Self-positioning, perceived inadequacy, and communicative disengagement among adolescent EFL learners: A qualitative psycholinguistic analysis

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Abstract. Speaking-related difficulty in foreign language learning has been widely examined through constructs such as foreign language anxiety, willingness to communicate, and perceived communicative competence. Far less attention, however, has been devoted to the interpretive processes through which learners position themselves as speakers and regulate communicative engagement. Drawing on qualitative interview data from a broader mixed-methods project involving 95 upper-secondary EFL learners, the article examines communicative disengagement through the concepts of self-positioning and perceived inadequacy. A qualitative subsample selected from learners reporting moderate to high speaking-related difficulty participated in two rounds of individual interviews, resulting in 14 interviews in total. The data were analysed using interpretive thematic analysis informed by principles of constant comparison. The analysis identified four recurring patterns of self-positioning: the inadequate speaker, the blocked speaker, the context-sensitive communicative self, and the disengaged or resigned speaker. Across these patterns, reduced participation was shaped less by learners' linguistic resources than by how they interpreted their competence, anticipated communicative exposure, and negotiated the psychological risks associated with speaking. Speaking-related disengagement was therefore sustained not only by difficulty in language production, but also by expectations of inadequacy, evaluation, and interpersonal vulnerability. The findings suggest that self-positioning functions as a mediating mechanism shaping whether competence is translated into participation or communicative disengagement. Speaking-related difficulty is thus conceptualised not simply as an outcome of anxiety or insufficient proficiency, but as a psychologically mediated process shaped by learners' interpretations of speaking situations and of themselves as legitimate speakers within classroom interaction.

Keywords: *adolescent EFL learners, communicative disengagement, foreign language anxiety, perceived inadequacy, self-positioning, willingness to communicate.*

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Юрікова Івана. Самопозиціонування, сприймана неадекватність і комунікативне відсторонення у підлітків, які вивчають англійську як іноземну: якісний психолінгвістичний аналіз.

Анотація. Труднощі, пов'язані з усним мовленням у процесі вивчення іноземної мови, широко досліджувалися крізь призму таких конструктів, як тривожність під час вивчення іноземної мови, готовність до комунікації та сприймана комунікативна компетентність. Водночас значно менше уваги приділялося інтерпретаційним процесам, за допомогою яких учні позиціонують себе як мовців і регулюють власну комунікативну участь. Спираючись на якісні інтерв'ю, отримані в межах ширшого дослідження змішаного типу за участю 95 учнів старшої школи, які вивчали англійську мову як іноземну, стаття розглядає комунікативне відсторонення крізь призму самопозиціонування та сприйманої неадекватності. Підгрупа якісного етапу, відібрана серед учнів, які повідомляли про помірні або високі труднощі, пов'язані з усним мовленням, взяла участь у двох раундах індивідуальних інтерв'ю, у результаті чого було отримано 14 інтерв'ю загалом. Дані було проаналізовано за допомогою інтерпретативного тематичного аналізу з використанням принципів постійного порівняння. Аналіз виявив чотири повторювані моделі самопозиціонування: неадекватний мовець, заблокований мовець, контекстно чутливе комунікативне «Я» та відсторонений або резигнований мовець. У межах цих моделей зниження комунікативної участі визначалося не стільки мовними ресурсами учнів, скільки тим, як вони інтерпретували власну компетентність, передбачали необхідність публічної комунікативної участі та осмислювали психологічні ризики, пов'язані з усним мовленням. Відповідно, комунікативне відсторонення підтримувалося не лише труднощами мовленнєвого продукування, а й очікуваннями неадекватності, оцінювання та міжособистісної вразливості. Результати свідчать про те, що самопозиціонування виконує функцію медіаційного механізму, який визначає, чи трансформується компетентність у комунікативну участь або ж у комунікативне відсторонення. Отже, труднощі, пов'язані з усним мовленням, концептуалізуються не просто як наслідок тривожності чи недостатнього рівня володіння мовою, а як психологічно опосередкований процес, сформований тим, як учні інтерпретують комунікативні ситуації та самих себе як легітимних мовців у навчальній взаємодії.

Ключові слова: *учні старшої школи, які вивчають англійську мову як іноземну; комунікативне відсторонення; тривожність під час вивчення іноземної мови; сприймана неадекватність; самопозиціонування; готовність до комунікації.*

Introduction

Speaking in a foreign language becomes psychologically demanding when communication is experienced not simply as language use, but as public evidence of competence. In classroom settings, oral participation places learners in situations of visibility, evaluation, and comparison, making participation dependent not only on linguistic resources, but also on how learners anticipate communicative exposure and position themselves in relation to speaking.

Research on *foreign language anxiety (FLA)* has consistently shown that speaking is among the areas of language learning most strongly associated with apprehension, avoidance, and reduced participation (Horwitz et al., 1986;

MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994; Gregersen & MacIntyre, 2014). Work on *willingness to communicate (WTC)* and perceived communicative competence has similarly demonstrated that participation depends not only on proficiency, but also on self-confidence, classroom climate, anticipated communicative outcomes, and learners' subjective evaluations of their speaking ability (MacIntyre et al., 1998; MacIntyre, 2007). These perspectives have been essential in moving explanations of classroom silence beyond purely linguistic accounts.

From a psycholinguistic perspective, speaking difficulty is not limited to the possession of linguistic knowledge, but also involves the conditions under which this knowledge can be accessed, organised, and produced during interaction. Anxiety and self-evaluation may influence not only learners' willingness to speak, but also the extent to which available linguistic resources become usable in real time (MacIntyre, Noels, & Clément, 1997; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994). Psycholinguistic work on L2 assessment further shows that specific linguistic resources, such as vocabulary knowledge, provide important indicators of language proficiency (Lõo et al., 2025). At the same time, research on language assessment, self-assessment, identity, and agency suggests that learners' evaluations of proficiency are also tied to how they understand themselves as language users (Little & Erickson, 2015). Classroom speaking is therefore a point at which linguistic resources, affective appraisal, self-assessment, and self-related interpretation converge.

