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Student Silence in Bangladeshi Tertiary-level EFL Classrooms: A Mixed-Method Study of Factors, Perceptions, and Recommendations

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Abstract: Student engagement in class activities is an integral part of an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom, yet many students hesitate to speak despite efforts by instructors. While this phenomenon has been widely examined globally, limited empirical research has systematically explored the factors that shape student silence and willingness to communicate in Bangladeshi tertiary-level EFL classrooms. Drawing on relevant frameworks, such as the Willingness to Communicate (WTC) theory, Krashen's Affective Filter hypothesis, and Vygotsky's Sociocultural perspective, this study explores the causes, implications, and potential interventions for student silence in Bangladeshi EFL classes. Using a mixed-method design, data were collected from 123 university-level EFL students via questionnaires,

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interviews, and classroom observations. Participants were selected through purposive and snowball sampling. Quantitative data were analyzed with descriptive statistics and Spearman's rank-order correlation; on the other hand, qualitative responses were examined thematically. The findings reveal that student silence is driven by multiple factors, including language anxiety, fear of peer judgment, and classroom structure. Notably, over 70% of students reported hesitating to speak due to fear of making mistakes. Qualitative analysis highlights that this silence often stems from deeply rooted sociocultural norms in Bangladesh, where speaking less in front of teachers and elders is considered respectful. Students generally viewed their reticence as hindering their own learning and suggested interventions, such as group work, additional preparation time, and stronger teacher encouragement. These results have important implications for EFL curriculum designers and teacher training and classroom practices that emphasize the need to foster supportive, low-anxiety communicative environments in South Asian educational contexts.

Keywords: Bangladesh; Classroom Engagement; Language Anxiety; Higher Education; Mixed-Methods Research; Willingness to Communicate (WTC)

1. Introduction

Student participation has long been recognized as central to language learning, yet silence continues to be a recurring feature in classrooms worldwide. Global scholarship has begun to reframe student silence not as disengagement, but as a nuanced form of classroom interaction influenced by cognitive, affective, and pedagogical factors (Wagnon et al., 2024). Research on higher education contexts has also shown that student silence is influenced by pedagogical choices, learning environments, and affective factors, such as confidence and anxiety (Su et al., 2023). These findings highlight that silence, while often perceived negatively, requires a more nuanced understanding within language education.

In Asian contexts, researchers have similarly shifted understandings of silence from deficit models to more complex, culturally mediated behaviors. The issue has received increasing attention due to the prevalence of large classes, teacher-centered instruction, and cultural expectations surrounding respect and authority. For example, Maher and King (2022) found that silence in Japanese university classrooms was closely linked to speaking-related anxiety rather than a lack of knowledge. Similarly, Zafarina (2022) reported that Indonesian students often remained quiet because of cultural norms and low confidence.

Studies in China and Korea also indicate that silence may be used strategically, either to avoid mistakes or to maintain group harmony. While these studies provide valuable insights, they are embedded in educational systems with distinct linguistic histories, classroom hierarchies, and assessment cultures that limit their direct transferability to the Bangladeshi context. These regional findings suggest that silence in classrooms is often shaped by cultural norms and pedagogical

practices, which highlight the need to examine how these dynamics are manifested in Bangladesh.

Even though English proficiency among Bangladeshi graduates remains moderate, with national surveys that indicate low speaking and writing scores relative to regional standards, the demand for English continues to grow due to its socio-economic importance in higher education, the workplace, and global mobility (Islam et al., 2024). Although Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) has been widely introduced in Bangladesh, many tertiary-level classrooms—comprising students aged 18–24 in universities with structured degree programs—remain dominated by grammar-focused instruction and teacher talk (Alam & Kabir, 2015; Rouf & Mohamed, 2022). Research shows that students often lack opportunities for meaningful oral communication in English, and their lacking leads to low confidence and avoidance of participation in English communication (Seraj et al., 2021).

These pedagogical barriers, alongside sociocultural norms that encourage restraint and deference when speaking before teachers—have implications for national learning outcomes and graduates' communicative readiness. Furthermore, post-pandemic shifts, including online teaching experiences and disrupted classroom routines, have affected students' engagement and speaking confidence. This makes Bangladesh a particularly important site for studying student silence as it sits at the intersection of linguistic challenges, cultural expectations, and pedagogical practices. Despite its prevalence, research on student silence in Bangladeshi tertiary-level EFL classrooms remains limited, fragmented, and largely descriptive, with few studies adopting integrative or mixed-method approaches.

To fill in this research gap, this study addresses the issue of student silence by examining its underlying factors, learners' perceptions, and pedagogical responses within a mixed-method framework. Drawing on Willingness to Communicate (WTC) Theory and Sociocultural Theory, the objectives of this study are threefold: (1) to analyze the main factors of silence in EFL classrooms, including the relationship between English proficiency and classroom participation, (2) to examine students' perceptions of silence and classroom participation, with particular attention to the influence of teacher-related factors, such as instructional style and interactional behavior, and (3) to develop recommendations for teachers on how to create a more interactive and supportive classroom environment.

To achieve these objectives, the study addressed the following research questions:

1. What factors contribute to student silence in Bangladeshi university EFL classrooms, and what is their relationship with participation?
2. How do students perceive the long-term influence of their silence on their language learning experiences?
3. What strategies or classroom interventions do students believe would reduce silence and promote more active participation in EFL classrooms?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Perspectives on Student Silence

To examine student silence in Bangladeshi university EFL classrooms, this study draws on three interrelated theoretical models. Each of them offers distinct insights into the causes, perceptions, and potential solutions for silence.

2.1.1 *Willingness to Communicate (WTC) Theory*

MacIntyre et al. (1998) proposed that students' willingness to communicate was shaped by linguistic confidence, social dynamics, and emotional state. In the context of this study, WTC provides a framework for understanding why some students engage actively while others, despite possessing adequate language skills, remain silent. Since one of the study's aims is to identify the primary factors that influence silence, WTC helps explain how variables, such as fear of negative evaluation, peer relationships, and perceived speaking competence, affect students' readiness to participate in class discussions.

