



Psychological flexibility and avoidant classroom silence among EFL learners: The mediating role of fear of negative evaluation

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Abstract: This study examined whether fear of negative evaluation mediates the relationship between psychological flexibility and avoidant classroom silence among university EFL learners. Three-wave data were collected from 452 students in 30 classes across five public universities in Henan Province, China (females = 60.4%; 57.7% first-year; 42.3% second-year; mean age = 19.42, SD = 0.86). Participants completed surveys and a subsample of 20 completed follow-up interviews for personal reflections. Longitudinal structural equation modelling findings revealed psychological flexibility to be associated with lower subsequent fear of negative evaluation and avoidant classroom silence. Fear of negative evaluation was associated with greater silence, and in part, with lower psychological flexibility and greater silence. Interview findings indicated that learners viewed speaking as public evaluation, used silence for immediate emotional protection, and were more likely to participate when they accepted discomfort and focused on meaningful learning goals. These findings suggest a need for student counseling and development services with an emphasis promoting psychological flexibility as an action-enabling resource and fear of negative evaluation as a proximal mechanism underlying avoidant classroom silence.

Keywords: psychological flexibility; fear of negative evaluation; avoidant classroom silence; EFL learners; longitudinal mediation

Introduction

Psychological flexibility is a proven learning resource across settings, and this would be true in the domain of second language learning. However, second language learning as an adults may be intimidating to new learners who may respond with withdrawal when speaking feels socially risky or evaluative (Khajavy et al., 2025; Papi & Khajavy, 2023). Student second language learners may choose silence for social fear associated with speaking anxiety and the risk for emerging or new relationships in classroom conditions (Maher & King, 2022; Pham et al., 2023; Sato, 2024). Repeated withdrawal can restrict practice and feedback and maintain threat perceptions (Tai & Lee, 2024). Psychological flexibility may determine whether difficult internal experiences rigidly control action (Kashdan & Rottenberg, 2010), while fear of negative evaluation may provide a proximal mechanism because it captures apprehension about unfavourable judgement and has been linked to maladaptive silence (Yue et al., 2022). We therefore test psychological flexibility as predictor, fear of negative evaluation as mediator, and avoidant silence as outcome.

Psychological flexibility and avoidant classroom silence

Psychological flexibility is the capacity to remain open to difficult thoughts and emotions, attend to present demands, and act in line with meaningful goals (Hayes et al., 2005). In EFL classrooms, flexible learners may still feel nervous or uncertain but are less likely to treat those experiences as reasons to avoid speaking. They can redirect attention to meaning, task demands, feedback, and longer-term learning goals, consistent with evidence linking flexibility to

adaptive, values-consistent engagement under discomfort (Chalghaf et al., 2026).

Psychological flexibility differs from affective and competence-related variables. Language anxiety indexes distress; confidence and self-efficacy concern perceived capability; WTC captures readiness to communicate. Flexibility instead concerns how learners relate to discomfort or self-doubt once it occurs (Sanders et al., 2024). Thus, learners with similar anxiety may differ in whether it governs behaviour: a flexible learner may still answer, seek clarification, or continue after an error because discomfort does not automatically determine action (Grégoire et al., 2017).

Accordingly, psychological flexibility complements rather than duplicates established EFL constructs. Anxiety, confidence, perceived competence, self-efficacy and WTC describe how learners feel, judge competence, or intend to communicate (Kirkpatrick et al., 2025; Yang et al., 2026; Zarrinabadi et al., 2021); flexibility provides a process-oriented account of whether difficult internal experiences control behaviour.

Fear of negative evaluation as the proximal mediating mechanism

Fear of negative evaluation is apprehension about unfavourable judgement and expectations of negative assessment (Leary, 1983; Watson & Friend, 1969). Here it is a proximal cognitive-affective appraisal of social-evaluative threat rather than a transient emotion. EFL speaking makes pronunciation, fluency, vocabulary, grammar, and response speed publicly observable. Unlike broader language anxiety, fear of negative evaluation specifically concerns apprehension about how one's performance may be judged by others (Gregersen, 2023),



so errors can trigger anticipated embarrassment, correction, ridicule, or unfavourable comparison (Peng & Wang, 2022).

Fear of negative evaluation may encourage safety behaviours such as avoiding eye contact, withholding questions, over-rehearsing, shortening responses, or remaining silent. These behaviours reduce immediate exposure but also limit corrective experiences; short-term relief may reinforce silence as protection (Arafa & Ali, 2026). Yue et al. (2022) found that fear of negative evaluation was associated with negative classroom silence and partly mediated the self-efficacy–silence relationship, but their cross-sectional nursing-student sample could not establish temporal ordering in EFL classrooms.