Although these perspectives move the discussion beyond linguistic proficiency alone, they do not fully explain how learners come to interpret speaking situations as manageable, exposing, legitimate, or psychologically risky. Learners with comparable linguistic resources may differ substantially in whether participation is experienced as viable, threatening, or personally costly. Similar outward behaviours – silence, hesitation, avoidance, or minimal contribution – may therefore emerge from different self-related processes, including fear of evaluation, anticipated inadequacy, or accumulated disengagement.

The present article approaches communicative disengagement through the concepts of self-positioning and perceived inadequacy. Rather than treating reduced participation primarily as a consequence of anxiety or insufficient competence, the study examines how learners come to understand themselves as particular kinds of speakers within classroom interaction and how these understandings shape communicative participation.

This perspective is especially relevant during adolescence, when peer comparison, public performance, and social legitimacy acquire heightened psychological significance (Harter, 2012; Steinberg, 2014). In foreign language classrooms, where speaking often makes competence publicly visible, participation

may become psychologically burdensome even when learners possess sufficient linguistic resources to communicate.

Drawing on qualitative data from a broader mixed-methods project involving upper-secondary EFL learners, the article examines how learners reporting moderate to high speaking-related difficulty position themselves as speakers and how these positionings shape communicative participation. The analysis identifies four recurring patterns of self-positioning – the inadequate speaker, the blocked speaker, the context-sensitive communicative self, and the disengaged or resigned speaker – and argues that self-positioning functions as a mediating mechanism through which competence becomes either participation or communicative disengagement.

Theoretical Background

Speaking Participation As Psychologically Mediated Action

Research on speaking participation in a foreign language has increasingly emphasised that classroom communication cannot be fully understood through linguistic proficiency alone. Contemporary perspectives highlight the role of affective, interpersonal, and contextual factors in shaping learners' engagement with speaking opportunities (MacIntyre et al., 1998; MacIntyre, 2007; Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015; Tavakoli & Zarrinabadi, 2018). This perspective is reflected in research on *willingness to communicate (WTC)*, which conceptualises speaking not as a direct outcome of language ability, but as a situated and context-sensitive decision shaped by perceived competence, anxiety, interpersonal motivation, and classroom conditions (MacIntyre et al., 1998). Subsequent work has further shown that learners' readiness to speak fluctuates across interactional contexts and depends substantially on whether speaking is experienced as psychologically safe, socially acceptable, and communicatively worthwhile (MacIntyre, 2007; Tavakoli & Zarrinabadi, 2018). Participation is therefore mediated not only by what learners are capable of saying, but by how they appraise the communicative situation itself.

Psycholinguistic research also shows that specific linguistic resources, such as vocabulary knowledge, can provide important indicators of L2 proficiency (Lõo et al., 2025). However, the availability of such resources does not in itself explain whether learners are able or willing to mobilise them during classroom speaking. The present study therefore distinguishes between linguistic resources as available knowledge and communicative participation as the situated use of those resources under conditions of visibility, evaluation, and self-appraisal.

A related line of inquiry has focused on foreign language anxiety (FLA), typically conceptualised as a situation-specific form of anxiety associated with

language learning and use, particularly speaking (Horwitz et al., 1986; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994). Research has consistently linked FLA to avoidance, reduced willingness to communicate, and lower communicative participation, while also demonstrating that anxiety can interfere with processing, retrieval, attentional control, and performance during oral interaction (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994; Gregersen & MacIntyre, 2014). In this sense, speaking-related anxiety is not only an emotional reaction to communication, but may also affect the real-time mobilisation of linguistic resources under evaluative conditions. This body of work has been essential in challenging purely competence-based explanations of classroom silence and communicative withdrawal.

At the same time, constructs such as WTC and FLA only partially account for how speaking acquires psychological significance for learners. They explain why participation may become difficult, but less fully how learners come to interpret themselves as speakers within evaluative classroom environments. Similar patterns of silence, hesitation, or avoidance may emerge from substantially different self-related processes, including anticipated inadequacy, fear of exposure, perceived illegitimacy, or accumulated disengagement. Oral participation is therefore best understood not as a direct behavioural expression of competence or anxiety, but as psychologically mediated action shaped by learners' interpretations of speaking situations and of themselves within them.

Self-positioning, Perceived Inadequacy, and Communicative Disengagement

Research on learner self-concept and identity highlights the importance of how learners understand themselves as speakers within classroom interaction (Mercer, 2011; Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015; Kayi-Aydar, 2019). Work linking language assessment, self-assessment, learner identity, and agency further suggests that learners' evaluations of proficiency are not neutral judgements of ability, but may shape how they understand themselves as language users (Little & Erickson, 2015). These self-understandings influence how learners evaluate their abilities, interpret communicative experiences, and approach opportunities for participation. Speaking-related difficulty therefore cannot be reduced to insufficient proficiency alone. Learners with comparable linguistic resources may experience speaking situations in markedly different ways, depending on how they perceive their competence and what they expect participation to reveal about them.

Self-positioning offers a useful framework for examining these processes. Positioning perspectives focus on how individuals locate themselves within interactional contexts and how these positions organise engagement (Davies & Harré, 1990; Kayi-Aydar, 2019). In foreign language classrooms, repeated

experiences of evaluation, comparison, correction, or marginal participation may gradually lead learners to view themselves as incompetent, vulnerable, peripheral, or fundamentally unsuited to communication. These are not fixed traits, but interpretive orientations through which future speaking situations are anticipated and approached.

