



Exploring Fear of Negative Evaluation (FNE) as a Deterrent to Oral Participation: A Case Study of English Majors at Omar Al-Mukhtar University

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Abstract

Fear of Negative Evaluation (FNE) is a major psychological barrier that can inhibit oral participation in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms. This study investigates how FNE affects the oral performance of English majors at Omar Al-Mukhtar University and identifies the avoidant behaviors students employ to protect themselves from perceived embarrassment or criticism. The study adopted a descriptive quantitative model within a case study design. Data were collected from 35 undergraduate students in the third and fourth years of study through an online Likert-scale questionnaire consisting of 11 items representing seven common psychological and defensive behaviors. Descriptive statistics were used to analyze the data through Excel and Google Sheets. The findings indicate that FNE functions as a substantial deterrent to oral participation and is reflected in a range of self-protective behaviors, including avoidance of eye contact, excessive silence, reliance on short answers, hiding behind objects, and the use of Arabic as a safer alternative to English. Overall, the results suggest that many students prioritize psychological safety over communicative risk-taking in the classroom. The study concludes that reducing FNE requires more supportive feedback practices, greater teacher awareness of hidden affective barriers, and a classroom environment that encourages participation without fear of public judgment.

Keywords

Fear of Negative Evaluation, oral participation, EFL learners, academic anxiety, avoidance strategies, defensive behaviors, Omar Al-Mukhtar University.

المخلص

بوصفه عائقاً أمام المشاركة الشفوية لدى طلبة (FNE) يهدف هذا البحث إلى استكشاف أثر الخوف من التقييم السلبي تخصص اللغة الإنجليزية بجامعة عمر المختار. وتنطلق الدراسة من افتراض أن ضعف المشاركة الشفوية لا يرتبط دائماً بضعف الكفاءة اللغوية، بل قد يكون ناتجاً عن عوامل نفسية تتصل بالخوف من الحكم الاجتماعي والنقد العلني داخل الصف الدراسي. واعتمدت الدراسة المنهج الوصفي الكمي ضمن إطار دراسة الحالة، وشملت عينة مكونة من 35 طالباً وطالبة من طلبة السنتين الثالثة والرابعة في قسم اللغة الإنجليزية. وجمعت البيانات من خلال استبانة إلكترونية وفق مقياس ليكرت، تضمنت 11 بنداً تمثل سبعة سلوكيات نفسية ودفاعية شائعة. وتم تحليل البيانات باستخدام الإحصاء الوصفي من خلال وأظهرت النتائج أن الخوف من التقييم السلبي يمثل عاملاً مؤثراً في الحد من Excel وGoogle Sheets برنامجي المشاركة الشفوية، ويتجلى في مجموعة من السلوكيات الوقائية مثل تجنب التواصل البصري، والتزام الصمت لتفادي الوقوع في الخطأ، والاكتماء بإجابات قصيرة، والاختباء خلف الأشياء، واستخدام اللغة العربية بوصفها خياراً أكثر أمناً من الإنجليزية. وتشير النتائج إجمالاً إلى أن عدداً من الطلبة يفضلون الأمان النفسي على المجازفة التواصلية داخل الصف. وتخلص الدراسة إلى أن الحد من هذا النوع من القلق يتطلب تبني أساليب تغذية راجعة أكثر دعماً، وزيادة وعي المعلمين بالعوائق الوجدانية الخفية، وتوفير بيئة صفية مشجعة على المشاركة دون خوف من التقييم السلبي.

الكلمات المفتاحية

الخوف من التقييم السلبي، المشاركة الشفوية، متعلمو اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية، القلق الأكاديمي، استراتيجيات التجنب، السلوكيات الدفاعية، جامعة عمر المختار.

Introduction

In contemporary EFL classrooms, students' oral participation is shaped not only by their linguistic competence but also by a range of psychological and pedagogical factors. Among

the four language skills, speaking is often the most vulnerable to anxiety because it requires learners to perform spontaneously in front of others and exposes them to immediate evaluation by teachers and peers. In many university contexts, students may possess an adequate linguistic background yet still hesitate to speak because of self-doubt, fear of mistakes, and concern about public embarrassment. This issue appears particularly relevant in contexts where classroom participation is influenced by strong social expectations and sensitivity to judgment.