2.1.2 *Affective Filter Hypothesis*

Krashen's (1982) affective filter hypothesis explains how emotional states can act as barriers to language learning. Students with high anxiety, low self-confidence, or a strong fear of mistakes develop psychological "filters" that block language input from being processed effectively. This theory is highly relevant to the present research since findings from the questionnaire, interviews, and observations aim to uncover the extent to which anxiety and related emotions reduce students' willingness to speak. By linking these insights to the study's goal of proposing strategies for more active participation, the affective filter perspective offers a way to frame interventions that reduce emotional barriers.

2.1.3 *Sociocultural Theory*

Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory emphasizes the role of social interaction, classroom norms, and cultural expectations in shaping learning behaviors. In Bangladeshi EFL classrooms, deeply rooted cultural norms, such as deference to authority and reluctance to challenge teachers, can significantly influence silence (Islam & Stapa, 2021). Since another objective of this study is to explore culturally responsive approaches to reducing silence, sociocultural theory provides a lens for understanding how collaborative learning environments, peer interaction, and shifts in teacher-student dynamics can foster greater oral participation.

Taken together, WTC theory, the Affective Filter Hypothesis, and Sociocultural Theory provide a complementary lens for understanding student silence as a multidimensional phenomenon shaped by affective states, classroom interaction, and broader cultural norms. Although these theories originate from different traditions, they converge in explaining why learners may remain silent despite pedagogical efforts to promote participation. This theoretical synthesis provides the foundation for examining how silence has been conceptualized and interpreted in educational contexts.

2.2 Silence in Educational Contexts

Silence in classrooms has long been viewed as passivity or disengagement, but recent studies (Ljalikova et al., 2025; Steele, 2025) highlight its multifaceted role.

Juma et al. (2022) argued that silence could signal disengagement and impede achieving teaching objectives, especially when learners withdraw entirely. However, silence is not inherently negative. Bao and Nguyen (2020) and Dung (2024) showed that learners sometimes used silence strategically to process information, brainstorm, or avoid embarrassment. These findings suggest that silence can reflect disengagement in some cases; nevertheless, it can signal thoughtful engagement in others, depending on context. Fathi and Mohammaddokht (2021) further established a link between anxiety levels and learners' ideal L2 self. This suggests that persistent silence can affect long-term language identity development. In the Bangladeshi context, such prolonged silence may weaken learners' ideal L2 self as limited opportunities for meaningful oral engagement restrict their ability to envision themselves as confident English users in academic and professional domains.

2.3 Factors Contributing to Student Silence in EFL Classrooms

Past research identifies several interrelated factors that contribute to student silence in language classrooms. These factors can be broadly classified into linguistic barriers, psychological factors, and sociocultural influences.

2.3.1 Linguistic Barriers

Limited proficiency remains a consistent barrier to oral participation. In Indonesia, Pratolo et al. (2024) reported that low proficiency continued to discourage learners from speaking, with many preferring silences to avoid mistakes. Similarly, Dung (2024) found that Vietnamese students kept quiet to "gain more thinking time" and reduce the risk of embarrassment. On the other hand, students with stronger grammatical or language proficiency feel more confident; as a result, they are more likely to engage in classroom discussions (Le Xuan Mai et al., 2024). These insights confirm that linguistic limitations remain a central contributor to silence in EFL classrooms. Findings like these are highly relevant to the current research, which investigates how language proficiency and instructional support intersect to influence speaking behavior in the Bangladeshi context.

2.3.2 Psychological Factors: Anxiety and Fear of Judgment

Language anxiety is a well-documented cause of student silence in EFL classrooms. Krashen's (1982) affective filter hypothesis explains that students with high anxiety levels develop psychological barriers that prevent them from actively engaging in language tasks. Horwitz et al. (1986) further identify three types of anxiety in language learning: communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation. Khafidhoh et al. (2023) and Alazeer and Ahmed (2023) showed that the fear of making mistakes in front of peers discouraged students from participating in class discussions. Many EFL students feel self-conscious about their pronunciation and grammar, worrying that incorrect usage may result in negative peer judgment (Indahyanti et al., 2023). Nyborg (2022) observed that students were more likely to engage in smaller, informal discussions rather than whole-class interactions as they feel less pressure in low-stakes settings.

Additionally, some students experience low self-confidence, which contributes to their reluctance to participate (Erdiana et al., 2020). Confidence, a core element of the willingness to communicate framework (Huang et al., 2025; MacIntyre et al., 1998; Zadorozhnyy & Lee, 2025) remains critical in shaping students' participation in English communication. EFL learners in post-pandemic classrooms often manage this lack of confidence or anxiety, using cognitive preparation, relaxation strategies, and peer support (Afidawati et al., 2024). These patterns provide a useful lens for examining how affective factors operate in the Bangladeshi university classroom, where both linguistic and social pressures can amplify silence.

2.3.3 Sociocultural Factors: Classroom Norms and Teacher-Student Interaction

From a sociocultural theory perspective, classroom participation is shaped by social dynamics, cultural expectations, and teacher-student interactions (Vygotsky, 1978). Students in collectivist societies are often discouraged from challenging authority, which contributes to classroom silence (Rahman et al., 2018). Teacher-centered instructional styles may further discourage verbal participation. In many traditional classrooms, teachers dominate discussions, leaving little room for student-led conversations (Bhardwaj, 2025). Teacher communication styles are fundamental to promoting student engagement, academic motivation, and overall learning success. Controlling or indifferent styles often reduce participation and motivation (Inayat & Ali, 2020).

The hierarchical nature of teacher-student relationships in many Asian educational settings also affects student participation. Students often hesitate to question teachers or share opinions, fearing they may be perceived as disrespectful (Sibia et al., 2023). However, studies suggest that when teachers adopt a more facilitative approach, student engagement improves significantly (Wu, 2024). These observations are particularly relevant to the present study, which explores how cultural norms and classroom interaction patterns influence students' willingness to speak in Bangladeshi EFL settings.