In the proposed sequence, psychological flexibility is the upstream predictor and fear of negative evaluation the mediator. Flexible learners may notice thoughts such as “others will think my English is poor” without treating them as accurate predictions or reasons to withdraw. Acceptance and distance from self-critical thoughts may make criticism more manageable, whereas rigid responding can allow anticipated judgement to dominate attention. Greater flexibility is therefore expected to predict lower subsequent evaluative fear, which in turn predicts less protective silence.

Prior studies have examined self-efficacy, teacher support, classroom climate, speaking anxiety, and social anxiety as predictors of participation and silence (Siera-Sánchez et al., 2026; Yang et al., 2026). Psychological flexibility has rarely been tested as an antecedent of social-evaluative fear in EFL communication, and much evidence remains cross-sectional (Rohrer & Murayama, 2023). A three-wave design therefore permits a more rigorous test of the proposed temporal mechanism.

Theoretical foundations

Psychological flexibility theory and cognitive-behavioural accounts of social-evaluative avoidance jointly inform the model. The flexibility framework explains how learners can remain engaged in valued behaviour despite anxiety and self-doubt (Morris & Bilich-eric, 2017); in EFL participation, speaking need not wait for nervousness to disappear when communication serves meaningful learning goals.

Cognitive-behavioural models explain how anticipated humiliation, rejection, or comparison can translate into silence as a safety behaviour (Rieder et al., 2025; Zech et al., 2023). Although avoidance reduces immediate discomfort, it limits corrective experiences that could challenge exaggerated expectations of criticism and may strengthen later withdrawal (Al-Ahmadi & King, 2022).

In summary, these perspectives distinguish discomfort, threat appraisal, and avoidance. Psychological flexibility is the upstream capacity that may reduce the behavioural dominance of threat-related thoughts; fear of negative evaluation is the proximal appraisal of social risk; and avoidant silence is the protective behavioural response. The model therefore specifies psychological flexibility → fear of negative evaluation → avoidant silence while retaining a direct path from flexibility to silence to allow additional mechanisms.

Study context

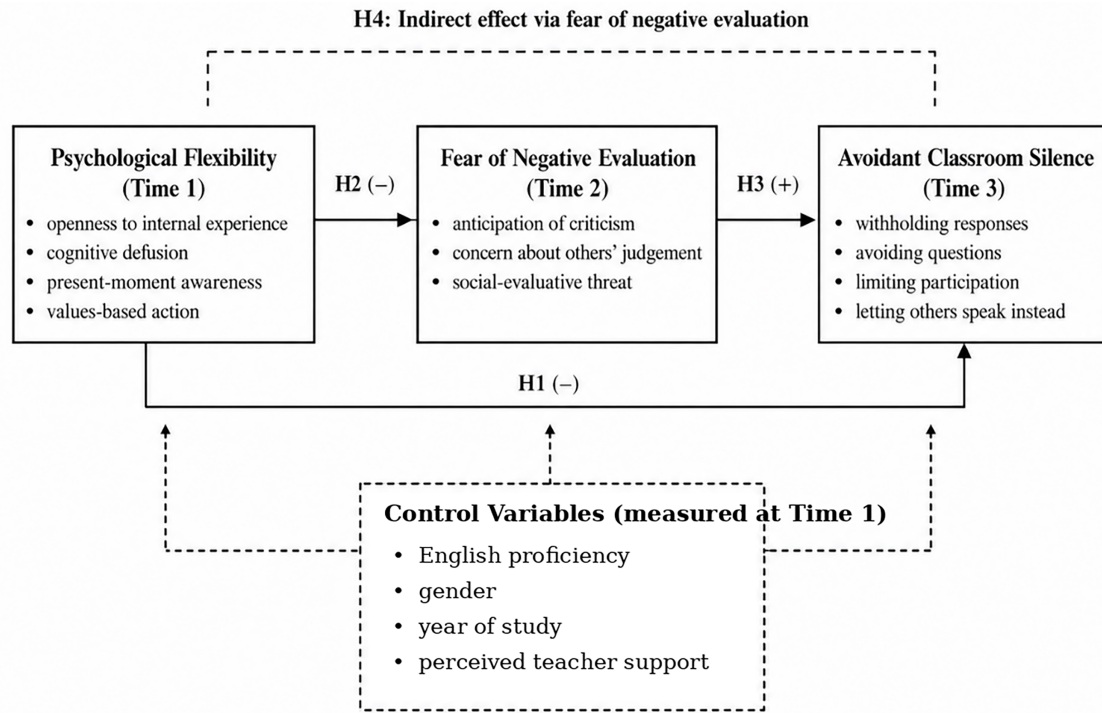
English occupies an important place in Chinese higher education, where many non-English-major undergraduates complete compulsory College English coursework as part of their degree programmes. Although university English teaching has increasingly emphasised communicative competence and learner participation, classroom practice has historically also been shaped by examination demands, linguistic accuracy, and relatively teacher-directed instructional traditions. As a result, oral participation can occur within a tension between institutional expectations for greater communicative engagement and learners' established experience of accuracy-focused language learning. Research in Chinese university EFL classrooms has shown that students' willingness to communicate is not determined by language proficiency alone but emerges from the interaction of learner beliefs, affective states, linguistic resources, and classroom conditions (Peng, 2012). Meanwhile, Zhou (2015) found that although administrators, teachers, and students generally recognised the importance of oral participation, their understandings of how such participation should be supported were not always aligned.