One of the most influential affective variables underlying this hesitation is Fear of Negative Evaluation (FNE). This phenomenon was first described by Watson and Friend (1969) as central to social-evaluative anxiety. Within EFL learning, this construct is especially significant because speaking is inherently public and often involves uncertainty, self-monitoring, and the possibility of visible error. Previous scholarship has shown that anxiety may reduce willingness to communicate and weaken classroom engagement, particularly in speaking tasks where learners perceive correction, comparison, or criticism as threatening (Horwitz et al., 1986).

Problem Statement

At Omar Al-Mukhtar University, the problem addressed in this study goes beyond language proficiency alone. Many students face psychological barriers that prevent them from participating orally despite having an academic background in English studies. Fear of social judgment and public criticism often silences students in the classroom and leads them to adopt behaviors intended to minimize exposure and preserve face. In such cases, oral silence should not be interpreted simply as lack of motivation or insufficient preparation; rather, it may reflect a defensive response to evaluative pressure. This issue is particularly important in the local Libyan context, where sensitivity to public embarrassment may intensify students' reluctance to engage openly in classroom interaction.

Significance of the study

The significance of this study lies in its focus on a hidden yet influential psychological barrier affecting oral participation among English majors. By examining how Fear of Negative Evaluation shapes students' classroom behavior, the study contributes to a more context-sensitive understanding of speaking anxiety in Libyan EFL higher education. It is also significant in practical terms because it helps instructors and university administrators recognize that reduced participation may reflect affective difficulties rather than weak language ability alone. In this sense, the study offers value for both applied linguistics and pedagogical practice by drawing attention to behavioral indicators that may otherwise remain unnoticed in the classroom.

Research Objectives

1. To investigate how the Fear of Negative Evaluation (FNE) affects the oral performance of students at Omar Al-Mukhtar University.
2. To identify the avoidant behaviors that students adopt to avoid being negatively evaluated.
3. To propose practical strategies for instructors to reduce fear of students and increase participation.

Literature review (Theoretical conceptualization)

Fear of Negative Evaluation is rooted in the broader literature on social-evaluative anxiety. Watson and Friend (1969) conceptualized it as a central component of anxiety arising from the possibility of being judged by others. Winston (1988) was among the early scholars who discussed psychological barriers in language learning and linked them to apprehension associated with evaluation. Later, Horwitz et al. (1986) located this construct within foreign language learning by describing it as apprehension about others' evaluations, avoidance of evaluative situations, and the expectation of negative judgment.

Within EFL settings, this conceptualization is especially relevant because speaking tasks place learners in visible, high-risk situations where errors may be publicly noticed. The theoretical

significance of FNE in language learning also relates to the way anxiety affects willingness to communicate, self-confidence, and classroom participation. In this sense, oral performance cannot be interpreted solely through linguistic competence; it must also be understood through affective factors that shape how students respond to correction, peer observation, and public performance (MacIntyre, 1994; Oxford, 1999).

Existing Literature

The study draws on a body of literature that links anxiety with participation patterns in language classrooms. Horwitz et al. (1986) defined FNE as apprehension about others' evaluations, avoidance of evaluative situations, and the expectation of negative judgment. MacIntyre (1994) further noted that instructors need to adapt to the psychological demands that influence students' communicative behavior in the classroom.

In relation to classroom behavior, Gregersen (2003) and Oxford (1990) highlighted avoidant responses such as eye contact avoidance in language-anxious students. Ely (1986) discussed discomfort, risk-taking, sociability, and motivation in the L2 classroom, which helps explain why some learners prefer minimal verbal output. Auerbach (1993) also demonstrated that the first language may function as a strategic shelter in classroom interaction, particularly when learners feel insecure or overexposed. Gregersen and Horwitz (2002) showed that anxious students may also resort to excessive apologizing as a face-saving strategy.