Communicative disengagement can therefore be understood not simply as avoidance behaviour, but as a psychologically mediated response to anticipated exposure. Reduced participation may protect learners from situations in which inadequacy, loss of face, or interpersonal devaluation appear likely to be confirmed. Silence and withdrawal are therefore not merely absences of participation; they may reflect learners' expectations of what speaking is likely to reveal about them within classroom interaction.

These processes are particularly relevant in adolescence, when peer evaluation, public performance, and social belonging acquire heightened psychological significance (Harter, 2012; Steinberg, 2014). In foreign language classrooms, where speaking often makes competence publicly visible, communication may become especially burdensome even when learners possess sufficient linguistic resources to participate.

Methodology

Research Design and Participants

The study draws on the qualitative strand of a broader mixed-methods project examining speaking-related difficulties and communicative participation among adolescent learners of English as a foreign language. The broader project involved upper-secondary EFL learners (N = 95) aged 16–18 years (M = 16.6) enrolled at a secondary vocational school in Slovakia. Participants were drawn from four different classes, and their English proficiency corresponded approximately to A2–B1 levels of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). The quantitative phase used questionnaire data to identify learners' levels of foreign language anxiety and related patterns of speaking difficulty and communicative avoidance. The questionnaire design and quantitative findings from this phase are reported in detail elsewhere (Jurikova, 2025). These results informed participant selection for the qualitative phase, allowing closer examination of the self-related meanings associated with learners' speaking difficulty and avoidance of oral communication.

The qualitative subsample consisted of seven learners (n = 7; F = 5, M = 2) selected from the original sample of 95 participants. Eligibility for inclusion was determined by questionnaire responses indicating moderate to high levels of

foreign language anxiety, speaking-related difficulty, and communicative avoidance. From this pool of eligible learners, seven participants were randomly selected for the interview phase. The aim was not statistical representativeness, but the inclusion of information-rich cases in which the interpretive and self-related dimensions of communicative disengagement could be examined in depth.

The qualitative strand thus extends the broader mixed-methods project by moving from the identification of anxiety-related patterns and communicative avoidance to an interpretive analysis of how learners understood themselves as speakers. During analysis, participant accounts were compared for recurrence, variation, and explanatory value. As the analysis progressed, later interviews elaborated already emerging patterns rather than introducing substantively new forms of self-positioning.

Data Collection

Data were collected through two rounds of individual interviews with the seven participants, resulting in 14 interviews in total. The interviews were conducted in Slovak, the participants' first language, to allow learners to describe emotionally and socially sensitive classroom experiences without the additional burden of using English. Interview excerpts included in the article were translated into English by the author.

The first round consisted of open interviews. Participants were invited to describe their experience of learning English, how they felt during English lessons, and which classroom situations they associated with speaking-related difficulty, discomfort, or avoidance. This stage allowed participants' own accounts of classroom speaking to guide the direction of the interview rather than imposing predefined explanatory categories.

The second round consisted of semi-structured follow-up interviews. These interviews revisited issues that emerged in the first round and explored them more systematically across participants. The main areas addressed included perceived speaking competence, fear of making mistakes, peer comparison, teacher and peer responses, classroom visibility, confidence, avoidance of oral participation, and learners' understandings of themselves as English speakers.

Examples of guiding questions included: "How do you usually feel during English lessons?", "What happens when you are expected to speak English in class?", "Are there situations in which speaking English feels easier or more difficult for you?", "How do you usually decide whether to speak or remain silent?", "What goes through your mind when you are unsure how to say something in English?", "How do your classmates or teacher usually react when someone makes a mistake?", "Do you ever compare your English with that of

other students?", "How would you describe yourself as an English speaker?", and "Is speaking English different for you from communicating in Slovak or in another foreign language?"

The interviews focused not only on whether learners experienced speaking-related difficulty, but on how they interpreted classroom speaking and what they expected participation to reveal about them. This made it possible to examine anticipatory meanings associated with oral participation, including expectations of inadequacy, embarrassment, exposure, or negative evaluation. The interviews were transcribed verbatim, and participants are identified in the article using participant codes.

Data Analysis

The interview data were analysed using interpretive thematic analysis informed by principles of constant comparison (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021; Charmaz, 2014). The analysis was conducted on the Slovak-language transcripts; translation into English was undertaken only for excerpts selected for presentation in the article. Consistent with the study's interpretive orientation, learners' accounts were treated as situated constructions of how they understood classroom speaking, evaluated themselves as speakers, and made sense of participation, hesitation, or withdrawal.

Analysis proceeded iteratively through repeated reading, coding, comparison, and refinement of emerging categories. Initial coding focused on references to communicative exposure, anticipated inadequacy, concerns about making mistakes, self-evaluation, classroom visibility, peer comparison, teacher and peer responses, and avoidance of oral participation. Particular attention was paid not only to what learners reported experiencing, but also to how they explained these experiences and what meanings they attached to speaking in front of others.

Codes were then compared across participants to identify recurring interpretive orientations rather than isolated difficulties or individual incidents. Through this process, related codes were grouped into broader patterns of self-positioning, with attention to both recurrence and meaningful variation across accounts. The analysis resulted in four analytical categories: the inadequate speaker, the blocked speaker, the context-sensitive communicative self, and the disengaged/resigned speaker. These categories were used to interpret how learners' perceived difficulty in speaking English became linked to communicative disengagement. Rather than treating silence or reduced participation as direct outcomes of low proficiency or anxiety alone, the analysis examined how learners positioned themselves in relation to classroom speaking and how these positions shaped their willingness to participate.

Ethical Considerations

The study followed ethical principles for educational research involving human participants and minors. Before data collection, participants and their parents or legal guardians were informed about the purpose of the research, the voluntary nature of participation, and the confidential handling of the data. Consent was obtained from parents or legal guardians, and participants also agreed to take part in the interview process. Participants were informed that they could decline to answer any question or withdraw from the study. All interview data were treated confidentially, transcripts were anonymised prior to analysis, and participants are referred to in the article by codes rather than names.