This context makes social-evaluative processes particularly relevant to classroom speaking. For many Chinese university EFL learners, speaking in English is not only a linguistic task but also a publicly observable performance in which pronunciation, grammatical accuracy, response speed, and perceived competence can become visible to teachers and peers. Recent evidence from Chinese undergraduates indicates that speaking anxiety is meaningfully associated with learners' expectations of their own performance and with spoken-English achievement (Chen, 2024). At a broader classroom level, research with Chinese university students has also shown that classroom environment and L2 emotions, including anxiety, are closely related to willingness to communicate (Li et al., 2025). These findings suggest that participation in Chinese EFL classrooms is shaped jointly by individual regulatory resources and social-interactional conditions. The present study therefore examines psychological flexibility and fear of negative evaluation as learner-level processes that may help explain why some students continue speaking despite discomfort whereas others use silence as protection from anticipated evaluation.

Goals of this study

The study examined whether psychological flexibility prospectively predicted avoidant classroom silence and whether fear of negative evaluation mediated the relationship. All constructs were measured at each wave, but the focal test used T1 psychological flexibility, T2 fear of negative evaluation and T3 silence, reflecting an upstream regulatory capacity, proximal threat appraisal, and subsequent behavioural response. Temporal separation allowed prior mediator and outcome levels to be controlled and reduced ambiguity inherent in same-wave mediation. Same-wave models were treated as supplementary sensitivity analyses rather than tests of temporal mediation. The following hypotheses were tested (Figure 1):

H1: Higher psychological flexibility at Time 1 is prospectively associated with lower avoidant classroom



Note. Solid arrows indicate hypothesised direct paths. Dashed lines indicate mediated or control relationships. (–) = negative relationship; (+) = positive relationship.

Figure 1. Conceptual framework

silence at Time 3 after autoregressive stability in avoidant classroom silence is modelled.

H2: Higher psychological flexibility at Time 1 prospectively predicts lower fear of negative evaluation at Time 2 after baseline fear of negative evaluation is controlled.

H3: Higher fear of negative evaluation at Time 2 prospectively predicts greater avoidant classroom silence at Time 3 after prior avoidant classroom silence is controlled.

H4: Fear of negative evaluation at Time 2 mediates the prospective relationship between psychological flexibility at Time 1 and avoidant classroom silence at Time 3.

Findings would extend EFL participation research by introducing psychological flexibility as an upstream regulatory resource, and specifying fear of negative evaluation as a proximal mediator. Moreover, the avoidant silence findings would inform further related studies regarding its protective function rather than equating it with low WTC, anxiety, or strategically productive non-speaking.

Method

Research design

This explanatory sequential mixed-methods study (Watkins & Gioia, 2015) combined a three-wave prospective quantitative phase with follow-up interviews. The quantitative phase tested longitudinal relationships among psychological flexibility, fear of negative evaluation and avoidant silence; interviews explained how learners experienced those processes. Integration occurred through connecting and building: repeated silence scores defined four longitudinal profiles, while flexibility and

fear-of-negative-evaluation scores informed maximum-variation case selection. Interview prompts targeted evaluative thoughts, responses to discomfort, participation decisions, and contextual influences. Quantitative results had priority; interviews explained convergent patterns, discrepant cases and contextual conditions rather than independently testing mediation.

Participants and setting

A multistage convenience cluster sampling procedure was used to recruit a total of 584 undergraduate students from five public universities in Henan Province, China, and who were taking compulsory English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classes and in three waves. First, 584 completed the Time 1(T1) wave; 523 completed the T2 wave, and 452 completed T3 (77.4% retention). The final sample comprised 273 women (60.4%) and 179 men (39.6%), mean age 19.42 years (SD = 0.86); 261 (57.7%) were first-year and 191 (42.3%) second-year students across several disciplines.

Measures

Participants completed surveys (as described below) and a subsample of 20 completed follow up interviews. All measures were on a five-point Likert scales, with higher scores indicating higher levels of the corresponding construct. Internal-consistency estimates are reported with the instrument descriptions below, with observed α and ω coefficients ranging from 0.84 to 0.90.