In the local context, the study refers to recent Libyan work. Misrata University EFL Scholars (2025) addressed collaborative learning strategies. Bobaker (2025) discussed anxiety at Ajdabiya University and linked it to factors such as ridicule, correction, and limited vocabulary. Emhemed (2025) examined difficulties and causal factors at Jafarah University. Abdelrazik and Megaiab (2025) empirically investigated speech anxiety among elementary learners of English at language centers in Al-Bayda. Collectively, these studies confirm that anxiety is a real issue in Libyan EFL settings; however, they focus mainly on causes rather than on the specific behavioral coping patterns students employ during oral participation.

Research Gap

Although previous research has examined the causes of foreign language anxiety and its influence on classroom participation, relatively limited attention has been given to the specific behavioral patterns students adopt to protect themselves from negative evaluation. In the local context, recent studies have highlighted major sources of speaking anxiety, such as fear of peer ridicule, excessive correction, limited vocabulary, and low self-confidence (Bobaker, 2025; Emhemed, 2025; Abdelrazik & Megaiab, 2025). However, these studies have focused primarily on the origins of anxiety rather than on the observable coping behaviors through which students manage it during oral interaction.

This leaves an important gap in understanding how anxiety is enacted behaviorally in the classroom, particularly in Libyan EFL settings. More specifically, there is limited local research addressing the defensive strategies students use to avoid participation while attempting to preserve face and reduce exposure to public judgment. The present study seeks to address this gap by examining seven observable avoidant behaviors associated with Fear of Negative Evaluation among English majors at Omar Al-Mukhtar University. In particular, the study draws on behaviors discussed in previous literature, including eye contact avoidance (Gregersen, 2003; Oxford, 1990), short or monosyllabic responses to evade errors (Ely, 1986; Horwitz et al., 1986), the use of L1 as a language-switching safety net (Auerbach, 1993), and frequent apologizing to lower instructor expectations (Gregersen & Horwitz, 2002).

Methods and the Research Design

This study adopted a descriptive quantitative model within a case study design to examine the role of Fear of Negative Evaluation in shaping students' oral participation. The case study approach was considered appropriate because it allowed the researchers to investigate the phenomenon within a specific institutional and social context, namely the English Department

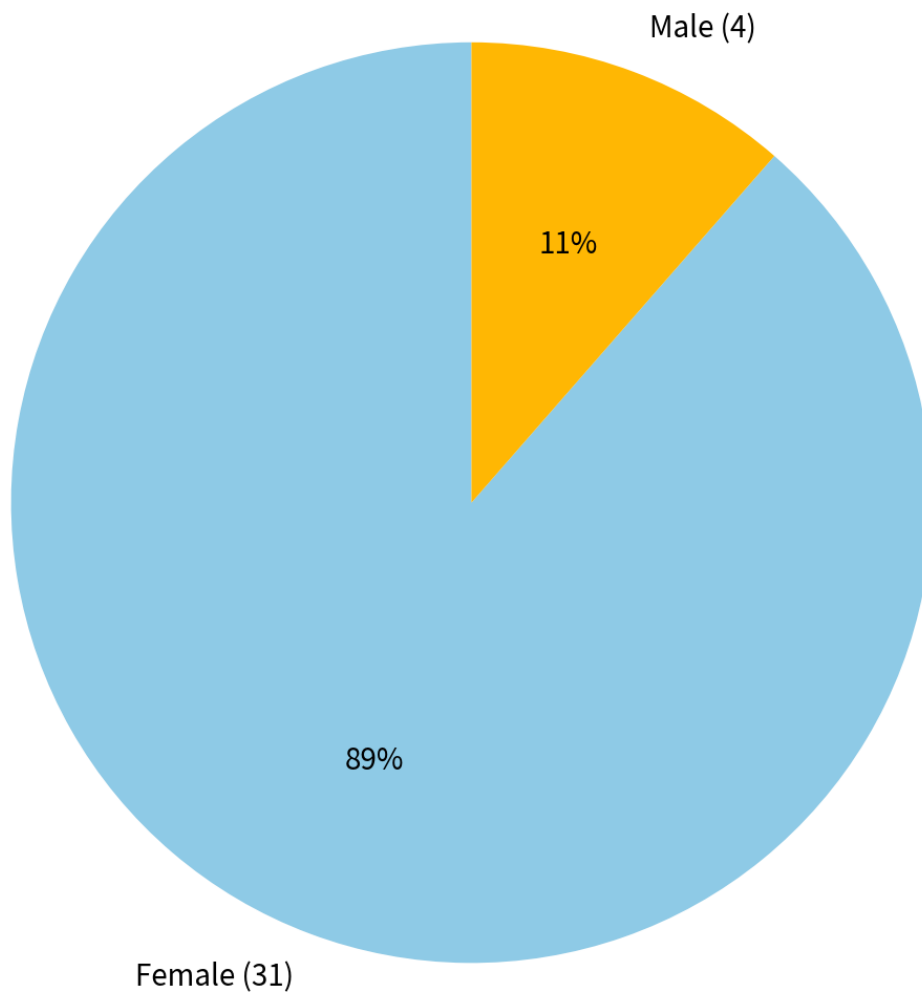
at Omar Al-Mukhtar University. This orientation is consistent with classroom-based inquiry that seeks to interpret learner behavior in context (Allwright, 1991).

