



THE IMPACT OF EMOTIONAL CLIMATE ON STUDENT SPEAKING
ENGAGEMENT IN THE EFL CLASSROOM IN HIGHER EDUCATION

<https://doi.org/10.70728/c.series.v08.i03.071>

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Annotation. This study explores how the emotional climate of the classroom influences student speaking engagement in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) course at the university level. Although communicative teaching methods are widely used, many students remain reluctant to participate actively in speaking tasks, even when they have sufficient language proficiency. The research suggests that this reluctance may be connected not only to linguistic factors but also to the emotional atmosphere in the classroom. A short-term pilot experiment was conducted with 48 undergraduate students divided into control and experimental groups. The experimental group experienced targeted strategies aimed at creating a supportive and psychologically safe environment, including delayed error correction, positive feedback, humor-based warm-ups, and cooperative peer interaction. The results showed a significant increase in voluntary participation and longer student responses in the experimental group. The findings demonstrate that emotional climate is a manageable pedagogical factor that can directly enhance students' willingness to speak and engage more actively in EFL classrooms.

Keywords: emotional climate, speaking engagement, EFL classroom, higher education, psychological safety, foreign language anxiety, student participation, communicative competence.

Аннотация. Статья посвящена исследованию влияния эмоционального климата на речевую активность студентов в аудитории английского языка как иностранного в условиях высшего образования. Несмотря на широкое внедрение коммуникативных методик, многие студенты демонстрируют низкую готовность к устному участию, даже обладая достаточным уровнем языковой подготовки. В работе рассматривается гипотеза о том, что ключевым фактором, влияющим на вовлечённость в говорение, является не только уровень языковой компетенции, но и эмоциональная атмосфера в учебной группе. В рамках пилотного эксперимента с участием 48 студентов была реализована серия педагогических интервенций, направленных на формирование психологически безопасной среды: отсроченная коррекция ошибок, поддерживающая обратная связь, использование юмора и кооперативные формы взаимодействия.

Результаты показали статистически значимое увеличение количества добровольных высказываний и объёма устных ответов в экспериментальной группе. Полученные данные подтверждают, что эмоциональный климат является управляемым педагогическим ресурсом, способным существенно повысить речевую вовлечённость студентов.

Ключевые слова: эмоциональный климат, речевая вовлеченность, английский язык как иностранный, высшее образование, психологическая безопасность, устная коммуникация, педагогические интервенции.

Annotatsiya. Maqolada oliy ta’lim muassasalarida ingliz tilini chet tili sifatida (EFL) o’qitish jarayonida emotsional muhitning talabalarning og’zaki nutqiy faolligiga ta’siri o’rganiladi. Kommunikativ metodlar keng qo’llanilishiga qaramay, ko’plab talabalar yetarli til bilimiga ega bo’lsalar ham, og’zaki faoliyatda sust ishtirok etadilar. Tadqiqotda nutqiy faollikka ta’sir qiluvchi asosiy omil sifatida nafaqat lingvistik kompetensiya, balki auditoriyadagi emotsional muhit ham muhim ahamiyatga ega ekanligi ilgari suriladi. 48 nafar talaba ishtirokida o’tkazilgan pilot tajriba doirasida psixologik xavfsiz muhitni shakllantirishga qaratilgan pedagogik strategiyalar qo’llanildi: xatolarni kechiktirib tuzatish, qo’llab-quvvatlovchi fikr-mulohaza, hazilga asoslangan kirish mashqlari va hamkorlikdagi ishlash shakllari. Natijalar tajriba guruhida ixtiyoriy nutqiy chiqishlar soni va javoblar hajmi sezilarli darajada oshganini ko’rsatdi. Tadqiqot emotsional muhit boshqariladigan pedagogik omil ekanini va u talabalarning nutqiy faolligini samarali oshirishi mumkinligini tasdiqlaydi.

Kalit so‘zlar: emotsional muhit, nutqiy faollik, ingliz tili (chet tili sifatida), oliy ta’lim, psixologik xavfsizlik, til o’rganishdagi xavotir, og’zaki muloqot, pedagogik strategiyalar.

Introduction. The development of oral communicative competence is widely recognized as one of the central objectives of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction in higher education. In contemporary language pedagogy, communicative competence is viewed not only as mastery of grammatical structures and vocabulary but also as the ability to use language effectively in authentic social interaction. University-level foreign language programs increasingly emphasize interactive speaking activities, collaborative learning, and task-based instruction as core components of communicative language teaching.