Psychological flexibility. Psychological flexibility was assessed using the six-item Psy-Flex developed by Gloster et al. (2021), which covers present-moment awareness

(1 item; e.g., Focusing on important moments even when one's thoughts wander), acceptance (1 item; e.g., allowing unpleasant thoughts and experiences without immediately trying to eliminate them), cognitive defusion (1 item; e.g., viewing hindering thoughts from a distance rather than being controlled by them), self-as-context (1 item; e.g., maintaining a stable sense of self despite confusing thoughts or experiences), values awareness (1 item; e.g., identifying what is personally important and where to invest one's energy), and committed action (1 item; e.g., engaging fully in activities that are important, useful, or meaningful). For the Time 1 administration entering the focal longitudinal pathway, internal consistency was satisfactory (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.84$; McDonald's $\omega = 0.84$).

Fear of negative evaluation. Fear of negative evaluation was assessed using the Chinese version of the eight-item *Brief Fear of Negative Evaluation Scale–Straightforward Items* (BFNE-S; Leary, 1983; Wei et al., 2015). The instructions asked participants to consider situations in which they speak or are expected to speak English in class (e.g., worrying about others' judgements and being concerned about making a poor impression when speaking English). Internal consistency was satisfactory at both Time 1 ($\alpha = 0.90$; $\omega = 0.90$) and Time 2, which entered the focal mediation pathway ($\alpha = 0.89$; $\omega = 0.90$). Longitudinal measurement invariance was examined before hypothesis testing.

Avoidant classroom silence. The eight-item EFL Avoidant Classroom Silence Scale was developed from research on negative classroom silence and anxiety-related withdrawal (Jia et al., 2021; Maher & King, 2023; Yue et al., 2022). Items assessed deliberate non-participation motivated by fear, embarrassment, or anticipated negative evaluation on a five-point frequency scale over the preceding four weeks. Sample items are remaining silent despite having an answer because of concern about being judged and avoiding asking questions because speaking publicly may cause embarrassment. Reliability was satisfactory at T1 ($\alpha = 0.88$, $\omega = 0.89$), T2 ($\alpha = 0.88$, $\omega = 0.88$), and T3 ($\alpha = 0.89$, $\omega = 0.89$).

Teacher-rated oral participation. At Time 3, participating EFL instructors assessed each student's oral participation using four behavioural items covering volunteering answers, asking or responding to questions, contributing to pair or group discussions, and continuing to speak after errors or corrective feedback (e.g., voluntarily answering questions and continuing to participate after receiving corrective feedback). Teacher ratings served as a supplementary behavioural criterion to complement students' self-reported avoidant silence and showed satisfactory internal consistency ($\alpha = 0.86$; $\omega = 0.87$).

Control variables

Gender, academic year, English proficiency and perceived teacher support were included as control variables. English proficiency was represented by students' most recent standardised university English examination score, converted to a 0–100 scale. Perceived teacher support was assessed at Time 1 using four items addressing teachers' encouragement, respectful feedback, availability of assistance, and acceptance of language errors. Class membership was

retained as a clustering variable because students were nested within intact EFL classes.

Procedure

This study involving human participants was reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board at Nanyang Normal University (approval no. NYNU-ERC-2026-37). All participants provided informed consent prior to participation. They were informed of confidentiality and withdrawal assurances. Surveys were administered during a 16-week semester at Weeks 3–4, 8–9 and 13–14, approximately five weeks apart.

Data analysis

Quantitative data were analysed using SPSS 29.0 and Mplus 8.10. Data screening addressed duplicate submissions, substantial missingness, invariant responses, implausibly short completion times, outliers, and attrition across waves. Missing data were handled using full-information maximum likelihood estimation. Descriptive statistics, Cronbach's alpha, McDonald's omega, Pearson correlations, and intraclass correlation coefficients were calculated. Because students were nested within classes, cluster-robust standard errors were used.

Confirmatory factor analysis compared the hypothesised three-factor model with alternatives, followed by configural, metric, and scalar invariance tests across waves using χ^2 , CFI, TLI, RMSEA, and SRMR. The primary hypotheses were tested with an autoregressive longitudinal SEM. Although all constructs were measured at each wave, the confirmatory mediation used the theoretically ordered T1 psychological flexibility $\rightarrow$ T2 fear of negative evaluation $\rightarrow$ T3 avoidant silence sequence while controlling prior mediator and outcome levels. Three supplementary within-wave models were also estimated separately at T1, T2, and T3 using composite scores, with flexibility as predictor, fear as mediator, and silence as outcome; these were interpreted as exploratory sensitivity analyses rather than temporal mediation. Indirect effects used 5000 bootstrap resamples and 95% CIs. Reverse and teacher-rated participation models were also examined.

Preliminary analyses

Attrition analyses indicated that participants who completed all three waves did not differ significantly from those who withdrew in gender, academic year, English proficiency, psychological flexibility, fear of negative evaluation, or avoidant classroom silence at Time 1 (all $ps > 0.14$). Missing values accounted for 1.6% of the observations and were handled using full-information maximum likelihood estimation. Recruitment, wave-specific participation, exclusions, and the final longitudinal sample size are reported in the Participants and setting section.

