the frequency of teacher use of the target language acted as positive predictors. Taken together, these findings support an ecological interpretation in which speaking participation emerges from the interaction of learner emotion, perceived competence, teacher behavior, and the immediate social conditions of the classroom rather than from linguistic proficiency alone (Dewaele, 2019; Khajavy et al., 2018; Peng & Woodrow, 2010). A second major development in affective research is the shift from an exclusive focus on negative emotion toward positive psychology and foreign language enjoyment (FLE). Dewaele and MacIntyre (2014) argued that enjoyment and anxiety are not opposite ends of a single continuum; learners can experience both within the same lesson. Later studies have shown that FLE is associated with teacher and learner variables, classroom interaction, attitudes toward the target language, and the amount of language use in class (Dewaele et al., 2018). Dewaele and Alfawzan (2018) further reported that enjoyment can make an independent contribution to language performance. This line of research changes the pedagogical question from merely “How can anxiety be reduced?” to the broader “What classroom conditions support positive engagement while learners manage inevitable difficulty?”

The coexistence of enjoyment and anxiety helps explain why interactive speaking activities can be productive even when students remain somewhat nervous. A moderate degree of tension may accompany any authentic oral performance; what matters is whether the learner also experiences interest, support, competence, and a realistic opportunity to succeed. Dewaele et al. (2022) found that changes in learning environment altered patterns of enjoyment, anxiety, and boredom, with social interaction emerging as a key element in learners’ experiences. More recently, Tsang and Davis (2024), working specifically with Grade 5 EFL children, found that games and videos were among the most enjoyable classroom activities and that opportunities for interaction were

frequently mentioned as reasons for enjoyment. Their findings are especially relevant to the current study because the participating Ecuadorian learners similarly showed greater engagement during games, interactive work, and visually supported activities.

Teacher behavior also contributes to the emotional climate in which speaking occurs. Emotional safety does not mean avoiding correction; rather, it concerns how correction is delivered, when it occurs, and whether the learner interprets feedback as assistance or public failure. Recent affective research indicates that teacher behavior, support, and classroom conditions can shape learners' anxiety, enjoyment, and readiness to participate orally (Dewaele et al., 2022; Wu, 2024). Dewaele et al. (2018) found that teacher-related variables were more strongly connected with enjoyment than with anxiety, suggesting that teachers may have particular leverage in creating positive emotional experiences. More recent evidence also indicates that teacher characteristics and perceived support are related to learners' enjoyment, anxiety, and willingness to communicate (Wu, 2024; Zhang et al., 2026).

For young learners, feedback is likely to interact with self-confidence because children are still developing judgments about their own communicative competence. Repeated experiences of successful participation may strengthen the expectation that speaking is manageable, whereas repeated public failure may lead learners to minimize risk by giving shorter answers or avoiding turns. Yim's (2014) findings on self-perceived proficiency are consistent with this interpretation, as are more recent studies that model perceived communicative competence as an antecedent of WTC. The central pedagogical issue is therefore not whether learners make errors—errors are inevitable in development—but whether classroom interaction allows them to remain engaged after errors occur.

Collaborative interaction is particularly relevant because it changes both the linguistic and emotional structure of speaking. Pair and small-group tasks distribute speaking turns, provide opportunities for rehearsal, and reduce the amount of attention directed toward a single learner. Aramaki (2024) reports that collaborative task repetition can reduce anxiety among young EFL learners, while Buckingham and Alpaslan (2017) found that structured opportunities for oral practice supported young learners' speaking proficiency and WTC. Evidence from other EFL populations also shows that collaborative or scaffolded speaking environments can improve communicative confidence and reduce speaking anxiety (Zarrinabadi & Alipour, 2020; Fathi et al.,

2024; Wu et al., 2025). These findings justify examining pair/group interaction not merely as a teaching technique but as an emotional affordance for oral participation.

Visual and multimodal support may function in a similar way. Pictures, flashcards, gestures, and other contextual cues can reduce retrieval demands and give learners a concrete starting point for an utterance. Research on multimodal classroom environments has linked pedagogical multimodality with WTC and perceived classroom environment, indicating that communication is supported not only by verbal input but also by visual and interpersonal resources (Peng, 2019). In the present context, visual support was observed alongside increased confidence during vocabulary-based oral responses, suggesting that scaffolding may contribute indirectly to emotional comfort by making the speaking task more predictable and manageable.

Despite the growth of affective research, three gaps remain relevant. First, much of the evidence comes from adult or university EFL contexts, even though anxiety and WTC are already consequential in primary and lower-secondary education (Yim, 2014; Buckingham & Alpaslan, 2017; Aramaki, 2024; Feng et al., 2025). Second, many studies rely primarily on self-report scales; classroom observations can contribute complementary evidence about how affect is manifested behaviorally during actual speaking activities. Third, Latin American school contexts remain underrepresented in the international literature on foreign language emotions, which limits understanding of how broader theoretical constructs are expressed in specific institutional and sociocultural settings.