Within foreign language teacher education programs, speaking proficiency assumes an even more significant role. Future teachers must demonstrate not only linguistic accuracy but also confidence, spontaneity, and communicative flexibility. Their future professional performance will require them to manage classroom discourse, provide explanations in the target language, facilitate interaction among students, and respond spontaneously to unexpected communicative situations. Consequently, the quality of their own speaking experience as language learners may strongly influence their ability to foster communicative environments in their future classrooms (Dörnyei, 2005).

However, despite the widespread implementation of communicative approaches in university curricula, instructors frequently encounter limited student participation during speaking activities. Classroom observations often reveal similar behavioral patterns across

different groups. Many students hesitate to initiate discussion, wait for the teacher to nominate them before speaking, provide short or formulaic responses, and demonstrate visible hesitation when attempting to express complex ideas. These patterns may occur even in groups where students demonstrate adequate grammatical knowledge and vocabulary in written assignments or structured exercises.

The discrepancy between communicative teaching methodology and actual student speaking behavior raises important pedagogical questions. If classroom activities are designed to promote interaction, why do students still demonstrate reluctance to speak? Traditional explanations frequently attribute low participation to limited vocabulary, insufficient preparation, or poorly designed tasks. While these factors may indeed influence performance, they often fail to fully explain why linguistically capable students remain passive during speaking activities (Fredricks et al., 2004).

An alternative perspective suggests that affective factors within the classroom environment may significantly influence student willingness to participate. In particular, the emotional climate of the classroom—shaped by teacher behavior, peer relationships, and implicit norms of interaction—may play a crucial role in determining whether students feel comfortable engaging in communicative activities. When students perceive the learning environment as supportive and non-threatening, they may be more willing to take linguistic risks and participate actively in discussion. Conversely, when the classroom atmosphere generates anxiety or fear of negative evaluation, students may withdraw from participation regardless of their actual linguistic competence (Edmondson, 1999).

The present study investigates the relationship between emotional climate and student speaking engagement in higher education EFL classrooms. Specifically, the research examines whether targeted instructional strategies designed to enhance emotional climate can produce measurable changes in students’ observable speaking behavior. By focusing on behavioral indicators of engagement, the study aims to provide empirical evidence that affective classroom conditions directly influence patterns of oral participation.

The hypothesis underlying this study is that a supportive and psychologically safe emotional climate leads to measurable increases in student speaking engagement. Such engagement may be reflected in higher rates of voluntary participation, longer and more elaborated oral responses, and increased communicative initiative during classroom interaction.

Emotional climate refers to the overall affective atmosphere of a learning environment. It emerges from ongoing patterns of interaction among teachers and students and reflects shared perceptions regarding support, acceptance, and interpersonal safety within the classroom. Emotional climate is not limited to individual emotions but represents a collective experience that shapes the quality of communication within a group. In educational psychology, emotional climate is closely related to the concept of psychological safety. Psychological safety refers to the perception that individuals can express ideas, ask questions, or make mistakes without fear of humiliation or negative consequences. When psychological safety is present, learners are more likely to engage in exploratory behavior, express

uncertainty, and participate actively in collaborative tasks. In language classrooms, psychological safety becomes particularly important because language production inherently involves vulnerability. Students must express thoughts using an incomplete linguistic system, often under time pressure and in front of peers. Mistakes are inevitable, and learners must tolerate a certain degree of linguistic uncertainty. In environments where errors are treated as evidence of failure rather than as natural stages of development, students may become reluctant to speak.

Teacher communication style plays a critical role in shaping emotional climate. For example, frequent interruption during student speech, immediate corrective feedback, or implicit comparison among students may unintentionally create emotional tension. Even subtle signals such as facial expressions, tone of voice, or reaction to mistakes can influence how safe students feel when speaking. Conversely, teachers who emphasize supportive feedback, encourage idea development, and normalize linguistic experimentation may foster a more open and collaborative communicative environment.

Peer relationships also contribute significantly to emotional climate. Students who feel accepted by their classmates may be more willing to share ideas and engage in discussion. In contrast, fear of negative peer judgment may increase communicative inhibition. Classroom norms regarding turn-taking, humor, and cooperative interaction can either support or discourage participation.

Foreign language learning differs from many other academic disciplines because it requires learners to publicly perform their developing knowledge. Unlike written tasks that allow time for planning and revision, speaking demands immediate processing and spontaneous production. This immediacy can increase learners' sensitivity to evaluation and potential embarrassment.