Population and Samples

The participants consisted of 35 undergraduate students enrolled in the third and fourth years of study, including students in Linguistics and Translation. The sample included 31 female students and 4 male students. These participants represented the target population of the study and were selected from learners expected to engage in oral classroom participation.

Figure 1. Gender Distribution of Participants

Fig. 1. Gender Distribution of Participants (N=35)



Instruments

Data were collected through an online survey distributed via Google Forms. The instrument was based on a Likert scale and consisted of 11 items designed to reflect seven common psychological and defensive behaviors associated with Fear of Negative Evaluation. These behaviors were intended to capture the strategies students use to minimize exposure to judgment and reduce the emotional risk of speaking in class.

Data collection and process

Following supervisor approval and participant consent, the survey link was shared with third- and fourth-year students through WhatsApp groups. The use of an online questionnaire was intended to facilitate data collection and encourage student participation in a less pressuring format.

Data Analysis Methods

For data analysis, descriptive statistics were employed. The responses were processed using Excel and Google Sheets in order to calculate frequencies and percentages of participants' responses. This analytical procedure enabled the researchers to identify the most common avoidant behaviors associated with Fear of Negative Evaluation in the target context.

Data Analysis Results

The findings indicate that Fear of Negative Evaluation constitutes a clear barrier to oral participation among the participants. In general, the responses suggest that many students experience psychological pressure when speaking English in class and therefore rely on defensive behaviors to protect themselves from possible embarrassment or criticism.

One prominent finding concerns visual and physical avoidance. A considerable proportion of students reported avoiding eye contact with the instructor, with 47% indicating agreement with this behavior. Similarly, 48% reported hiding behind books or other objects, suggesting that some students seek to reduce their visibility during oral activities.

Silence also emerged as a central coping strategy. The results show that 52% of the participants preferred to remain silent in order to avoid making mistakes, while 60% demonstrated a broader preference for safety over risk in oral performance. These findings suggest that many learners perceive classroom speaking as a threatening situation in which remaining silent may seem safer than active participation.

Other findings point to verbal minimization and face-saving strategies. Approximately 47% of the students relied on short "yes/no" answers in order to limit exposure, while 41% reported excessive apologizing as a way of reducing the perceived seriousness of their mistakes. In addition, 45% indicated that they tended to agree with others' ideas in order to remain in a socially safe position, although 54% disagreed with directly copying the answers of others.

The data also reveal the role of first language use as a protective mechanism. Nearly 48% of the participants reported that Arabic felt easier and less risky than English in classroom interaction, and 42% associated this reliance on Arabic with lexical deficiency. This suggests that language choice may reflect both psychological anxiety and linguistic insecurity.