Absolute skewness and kurtosis values were below 1.00, indicating no substantial deviation from normality. Intraclass correlation coefficients were 0.03 for psychological flexibility, 0.05 for fear of negative evaluation and 0.07 for avoidant classroom silence. Cluster-robust standard errors were therefore used to account for students nested within EFL classes.

Table 1. Measurement-model and longitudinal-invariance results

Model	χ^2	df	CFI	TLI	RMSEA	SRMR	ΔCFI
Three-factor model	242.18	167	0.966	0.960	0.032	0.039	—
Two-factor model	618.43	169	0.804	0.775	0.077	0.091	—
Single-factor model	1112.56	170	0.591	0.542	0.111	0.128	—
Configural invariance	786.54	531	0.956	0.950	0.033	0.045	—
Metric invariance	809.71	549	0.955	0.950	0.033	0.047	−0.001
Scalar invariance	835.38	567	0.954	0.950	0.033	0.049	−0.001

Note. N = 452. The first three rows use Time 1 item-level data from the final matched longitudinal sample to compare the hypothesised three-factor model with alternative factor structures. The final three rows use repeated item-level data from Times 1–3 in the same matched sample to evaluate configural, metric, and scalar invariance. The two-factor model combined fear of negative evaluation and avoidant classroom silence; the single-factor model combined all indicators.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics, reliability estimates and selected correlations for focal longitudinal variables

Variable	M	SD	α	ω	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Psychological flexibility T1	3.44	0.63	0.84	0.84	—						
Fear of negative evaluation T1	3.08	0.70	0.90	0.90	−0.41***	—					
Avoidant classroom silence T1	2.92	0.72	0.88	0.89	−0.37***	0.50***	—				
Fear of negative evaluation T2	3.02	0.68	0.89	0.90	−0.51***	0.70***	0.40***	—			
Avoidant classroom silence T2	2.83	0.70	0.88	0.88	−0.34***	0.48***	0.72***	0.38***	—		
Avoidant classroom silence T3	2.76	0.68	0.89	0.89	−0.46***	0.54***	0.57***	0.58***	0.73***	—	
Teacher-rated participation T3	3.35	0.72	0.86	0.87	0.42***	−0.47***	−0.42***	−0.50***	−0.53***	−0.74***	—

Note. N = 452. α = Cronbach's alpha; ω = McDonald's omega. Values in Columns 1–7 are Pearson correlation coefficients (r). The asterisks indicate the statistical significance of the corresponding correlations (*** p < 0.001).

Measurement model and longitudinal invariance

As shown in Table 1, the baseline measurement-model comparisons were estimated from the Time 1 item-level data of the final matched longitudinal sample (N = 452). The hypothesised three-factor model demonstrated satisfactory fit, χ^2 (167) = 242.18, CFI = 0.966, TLI = 0.960, RMSEA = 0.032 and SRMR = 0.039. It fitted the data substantially better than the two-factor and single-factor alternatives, supporting the empirical distinctiveness of psychological flexibility, fear of negative evaluation and avoidant classroom silence. All standardised factor loadings were statistically significant and ranged from 0.65 to 0.86.

Longitudinal measurement invariance was subsequently examined across the three waves. The configural model demonstrated satisfactory fit, indicating that the same factor structure was supported over time. Changes in CFI between the configural, metric, and scalar models did not exceed 0.01, supporting metric and scalar invariance. The constructs could therefore be meaningfully compared across measurement occasions.

Interview data were analysed using theoretically informed reflexive thematic analysis, combining deductive codes from the framework with inductive codes from transcripts. The first author coded all interviews and a second bilingual researcher reviewed the framework and alternative interpretations. Themes were compared across the four longitudinal profiles. Integration occurred by connecting phases through profile-based sampling, building interview prompts around quantitative pathways and contrasting cases, and merging findings in a joint display. Qualitative

results explained statistical relationships and identified classroom conditions that might amplify or buffer them.

Results

Descriptive statistics and correlations

Table 2 reports selected descriptive statistics, reliability estimates and zero-order correlations for the focal lagged pathway and teacher-rated criterion. T1 psychological flexibility correlated negatively with T2 fear of negative evaluation ($r = -0.51$, $p < 0.001$) and T3 silence ($r = -0.46$, $p < 0.001$); T2 fear of negative evaluation correlated positively with T3 silence ($r = 0.58$, $p < 0.001$). T3 silence correlated negatively with teacher-rated participation ($r = -0.74$, $p < 0.001$). These correlations are descriptive; repeated-measures relationships are represented by autoregressive and cross-lagged paths in Figure 2.