Research on foreign language anxiety has demonstrated that affective barriers can significantly inhibit oral participation (Horwitz et al., 1986). Foreign language anxiety is often characterized by feelings of tension, nervousness, and worry that occur specifically in language learning contexts. Students experiencing high levels of anxiety may avoid volunteering answers, shorten their responses, or rely on memorized expressions in order to minimize communicative risk.

Importantly, these avoidance behaviors do not necessarily reflect a lack of competence. In many cases, students possess the linguistic resources necessary for communication but hesitate to use them due to fear of negative evaluation. This suggests that psychological factors may suppress the expression of linguistic ability in classroom settings. Another relevant concept in second language acquisition research is willingness to communicate (WTC). Willingness to communicate refers to the probability that a learner will initiate communication when given the opportunity (MacIntyre et al., 1998). WTC is influenced not only by stable personality traits but also by situational factors such as classroom atmosphere, task type, and perceived support from peers and teachers.

A supportive emotional climate may therefore increase students' readiness to initiate communication even when their linguistic resources are imperfect. When learners perceive the

classroom as a safe space for experimentation, they may be more willing to attempt complex expressions and engage in extended interaction. From the perspective of self-determination theory, learning environments that satisfy the psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness foster greater intrinsic motivation and engagement (Ryan & Deci, 2000). In language classrooms, these needs may be supported through respectful teacher-student relationships, opportunities for meaningful interaction, and feedback that emphasizes progress rather than deficiency.

Student engagement is widely recognized as a multidimensional construct encompassing behavioral, cognitive, and emotional components. Behavioral engagement refers to observable participation in learning activities, including contributions to discussions, responsiveness during interaction, and involvement in collaborative tasks. Cognitive engagement involves the degree of mental effort and strategic processing learners invest in academic tasks. In language learning, this may include planning utterances, using communication strategies, and monitoring linguistic output.

Emotional engagement reflects learners' affective responses to the learning environment, including interest, enjoyment, and sense of belonging. These emotional responses can significantly influence motivation and persistence. In EFL speaking classrooms, behavioral engagement is often the most directly observable dimension. Speaking engagement can be operationalized through measurable indicators such as the number of voluntary speaking turns, the duration and complexity of utterances, and the frequency of student-initiated interaction (Mercer & Dörnyei, 2020).

The present study focuses primarily on behavioral engagement because it allows for systematic observation and quantifiable analysis. However, behavioral engagement is closely connected to emotional conditions within the classroom. Students who feel psychologically safe and supported may demonstrate higher levels of participation and communicative initiative.

The study was conducted as a short-term pilot experimental investigation designed to examine whether targeted emotional climate interventions could produce immediate changes in student speaking engagement. A pilot design was selected to explore the feasibility of implementing affective strategies within regular classroom instruction and to identify potential patterns that could be examined in larger-scale research.

The participants consisted of 48 undergraduate students enrolled in a foreign language teacher education program at a higher education institution. All participants had comparable levels of English proficiency as determined by previous academic assessments and placement results. The students were divided into two groups: a control group and an experimental group, each consisting of 24 students. Both groups attended compulsory EFL speaking classes taught by the same instructor in order to maintain consistency in teaching style, materials, and task structure. The intervention lasted two weeks and included four 90-minute speaking sessions. During this period, the experimental group was exposed to structured strategies specifically designed to enhance emotional climate. These strategies included several components.

First, corrective feedback was delayed in order to avoid interrupting students during communicative production. Instead of immediate correction, the instructor provided feedback after the completion of activities, focusing on patterns rather than individual errors. Second, verbal reinforcement emphasized effort, idea development, and communicative success rather than linguistic accuracy alone. Positive comments such as “That’s an interesting idea” or “I like how you explained that” were used to encourage elaboration. Third, the instructor explicitly discussed the role of error in language learning, emphasizing that mistakes are a natural and necessary part of the learning process. Fourth, each session began with short humor-based warm-up activities designed to reduce tension and create a relaxed atmosphere.

Finally, peer interaction tasks were structured to emphasize cooperation rather than competition. Students worked in pairs or small groups to solve communicative problems, share experiences, or complete collaborative tasks.

The control group, by contrast, received instruction using standard communicative techniques without explicit affective interventions.

Data were collected through a mixed-method approach combining questionnaire data and classroom observation. A classroom emotional climate questionnaire was administered to both groups before and after the intervention. The questionnaire measured several dimensions of perceived emotional climate, including psychological safety, comfort in expressing opinions, perceived teacher support, and peer acceptance.