2.4 Regional Perspectives on Language Hierarchy in South Asia

In addition to global theories, it is essential to consider the sociolinguistic realities of South Asia, where English is often perceived as a marker of social capital and academic prestige (Khan & Jayaraj, 2025). Research indicates that students across East and Southeast Asia experience heightened anxiety when speaking English as linguistic errors are often perceived as signs of incompetence rather than part of the learning process (Dung, 2024). This reinforces Krashen's (1982) notion of the affective filter in a uniquely regional context.

Cultural norms rooted in postcolonial education systems and societal hierarchies promote deference to authority and discourage open dialogue, especially in formal classroom settings (Shah, 2025). These norms align with Vygotsky's emphasis on the sociocultural mediation of learning, but they highlight that silence in South Asian EFL classrooms is not merely individual. It is shaped by deeply embedded social expectations. This regional lens complements and contextualizes the broader theoretical framework applied in this study.

2.5 Bangladeshi Tertiary Learners and the Culture of Silence

Building on the broader Asian context, several scholars have highlighted how silence manifests in Bangladeshi tertiary-level EFL classrooms. Islam and Roy (2024) and Chowdhury et al. (2024) argue that anxiety, low confidence, and limited practice opportunities often underpin students' reluctance to speak. Similarly, research found that teacher-centered, lecture-driven classrooms and reliance on Bangla restrict spontaneous interaction in Bangladeshi classrooms (Islam & Stapa, 2021). More recently, Almashour et al. (2025), Dauletiyarova and Durrani (2025) and Alam et al. (2022) suggest that entrenched cultural expectations and hierarchical classroom norms further inhibit open participation. Taken together, these perspectives indicate that student silence in Bangladesh is not merely an individual response but one shaped by overlapping pedagogical and sociocultural dynamics.

2.6 Research Gap

While existing literature provides insights into student silence in EFL classrooms, most studies focus on Chinese, Japanese, and Vietnamese contexts (Dung, 2024; Dung, 2024; Wu, 2024), with little attention to the Bangladeshi context. The unique sociocultural and educational landscape of Bangladesh requires a localized investigation into student silence. Several Bangladeshi studies (e.g., Alam et al., 2022; Chowdhury et al., 2024; Islam & Roy, 2024; Islam & Stapa, 2021) have discussed the factors that contribute to student silence. However, most of them have focused broadly on classroom interaction or pedagogical barriers rather than examining students' perspectives in depth. Thus, there remains a lack of research that systematically explores silence through the lived experiences of Bangladeshi EFL students.

Additionally, prior research tends to rely on either quantitative surveys (Alazeer & Ahmed, 2023) or qualitative interviews (Afidawati et al., 2024), but few studies have used a mixed-method approach that integrates questionnaires, interviews, and classroom observations. This study addresses this gap by offering a comprehensive, triangulated analysis of student silence in Bangladeshi university EFL classrooms. Furthermore, although many studies identify the causes of silence, fewer provide student-driven recommendations on how to address them. By incorporating students' perspectives through semi-structured interviews, this research aims to develop practical strategies for an interactive classroom environment.

3. Methodology

This research combined quantitative and qualitative methods to explore the issue comprehensively. It employed a Convergent Parallel Mixed-Method Design, collecting and analyzing both data types simultaneously to triangulate the findings. The rationale for using a mixed-methods approach stems from the need to capture both the broad patterns of silence (through surveys) and the deeper, subjective experiences of students (through interviews and observations). This multi-dimensional approach allows for a more nuanced understanding of the phenomenon and provides richer insights into how it can be addressed (Dörnyei & Taguchi, 2018).

3.1 Participants

The participants of the current study consisted of first-year to master's English major students, aged 20 to 26, with varying levels of proficiency in English. A sample of 123 students was drawn from a sampling frame of 502. The researchers used purposive and snowball techniques to collect the data for the present study. Purposive criteria required participants to be English majors and to have completed at least one semester of university-level EFL coursework, to ensure familiarity with classroom dynamics. For the semi-structured interviews, three participants were selected. The researchers employed a maximum variation purposive sampling strategy, ensuring representation across different proficiency levels and participation tendencies (i.e., highly active, moderately active, and silent students). Selection was based on data obtained from class observations and departmental placement.

Although the interview sample size was small, this approach was adopted to capture contrasting experiential profiles. Data saturation during the snowball recruitment and interview phase was monitored through on-going thematic mapping. Recruitment ended when the final participant's narratives repeated existing patterns regarding silence without yielding new conceptual categories. This aligns with qualitative research guidelines that emphasize depth and information-rich cases over sample size (Boyd, 2001). Participation in this study was voluntary and anonymous, with no direct impact on students' academic performance. To maintain confidentiality, pseudonyms were assigned to all participants.

3.2 Instruments and Data Collection Procedures

To gain a comprehensive understanding of student silence in Bangladeshi EFL classrooms, this study employed a triangulated data collection strategy involving questionnaires (**Appendix A**), semi-structured interviews (**Appendix B**), and classroom observations. The survey questionnaire was adapted from Dung (2024). Each instrument was carefully distributed and implemented to ensure reliability, relevance, and alignment with the research objectives.

3.3 Student Questionnaire

A structured questionnaire was adapted based on the study's theoretical framework. It addressed students' willingness to communicate, as well as affective factors (e.g. anxiety, motivation) and sociocultural influences on participation. It featured a 5-point Likert scale (Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree) to assess students' comfort, hesitation, and perceived classroom dynamics. The questionnaire was distributed online, using Google Forms, and responses were collected over two weeks. A total of 123 valid responses were gathered. Quantitative data were analyzed, using SPSS, and this is primarily aimed to generating descriptive statistics and conduct reliability analyses.