Hypothesis testing

The autoregressive longitudinal structural model demonstrated satisfactory fit, χ^2 (598) = 854.72, CFI = 0.957, TLI = 0.952, RMSEA = 0.031, 90% CI [0.027, 0.035], and SRMR = 0.046. The full model included repeated measures of all three constructs across the three waves. Substantial autoregressive stability was observed for psychological flexibility (T1 $\rightarrow$ T2: $\beta = 0.63$; T2 $\rightarrow$ T3: $\beta = 0.60$), fear of negative evaluation ($\beta = 0.70$ and 0.65 , respectively), and avoidant classroom silence ($\beta = 0.72$ and 0.68 , respectively), all $ps < 0.001$ (Figure 2). The focal cross-lagged effects were therefore estimated over and above substantial prior stability in the constructs.

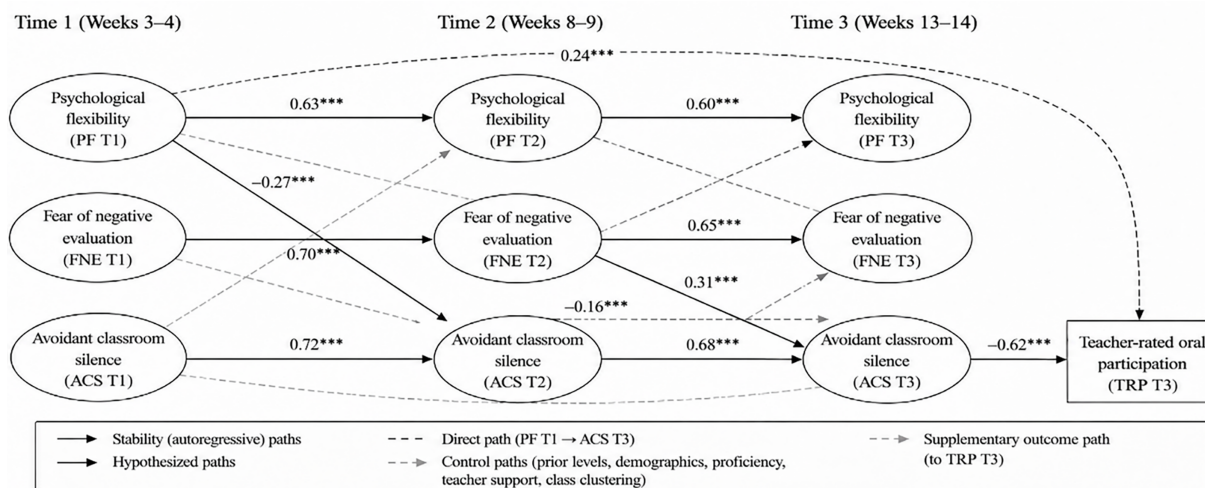


Figure 2. Standardised repeated-measures longitudinal mediation model. *Note.* PF = psychological flexibility; FNE = fear of negative evaluation; ACS = avoidant classroom silence; TRP = teacher-rated oral participation. Values represent standardized path coefficients (β). *** $p < 0.001$.

Psychological flexibility effects. In the total-effect model, Time 1 psychological flexibility negatively predicted Time 3 avoidant classroom silence after prior silence and the control variables were considered, $\beta = -0.241$, $SE = 0.035$, $p < 0.001$, 95% CI $[-0.311, -0.172]$. Hypothesis 1 was therefore supported.

In the mediation model, Time 1 psychological flexibility negatively predicted Time 2 fear of negative evaluation after baseline fear was controlled, $\beta = -0.272$, $SE = 0.038$, $p < 0.001$, 95% CI $[-0.346, -0.197]$, supporting Hypothesis 2.

Negative evaluation mediation. Time 2 fear of negative evaluation subsequently predicted higher Time 3 avoidant classroom silence after prior silence was controlled, $\beta = 0.312$, $SE = 0.037$, $p < 0.001$, 95% CI $[0.239, 0.385]$, supporting Hypothesis 3. Participants with persistently high or increasing silence commonly interpreted English speaking as a public evaluation of their pronunciation, grammatical accuracy, response speed, and academic ability. Anticipated correction, peer comparison, laughter, and unfavourable judgements made ordinary classroom questions appear socially threatening.

“When the teacher asks me to answer in English, I feel that everyone is checking my pronunciation and grammar. Even when I know the answer, I worry that one mistake will make the whole class think my English is poor.”—Participant P03, persistently high-silence profile.

“I am not only afraid of giving the wrong answer. I am more afraid of how my classmates will look at me after I make a mistake.”—Participant P08, increasing-silence profile.

These accounts clarified why fear of negative evaluation predicted subsequent avoidant classroom silence.