Results

The broader mixed-methods project identified several sources of difficulty in classroom speaking among adolescent EFL learners. The present analysis adopts a more focused interpretive perspective by examining how learners understood themselves as English speakers and how these self-understandings shaped their willingness to participate in classroom interaction.

Across the interviews, reduced oral participation rarely appeared as a simple consequence of limited linguistic knowledge. Learners often described possessing at least some communicative resources, yet still experienced speaking in class as exposing, personally risky, or unlikely to lead to successful participation. The central issue was therefore not competence alone, but the meanings learners attached to speaking and to the possible consequences of being heard, evaluated, or compared with others.

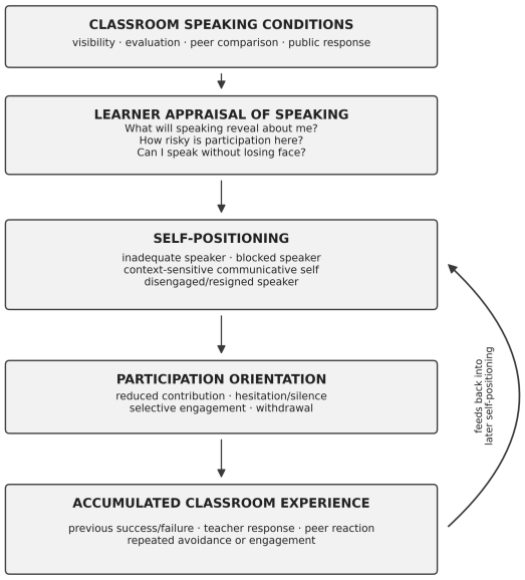
Table 1
Patterns of Self-Positioning and Participation Orientations

Pattern of self-positioning	**Dominant self-understanding**	**Primary interpretive process**	**Participation orientation**
Inadequate speaker	"I am weaker than others."	Anticipated confirmation of inadequacy	Reduced contribution and expectation of likely failure
Blocked speaker	"I may know it, but speaking exposes me."	Anticipatory inhibition and self-monitoring	Hesitation, silence, or withdrawal at the point of speaking

Context-sensitive communicative self	"I can participate when the conditions are safe."	Sensitivity to evaluation and reduced perceived interpersonal safety	Selective participation dependent on familiarity and perceived safety
Disengaged or resigned speaker	"Further effort is unlikely to lead to change."	Protective withdrawal and reduced communicative investment	Low initiative, emotional distance, and sustained withdrawal

The analysis identified four recurring patterns of self-positioning: the inadequate speaker, the blocked speaker, the context-sensitive communicative self, and the disengaged or resigned speaker. These patterns are not treated as fixed learner types. Rather, they represent recurring interpretive orientations through which learners made sense of classroom speaking, anticipated its interpersonal consequences, and regulated their participation accordingly. Table 1 summarises these patterns by linking each form of self-positioning to its dominant self-understanding, primary interpretive process, and participation orientation. Figure 1 visualises the interpretive pathway through which classroom speaking conditions become linked to participation, hesitation, or withdrawal.

Figure 1
Self-Positioning As a Mediating Process in Classroom Speaking



Note. Classroom speaking conditions are interpreted through learners' appraisals of exposure, risk, and legitimacy as speakers. These appraisals contribute to recurring forms of self-positioning, which shape participation orientation and become reinforced or modified through accumulated classroom experience.

Positioning the Self As an Inadequate Speaker

For some learners, communicative participation was organised primarily around a stable sense of inadequacy and the expectation that speaking would confirm personal weakness. Rather than describing isolated task-related difficulties, these learners interpreted speaking problems as evidence of who they were as English speakers. Their accounts reflected an enduring perception of being weaker, less capable, or less suited to successful participation than their peers.

This positioning was particularly visible in accounts where learners located the problem within the self rather than within a specific task or momentary difficulty. One participant described her position directly: "I am not good at all. I do not have the knowledge" (P_4). In this account, difficulty was not framed as a temporary obstacle that could be resolved within a particular classroom activity, but as evidence of a more general lack of competence. The learner's self-positioning therefore preceded the speaking situation itself: participation was approached from the expectation that it would reveal what she already believed to be true about herself as an English speaker.

In several cases, this sense of inadequacy was reinforced through comparison with more proficient classmates. One learner explained that she was usually successful in other subjects, but that English made her feel different: "I can see that I am weaker there, and then they compare it" (P_1). Peer comparison therefore did not merely reflect differences in performance; it gave those differences interpersonal meaning. Speaking was experienced as a situation in which weakness could become visible not only to the teacher, but also to classmates who were perceived as more legitimate or capable speakers.

These accounts often coexisted with at least partial communicative ability. One learner explained: "I really do know the grammar, I can learn it, but communication – not at all" (P_1). What mattered was therefore not only what learners knew, but whether they believed they could display that knowledge under conditions of visibility and evaluation. Learners evaluated themselves not solely through linguistic knowledge, but through their perceived ability to perform that knowledge publicly and appropriately.

This positioning also shaped participation prospectively. Speaking situations were approached with the expectation that weakness might become visible or confirmed through interaction. The same participant described being able to communicate in everyday situations, but still not feeling able to say something "the way it should be" (P_1). This suggests that engagement was filtered less through communicative limitations alone than through anticipated insufficiency: learners judged their possible contribution against an imagined standard of correctness or adequacy before deciding whether to speak.

Under such conditions, participation became psychologically costly before communication itself had begun. Learners often contributed minimally, avoided volunteering, or preferred silence to the possibility of public confirmation of inadequacy. Withdrawal therefore emerged not simply as a reaction to communicative failure, but as a way of avoiding situations in which an already established sense of limitation might be confirmed in front of others.