Recent Ecuadorian evidence strengthens the relevance of this problem in basic education. Vélez Muñoz et al. (2026), in a study published in *Maestro y Sociedad* with 180 eighth-, ninth-, and tenth-grade students and five English teachers, identified low stable motivation, limited peer-to-peer use of English, restricted classroom participation, and fear or uncertainty during oral and pronunciation-related activities. The authors also emphasized the interplay of affective, cognitive, and methodological conditions and recommended greater oral practice, participatory strategies, and emotionally supportive classroom interaction. Although that study examined broader difficulty factors rather than speaking emotions as its primary object, its Ecuadorian school-based evidence provides an important regional antecedent for the present investigation and reinforces the need to examine how motivation, anxiety, confidence, classroom methodology, and opportunities for interaction converge in learners' actual use of English.

The original problem identified in the participating institution was that some seventh-grade learners who possessed sufficient knowledge to respond in English nevertheless hesitated, remained silent, or restricted their oral production in situations involving individual exposure. At the same time, teachers perceived changes in participation when oral work became collaborative, playful, visually supported, or accompanied by positive feedback. These observations pointed to a need to examine emotional factors as part of speaking development rather than treating low participation solely as a linguistic deficit.

Accordingly, the present study analyzes how emotional factors are manifested in and associated with the development of speaking skills among young EFL learners during ordinary classroom interaction in Chone, Ecuador. The study focuses on anxiety, fear of error, motivation, self-confidence, collaborative interaction, and emotional classroom climate, while avoiding causal claims that cannot be supported by a qualitative cross-sectional design. The objective of the article is to analyze the relationship between emotional factors and speaking participation in young learners of English as a foreign language.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

A qualitative approach with descriptive scope and a cross-sectional design was used. The design was appropriate because the study sought to interpret emotional manifestations and participation patterns as they occurred in the natural classroom rather than to manipulate an intervention or quantify causal effects. The unit of interest was the relationship between emotional conditions and observable speaking behavior during communicative English activities. Consequently, the study emphasized meanings, recurring patterns, and convergence across qualitative sources.

The research was conducted in a private educational institution in Chone, Ecuador. The accessible student population comprised 135 learners. A non-probability convenience sample of 37 seventh-grade students participated in the classroom observations, together with three English teachers who were directly involved in the relevant instructional context. Convenience sampling was used because selection depended on accessibility and direct participation in the phenomenon under study. The sample is therefore contextual and should not be interpreted as statistically representative of all seventh-grade EFL learners in Ecuador.

Two complementary data-collection techniques were employed: classroom observation and semi-structured teacher interviews. Classroom observation was used to document emotional and

behavioral manifestations during speaking activities, including hesitation, silence, response length, avoidance, eye contact, willingness to volunteer, interaction with peers, reactions to correction, and changes in participation across task formats. The interviews were used to explore teachers' perceptions of anxiety, motivation, self-confidence, fear of mistakes, peer judgment, classroom climate, and the strategies they considered helpful for oral participation.

The study used an observation sheet and a semi-structured interview guide. The observation sheet organized attention around four initial sensitizing dimensions derived from the purpose of the study: anxiety/communicative insecurity, motivation/engagement, self-confidence, and oral participation. The interview guide included open prompts about situations in which students were more or less willing to speak, common emotional barriers, reactions to mistakes and correction, and perceived effects of pair work, group work, games, and teacher support. These dimensions guided data collection without requiring that all evidence fit predetermined categories.

Before application, the two instruments were reviewed by three experts in English language teaching and research methodology. The reviewers examined wording, relevance, clarity, and organization and suggested adjustments before final administration. The original study did not report a quantitative content-validity coefficient; therefore, expert review is described as qualitative instrument validation and no numerical validity index is claimed.

To make the student-derived evidence more transparent, the observation dimensions described in the original study were organized into an analytical specification for reporting purposes (Table 1). The specification preserves the four dimensions explicitly documented in the study—anxiety, self-confidence, motivation, and oral participation—and links them to observable manifestations reported in the classroom records. It is not treated as a psychometric scale and no composite score is calculated; its purpose is to support systematic qualitative coding and subsequent verification against the original completed observation sheets.

Table 1.

Analytical specification of the classroom observation instrument

Dimension	Observable indicators	Evidence recorded	Interpretive focus
Anxiety / communicative insecurity	Nervousness before speaking; hesitation; delayed initiation; eye-contact avoidance; silence/avoidance	Occurrence in oral tasks plus brief field-note example	Whether communicative pressure co-occurs with restricted participation
Self-confidence	Need for prompts/reassurance; independent initiation;	Observed level of support needed and behavioral response after feedback	Degree of communicative security and autonomy during speaking

	continuation after an error; willingness to volunteer		
Motivation / engagement	Attention to task; enthusiasm; volunteering; persistence; response to games or interactive activities	Visible engagement and changes across task formats	Whether engaging tasks co-occur with increased attempts to use English
Oral participation / interaction	Response length; frequency of attempts; pair/group participation; whole-class participation; spontaneous responses	Comparative observation across individual, pair/group, and supported tasks	How interaction format and emotional comfort relate to speaking behavior

Source: Authors' analytical organization based on the dimensions and manifestations documented in the original observation procedure.