3.4 Semi-Structured Interviews

To obtain deeper insights, three students were selected to represent different academic levels and participation profiles. This approach followed Boyd's (2001) guideline that 2 to 10 participants may be sufficient when data saturation is achieved. Each interview lasted approximately 12 minutes, and it was conducted

in a non-judgmental manner to ensure psychological safety. Interview questions explored experiences of silence, sources of anxiety, teacher behaviors, and student perceptions of participation. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis.

3.5 Classroom Observations

Two different English courses (ENG 101 and ENG 201) were observed to capture varying contexts: one foundational course and one higher-level course. Each observation session lasted approximately 40 minutes, corresponding to a regular class period. A structured observation rubric guided data collection that focused on student responses to teacher prompts, verbal and non-verbal participation, peer interaction, classroom environment, and turn-taking patterns. These observations provided real-time qualitative data that complemented questionnaire responses and interview narratives. Full versions of each instrument, including observation rubrics, are included in the Appendices.

3.6 Validity and Reliability of the Instruments

The reliability of the questionnaire was evaluated. The researcher used Cronbach's alpha for each subscale. The Speaking Confidence and Anxiety subscale (4 items) demonstrated good internal consistency ($\alpha = 0.82$), which indicates that the items reliably captured students' self-perceptions of confidence, nervousness, and hesitation while they were speaking in classes. The Social and Teacher Influence subscale (4 items) produced an alpha of 0.65, which is considered acceptable in exploratory research contexts (Nunnally, 1978; Hair et al., 2010).

This suggests that the items adequately reflected the effects of peer reactions and teacher encouragement on students' willingness to participate. The Classroom Environment subscale (3 items) yielded a lower but still acceptable alpha ($\alpha = 0.60$). Although this value is modest, it is consistent with the expectation that scales with fewer items often produce lower reliability estimates (Tavakol & Dennick, 2011). Finally, the Silent Participation/Learning Preferences subscale (5 items) achieved an alpha of 0.68, which reflects acceptable internal consistency for measuring attitudes and behaviors related to silence as a learning strategy.

As anticipated, the overall Cronbach's alpha across all 16 Likert-scale items was lower ($\alpha = 0.57$). This outcome is expected because Cronbach's alpha assumes unidimensionality whereas the present questionnaire was intentionally designed to capture multiple, distinct constructs. Combining heterogeneous dimensions into a single reliability estimate typically yields reduced values (Hair et al., 2010). For this reason, reporting reliability at the subscale level provides a more accurate and meaningful assessment of the instrument. Overall, the reliability analysis demonstrates that each subscale achieves at least acceptable internal consistency, and the Speaking Confidence and Anxiety subscale shows particularly strong reliability. These findings support the use of the questionnaire as a psychometrically sound tool for examining different dimensions of classroom silence in EFL contexts.

Content validity was ensured through expert review by a colleague who had expertise in Applied Linguistics and language assessment, and the expert evaluated item with clarity, relevance, and alignment with the theoretical framework. Minor adjustments were made following the expert's review and pilot testing to improve item clarity and coherence. Construct validity was supported by basing items on established literature on student silence and classroom participation (e.g., Liu & Jackson, 2009; Tatar, 2005).

The semi-structured interview questions were similarly designed based on existing literature and theory on second language research methodologies (Dörnyei & Taguchi, 2018). To ensure consistency across interviews, a uniform protocol was followed, with only minor adjustments in the follow-up questions based on individual responses. The protocol was reviewed by a fellow researcher before data collection, and this protocol helped improve logical sequencing and question clarity. For the classroom observations, a structured observation rubric was used. Since the observations were conducted solely by one researcher, interrater reliability could not be tested. However, to attenuate potential observer effects, the researchers adopted a non-participant role, maintained minimal interaction with students, and conducted observations consistently, using predetermined criteria.

3.7 Data Analysis Procedure

For data analysis, this study followed a mixed-method approach, aligned with a Convergent Parallel Design, integrating both quantitative and qualitative strands to offer a comprehensive understanding of student silence in Bangladeshi EFL classrooms. Quantitative data from the questionnaire were processed. The researchers employed descriptive statistics, such as frequencies and percentages, to identify patterns in students' comfort levels, participation habits, and anxiety-related responses. Additionally, to address RQ1, Spearman's correlation coefficients were calculated to examine the relationships between key factors (e.g., fear of mistakes, anxiety, comfort) and students' participation levels. Cross-tabulation analyses were also conducted to examine associations between academic level and speaking frequency, and between proficiency level and self-reported comfort in speaking. These analyses were performed, using Microsoft Excel to generate visualizations and explore patterns relevant to the research questions.

Qualitative data from semi-structured interviews and classroom observations were analyzed thematically, using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework: familiarization, initial coding, theme identification, theme review, theme definition, and final write-up. Data were manually coded and organized into categories aligned with the research questions and theoretical framework. Key themes that emerged included: fear of mistakes and peer judgment, cultural norms that affect classroom interaction, teacher-student dynamics, and preferences for interactive methods. To enhance reliability, qualitative coding was reviewed by a faculty mentor, and a subset of data was re-coded after two weeks to assess internal consistency. Quantitative and qualitative findings were

triangulated during interpretation to enrich validity and offer deeper insights into the phenomenon.

4. Findings

The first research question [RQ1] relates to “What factors contribute to student silence in Bangladeshi university EFL classrooms, and what is their relationship with participation?” Based on the data from interviews, questionnaires, and classroom observations, several factors emerged as the contributors to student silence in Bangladeshi university EFL classrooms. These factors include linguistic barriers, psychological factors (anxiety), sociocultural influences, class size, and instructional methods.

The students' language proficiency was a significant factor in their willingness to speak. As shown in Table 1, students with lower proficiency, particularly those at the beginner and intermediate levels, were much more likely to remain silent. Classroom observations revealed that students in these proficiency groups hesitated to speak, especially when they were asked to engage in spontaneous discussions. Interview responses reinforced this pattern, with students frequently citing self-doubt and fear of incorrect grammar as key reasons for their silence. As one student noted,

“I know I can speak, but I always worry that my grammar will be wrong, and this will be embarrassing for me in the future.” (Participant 1)

This is supported by the Spearman correlation analysis, which indicated a moderate positive correlation ($\rho = 0.56$, $p < .001$) between language proficiency and participation. In other words, students with better proficiency were more likely to participate in class discussions.