Avoidant classroom silence outcomes. The indirect effect of Time 1 psychological flexibility on Time 3 avoidant classroom silence through Time 2 fear of negative evaluation was statistically significant, $\beta = -0.085$,

$SE = 0.015$, 95% bootstrap CI $[-0.117, -0.058]$. Hypothesis 4 was therefore supported. The direct effect of psychological flexibility on avoidant classroom silence remained significant after the mediator was included, $\beta = -0.156$, $SE = 0.041$, $p < 0.001$, 95% CI $[-0.236, -0.075]$, indicating partial mediation. The model explained 55.6% of the variance in Time 2 fear of negative evaluation and 65.4% of the variance in Time 3 avoidant classroom silence. The standardised direct and indirect effects are summarised in Table 3 and the standardised coefficients for the hypothesised longitudinal mediation model are presented in Figure 2.

Participants frequently described silence as a means of preventing embarrassment and reducing immediate anxiety. They avoided eye contact, waited for other students to answer, shortened their responses, or claimed not to know an answer. Although remaining silent provided short-term relief, repeated avoidance reduced opportunities for oral practice and made subsequent participation more difficult.

“When I lower my head and the teacher chooses someone else, I immediately feel relieved. But after doing this many times, speaking becomes even more difficult because I am no longer used to answering.”—Participant P06, increasing-silence profile.

“Sometimes I have an answer in my mind, but I tell myself that it may be wrong, so I remain quiet. Silence feels safer at that moment, although I later regret not trying.”—Participant P02, persistently high-silence profile.

Silence operated as a short-term protective response that could reinforce longer-term avoidance.

Students with decreasing or persistently low silence did not necessarily report an absence of anxiety. Instead, they described accepting the possibility of mistakes, redirecting attention to the communicative task, and participating because speaking supported personally meaningful learning goals.

Table 3. Standardised direct and indirect effects

Path	β	SE	p	95% CI	Decision
PF T1 $\rightarrow$ ACS T3, total effect	-0.241	0.035	<0.001	[-0.311, -0.172]	H1 supported
PF T1 $\rightarrow$ FNE T2	-0.272	0.038	<0.001	[-0.346, -0.197]	H2 supported
FNE T2 $\rightarrow$ ACS T3	0.312	0.037	<0.001	[0.239, 0.385]	H3 supported
PF T1 $\rightarrow$ ACS T3, direct effect	-0.156	0.041	<0.001	[-0.236, -0.075]	Significant
PF T1 $\rightarrow$ FNE T2 $\rightarrow$ ACS T3	-0.085	0.015	<0.001	[-0.117, -0.058]	H4 supported

Note. PF = psychological flexibility; FNE = fear of negative evaluation; ACS = avoidant classroom silence. Gender, academic year, English proficiency, perceived teacher support, prior mediator and outcome scores, and class clustering were controlled.

"I still feel nervous before speaking, but I now remind myself that nervousness does not mean I cannot answer. I focus on expressing the main idea rather than making every sentence perfect."—Participant P13, decreasing-silence profile.

"Making mistakes is uncomfortable, but improving my English is more important to me. If I always wait until I feel completely confident, I may never speak."—Participant P17, persistently low-silence profile.

These accounts supported the proposed protective role of psychological flexibility by showing how learners could participate despite evaluative discomfort.

Collateral within-wave mediation analyses findings

Supplementary within-wave models showed the same directional pattern at each wave. At T1, psychological flexibility predicted lower fear of negative evaluation ($\beta = -0.410$), fear predicted greater silence controlling flexibility ($\beta = 0.419$), and the indirect effect was $\beta = -0.172$, 95% CI [-0.227, -0.122]. At T2, corresponding paths were $\beta = -0.480$ and $\beta = 0.244$, with an indirect effect of $\beta = -0.117$, 95% CI [-0.170, -0.068]. At T3, the paths were $\beta = -0.460$ and $\beta = 0.372$, with an indirect effect of $\beta = -0.171$, 95% CI [-0.230, -0.120]. Direct effects remained negative, indicating partial mediation at each wave. These concurrent models provide supplementary cross-sectional consistency; the T1 $\rightarrow$ T2 $\rightarrow$ T3 model remains the primary temporal test. Detailed coefficients for the supplementary within-wave mediation models are presented in Table 4.

A reverse model tested whether T1 avoidant silence predicted T2 fear of negative evaluation and subsequent psychological flexibility. The indirect reverse pathway was not significant, $\beta = -0.001$, 95% CI [-0.009, 0.007], and model fit was slightly poorer than for the hypothesised model, χ^2 (598) = 879.65, CFI = 0.953, TLI = 0.948, RMSEA = 0.033, SRMR = 0.051. The T1 $\rightarrow$ T2 $\rightarrow$ T3 model was therefore retained as the primary mediation test because it preserves the hypothesised temporal ordering.