The information was analyzed through qualitative content analysis. First, observation notes and teacher responses were read repeatedly to identify recurrent statements and behaviors. Second, meaning units were coded according to the emotional condition described and the speaking behavior with which it co-occurred. Third, related codes were grouped into broader analytic categories: (a) anxiety and communicative insecurity, (b) fear of mistakes and peer evaluation, (c) motivation and engagement, (d) self-confidence and support seeking, (e) collaborative interaction, and (f) emotional classroom climate. Finally, interview and observation evidence was compared to identify convergent, complementary, or divergent patterns.

Triangulation was used at the source level. A pattern was treated as especially meaningful when teachers reported it and similar behavior was documented in classroom observation. For example, teachers' descriptions of reduced participation during individual oral exposure were compared with observations of hesitation, short answers, and avoidance. Similarly, reports that pair/group work reduced pressure were compared with observed increases in participation during collaborative interaction. Because the original data did not include systematic frequency counts for each code, the results are reported qualitatively rather than converted into percentages or inferential statistics. Ethical principles related to confidentiality, voluntary participation, and institutional authorization were considered. Formal authorization was obtained from the rector of the educational institution. Because the participants included minors, the version submitted for publication must state, with precision, whether parent or legal-guardian informed consent and student assent were obtained in the original study. These procedures should be added only if they were actually implemented; the present revision does not invent ethical procedures that were not documented in the source manuscript.

RESULTS

The working profile shows a coherent contrast between constraining and supportive conditions. Fear of making mistakes (64.9%), hesitation (62.2%), and nervousness before individual speaking (59.5%) are the most frequent restrictive patterns. Conversely, engagement in games and interactive tasks (78.4%), continued participation after positive feedback (75.7%), and increased participation in pair/group work (73.0%) are the strongest supportive patterns. These values demonstrate the kind of descriptive evidence that could complement the qualitative findings without converting the study into a quantitative design.

Table 2.

Working distribution of emotional and speaking behaviors (n = 37)

Observed indicator	n	%	Working interpretation
Fear of making mistakes	24	64.9	One of the most frequent constraining emotional patterns.
Nervousness before individual speaking	22	59.5	Individual exposure was associated with visible communicative pressure.
Hesitation before/during speaking	23	62.2	Hesitation frequently accompanied oral production.
Very short oral responses	21	56.8	Restricted response length was common in speaking tasks.
Silence or avoidance of participation	12	32.4	A smaller but relevant subgroup avoided oral participation.
Dependence on teacher prompts	20	54.1	Many learners required reassurance or direct support.
Increased participation in pair/group work	27	73.0	Collaborative formats were associated with stronger participation.
More spontaneous responses in pair/group work	23	62.2	Peer interaction appeared to facilitate spontaneous speech.
Higher engagement during games/interactive tasks	29	78.4	Interactive tasks showed the strongest engagement pattern.
Continued participation after positive feedback	28	75.7	Supportive feedback was followed by sustained participation.
Greater confidence with visual support	25	67.6	Visual prompts appeared to facilitate oral response.
Voluntary participation without direct prompting	17	45.9	Independent volunteering remained comparatively limited.

The analysis produced a coherent set of qualitative patterns showing that oral participation varied with the emotional and interactional conditions surrounding speaking tasks. Interview and observation data converged most strongly around five themes: anxiety during individual exposure, fear of mistakes and peer judgment, increased engagement in interactive activities, greater participation in collaborative formats, and the role of supportive feedback and classroom climate. The findings are presented as contextual associations rather than causal effects.

Table 3.

Working triangulation of student observations and teacher interview patterns

Category	Student-observation evidence		Teacher-interview pattern				Interpretation		
Anxiety / fear of mistakes	24/37	fear-of-error; hesitation	23/37	All	three	working teacher accounts describe fear of mistakes, insecurity, or public exposure.	Convergent	pattern	of communicative pressure during individual speaking.
Self-confidence	20/37	prompt-dependent; volunteered independently	17/37	Teachers	connect	confidence with volunteering, longer answers, and willingness to take risks.	Confidence	appears	variable across task formats and support conditions.
Collaborative interaction	27/37	increased participation; more spontaneous responses	23/37	Teachers	describe shy learners as more active in pair/group work.		Shared	communicative	responsibility appears to reduce perceived exposure.
Positive feedback / support	28/37	continued after positive feedback; 25/37 benefited from visual support		Teachers	emphasize encouragement, respectful correction, and visual scaffolding.		Supportive classroom conditions		appear to sustain communicative engagement.