Figure 2. Distribution of Responses for Each Behavior

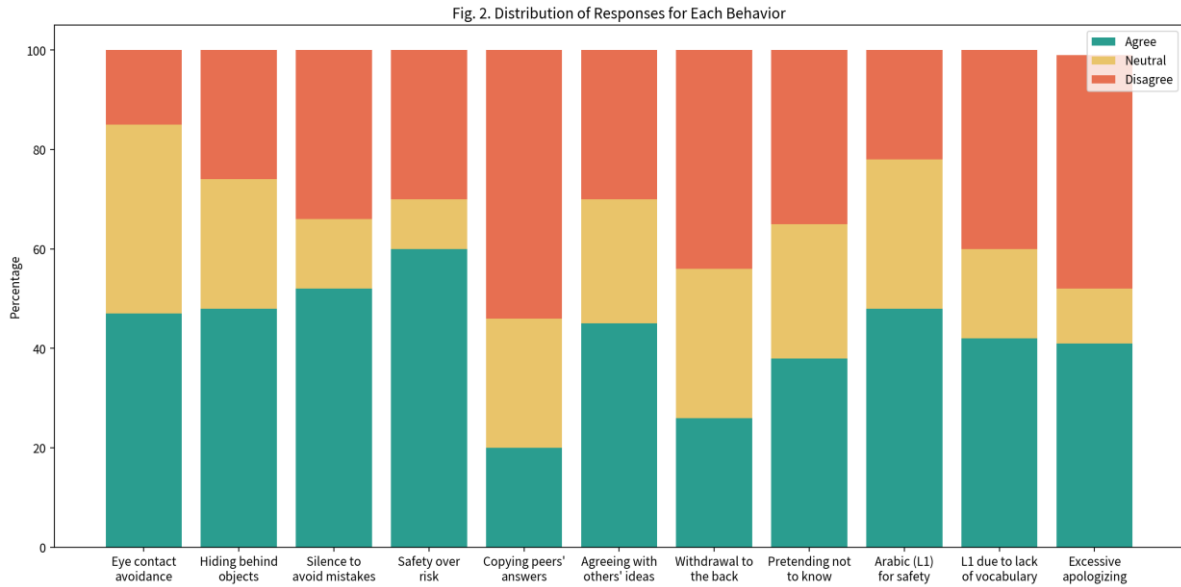


Table and figures

Table 1 presents a detailed overview of the responses from the participants to the eleven survey items from a frequency and percentage perspective. The figures are presented under their most relevant analytical sections in order to improve readability and alignment with the discussion.

No.	Behavior / Item	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
1	Eye contact avoidance	47%	38%	15%
2	Hiding behind objects	48%	26%	26%
3	Silence to avoid mistakes	52%	14%	34%
4	Safety over risk	60%	10%	30%
5	Copying peers' answers	20%	26%	54%
6	Agreeing with others' ideas	45%	25%	30%
7	Withdrawal to the back	26%	30%	44%
8	Pretending not to know the answer	38%	27%	35%
9	Using Arabic (L1) for safety	48%	30%	22%
10	Using L1 due to lack of vocabulary	42%	18%	40%
11	Excessive apologizing	41%	11%	47%