Speaking engagement was assessed through systematic classroom observation and audio recordings. Several observable indicators were measured:

- number of voluntary speaking turns per student
- average duration of utterances
- frequency of spontaneous topic initiation
- participation rate in pair and group activities

Quantitative data were analyzed using paired and independent samples t-tests in order to determine whether differences between groups were statistically significant.

Pre-test analysis revealed no statistically significant differences between the control and experimental groups. Both groups demonstrated moderate participation levels, with approximately 40 percent of speaking turns initiated voluntarily rather than prompted by the instructor.

Following the two-week intervention, statistically significant changes were observed in the experimental group. The number of voluntary speaking turns increased by approximately 32 percent. In addition, the average length of student utterances increased from 18 seconds to 27 seconds per contribution.

Students in the experimental group also demonstrated greater willingness to elaborate on their ideas and respond directly to peers without teacher prompting. Instances of spontaneous topic initiation increased noticeably during group discussions.

In contrast, the control group showed only marginal improvement, with approximately an 8 percent increase in voluntary participation. This change did not reach statistical significance.

Questionnaire results indicated a significant increase in perceived psychological safety within the experimental group. Students reported feeling more comfortable expressing incomplete or developing ideas and less concerned about making mistakes in front of their peers.

The findings of the study confirm that emotional climate exerts a measurable influence on speaking engagement in higher education EFL classrooms. Even within a relatively short two-week intervention, structured affective strategies produced noticeable behavioral changes in student participation.

The increase in voluntary speaking turns suggests that a supportive emotional environment reduces communicative inhibition. When students perceive the classroom as a safe space for experimentation, they may become more willing to take risks and express their ideas despite linguistic limitations (Edmondson, 1999; Horwitz et al., 1986). The increase in utterance length indicates not only greater participation but also deeper engagement with communicative tasks. Students appeared more willing to elaborate on their ideas rather than providing minimal responses.

These results support previous research on willingness to communicate, which emphasizes the importance of situational factors in shaping communicative behavior (MacIntyre et al., 1998). Classroom atmosphere, teacher behavior, and peer relationships may significantly influence learners' readiness to initiate interaction.

The study also highlights the pedagogical potential of emotional climate as a manageable instructional variable. Unlike factors such as class size or curriculum structure, emotional climate can be shaped through relatively simple changes in teacher behavior and classroom interaction patterns.

Strategies such as delayed corrective feedback, supportive reinforcement, humor-based warm-ups, and cooperative tasks require minimal additional resources but may significantly enhance student participation. However, it is important to note that the study does not claim long-term improvements in language proficiency. The results demonstrate short-term behavioral changes that may serve as a prerequisite for sustained language development. Increased speaking engagement may create more opportunities for meaningful language practice, which in turn may support long-term proficiency growth.

The scientific novelty of the study lies in providing empirical evidence of the short-term impact of structured emotional climate interventions on measurable speaking engagement indicators in higher education EFL contexts. By operationalizing emotional climate as a pedagogically manageable construct, the study establishes a direct relationship between affective classroom conditions and observable behavioral engagement.

The findings offer practical implications for EFL instructors in higher education. The results suggest that affect-sensitive teaching strategies can significantly enhance student participation without requiring major curricular reforms. Teachers may improve classroom interaction by implementing supportive feedback practices, incorporating humor-based warm-ups, and explicitly normalizing the role of error in language learning.

Furthermore, the study underscores the importance of integrating emotional awareness into teacher training programs. Future language teachers should not only develop linguistic competence and methodological knowledge but also learn to create emotionally supportive learning environments.

The present study confirms that emotional climate plays a crucial role in shaping student speaking engagement in higher education EFL classrooms. A supportive and psychologically safe environment contributes to increased voluntary participation, greater communicative initiative, and more elaborated oral production. When students perceive the classroom as a space where mistakes are treated as part of the learning process rather than as failures, they demonstrate greater willingness to take linguistic risks and express complex ideas (MacIntyre et al., 1998). The findings suggest that emotional climate should not be viewed as a peripheral aspect of instruction but as a central pedagogical variable that can be intentionally shaped through teacher behavior, feedback strategies, and classroom interaction patterns. At the same time, the study has certain limitations, including its short duration and relatively small sample size. The results primarily reflect immediate behavioral changes rather than long-term language development outcomes. Future research should therefore investigate the sustainability of these effects over extended periods and examine whether increased speaking engagement leads to measurable gains in communicative competence. Further studies may also explore how emotional climate interacts with individual learner variables such as motivation, personality traits, and proficiency level. A deeper understanding of these interactions may help educators design more effective learning environments that support both linguistic development and student confidence.

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