Student evidence in this study derives from classroom observation rather than from a student questionnaire. Accordingly, the results below report observable manifestations and contrasts across task conditions instead of presenting response percentages that were not collected. For the working research archive, a student-by-student coding matrix (S01–S37) has been prepared to permit retrospective calculation of frequencies and percentages only after the original observation sheets are compared and verified. This preserves the qualitative design while creating a transparent route for adding descriptive counts if the source records support them.

Anxiety and communicative insecurity during individual exposure

Teachers repeatedly described individual speaking in front of classmates as a situation in which some learners became visibly insecure. One teacher stated that “several students avoid answering orally because they are afraid of making mistakes in front of their classmates.” Another explained that “some children become silent when they are asked to speak individually in English.” These

accounts identified the anticipated social consequences of an error, rather than linguistic difficulty alone, as a relevant feature of oral reluctance.

Classroom observations were consistent with these perceptions. During individual oral activities, some students avoided eye contact, delayed their responses, or produced only a few words even when the task required a longer contribution. In some cases, the learner appeared to know part of the expected language but restricted the response once attention was focused on them. Such behavior was interpreted as communicative insecurity because it occurred most clearly under public oral exposure and was less pronounced in collaborative formats.

Fear of mistakes, peer judgment, and restricted oral risk-taking

Fear of making mistakes emerged as a related but analytically distinguishable theme. Teachers indicated that some students anticipated being judged by classmates and therefore preferred not to volunteer. The observed consequence was not simply silence: fear was also reflected in limited vocabulary use, dependence on prompts, and reluctance to extend an answer. The learner's goal appeared to shift from communicating a message to minimizing the possibility of producing an incorrect form.

This pattern suggests restricted oral risk-taking. Students who perceived greater evaluative pressure tended to rely on safer, shorter utterances. The data did not permit a measurement of anxiety intensity, but the convergence between interview reports and observable hesitation supports the interpretation that fear of error was intertwined with the amount and spontaneity of speech produced during individual tasks.

Motivation and engagement in games and interactive tasks

The teachers consistently reported greater willingness to participate when speaking was embedded in games or short interactive dynamics. These activities were described as creating a more relaxed atmosphere in which students focused on completing the task rather than on avoiding mistakes. Children showed more enthusiasm and were more willing to attempt brief oral contributions when the activity had a playful or interactive structure.

Observations supported this theme. Compared with highly structured individual exercises, interactive activities were accompanied by more volunteering, quicker responses, and a greater number of spontaneous attempts to use English. The evidence does not establish that games directly caused better speaking performance, but it shows that the emotional tone and participation pattern differed when oral practice was integrated into engaging activity formats.

Self-confidence, feedback, and continuity after errors

Self-confidence was visible in the degree of independence with which students initiated and sustained speech. Teachers described several learners as needing reassurance or prompting before speaking. During observation, supportive expressions and respectful correction were often followed by continued participation, whereas the students most concerned about public mistakes tended to stop or shorten their turns.

Positive feedback therefore appeared to function less as praise in isolation and more as interactional support that helped preserve participation after an imperfect response. The relevant behavioral indicator was continuity: students were more likely to remain engaged when correction did not transform the error into a public sanction. This finding connects emotional comfort with the pedagogical management of accuracy during speaking practice.

Collaborative interaction and reduced communicative pressure

Pair and group work produced one of the clearest contrasts in the data. Teachers noted that students they considered shy or insecure tended to participate less in whole-class individual activities but improved their involvement when they worked with classmates. Collaborative tasks were described as spaces in which speaking pressure was shared and students could rehearse or receive immediate peer support.

Observation showed a similar pattern. Some learners who gave very brief individual answers spoke more frequently during paired interaction and appeared physically more relaxed. Because the original instrument did not generate systematic frequency counts, the magnitude of this change cannot be quantified. Nevertheless, the repeated contrast across sources supports collaborative interaction as an important contextual condition associated with greater oral participation.

Emotional classroom climate and visual support

The overall classroom climate was described and observed as respectful. Teachers emphasized that students communicated more confidently when they perceived encouragement and emotional support. Conversely, they believed that constant criticism or correction in front of peers could increase insecurity. The classroom environment therefore operated as a background condition that shaped how individual speaking events were interpreted by learners.

Visual materials such as flashcards and pictures were also associated with greater ease in vocabulary-based speaking tasks. These resources provided concrete cues from which students could construct an answer and appeared to reduce uncertainty about what to say. Visual support

did not eliminate hesitation, but it was frequently present when students responded with greater confidence.

Table 4.