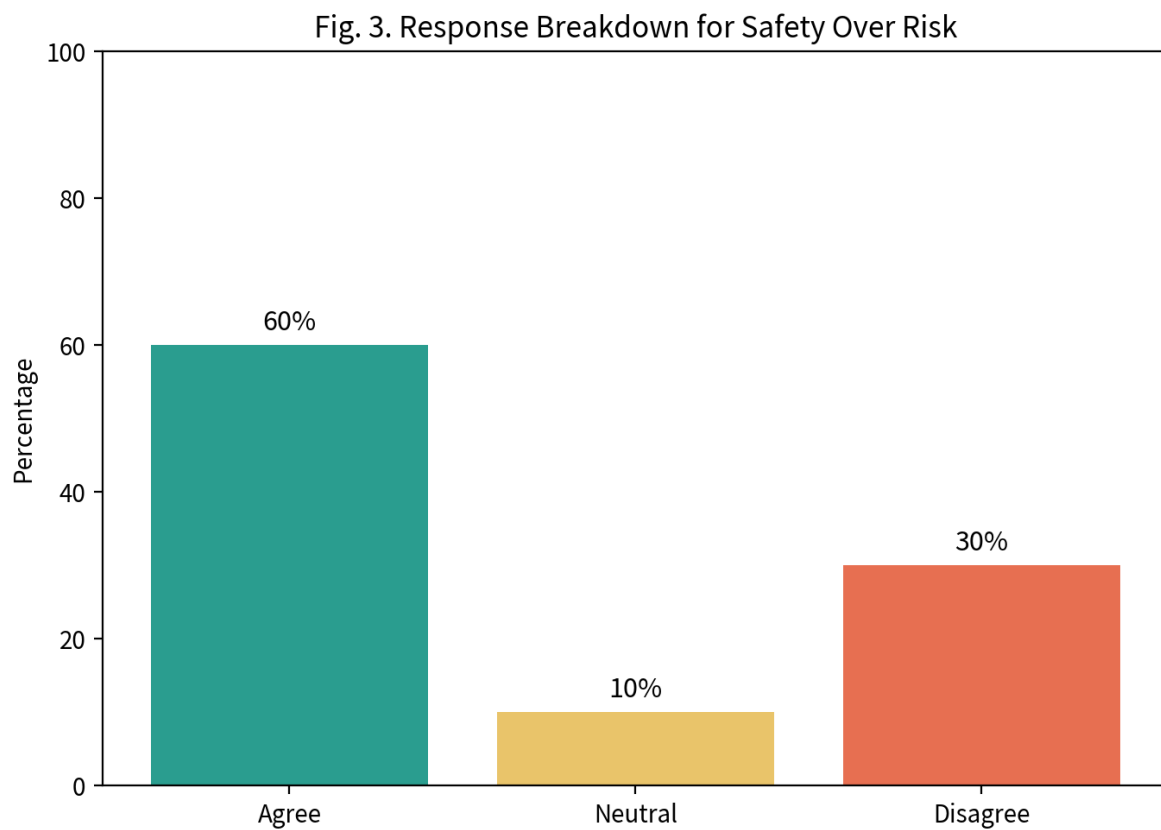
Note. N = 35 participants.

Results Break

A closer breakdown of the results shows that the identified behaviors function as safety mechanisms in the classroom. Eye contact avoidance and hiding behind objects reflect visual and physical withdrawal, while silence and short answers show verbal minimization intended to reduce the risk of making mistakes. Excessive apologizing appears to operate as a face-saving strategy, and the use of Arabic suggests a shift toward a linguistically safer option when students feel threatened by evaluation. At the same time, the fact that many students rejected direct copying indicates that anxiety shapes participation patterns without necessarily erasing students' sense of academic responsibility.

The strongest agreement appeared in the item related to preferring safety over risk (60%), followed by silence to avoid mistakes (52%), using Arabic for safety (48%), hiding behind objects (48%), and eye contact avoidance (47%). By contrast, the highest disagreement appeared in copying peers' answers (54%), followed by excessive apologizing (47%) and withdrawal to the back of the classroom (44%). These patterns indicate that students tend to favor subtle or indirect defensive strategies rather than overtly unethical ones.

Figure 3. Response Breakdown for Safety Over Risk



Key Findings Discussion

The findings of this study suggest that Fear of Negative Evaluation constitutes a meaningful barrier to oral participation among English majors at Omar Al-Mukhtar University. The data indicate that students do not merely experience general discomfort when speaking English; rather, they adopt identifiable self-protective behaviors that reduce their exposure to judgment in classroom interaction. These behaviors include avoiding eye contact with the instructor, remaining silent to avoid mistakes, relying on very short answers, hiding behind books or objects, retreating physically to less visible positions in the classroom, excessive apologizing,