The Blocked Speaker: Anticipatory Inhibition and Self-Limitation

For some learners, communicative participation was constrained not by a stable sense of global inadequacy, but by a disruption that emerged when private understanding had to become public performance. These learners did not necessarily describe themselves as wholly incapable of learning English. Rather, they reported a gap between understanding, preparing, or knowing something privately and being able to produce it once speaking became visible to others.

This pattern was especially evident in accounts where learners distinguished between comprehension and spoken expression. One participant explained, "I do understand, but I'm afraid to express myself" (P2), while another stated, "Maybe I do know what to say, but I'm afraid to say it" (P6). These accounts suggest that communicative difficulty did not necessarily originate in insufficient understanding. Rather, participation became constrained at the moment when knowledge had to be retrieved, organised, and made audible under conditions of visibility and evaluation.

A defining feature of this pattern was anticipatory inhibition. Learners approached speaking situations already oriented toward the possibility of embarrassment, negative evaluation, or public failure. In several accounts, the barrier emerged before communication itself had begun. One participant described the process as immediate and automatic: "When the teacher calls on me, I immediately feel stressed, I start to stammer, and then I go quiet" (P1). Speaking difficulty was therefore experienced not simply as a reaction to unsuccessful performance, but as a consequence of what learners expected public participation to involve.

This anticipation was frequently intensified by self-monitoring. Learners described paying close attention to correctness, pronunciation, lexical choice, and the anticipated reactions of others while attempting to speak. One participant noted that while speaking, she was already thinking that it "probably sounds stupid" (P7). Communication was therefore accompanied by a parallel effort to monitor possible error and social evaluation, making fluent participation more difficult to sustain.

Previous classroom experiences often reinforced this inhibition. Several learners referred to ironic comments, dismissive responses, immediate

correction, or visible impatience as moments that shaped later reluctance to participate. One participant explained that after such experiences, "I get a kind of block and then I don't want to communicate at all for the rest of the lesson" (P_3). Such episodes did not remain isolated incidents; they became part of the anticipatory framework through which future speaking situations were interpreted.

The behavioural consequences were visible in shortened responses, avoidance of volunteering, silence despite partial knowledge, or reliance on others to speak instead. As one participant explained, "Sometimes I'd rather stay quiet and let the others say it" (P_5). In this pattern, withdrawal functioned less as evidence of linguistic inability than as protection from the psychological demands of public performance.

What distinguishes the blocked speaker is therefore the location of the difficulty. Communicative disengagement arises primarily at the point where knowledge must be converted into public speech. These learners may understand, prepare, or even wish to participate, yet speaking becomes difficult because participation itself is experienced as exposing. Communication is constrained not primarily by what learners know, but by what they anticipate will happen once that knowledge is spoken aloud.

Context-Sensitive Communicative Self

A third pattern involved learners whose communicative participation was not consistently absent, but conditional. These learners did not position themselves as consistently incapable, nor did they describe speaking as invariably blocked. Instead, their sense of themselves as speakers shifted according to the interactional conditions in which communication occurred. Participation became possible in contexts perceived as familiar, predictable, and socially safe, but more fragile in settings associated with uncertainty, observation, or evaluation.

The defining feature of this pattern was variability rather than stable withdrawal. Some learners described being able to communicate more freely with close friends, familiar classmates, or people whose reactions they could anticipate. One participant explained: "I like communicating with people I know, but when I meet new people, I am quieter" (P_1). Her account suggests that communicative confidence was not absent, but depended on whether the immediate social environment allowed her to speak without excessive interpersonal exposure. In the foreign language classroom, this sensitivity was intensified because speaking English added linguistic uncertainty to an already evaluative situation.

For some learners, participation was also shaped by the composition of the classroom group. Learners described feeling less secure when they were placed with classmates perceived as more proficient, especially when differences in ability became visible during speaking activities. In such situations, willingness to speak depended not only on the task itself, but on learners' sense of whether they could occupy the position of a competent speaker in that setting. Familiarity, peer reactions, and perceived comparability therefore influenced whether speaking felt manageable or exposing.

This pattern was particularly visible when learners compared English with other language-learning contexts. One participant contrasted English with Russian, explaining that in Russian she felt comfortable and was willing to speak: "In Russian I feel comfortable, I speak there" (P2). Another learner described a similar contrast, noting that in Russian, "even if I say something wrong, she corrects me, and I am not ashamed of the correction" (P4). These accounts show that the same learner could experience oral participation differently depending on teacher response, the emotional tone of correction, and perceived classroom safety. The issue was therefore not simply whether the learner was generally communicative or anxious, but whether the classroom made participation possible without excessive threat.

At the same time, context-sensitivity was not limited to the foreign language classroom. For some learners, it reflected a broader communicative orientation. Learners who described themselves as quieter in unfamiliar groups also reported greater difficulty speaking English when the classroom included peers with whom they did not feel socially close. In such cases, English did not create insecurity from nothing; rather, it made an existing sensitivity to interpersonal exposure more consequential because language performance became publicly visible.

What unites these accounts is that learners did not experience themselves as consistently capable or incapable speakers. Their self-positioning shifted with the perceived safety, familiarity, and evaluative intensity of the situation. Familiar relationships, predictable reactions, supportive correction, and lower interpersonal risk supported participation, whereas unfamiliar or evaluative settings often reduced learners' willingness to engage.

This pattern is distinct from both the inadequate and the blocked speaker. The issue is not primarily a stable sense of personal limitation, nor a breakdown at the point of performance. Rather, participation is regulated by the social conditions under which learners can recognise themselves as legitimate speakers. For these learners, communication becomes possible when classroom conditions allow visibility without excessive interpersonal threat.

