

Affective Influences on Oral Communication: Investigating Students' Reluctance to Speak in Language Classrooms

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Abstract. *Affective factors play a crucial role in the development of oral proficiency in second language learning. Among these factors, inhibition and second language ego significantly influence learners' willingness to participate in speaking activities and their overall communicative competence. This article examines how varying levels of inhibition affect the formation of a second language ego across different age groups, with particular attention to adolescent learners. Drawing on theoretical perspectives from second language acquisition research, the study highlights the relationship between anxiety, affective filter, and oral language performance. The discussion emphasizes that high levels of inhibition and negative language ego can hinder learners' oral development, whereas reduced anxiety and a positive second language ego facilitate effective communication. The article concludes by underscoring the importance of creating supportive, low-anxiety classroom environments that encourage risk-taking and active participation. Such pedagogical practices can help learners build confidence, reduce affective barriers, and enhance their oral proficiency in the target language.*

Key words: *affective factors, inhibition, second language ego, oral proficiency, language anxiety, affective filter, speaking skills, second language acquisition.*

Learning a foreign language involves more than the acquisition of grammatical rules and vocabulary. It is a complex and socially driven process that takes place largely through interaction with others. Since the fundamental function of language is communication, effective interaction requires learners to develop sufficient awareness of the target language and its social use in order to avoid feelings of embarrassment, anxiety, or alienation. Engaging in communication in a foreign language often exposes learners to situations in which they are unable to express their thoughts as accurately or fluently as in their first language, which can lead to frustration. This challenge is particularly pronounced among adult learners, who tend to be more sensitive to evaluation and the judgments of others. As a result, fear of making mistakes or being negatively assessed may cause discouragement, reduce willingness to communicate, and foster a sense of failure in relation to the target language.

Self-regulated learning refers to the ability of learners to actively control their cognitive, motivational, and behavioral processes toward achieving academic goals (Zimmerman, 2000). In academic writing, SRL manifests in behaviors such as goal setting, strategic planning, self-monitoring, feedback seeking, and reflection. This meta-analysis investigates how SRL contributes to academic writing development by analyzing research findings across multiple contexts, including first and second language writing environments. It aims to identify which SRL components are most effective, how they interact with writing outcomes, and what implications arise for pedagogy and curriculum development.

Learning another language is not necessarily about adopting different cultural and social behaviors, however it may have a relevant impact on the emotional being of the learner. The affective side of

the learner has probably the most influence on language learning success or failure (Oxford, 1996). It is said that good language learners usually know how to control their emotions and attitude about learning (Naiman, Frohlich and Todesco, 1975; Wenden, 1986 b). Negative feelings can hinder progress; on the other hand, positive feelings and attitudes can make language learning more effective and enjoyable.

Globalization and the rapid development of digital technologies have intensified language contact among internet users worldwide. As a result of this widespread interaction, English has emerged as the dominant *lingua franca* of the online environment. Consequently, there has been growing pressure on individuals to acquire English proficiency. For many adults, learning English as a second language is no longer optional but a necessity for meeting the demands of the contemporary job market. Limited ability to communicate effectively in English may threaten individuals' professional stability or restrict access to future career opportunities. Moreover, the internet has evolved into the world's largest repository of academic, economic, and political information. While access to knowledge has expanded significantly, it remains largely available to those who possess adequate proficiency in English, thereby reinforcing the importance of English language competence in the modern globalized world.

Affective factors play a crucial role in shaping learners' willingness to participate in oral communication activities in foreign language classrooms. Emotional variables such as anxiety, fear of negative evaluation, low self-confidence, and lack of motivation often function as barriers that prevent learners from expressing themselves freely in the target language. According to Krashen, these emotional barriers operate as an *affective filter* that can block language input from being fully processed, even when instruction is well designed and linguistically appropriate. Learners who experience high levels of anxiety are less likely to take risks in speaking activities and tend to avoid interaction, which limits their opportunities for meaningful language use and development. Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope emphasize that foreign language anxiety is particularly evident in speaking tasks, where learners feel exposed to peer judgment and teacher evaluation. Adult learners, in particular, may experience heightened anxiety due to established self-identities and fear of losing face, which can negatively influence their classroom participation. Furthermore, social and cultural expectations surrounding accuracy and fluency may intensify learners' reluctance to speak, especially in contexts where errors are perceived as failures rather than natural stages of language development. Research suggests that supportive classroom environments that encourage risk-taking, emphasize communicative meaning over grammatical perfection, and foster positive teacher-student relationships can significantly reduce affective barriers and promote learners' oral engagement. By addressing affective influences alongside linguistic instruction, teachers can create conditions that facilitate more confident and active participation in speaking activities.

Learners differ significantly in their levels of inhibition, which plays a central role in the formation of a second language ego. During childhood, language ego is still developing and remains relatively flexible until puberty. At this stage, acquiring a second language does not strongly threaten learners' self-identity, resulting in lower levels of inhibition. Consequently, children tend to achieve oral proficiency in a foreign language more easily than adolescents. In contrast, adolescents often exhibit a more rigid language ego when learning a new language. The reduced flexibility of their second language ego requires them to consciously construct a new linguistic identity, a process that can be challenging. To a considerable extent, success in developing oral proficiency depends on whether learners possess a positive or negative second language ego. This orientation is largely shaped by defensive mechanisms, particularly inhibition. High levels of inhibition make it difficult for learners to establish a functional second language ego, thereby impeding oral language development.

Senior high school students undergo significant physical and psychological maturation, a period often associated with heightened anxiety and a stronger affective filter in second language learning. Elevated anxiety levels typically correspond to increased inhibition and a less positive language ego. Zukowski argues that the intentional and conscious development of a second language ego can enhance essential communicative abilities. When learners experience reduced inhibition while forming a new language ego, they are more likely to achieve higher levels of oral proficiency.

Conversely, excessive inhibition and a negative language ego can severely obstruct the development of speaking skills.

Overall, the second language ego exerts a substantial influence on oral English performance. Therefore, English teachers should place greater emphasis on fostering a positive second language ego in oral instruction. By minimizing the negative effects of defensive mechanisms and creating supportive, low-anxiety learning environments, teachers can help students develop confidence and improve their communicative competence in the target language.

In conclusion, affective factors, particularly inhibition and second language ego, play a decisive role in learners' oral language development. The formation of a positive second language ego is closely linked to learners' emotional readiness and their ability to manage anxiety in the language classroom. While younger learners benefit from greater psychological flexibility and lower inhibition, adolescent and senior high school learners often experience increased anxiety and defensive behaviors that hinder their willingness to communicate. High levels of inhibition can obstruct the construction of a functional second language ego, thereby limiting opportunities for meaningful oral interaction and language growth. Therefore, it is essential for teachers to recognize the impact of affective variables and actively create supportive, low-anxiety learning environments. By encouraging risk-taking, valuing communicative meaning over accuracy, and fostering positive teacher-student interactions, educators can help learners develop a confident second language ego and ultimately enhance their oral English proficiency.

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