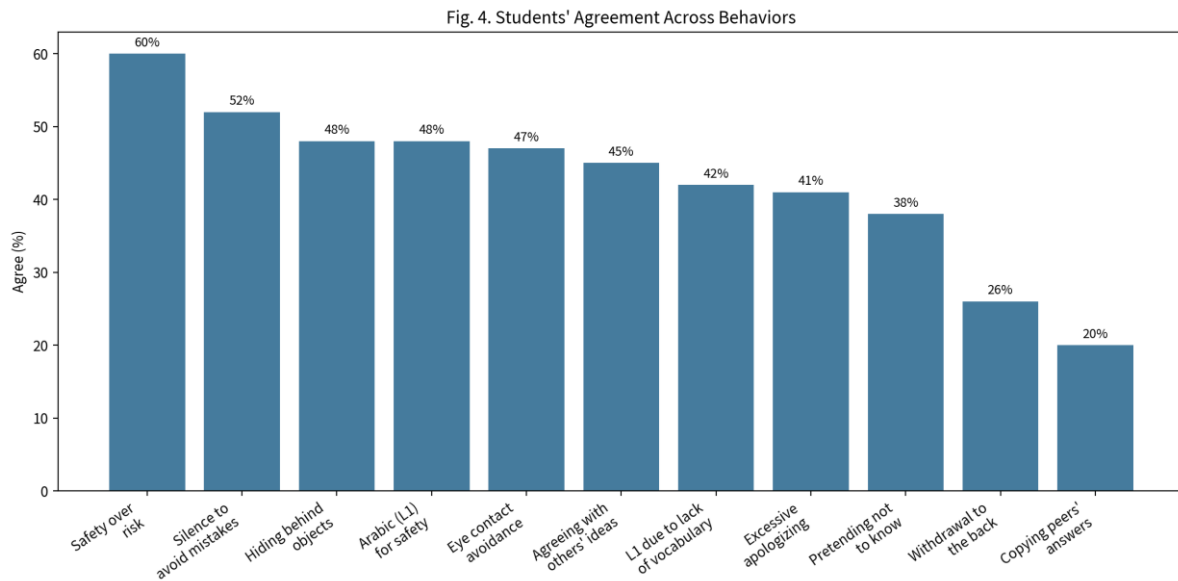
and using Arabic as a safer linguistic option. Collectively, these patterns show that many learners prioritize psychological safety over active participation.

Several of the findings support this interpretation in clear ways. Avoidance of eye contact was endorsed by 47% of the respondents, while 48% reported hiding behind objects, suggesting that physical and visual withdrawal function as defense mechanisms in evaluative classroom situations. Silence also emerged as a major form of self-preservation, with 52% indicating that they remain silent to avoid mistakes and 60% showing a broader preference for safety over risk in oral performance. In addition, 47% relied on short “yes/no” responses to minimize exposure, and 41% reported excessive apologizing as a face-saving strategy. These results reinforce the view that FNE is not only an internal emotional state but also a set of observable behavioral responses that shape participation patterns in the classroom.

The findings are broadly consistent with the literature cited in the study. In line with Horwitz et al. (1986), the participants’ behavior reflects apprehension about others’ evaluations and avoidance of evaluative situations. Similarly, eye contact avoidance corresponds to Gregersen’s (2003) discussion of anxious classroom behavior, while excessive apologizing reflects a strategy for lowering expectations and reducing perceived threat (Gregersen & Horwitz, 2002). The use of Arabic as a safer alternative to English can also be understood in relation to Auerbach’s (1993) discussion of L1 use as a strategic shelter in language learning. Moreover, the tendency of some students to agree with others’ ideas in order to remain in a “safe zone” reflects the social dimension of anxiety and supports earlier observations regarding self-protection and conformity in language classrooms (Levine, 2003; Bailey, 1983).

At the same time, the results reveal an important nuance. Although many students adopt avoidance strategies, they do not necessarily abandon academic integrity altogether. The study notes that 54% disagreed with directly copying others’ answers, even though 45% preferred agreement as a socially safer strategy. This distinction suggests that students are not simply disengaged; rather, they are managing participation carefully under pressure. Their behavior reflects a tension between the desire to engage and the need to protect themselves from embarrassment, criticism, or loss of face. In this respect, FNE appears to shape not only whether students speak, but also how they manage their classroom presence.