Triangulated emotional conditions and speaking behaviors identified in the study

Analytic category	Interview evidence	Observation evidence	Interpretive relationship
Anxiety / individual exposure	Teachers reported silence and avoidance when learners had to speak individually.	Hesitation, eye-contact avoidance, brief responses, delayed initiation.	Higher perceived exposure co-occurred with restricted participation.
Fear of mistakes / peer judgment	Teachers associated errors with fear of classmates' reactions.	Students limited answers, relied on prompts, or stopped speaking.	Fear of negative evaluation was linked to reduced oral risk-taking.
Games / interactive tasks	Teachers described greater enthusiasm and willingness to participate.	More volunteering and spontaneous attempts were observed.	Engaging task formats co-occurred with higher oral engagement.
Pair and group work	Teachers reported improved participation among shy/insecure learners.	Participation increased compared with individual whole-class tasks.	Collaborative formats appeared to reduce communicative pressure.
Positive feedback / respectful correction	Teachers emphasized encouragement and confidence building.	Students often continued participating after supportive correction.	Feedback style was associated with maintenance of communicative confidence.
Visual support	Teachers used contextual supports during oral activities.	Flashcards/pictures accompanied more confident vocabulary responses.	Scaffolding appeared to reduce uncertainty in initiating speech.

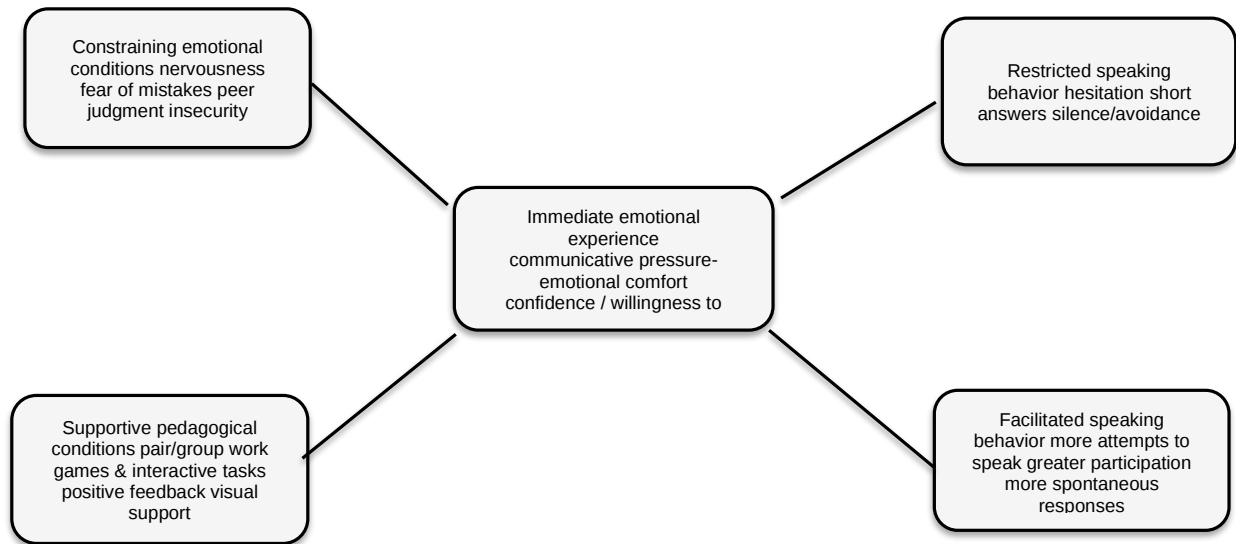
Source: *Authors' elaboration from classroom observations and semi-structured teacher interviews.*

The table makes visible the student-derived component of the dataset by separating what teachers reported from what was actually documented in learners' classroom behavior. This distinction is important because the observational evidence—hesitation, response length, avoidance, volunteering, participation in pairs/groups, and continuity after feedback—constitutes the direct empirical contribution of the 37 student participants.

The combined pattern can be summarized conceptually as a movement between communicative pressure and emotional comfort. Constraining conditions were associated with restricted speaking behaviors, whereas supportive pedagogical conditions were associated with increased participation. Figure 1 represents this interpretive relationship without assigning frequencies or causal weights that were not collected in the original study.

Figure 1.

Qualitative relationship between emotional conditions and speaking participation.



Source: Authors' elaboration based on the triangulated interview and observation data.

DISCUSSION

The findings indicate that emotional conditions were closely intertwined with the way young learners participated in English speaking activities. The most restrictive pattern appeared when oral production involved individual exposure before classmates. In those situations, teachers reported fear of mistakes and silence, while observations documented hesitation, short responses, and avoidance. This convergence is consistent with the classic construct of foreign language classroom anxiety, in which communication apprehension and fear of negative evaluation are central components (Horwitz et al., 1986). It also aligns with Mak's (2011) finding that speaking in front of a class, correction during performance, and negative self-evaluation are important sources of speaking anxiety. Recent experimental and technology-mediated studies likewise report that reducing evaluative pressure can lower speaking anxiety and strengthen confidence or willingness to communicate (Elov et al., 2025; Wang et al., 2024).