Neutral responses in Table 1 (24%) warrant particular attention as they represent students who neither felt fully comfortable nor entirely uncomfortable in speaking. Observation data indicate that many of these students were moderately active, participating selectively when topics were familiar or when peer support was present. This group appears to occupy a transitional position between silence and active participation, and this highlights the importance of contextual and instructional factors in shaping engagement. A moderately active student explained,

“I speak when I feel confident about the topic, but I usually stay quiet if I'm not fully prepared.” (Participant 3)

Table 1: Comfort Levels in Speaking by Proficiency Level

Proficiency Level	Comfortable	Neutral	Uncomfortable	Total
Advanced	51 (82%)	7 (11%)	4 (7%)	62
Intermediate	13 (22%)	23 (40%)	22 (38%)	58
Beginner	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	3 (100%)	3
Total	64 (52%)	30 (24%)	29 (24%)	123

Psychological factors, particularly fear of mistakes and anxiety, also contributed significantly to their English communication. Many students reported that worrying about their grammar, pronunciation, or fluency led them to remain silent even when they understood the content. Classroom observations further confirmed that anxious students would often avoid eye contact and show signs of discomfort when they were called upon to speak. One participant shared,

"When I want to speak, I think that I may make a mistake, and this makes me afraid." (Participant 2)

This aligns with the Affective Filter Hypothesis, as anxiety was shown to inhibit speaking. The Spearman correlation revealed a moderate negative relationship ($\rho = -0.66$, $p < .001$) between comfort in speaking and speaking anxiety, which confirms that higher anxiety correlates with reduced participation. Table 2 presents the comfort level in speaking and speaking anxiety of the students. Items 3 and 4 in Table 2 were reverse-coded because they were negatively worded statements (e.g., hesitation and nervousness). Reverse-coding ensured that higher scores consistently reflected greater comfort in speaking across all items.

Table 2: Comfort in Speaking and Speaking Anxiety

SL No	Items	Mean	SD
1	I feel confident in speaking English during class discussions.	3.28	0.87
2	I feel relaxed when I speak English in class.	3.15	0.75
3	I hesitate to speak because I worry about making mistakes (reverse-coded).	4.05	0.72
4	I feel nervous when I am called to answer in class (reverse-coded).	3.45	0.79

As shown in Table 2, students' anxiety was more prominent when they worried about making mistakes, "I hesitate to speak because I worry about making mistakes" (Mean = 4.05; SD = 0.72); on the other hand, they reported greater comfort during class discussions, "I feel confident in speaking English during class discussions." (Mean = 3.28; SD = 0.87). Sociocultural factors, including the

respect for authority and teacher-student hierarchy, also played a significant role. Many students expressed reluctance to speak unless they were directly called upon by the teacher. 47.5% of them prefer to listen rather than speak. This cultural tendency was also observed in the classes where students would rarely initiate conversations or challenge the teacher. The school system, which emphasizes rote learning and written exams, does not prioritize speaking activities; as a result, many students were not accustomed to engaging in spoken English in academic settings. One participant explained,

"In school, we were never encouraged to speak in class. The habit of talking in class was a new thing in our university life." (Participant 1)

The data further supported the correlation between classroom environment and student participation, and a positive correlation ($\rho = 0.60, p < .001$) between the classroom environment (shaped by cultural influences) and student participation was found. Students in environments where the teacher encouraged participation and fostered a less hierarchical atmosphere were more likely to engage.

The second research question [RQ 2] refers to "How do students perceive the long-term influence of their silence on their language learning experiences?" Students overwhelmingly perceived that their silence negatively impacted their language learning, especially in developing speaking and listening skills. Students indicated that they felt their silence limited their opportunities to practice and receive feedback. One student shared,

"I know I can speak, but I always worry that my grammar will be wrong, and that will make me feel embarrassed." (Participant 2)

This result was consistent across both qualitative and quantitative findings, as the mean for willingness to participate was 3.25 (SD = 0.79). This shows that students were somewhat reluctant to engage in discussions.

The quantitative analysis showed a positive correlation ($\rho = 0.55, p < .001$) between comfort in speaking and language learning progress, and this suggests that students who felt more comfortable speaking believed they were making greater progress. This perception was echoed in the interviews, where students mentioned that their silence resulted in missed opportunities to practice spontaneous speaking. One student noted,

"I feel I could improve faster if I were more vocal in class,"
(Participant 1)

Reflecting on learning outcomes, another moderately active student noted,

"Sometimes I participate, but when I stay silent, I feel I miss chances to improve my speaking." (Participant 3)

Peer judgment was another significant factor that influenced student participation in English communication. Students indicated that the fear of being judged by their classmates deterred them from speaking. The mean for peer judgment was 4.10 (SD = 0.63). This reflects the significant pressure students felt to avoid making mistakes in front of peers. This finding was consistent with classroom observations where anxious students avoided eye contact and showed signs of

discomfort when called upon. Table 3 shows the summary of language learning and speaking comfort measures.

Table 3: Summary of Language Learning and Speaking Comfort Measures

Variable	Mean	SD	Range
Language Learning Progress	4.12	0.75	1 - 5
Comfort in Speaking	3.28	0.87	1 - 5

As shown in Table 3, students' language learning progress was at the highest level (Mean = 4.12; SD = 0.75); on the other hand, their comfort level in speaking was moderate (Mean = 3.28; SD = 0.87).

The third research question [RQ 3] of the current study is "What strategies or classroom interventions do students believe would reduce silence and promote more active participation in EFL classrooms?" Students were asked about strategies they believed would help reduce silence and increase class participation. The most common suggestions included teacher support, interactive learning methods, smaller class sizes, and increased preparation time.