Disengaged or Resigned Speaker

A fourth pattern involved learners whose relationship to communicative participation was characterised less by immediate fear or inhibition than by diminished investment. Rather than describing speaking as impossible, these learners questioned whether further effort was worthwhile, relevant, or likely to change their position as English speakers. Participation was therefore not primarily experienced as blocked or unsafe; it was approached with reduced expectation that communicative engagement would lead to progress.

In these accounts, perceived inadequacy had become incorporated into a more settled self-understanding. One learner expressed this position directly: "I've kind of come to terms with it" (P3). This statement suggests a shift from active struggle toward acceptance of perceived limitation. Speaking was no longer approached primarily as a challenge to be overcome, but as an area in which restricted progress had already been anticipated or accepted.

This resigned orientation was often accompanied by a diminished sense of relevance. In this pattern, English was described as uninteresting, frustrating, or disconnected from future goals. One participant stated that English "doesn't interest me" and did not regard it as relevant to his future aims (P3), while another did not see English as important for her imagined future (P5). In such accounts, disengagement was not simply a matter of low motivation. Rather, the value of continued effort diminished when learners no longer expected participation to produce a meaningful change in competence, confidence, or classroom position.

Accumulated difficulty further reinforced this orientation. Some learners described having fallen too far behind or feeling that catching up was no longer realistic. One participant framed the problem as an already established condition: "I feel I have missed too much already" (P3), while another learner's account similarly suggested that catching up no longer seemed realistic (P6). Such accounts suggest that resignation developed gradually through repeated experiences in which effort did not produce a sufficient sense of progress or renewed possibility. Difficulty was therefore experienced not as temporary, but as something increasingly difficult to reverse.

In some cases, disengagement was accompanied by rationalisations that reduced the perceived importance of classroom demands. One participant questioned the usefulness of grammar by suggesting that "people don't really care about grammar in real life" (P3). Within the broader pattern of responses, such comments appear less as simple resistance than as protective adjustments to ongoing difficulty. By lowering the perceived value of what was being demanded, learners could reduce the personal cost of not meeting those demands.

The behavioural consequences were visible in low initiative, reduced involvement, and emotional distance from classroom interaction. One participant described English lessons in terms of withdrawal rather than immediate fear: "I feel annoyed; I want to leave" (P3). Participation was limited not only through anxiety or hesitation, but through a more stable reduction of investment. What distinguishes this pattern is the shift from struggling with speaking to withdrawing from it as a meaningful site of effort. Communicative disengagement therefore emerged when learners no longer expected participation to change how they experienced themselves as English speakers or how they were recognised by others.

Discussion

Reframing Communication Barriers in Foreign Language Learning

Reduced oral participation in the foreign language classroom cannot be fully explained as a direct consequence of limited linguistic competence or anxiety. Previous research has consistently linked speaking-related anxiety to communicative avoidance, reduced willingness to communicate, and lower levels of classroom participation (Horwitz et al., 1986; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994; Gregersen & MacIntyre, 2014; Rababah & Almwajeh, 2024). However, this explanation becomes less sufficient when learners possess at least some communicative resources, are not simply unable to communicate, yet continue to withdraw from classroom speaking. In such cases, the issue concerns not only whether learners can speak, but how speaking is anticipated, interpreted, and made personally consequential.

Research on classroom silence similarly suggests that communicative restraint is dynamic, context-dependent, and shaped by learners' understandings of themselves within interaction (King, 2014; Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014). Speaking is not experienced merely as language practice, but as a socially meaningful form of participation through which learners negotiate competence, legitimacy, and belonging within the classroom community. Communication barriers therefore need to be understood not only as affective reactions, but also as interpretive processes through which oral participation becomes associated with exposure, judgement, or possible loss of face.

The findings of this study suggest that self-positioning forms a central part of this process. Learners approached speaking situations through prior understandings of their competence, legitimacy, and prospects for successful participation. These understandings shaped whether speaking was experienced as manageable, exposing, worthwhile, or personally costly. Participation was

therefore influenced not only by available linguistic resources, but by the self-relevant meanings attached to using those resources in front of others.

This perspective extends research on learner self-concept and self-assessment by suggesting that self-beliefs function not only as evaluations of ability, but as frameworks through which communicative situations are appraised (Mercer, 2011; Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015; Little & Erickson, 2015). It also aligns with identity-oriented work in applied linguistics, which links language learning and participation to learners' investment and access to valued positions within social interaction (Darvin & Norton, 2015). Learners responded not only to the linguistic demands of speaking, but also to what participation was perceived to reveal about them as language users.

Anxiety remains an important component of speaking-related difficulty, but the findings indicate that its influence is intertwined with broader processes of self-interpretation. Communicative disengagement is therefore better understood as a meaning-making process through which learners regulate involvement in ways that protect valued understandings of themselves.

Reframing communication barriers in this way shifts the analytical focus from speaking as performance to speaking as participation. Classroom silence is often preceded by a process through which speaking has already been judged undesirable, risky, or unlikely to produce a positive outcome. Expanding opportunities for oral practice alone is therefore unlikely to increase engagement if learners continue to attach meanings to speaking that discourage involvement.

Self-Positioning As a Mediating Mechanism

The central theoretical contribution of the present study is to conceptualise self-positioning as a mediating mechanism between linguistic competence, affective response, and communicative participation. Linguistic resources do not become classroom participation automatically. They are filtered through learners' appraisals of their own ability, their anticipation of interpersonal consequences, and their sense of what kind of speaker they can be within a particular interaction.

This helps explain why learners with at least some communicative resources may remain persistently silent. Across the findings, reduced participation rarely reflected a simple absence of something to say. More often, it reflected the meanings attached to speaking: whether participation was expected to confirm inadequacy, activate inhibition, depend on interpersonal safety, or no longer justify sustained effort. Silence therefore emerged not simply as an absence of competence, but as an outcome of how competence was interpreted within classroom interaction.