These findings carry important pedagogical implications. First, instructors should recognize that limited oral participation may stem from affective barriers rather than weak motivation or insufficient preparation. Second, classroom feedback practices should be made more supportive and less threatening so that students do not associate speaking with public failure. Third, a collaborative and patient classroom climate is needed to reduce social-evaluative pressure and create space for gradual risk-taking in English. At the institutional level, the study also points to the value of workshops and professional development initiatives that help teachers identify and respond to hidden psychological barriers affecting participation.

Figure 4. Students' Agreement Across Behaviors

Conclusions

This study has shown that Fear of Negative Evaluation represents a significant barrier to oral participation among English majors at Omar Al-Mukhtar University. The findings indicate that students' reluctance to speak is not simply a matter of limited language ability; rather, it is closely connected to psychological pressure and the fear of being judged negatively in classroom settings. The study identified seven defensive behaviors that function as self-protective responses, confirming that many students attempt to reduce exposure to criticism by withdrawing, minimizing participation, or relying on safer communicative alternatives. The results further suggest that many students are not unwilling to participate in principle; instead, they are constrained by anxiety that interferes with their performance and limits their classroom engagement. In this sense, avoidant behaviors such as silence, reduced verbal output, eye contact avoidance, and reliance on Arabic can be understood as safety strategies rather than signs of indifference or lack of motivation. These patterns highlight a critical psychological conflict between students' desire to engage and their need to protect themselves from embarrassment or public criticism.

Recommendations of the Study

The study recommends that instructors adopt more supportive feedback styles and become more aware of the hidden psychological barriers that may reduce students' oral participation. It also recommends creating a more collaborative classroom environment in which students can participate without intense fear of public judgment. At the institutional level, the findings suggest that the university may benefit from providing workshops and professional development opportunities that help teachers address students' anxiety more effectively and improve the overall learning experience.

Limitations of the Study

The findings of this study should be interpreted in light of several limitations. First, the study was based on a relatively small case-study sample and relied on self-reported responses. Second, lexical deficiency appeared as an important issue in the data, yet it was not examined in depth as a factor distinct from psychological fear. Third, broader contextual factors, such as family dynamics, financial status, socio-economic pressures, and differences in teaching style, were beyond the scope of the present study.

Suggestions for the Future Research

Future research may extend this line of inquiry by examining the effects of family dynamics, financial status, and socio-economic problems on students' oral participation and anxiety. Comparative exploration of male and female students may also provide a clearer understanding of possible differences in the experience of Fear of Negative Evaluation. In addition, future studies may investigate how instructional practices and teacher feedback styles influence students' anxiety and willingness to participate in oral classroom activities.

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Appendix

Questionnaire Items

1. Gender

- Female
 - Male
2. I feel nervous when the teacher asking random question, so I pretend to be busy so he can pick other student.
- Agree
 - Neutral
 - Disagree
3. I pretend to look at my book so the teacher cannot pick me.
- Agree
 - Neutral
 - Disagree
4. I tend to use few words because I am afraid of making mistakes in front of the teacher and students.
- Agree
 - Neutral
 - Disagree
5. I tend to answer yes or no rather than giving long answers.
- Agree
 - Neutral
 - Disagree
6. I tend to repeat my friends' answers because it is safer.
- Agree
 - Neutral
 - Disagree
7. I prefer to agree with others instead of saying my own ideas because it requires a lot of effort to get out of my safety zone.
- Agree
 - Neutral
 - Disagree
8. I tend to sit in the back because I feel safer being invisible.
- Agree
 - Neutral
 - Disagree
9. I prefer to say "I do not know" rather than speak out loud.
- Agree
 - Neutral
 - Disagree
10. I tend to explain my ideas in Arabic because it is easier and safer.
- Agree
 - Neutral
 - Disagree
11. I tend to say "Sorry for my English" before I start talking because deep down I feel insecure about my language and I am afraid of making mistakes.
- Agree
 - Neutral
 - Disagree
12. I speak Arabic because I do not have enough English words.
- Agree
 - Neutral

- Disagree