The current evidence is particularly relevant because the participants were young learners rather than university students. Yim (2014) demonstrated that anxiety is already meaningful among primary-school EFL learners and that self-perceived proficiency occupies an important position in the anxiety process. The Ecuadorian observations suggest a compatible mechanism: several

students appeared capable of responding but restricted their oral behavior when they perceived the speaking event as socially risky. Thus, limited participation should not automatically be interpreted as lack of knowledge. In some cases, it may reflect the learner's appraisal of competence and the anticipated interpersonal consequences of error.

The negative association observed between anxiety-related behavior and oral participation also accords with broader quantitative evidence, while the present design provides a different type of support. Teimouri et al. (2019), in a meta-analysis of 97 reports and 19,933 learners, found an overall negative relationship between second-language anxiety and achievement. At the school-age level, MacIntyre et al. (2002) showed that WTC, perceived communicative competence, anxiety, motivation, and frequency of L2 communication are already meaningfully differentiated among junior-high learners. These studies do not permit the present qualitative observations to be interpreted as effect sizes or causal relationships, but they reinforce the plausibility of the behavioral pattern found here: when perceived competence is low and evaluative pressure is high, learners may possess relevant linguistic knowledge yet make less use of it in actual communication (MacIntyre et al., 2002; Teimouri et al., 2019).

The role of fear of mistakes also corresponds with research showing that anxiety can disrupt the real-time processes required for L2 speech. Zuniga and Simard (2022) found that increased anxiety was linked to discourse-level self-repairs and difficulties that emerge before words are fully formulated. Such evidence helps explain why the observed students sometimes hesitated or reduced their message even when linguistic content seemed available. Oral performance requires rapid allocation of attention, and anxiety may increase self-monitoring at exactly the moment when learners need to prioritize meaning and interaction.

At the same time, the findings should not be reduced to a deficit model of anxious learners. Participation varied across task conditions. Learners who were hesitant in individual whole-class interaction often became more active in pairs or groups. This variation is theoretically consistent with WTC research, which treats readiness to communicate as sensitive to situational confidence and immediate classroom conditions (MacIntyre et al., 1998; Zuniga & Simard, 2022; Feng et al., 2025). The learner is therefore not simply "willing" or "unwilling" to speak; willingness can change with interlocutor, group size, task familiarity, preparation, perceived evaluation, and emotional climate.

This situational variability is consistent with contemporary extensions of the WTC framework. MacIntyre (2020) argues that willingness to communicate should be understood dynamically, with rapid changes emerging from interactions among affect, perceived competence, context, and communicative opportunity. Khajavy et al. (2018) likewise demonstrated that classroom-level conditions contribute to WTC and enjoyment, while Dewaele and Pavelescu (2021) showed through multiple-case analysis that enjoyment and anxiety can fluctuate in complex and individually distinctive ways in relation to willingness to communicate. More recently, Lin et al. (2025) reported that foreign language anxiety was negatively associated with WTC and that academic buoyancy helped explain part of this relationship. These convergent findings support the interpretation that the observed movement from silence in individual exposure to greater participation in pair work reflects a context-sensitive communicative state rather than a fixed characteristic of the learner.

The relevance of WTC is strengthened by recent longitudinal research with young EFL learners. Feng et al. (2025) showed that language attitudes and WTC were positively related over time among seventh-grade students. Although their large-scale quantitative design cannot be directly equated with the present classroom evidence, it supports the interpretation that communication behavior is connected with broader affective orientations toward language learning. For the current participants, willingness was especially visible as a behavioral shift: students attempted more speech when they experienced lower communicative pressure and greater task support.

Collaborative interaction was one of the most consistent supportive conditions. Pair and group work reduced the visibility of individual performance and allowed learners to share responsibility for communication. Aramaki (2024), studying elementary EFL learners, likewise found value in collaborative oral task repetition as an anxiety-reduction strategy. Buckingham and Alpaslan (2017) showed that additional structured speaking practice could improve both speaking outcomes and young learners' WTC. Together with the present observations, these studies suggest that collaboration can function simultaneously as a linguistic practice opportunity and an emotional scaffold.

This interpretation does not imply that all group work automatically produces learning or emotional safety. Poorly structured collaboration can allow some learners to remain passive. The useful feature in the present study was the reduction of communicative pressure combined with an increased opportunity to attempt short turns. Pedagogically, pair work can therefore be used as an

intermediate step between teacher-led practice and individual public performance. Learners may first rehearse ideas with a peer, then repeat or extend them in a larger group, and finally participate independently. Such sequencing can preserve challenge while reducing abrupt exposure.

The motivational pattern observed during games and interactive activities also fits recent research with young learners. Tsang and Davis (2024) found that Grade 5 EFL learners frequently identified games and videos as enjoyable activities and valued fun, knowledge gain, interaction, and opportunities to use English. In the present study, games and interactive dynamics were likewise accompanied by enthusiasm and greater willingness to attempt speech. The parallel is important because it suggests that enjoyment is not merely entertainment detached from learning; interactive enjoyment may help create the emotional conditions in which learners use the target language more readily. This pattern also converges with recent work showing that emotionally supportive and interactive speaking environments can simultaneously reduce speaking anxiety and enhance enjoyment (Wu et al., 2025).