Self-positioning helps specify what occurs between communicative resources and observable participation. In the inadequate speaker pattern, available resources were filtered through the expectation that speaking would confirm limited ability. In the blocked speaker pattern, knowledge that may have been privately available became difficult to access or express once it had to be made public. In the context-sensitive pattern, participation depended on whether the situation allowed learners to recognise themselves as legitimate speakers. In the resigned pattern, disengagement reflected a reduced expectation that further participation could change the learner's position as an English speaker. These distinctions are theoretically important because they show that similar forms of silence or limited participation may be produced by different interpretive processes.

This interpretation connects learner self-concept with positioning theory. Self-beliefs shape how learners appraise communicative situations, while positioning theory helps explain how particular speaker positions become available, constrained, or difficult to occupy within classroom interaction (Mercer, 2011; Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015; Davies & Harré, 1990; Kayi-Aydar, 2019). From this perspective, participation is shaped not by confidence alone, but by whether learners can recognise themselves as legitimate speakers in the interactional space available to them.

The findings also refine work on willingness to communicate (WTC). WTC research identifies perceived competence, anxiety, and situational factors as important determinants of speaking behaviour (MacIntyre et al., 1998; MacIntyre, 2007). The present study does not replace these constructs, but clarifies how they may become consequential in classroom interaction. Perceived competence matters because learners interpret what their performance may reveal about them. Anxiety matters because speaking is appraised not only as language use, but as exposure to evaluation and possible inadequacy. Situational factors matter because classroom conditions shape whether learners can occupy a speaker position that feels socially available. Self-positioning therefore provides an explanatory link between established WTC-related variables and the learner's actual orientation to participation.

If self-positioning mediates participation, improving linguistic competence alone cannot reliably increase communicative engagement. Communication barriers persist when speaking is expected to reaffirm an established self-understanding rather than create the possibility of a different one. Supporting engagement therefore requires not only opportunities for practice, but also classroom conditions that enable learners to occupy speaker positions in which participation feels possible, legitimate, and worth sustaining.

Multiple Pathways to Communicative Disengagement

The findings suggest that communicative disengagement should not be treated as a unitary outcome. Similar forms of reduced participation may arise through different interpretive pathways. Silence, hesitation, avoidance, or limited contribution can therefore conceal important differences in how learners understand themselves, evaluate speaking situations, and regulate their involvement in classroom communication.

The four patterns identified in this study illustrate this heterogeneity. For some learners, withdrawal was organised around anticipated confirmation of inadequacy; for others, it resulted from inhibition at the point where privately available knowledge had to become public speech. Participation could also remain conditional on interpersonal safety or become progressively reduced through resignation and diminished investment. Although these pathways differed in their underlying dynamics, they produced similar behavioural outcomes in the classroom.

This distinction has important theoretical implications. Explanations of communicative withdrawal often focus on observable non-participation or on the presence of anxiety. The present findings suggest that such explanations remain incomplete unless they also account for the self-related meanings through which learners interpret speaking. Similar patterns of silence may therefore reflect different forms of self-positioning rather than a common underlying cause.

This interpretation aligns with research showing that classroom silence may reflect anxiety, strategic withdrawal, social caution, identity-related concerns, or low perceived value of participation rather than simple passivity (King, 2014). It also resonates with work emphasising the dynamic and context-sensitive nature of communicative behaviour in language learning (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014). The present findings extend these perspectives by showing how different forms of silence can be linked to different self-positioning processes within classroom interaction.

The practical significance of this distinction is that similar behaviours may require different pedagogical responses. Increased pressure to participate may intensify inhibition for some learners, while reassurance alone may have little effect on those whose withdrawal reflects diminished investment. Supporting participation therefore requires attention not only to whether learners are silent, but also to the function that silence serves within a given classroom situation.

Communicative Participation As Contextualised Engagement

The findings suggest that communicative participation is best understood not as a stable expression of competence, but as contextualised engagement emerging

within classroom interaction. Across the four patterns identified in this study, learners' willingness to speak varied not only according to their linguistic resources, but also according to how classroom situations made speaking feel possible, safe, legitimate, or worthwhile.

This was most visible in the accounts of context-sensitive learners, whose engagement depended on familiarity, interpersonal safety, and the anticipated responses of others. However, the influence of classroom context extended beyond this pattern alone. Learners describing inadequacy, inhibition, or resignation also referred to peer comparison, teacher reactions, previous speaking experiences, and participation structures as factors shaping their involvement. Participation therefore emerged neither as an individual trait nor as a direct consequence of competence, but as a relational process situated within particular classroom conditions.

This interpretation aligns with sociocultural perspectives that understand learning and participation as embedded in social interaction (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006; van Lier, 2004). Communication is not simply the use of linguistic knowledge, but a form of situated participation through which learners negotiate membership, legitimacy, and involvement in classroom life. Whether learners engage depends not only on what they know, but also on whether the classroom environment allows them to use that knowledge without excessive interpersonal cost.

The findings further suggest that communicative disengagement should not be treated solely as an individual learner characteristic. Reduced participation emerged through the interaction between self-positioning and context: learners interpreted classroom experiences through existing understandings of themselves as speakers, while those experiences could reinforce, challenge, or reshape these understandings. Participation is therefore best viewed as a dynamic process emerging through the reciprocal relationship between learner and environment.

Understanding communication in this way shifts attention away from locating participation solely within the learner and towards the classroom conditions that shape how speaking is experienced. Communicative participation is thus not a direct reflection of competence, but an emergent outcome of the relationship between learners, classroom contexts, and the meanings attached to speaking.