4.1 Teacher Support and Encouragement

Students reported that positive teacher reinforcement would encourage them to speak more. This confirms that a supportive teacher environment leads to more active student involvement. In the same way, classroom observations showed that when teachers provided encouraging feedback and scaffolding, students appeared more confident in participating.

4.2 Interactive Learning Methods

Many students preferred group activities, role-playing, and peer discussions. These methods were cited by students as being more engaging and less intimidating than traditional lecture-based instruction. One interviewee noted,

"If we had more group activities, I think I would talk more."

(Participant 1)

4.3 Smaller Class Sizes

Class size was identified as a significant factor that influenced student participation. Students believed that smaller class sizes would encourage them to speak more. In ENG 101, which had 40 students, it was observed that the teacher struggled to involve all students in speaking activities, while ENG 201, with 36 students, still had limited participation due to passive teaching methods.

4.4 Increased Preparation Time

Many students mentioned that if they had more preparation time before speaking tasks, they would feel more confident. Interviewees further explained that having even a few extra minutes to organize their thoughts would make them more willing to contribute. Table 4 shows the summary of thematic analysis codes and categories at a glance.

Table 4: Summary of Thematic Analysis Codes and Categories

Thematic Category	Codes Identified
Linguistic Factors	Low proficiency; grammar anxiety; pronunciation concerns
Psychological Factors	Fear of mistakes; speaking anxiety; low self-confidence
Sociocultural Factors	Respect for authority; peer judgment; classroom hierarchy
Pedagogical Factors	Teacher encouragement; interaction style; preparation time
Perceived Learning Impact	Missed speaking practice; reduced feedback; slow progress

5. Discussion

The findings of this study confirm that student silence in Bangladeshi university EFL classrooms is influenced by a combination of psychological, linguistic, and sociocultural factors. This aligns with existing research on classroom participation in Asian contexts (Afidawati et al., 2024; Liu & Jackson, 2009; Tsui, 1996). However, compared to some regional studies where silence is occasionally framed as reflective or strategic (e.g., Bao & Nguyen, 2020), silence in the present context appears predominantly anxiety-driven rather than pedagogically purposeful. Although the majority of students possess intermediate to advanced proficiency in English, fear of making mistakes, cultural factors, and peer judgment remain significant barriers to verbal participation. These psychological and sociocultural factors, alongside internal emotional and cognitive barriers, collectively shape patterns of classroom silence.

One of the most striking findings is the significant impact of fear of mistakes on students' willingness to speak. The Spearman's correlation analysis ($\rho = -0.66, p < .001$) clearly supports the notion that students who fear making mistakes are less likely to feel comfortable speaking. As highlighted by Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis (1982), this anxiety can act as a barrier to language acquisition, preventing students from engaging in meaningful communication. Interviews revealed that many students, even those with intermediate to advanced proficiency, reported concerns about their grammar and pronunciation.

For advanced students in particular, anxiety appears to stem not from limited linguistic competence but from heightened self-expectations, increased self-monitoring, and fear of negative evaluation in academically visible settings. These fears often made them reluctant to speak unless they were certain their response was accurate. This finding reinforces the importance of addressing emotional factors in EFL learning environments as linguistic proficiency alone does not guarantee active participation.

The mean for fear of mistakes was 4.05 (SD = 0.72), and this indicates generally high anxiety among the students; on the other hand, comfort in speaking showed a moderate mean of 3.28 (SD = 0.87). This moderate comfort level suggests a

fragile participation threshold, where students are neither fully disengaged nor confidently willing to speak. The correlation between comfort in speaking and fear of mistakes suggests a deeper interaction between language proficiency and anxiety. Even though students with higher proficiency are less likely to experience these anxieties, advanced learners reported significant reluctance to speak. Such moderate comfort levels imply that participation remains highly contingent on situational factors, such as peer reactions and instructional design. This highlights the need for pedagogical environments that stabilize willingness to communicate rather than leaving it context dependent.

The study also highlights the significant role of peer judgment in shaping classroom participation. Students preferred listening over speaking; it's clear that social pressures have a strong influence on their verbal engagement. This finding aligns with Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (1978), which emphasizes the critical role of the social interaction in learning. The mean for peer judgment was 4.10 (SD = 0.63), and this indicates substantial perceived pressure; on the other hand, willingness to participate remained moderate (M = 3.25, SD = 0.79). Similar patterns have been reported in regional EFL studies (e.g., Liu, 2005; Nakane, 2005) though the present findings suggest a stronger interaction between peer judgment and institutional hierarchy in the Bangladeshi context. These findings indicate that participation is shaped more by social evaluation than by intrinsic motivation.

To address this, reducing social pressure through structured peer interaction and collaborative learning is essential. Such practices can shift attention away from evaluation and toward shared meaning-making; thus, they can create a more supportive environment for speaking. Although peer judgment significantly shapes participation, cultural norms and classroom hierarchy must also be considered. The findings indicate that students participate more actively when peer support is visible and teacher authority is less rigidly foregrounded. A less hierarchical and more dialogic classroom structure may therefore mitigate fear of judgment and promote spontaneous engagement. Consistent with this, research on classroom silence (Khafidhoh et al., 2023; Liu, 2005) demonstrates that smaller, collaborative settings reduce performance pressure and facilitate greater student participation.

Interestingly, unlike some studies where silence is used strategically for processing or idea generation (Bao & Nguyen, 2020; Dung, 2024), most students in this study primarily exhibited silence due to hesitation, anxiety, or deference. This may reflect cultural norms in Bangladeshi classrooms, where silence signals respect or caution rather than deliberate cognitive strategy. This suggests important contextual variation within Asian EFL settings.

Another significant factor that influenced participation is teacher encouragement. Students indicated that positive reinforcement from teachers significantly boosted their willingness to communicate. However, classroom observations revealed that both the ENG 101 and ENG 201 courses were largely teacher-led, with limited opportunities for peer interaction. In this context, Communicative Language

Teaching (CLT) appears to be implemented in a form that emphasizes accuracy and presentation over interaction, thereby reproducing performance anxiety rather than reducing it. While teacher encouragement is important, it is insufficient within rigid, lecture-dominated formats. Task-based and problem-oriented approaches, such as Problem-Based Learning (PBL), may offer more effective alternatives by embedding communication within collaborative problem-solving and reducing the focus on individual linguistic performance.