Positive psychology research provides a useful explanation for this pattern. Dewaele and MacIntyre (2014) demonstrated that enjoyment and anxiety are distinct emotional dimensions that may coexist. Dewaele et al. (2018) later showed that enjoyment is closely related to teacher and classroom variables, and Dewaele and Alfawzan (2018) reported an independent positive relationship between enjoyment and performance. From this perspective, the observed Ecuadorian learners did not need to become completely anxiety-free before speaking. Rather, enjoyable and supportive conditions may have broadened their readiness to participate despite residual uncertainty.

The distinction between reducing negative emotion and building positive emotion is pedagogically significant. If instruction focuses only on avoiding anxiety, teachers may unintentionally simplify tasks too much or remove valuable communicative challenge. A more productive goal is to create manageable difficulty within a supportive environment. Games, collaborative tasks, and visual prompts can retain a meaningful linguistic objective while making the activity more predictable, socially distributed, and engaging. This approach is compatible with contemporary evidence that enjoyment, teacher support, and anxiety jointly shape WTC (Zhang et al., 2026).

Teacher feedback emerged as another mechanism through which emotional climate and speaking behavior were connected. In the observations, respectful correction was often followed by continued participation, whereas fear of criticism was associated with withdrawal in teacher

reports. The broader affective literature suggests that teacher behavior and the emotional climate surrounding oral performance can intensify or reduce anxiety and influence learners' readiness to remain engaged after an error (Dewaele et al., 2022; Wu, 2024). For young learners, feedback may be especially consequential because it contributes to their developing judgments of communicative competence.

The implication is not to replace correction with indiscriminate praise. Speaking development requires feedback on intelligibility, vocabulary, grammar, and interaction. However, the timing and framing of correction can protect communicative continuity. Teachers can prioritize meaning during initial fluency-oriented turns, note recurrent errors, and provide focused feedback after the message has been completed. When immediate correction is necessary, brief reformulation or supportive prompting may be less threatening than public interruption. The present data support this distinction because the key positive pattern was not praise itself but students' ability to continue speaking after receiving support.

Visual materials appeared to provide a further layer of support. Flashcards and pictures were associated with more confident responses during vocabulary-based interactions. This observation is consistent with broader research showing that classroom communication is multimodal and that visual, vocal, and environmental resources can influence learners' WTC (Peng, 2019). For beginning and young EFL learners, a visual cue can reduce the cognitive burden of deciding what to talk about and can support lexical retrieval, thereby indirectly reducing the uncertainty that contributes to hesitation.

The findings also underline the importance of distinguishing emotional state from stable personality. Some students whom teachers described as shy participated more actively when the task format changed. If reluctance were treated as an immutable trait, such variation would be difficult to explain. Dynamic models of WTC and classroom emotion provide a better fit: communicative behavior emerges from the interaction between learner characteristics and immediate situational affordances. Recent research on young EFL learners similarly emphasizes that emotional experiences and attitudes should be examined in relation to specific classroom activities and contexts rather than treated as fixed learner attributes (Tsang & Davis, 2024; Feng et al., 2025).

A further contribution of the study lies in its qualitative triangulation. Much affective research relies on questionnaires that ask learners to rate general anxiety, enjoyment, or WTC. Such

measures are valuable, but they may not capture how emotion appears behaviorally in specific moments. By combining teacher perceptions with classroom observation, the present study identified visible manifestations—hesitation, silence, short responses, reliance on prompts, changes across grouping formats—that help connect affective constructs with actual classroom participation. This approach responds to calls for more context-sensitive and process-oriented research on language emotions.

Nevertheless, the evidence should be interpreted cautiously. The study did not administer validated anxiety or WTC scales to the students, did not quantify speaking performance with an analytic rubric, and did not follow learners over time. It therefore cannot establish whether students with more anxiety had objectively lower proficiency or whether collaborative activities produced lasting speaking gains. The appropriate conclusion is narrower: within the observed classroom, specific emotional and pedagogical conditions repeatedly co-occurred with more restricted or more expansive speaking behavior.

The Ecuadorian context also matters. Much of the international literature cited here comes from Asian, European, or university EFL settings. The similarity of the observed patterns—fear of mistakes, situational WTC, the value of collaboration, the role of enjoyment—suggests that these constructs have relevance beyond the contexts in which they were originally studied. At the same time, cultural expectations regarding correction, teacher authority, peer evaluation, and English proficiency may shape their local expression. Future research in Ecuador should therefore avoid assuming that international models transfer unchanged and should develop evidence from multiple schools and regions. The broader literature increasingly treats emotional safety as a property of communicative spaces rather than an exclusively individual characteristic, including qualitative work on emotionally safe language-use environments (Dryden et al., 2021) and recent syntheses of enjoyment and anxiety in EFL education (Mierzwa-Kamińska, 2025).