Implications for Pedagogy

A central implication of the findings is that increasing opportunities for speaking does not, in itself, guarantee increased participation. When learners approach communication through established understandings of themselves as inadequate, vulnerable, or unlikely to succeed, additional speaking tasks may

simply create further occasions for anticipated difficulty. The issue is therefore not only how often learners are invited to speak, but whether participation is experienced as possible, legitimate, and developmentally worthwhile.

Pedagogical support should consequently address not only language development, but also the classroom conditions under which learners come to experience participation as compatible with seeing themselves as more capable speakers. This aligns with growing emphasis on learner agency, self-concept, and classroom climate as foundations of communicative engagement (Ushioda, 2011; Mercer & Dörnyei, 2020; Tavakoli & Zarrinabadi, 2018). Opportunities for speaking remain essential, but their effectiveness depends on whether learners experience participation as psychologically manageable and personally meaningful.

The findings further suggest that communicative disengagement should not be treated as a uniform problem requiring a uniform response. Learners whose participation is constrained by anticipatory inhibition may benefit from reduced performance pressure, structured preparation, gradual progression from lower- to higher-visibility tasks, and opportunities to rehearse contributions before speaking publicly. By contrast, learners whose disengagement reflects resignation or diminished investment may require support that strengthens relevance, purpose, and credible expectations of progress. Similar classroom behaviours may therefore require substantially different pedagogical responses.

The study also highlights the importance of how classroom evaluation is experienced. Evaluation does not merely measure performance; it shapes how participation is understood. Feedback remains an essential component of language learning, but its effects depend partly on whether it is experienced as developmental support or as confirmation of inadequacy. Participation is more likely to be sustained when learners can contribute without excessive concern that imperfect performance will define who they are as speakers.

More broadly, the findings encourage caution in interpreting silence as a straightforward indicator of low motivation, unwillingness to communicate, or lack of effort. Silence may reflect inhibition, self-protection, uncertainty, conditional engagement, or accumulated withdrawal. Understanding these possibilities does not require teachers to determine precisely why every learner remains silent, but it does require recognition that similar behaviours may emerge from different underlying experiences. Pedagogical decisions based solely on observable participation may therefore overlook the processes through which disengagement is produced and sustained.

Ultimately, supporting communication involves more than developing linguistic competence or increasing the quantity of speaking. It requires creating classroom conditions in which learners can participate without experiencing communication as a threat to valued understandings of themselves. Teachers do

not simply provide opportunities to speak; they also influence the meanings learners attach to participation. Effective pedagogy is therefore concerned with making engagement not only available, but also psychologically manageable and sustainable.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

The present study draws on qualitative data from a small subsample of adolescent EFL learners in one educational context and should therefore be understood as an analytically rather than statistically generalisable account of communicative disengagement. Its purpose was not to identify all sources of speaking-related difficulty, but to examine how learners understood themselves as speakers and how these understandings shaped classroom participation.

A further limitation concerns the reliance on learners' self-reported experiences. While this is consistent with the study's interpretive orientation, the data capture learners' reported meanings rather than the full interactional unfolding of classroom communication. Future research could therefore complement interview-based accounts with classroom observation and interactional or discourse-analytic approaches, allowing closer examination of how self-positioning is enacted, negotiated, or challenged during communication.

Future research might also explore how self-positioning develops over time. The findings suggest that communicative disengagement emerges through ongoing interactions between classroom experiences and learners' understandings of themselves as speakers. Longitudinal research could provide insight into how self-positioning becomes stabilised, challenged, or transformed across different stages of language learning.

A further direction concerns pedagogical intervention. The present findings suggest that supporting participation requires attention not only to learners' linguistic development, but also to the conditions under which speaking becomes psychologically manageable and personally meaningful. Future studies could therefore examine how different forms of feedback, task design, peer interaction, or staged participation influence learners' self-positioning and willingness to communicate.

More broadly, the study highlights the value of bringing research on foreign language anxiety into closer dialogue with work on learner self-concept, identity, agency, and classroom participation. Understanding communication barriers requires attention not only to emotional reactions, but also to how learners interpret speaking situations and understand themselves as participants in classroom communication.

Conclusion

This study examined how adolescent EFL learners position themselves as speakers and how these self-positionings shape communicative participation. The findings suggest that speaking-related difficulty cannot be fully explained through linguistic competence or anxiety alone. Rather, learners' willingness to speak is shaped by how they appraise speaking situations, anticipate their interpersonal consequences, and understand what participation may reveal about them as language users.

The study argues that communicative participation is mediated by learners' self-positioning in relation to classroom speaking. Learners respond not only to the linguistic demands of communication, but also to whether speaking feels manageable, exposing, legitimate, or worthwhile. Speaking may therefore become psychologically unavailable even when some communicative resources are present. Reduced participation emerges not simply from what learners can or cannot do, but from how available resources are interpreted in relation to the self and the classroom context.

The four patterns identified in the analysis – the inadequate speaker, the blocked speaker, the context-sensitive communicative self, and the disengaged or resigned speaker – demonstrate that similar forms of withdrawal may arise through different self-positioning processes. Communication barriers are therefore better understood as differentiated pathways of disengagement rather than as a uniform consequence of anxiety, limited proficiency, or low motivation.

Ultimately, the findings highlight the importance of viewing classroom communication not only as language use, but as a psychologically and socially situated form of participation. Supporting engagement requires attention not only to linguistic development, but also to classroom conditions under which learners can develop viable and legitimate speaker positions. From this perspective, communicative participation becomes possible when learners can use their linguistic resources without experiencing speaking as a threat to their existing or developing sense of themselves as language users.

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Generative AI Statement

During the preparation of this work, the author used OpenAI ChatGPT for language editing and revision support. After using this tool, the author reviewed and edited the content as needed and takes full responsibility for the content of the publication.

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