The classroom structure itself, as well as curriculum limitations, also contributed to students' reluctance to speak. Large class sizes, time limitations, and rigid lesson formats restricted opportunities for meaningful interaction. This echoes Nakane's (2005) argument that traditional classroom structures often reinforce silence by prioritizing passive learning. The limited success of CLT in this setting thus appears to be contextual rather than theoretical, constrained by structural, cultural, and assessment-driven factors. Overall, the interaction of psychological, social, and institutional variables underscores the complexity of student silence in Bangladeshi university EFL classrooms and highlights the need for pedagogically and culturally responsive interventions.

6. Conclusion

This study explored the factors that contribute to student silence in Bangladeshi university EFL classrooms, directly addressing the study's research objectives of identifying key contributing factors, examining their relationship with participation, and exploring students' perceptions of silence and possible interventions. The mixed-method design proved effective in capturing both the measurable patterns of participation and the nuanced, lived experiences behind students' silence; thus, it offers a comprehensive account of the phenomenon. The findings revealed that linguistic anxiety, cultural influences, classroom structure, and teacher-student interaction all play significant roles in shaping students' willingness to communicate. Despite many students possessing intermediate to advanced English proficiency, a majority of the students hesitate to speak due to fear of making mistakes and social pressure.

Theoretically, this study contributes to the literature by integrating affective, sociocultural, and instructional dimensions within a single analytical framework, demonstrating how these factors interact to shape willingness to communicate in the Bangladeshi higher education context. To reduce silence and enhance participation, teachers should encourage structured peer interaction, minimize error-focused correction, and create a low-anxiety, student-centered classroom environment. By focusing specifically on Bangladeshi university EFL classrooms and triangulating survey, interview, and observational data, this study offers an original empirical contribution to a context that remains comparatively underexplored in the literature.

Although this study provides valuable insights, further research could explore teacher perspectives on student silence or assess the long-term impact of specific classroom interventions on participation. Ultimately, addressing classroom silence requires a shift from a rigid, instructor-centered approach to a more

interactive, student-driven learning experience, to ensure that students develop both linguistic competence and the confidence to communicate in English, which, in the long term, may enhance academic achievement, language identity development, and professional readiness in global contexts.

6.1 Pedagogical Implications

The following implications emerge from the findings, particularly in response to the third research question. The findings of the current study highlight how teachers would benefit from the targeted training that focuses on managing speaking anxiety, providing supportive feedback, and promoting interaction without overemphasizing error correction. Also, the students should be aware of the need for group activities, peer discussions, and icebreaker tasks, which could be embedded in curriculum planning. In terms of materials development, textbooks and classroom resources should integrate structured speaking scaffolds, collaborative tasks, reflective prompts, and low-stakes discussion activities to gradually build students' confidence and willingness to communicate. Additionally, institutions can consider offering optional speaking labs or tutorials with fewer students to create low-pressure environments.

Technology can further facilitate these initiatives through blended learning platforms, online discussion forums, anonymous response tools, and recorded speaking tasks, which allow students to rehearse and participate in less intimidating formats before speaking publicly. Finally, speaking assessments can reward fluency and participation rather than grammatical perfection; thus, they can encourage more students to take verbal risks. This would ensure that students feel both linguistically and socially prepared to participate in EFL classrooms. By fostering inclusive, confidence-building, and participation-oriented learning environments, these implications align with Sustainable Development Goal 4 (Quality Education), which emphasizes equitable, inclusive, and effective learning opportunities for all students.

6.2 Limitations of the Study

Even though this study employed a mixed-method approach, several limitations can be acknowledged. First, although the sample was expanded to 123 participants, it was drawn from a single department within one public university and a government college, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other institutional contexts. Second, while gender data were collected, no gender-disaggregated analysis was conducted, and this can potentially overlook the gendered patterns in silence or participation. Third, classroom observations may have been influenced by the observer effect; both students and teachers may have altered their behavior due to the researchers' presence. Finally, although the qualitative data enriched the findings, time constraints limited the number of interviews and classroom visits. These limitations suggest that future studies should include more varied institutions, gender-based analysis, and multiple observation sessions to enhance validity and transferability.

6.3 Recommendations for Future Research

Building on the findings and limitations of this study, several avenues for future research are recommended. Future studies can explore the implementation of

Project-Based Learning (PBL) in Bangladeshi EFL classrooms as first-hand evidence suggests that PBL can significantly enhance learning outcomes. Future research should also examine teacher readiness for PBL implementation, including training, materials development, and assessment adaptation. Research into teachers' perspectives on student silence would provide a fuller understanding of classroom dynamics. Additionally, investigating the role of digital tools (e.g., online forums, collaborative platforms, AI-assisted speaking practice) may offer practical solutions for reducing silence, particularly in large classes.

Further studies with larger and more diverse samples, gender-based analysis, and longitudinal designs would improve generalizability. Methodologically, future studies may apply Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA), McDonald's Omega, or Composite Reliability (CR) to strengthen instrument validation. In terms of feasibility for local teachers in Bangladesh, future research may prioritize technology-assisted participation strategies and small-scale pedagogical adjustments before large-scale curricular reforms.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest in relation to this study.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Section 1: Demographic Information

1. **Age:**
 - Under 20
 - 20–22
 - 23–25
 - 26 or above
2. **Gender:**
 - Male
 - Female
 - Prefer not to say
3. **Year of Study:**
 - 1st Year
 - 2nd Year
 - 3rd Year
 - 4th Year
 - Master's Level
4. **Major/Field of Study:** (*Open-ended response*)
5. **English Proficiency Level (Self-assessed):**
 - Beginner
 - Intermediate
 - Advanced
6. **Have you ever studied English outside of university (e.g., private tutoring, language courses)?**
 - Yes
 - No