The present findings also complement recent Ecuadorian school evidence. Vélez Muñoz et al. (2026) reported that a substantial proportion of basic-education learners rarely used English with peers and that teachers observed fear, low enthusiasm, and silence when students were unsure of how to respond. The convergence is noteworthy because the two studies used different samples and analytical emphases: Vélez Muñoz et al. examined cognitive and motivational difficulty factors across upper-basic grades, whereas the present study focuses qualitatively on emotional manifestations during speaking among seventh-grade learners. Together, however, they suggest

that limited oral participation in Ecuadorian EFL classrooms may be better understood as the outcome of interacting emotional, motivational, pedagogical, and communicative conditions rather than as a simple lack of grammar or vocabulary.

For classroom practice, the results support a progression model for oral work. Teachers can begin with low-exposure rehearsal using visual prompts or pair interaction, move toward small-group communication, and then invite more public speaking once learners have had an opportunity to formulate and test their message. Error treatment can be differentiated according to the purpose of the task: fluency-oriented activities can prioritize communication first, whereas later stages can focus more explicitly on accuracy. Such sequencing may help learners accumulate successful speaking experiences and gradually strengthen self-confidence.

The findings also suggest that emotional climate should be considered part of speaking pedagogy rather than an optional pastoral concern. An emotionally supportive classroom does not remove academic expectations; it creates conditions in which learners are more willing to engage with them. When students understand that mistakes are expected in language development, receive respectful feedback, and have structured opportunities to interact with peers, they may be more prepared to take the communicative risks necessary for oral growth. This interpretation is consistent with current research showing that supportive conditions can reduce speaking anxiety and enhance WTC across a range of EFL environments (Aramaki, 2024; Fathi et al., 2024; Hedayati et al., 2026; Zhang et al., 2026). This interpretation is reinforced by recent intervention evidence in which cooperative speaking structures reduced foreign language speaking anxiety (Hedayati et al., 2026). Finally, the study opens several directions for further research. Longitudinal classroom observation could determine whether students who become more willing to participate also show measurable gains in fluency, complexity, accuracy, or pronunciation. Mixed-method research could combine age-appropriate affective scales with oral performance tasks and stimulated-recall interviews. Intervention studies could compare different sequences of individual, paired, and group speaking work while monitoring both emotional responses and language outcomes. Such designs would allow stronger claims about how emotional support contributes to the development—not only the immediate display—of speaking ability.

CONCLUSIONS

The study concludes that speaking participation among the participating young EFL learners was closely related to the emotional conditions present during classroom interaction. Nervousness, fear of making mistakes, perceived peer judgment, and communicative insecurity were associated with hesitation, brief responses, silence, dependence on prompts, and avoidance of individual oral tasks. These findings reinforce the view that limited oral participation cannot always be interpreted as a purely linguistic problem.

Supportive pedagogical conditions were associated with a different participation pattern. Pair and group work, games, interactive tasks, visual support, positive feedback, and respectful correction were accompanied by greater willingness to attempt English and by more spontaneous responses. The findings therefore support a progressive approach to speaking instruction in which learners receive opportunities to rehearse, interact in lower-pressure formats, and gradually move toward more independent public communication.

The study also highlights the importance of treating error as a normal component of language development. Teachers should preserve opportunities for corrective feedback while avoiding practices that unnecessarily intensify public exposure or transform errors into social sanctions. Feedback that allows learners to continue communicating may contribute to the gradual construction of self-confidence and willingness to speak.

Several limitations delimit these conclusions. The research involved a convenience sample from one private educational institution, used a qualitative cross-sectional design, and did not include direct student interviews, standardized affective measures, or an analytic assessment of speaking performance. Consequently, the findings are context-specific and do not demonstrate causal relationships. Future studies should include multiple schools, longitudinal follow-up, student voice, and mixed-method measurement of anxiety, enjoyment, WTC, and oral performance.

Within those limits, the study contributes evidence from an Ecuadorian school context to an international literature that has disproportionately examined older learners. Its main implication is that the emotional and pedagogical organization of speaking tasks matters: when communicative demands are accompanied by support, interaction, and a respectful treatment of error, young learners appear more willing to use the English they are developing.

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DECLARATIONS

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

Declaration of responsibility of authorship

We, Gema Lisseth Vélez Vargas and Miguel Macías Llor, authors of the indicated manuscript, DECLARE that we have contributed directly to its intellectual content, as well as to the genesis and analysis of its data; therefore, we are in a position to be made publicly responsible for it and accept that our names appear in the list of authors in the indicated order. We also declare that the ethical requirements of the aforementioned publication have been met, having consulted the Declaration of Ethics and Malpractice in Publication.

Gema Lisseth Vélez Vargas and Miguel Macías Llor: research, data collection, data interpretation and analysis, manuscript drafting, preparation of the abstract, and preparation of the conclusions.