Section 2: Speaking Confidence and Anxiety

7. **How comfortable do you feel speaking English in class discussions?**
 - Very comfortable
 - Somewhat comfortable
 - Neutral
 - A little uncomfortable
 - Very uncomfortable
8. **When I have an answer in mind, I hesitate to speak because I fear making mistakes.**
 - Always
 - Often
 - Sometimes
 - Rarely
 - Never
9. **How often do you contribute to class discussions?**
 - Almost always
 - Often
 - Occasionally
 - Rarely

- Never
- 10. What best describes your feelings when speaking English in class?**
 - Confident and relaxed
 - A little nervous but willing to try
 - Neutral, it depends on the situation
 - Nervous and hesitant
 - Very anxious and avoid speaking

Section 3: Classroom Environment and Social Influence

- 11. My classmates' reactions influence my willingness to speak.**
 - Strongly agree
 - Agree
 - Neutral
 - Disagree
 - Strongly disagree
- 12. How much does the teacher's encouragement affect your participation?**
 - A lot
 - Somewhat
 - Neutral
 - Very little
 - Not at all
- 13. I feel judged when I make mistakes while speaking English in class.**
 - All the time
 - Often
 - Sometimes
 - Rarely
 - Never
- 14. The classroom environment (e.g., seating arrangement, group activities) impacts how much I speak.**
 - Strongly agree
 - Agree
 - Neutral
 - Disagree
 - Strongly disagree

Section 4: Learning Preferences and Silent Participation

- 15. If given a choice, I would prefer to:**
 - Speak more in class
 - Listen more than speak
 - Keep the same level of participation
 - Avoid speaking unless required
- 16. Remaining silent helps me reflect and understand the lesson better.**
 - Always
 - Often
 - Sometimes
 - Rarely
 - Never

Section 5: Recommendations and Classroom Improvements

17. What would help you feel more comfortable speaking in class? (*Select all that apply*)

- More group discussions instead of individual speaking tasks
- Teachers being more supportive and encouraging
- Having more time to prepare before speaking
- Smaller class sizes for more personal attention
- A less judgmental classroom environment

18. What classroom activities do you think encourage students to speak more?

- Debates and structured discussions
- Role-playing and simulations
- Group presentations
- Casual conversations and icebreaker activities
- None, I prefer listening over speaking

19. If teachers wanted to help students overcome silence, what should they do? (*Open-ended response*)

Appendix B: Semi-structured Interview Questions

Section 1: Background and General Classroom Participation

Can you describe your typical participation in English language classes?

- How often do you speak in class, and what factors influence your decision to speak or remain silent?
- Do you feel more comfortable speaking in certain classroom situations (e.g., group discussions vs. whole-class discussions)? Why?

Section 2: Linguistic and Psychological Barriers (Willingness to Communicate & Affective Filter Hypothesis)

What difficulties do you face when speaking English in class (e.g., vocabulary, pronunciation, grammar, fluency)?

- Do you feel anxious or nervous when speaking English in front of your classmates? If so, why?
- Have you ever chosen to remain silent because you were afraid of making mistakes? Can you share an experience?
- How does the fear of being judged by classmates or teachers affect your willingness to participate?

Section 3: Sociocultural Influences on Silence (Sociocultural Theory)

How does the classroom environment (e.g., teacher's behavior, peer interaction, seating arrangement) affect your willingness to speak?

- In your opinion, how does Bangladeshi culture influence students' participation in English classes?
- Do you feel that your relationship with your teacher impacts how much you speak in class? If so, in what way?

Section 4: Strategies to Encourage Participation

What teaching methods or classroom activities make you feel more comfortable speaking English?

- How do you think teachers can help students overcome their fear of speaking?
- What changes would you like to see in the classroom to encourage more student participation

Section 5: Final Thoughts

Is there anything else you would like to share about your experiences with silence in EFL classrooms?

Appendix C: Observation Notes

Observation Note 1: Eng 101 (Ms. X's Class)

Date & Time: 11 November 2025, 11:00 AM

Course: Eng 101 (Foundational English)

Instructor: Ms. X

Class Size: Around 40 students

Classroom Setting: Arts Building, DU. Small, technology-supported with multimedia resources (microphone, speakers, projector, computer), well-lit and ventilated.

Lesson Focus: Listening and speaking skills

- A video clip was shown, followed by comprehension questions.
- A debate was organized to encourage speaking practice.
- The presentation-practice-production (PPP) method was followed.
- Medium of instruction: Mostly English, with occasional use of Bangla for clarification.

Student Participation:

- Students were actively engaged, confidently asking questions (mostly during the activities)
- The teacher provided relevant examples to enhance understanding.
- The class size limited peer interaction and group activities, reducing opportunities for independent learning.

Challenges Observed:

- Large class size restricted classroom interaction.
- One-hour duration was insufficient for extensive speaking activities.
- The curriculum appeared rigid, preventing flexibility in lesson structuring.

Observation Note 2: Eng 201 (Mr. Y's Class)**Date & Time:** 24 November 2025, 1:30 PM**Course:** Eng 201 (Academic Writing)**Instructor:** Mr. Y**Class Size:** 36 students**Classroom Setting:** Arts Building, DU. Moderate-sized classroom, well-lit and ventilated, equipped with multimedia tools (microphone, speakers, projector, computer), though not utilized.**Lesson Focus:** Academic writing - *Synthesis*

- The teacher introduced the concept and structure of synthesis.
- Students were assigned to write a summary and synopsis of a passage.
- The presentation-practice-production (PPP) framework was followed.
- Medium of instruction: Primarily English.

Student Participation:

- Limited interaction, except for question-answer segments and task submission.
- Students were task-oriented rather than exploratory, focusing on completing writing assignments rather than engaging in discussions.

Challenges Observed:

- Lack of engagement beyond structured writing tasks.
- Tight one-hour schedule restricted deeper discussions and interactive learning.
- Classroom technology was not utilized, which could have enhanced instruction.