A supplementary model used teacher-rated oral participation as the Time 3 outcome. Time 1 psychological flexibility positively predicted teacher-rated participation, $\beta = 0.24$, $p < 0.001$, whereas Time 2 fear of negative evaluation negatively predicted participation, $\beta = -0.36$, $p < 0.001$. The indirect effect through fear of negative evaluation was also significant, $\beta = 0.10$, 95% CI [0.07,

0.14]. These results suggested that the principal findings extended beyond student self-report.

Qualitative findings

Twenty students participated in the qualitative follow-up, with five selected from each longitudinal profile: persistently high silence, increasing silence, decreasing silence, and persistently low silence. The three themes most directly corresponding to the hypothesised quantitative pathways (speaking as a public evaluation, silence as immediate protection and acting despite discomfort) were reported alongside the relevant quantitative findings above. A fourth theme concerned the role of classroom context in amplifying or buffering the translation of evaluative concern into avoidant silence.

Classroom context as an amplifier or buffer

Teacher and peer responses influenced whether evaluative concern developed into avoidant silence. Public correction, impatient responses, peer laughter, and competitive comparison intensified perceived threat. In contrast, supportive feedback, normalisation of mistakes, preparation time, and small-group interaction made participation more manageable.

"When the teacher corrects every mistake immediately in front of the class, I lose my train of thought and do not want to continue. I become more worried about correctness than communication."—Participant P09, increasing-silence profile.

"My teacher usually says that mistakes are normal and gives us a few seconds to prepare. That makes me feel that answering is an opportunity to practise rather than a test."—Participant P18, persistently low-silence profile.

Classroom conditions appeared to amplify or buffer the psychological pathway from evaluative concern to avoidant silence.

Integration of quantitative and qualitative findings

The quantitative and qualitative findings demonstrated substantial convergence. The negative association between psychological flexibility and fear of negative evaluation was clarified by participants' descriptions of accepting discomfort, distancing themselves from self-critical thoughts, and focusing on meaningful learning goals. The positive relationship between fear of negative evaluation and

Table 4. Supplementary within-wave mediation models

Time	Path	β	SE	<i>p</i>	95% CI
T1	PF → FNE (a)	−0.410	0.043	<0.001	[−0.494, −0.326]
T1	FNE → ACS controlling PF (b)	0.419	0.044	<0.001	[0.333, 0.505]
T1	PF → ACS, direct effect (c')	−0.198	0.044	<0.001	[−0.284, −0.112]
T1	PF → FNE → ACS, indirect effect	−0.172	0.027	<0.001	[−0.227, −0.122]
T1	PF → ACS, total effect (c)	−0.370	0.044	<0.001	[−0.456, −0.284]
T2	PF → FNE (a)	−0.480	0.041	<0.001	[−0.561, −0.399]
T2	FNE → ACS controlling PF (b)	0.244	0.048	<0.001	[0.150, 0.338]
T2	PF → ACS, direct effect (c')	−0.283	0.048	<0.001	[−0.377, −0.189]
T2	PF → FNE → ACS, indirect effect	−0.117	0.026	<0.001	[−0.170, −0.068]
T2	PF → ACS, total effect (c)	−0.400	0.043	<0.001	[−0.485, −0.315]
T3	PF → FNE (a)	−0.460	0.042	<0.001	[−0.542, −0.378]
T3	FNE → ACS controlling PF (b)	0.372	0.044	<0.001	[0.285, 0.458]
T3	PF → ACS, direct effect (c')	−0.279	0.044	<0.001	[−0.365, −0.193]
T3	PF → FNE → ACS, indirect effect	−0.171	0.028	<0.001	[−0.230, −0.120]
T3	PF → ACS, total effect (c)	−0.450	0.042	<0.001	[−0.533, −0.367]

Note. PF = psychological flexibility; FNE = fear of negative evaluation; ACS = avoidant classroom silence.

Table 5. Joint display of quantitative and qualitative findings

Quantitative finding	Qualitative explanation	Integrated interpretation
Psychological flexibility negatively predicted fear of negative evaluation	Acting despite discomfort	Flexible learners accepted anxiety and focused on meaningful learning goals.
Fear of negative evaluation positively predicted avoidant silence	Speaking as a public evaluation	Speaking was interpreted as exposure to judgment and possible embarrassment.
Fear mediated the relationship between flexibility and silence	Silence as immediate protection	Avoidance reduced immediate discomfort but reinforced longer-term silence
Teacher-rated participation supported the self-report findings.	Classroom context as an amplifier or buffer	Teacher and peer responses influenced whether evaluative fear resulted in silence.
Some students reported evaluative fear but continued participating	Acting despite discomfort and supportive classroom conditions	Values-based action and contextual support may compensate for evaluative concern

avoidant classroom silence was explained by learners' perceptions of speaking as public evaluation and silence as a short-term protective response.

The interview findings also expanded the quantitative model by identifying classroom context as a possible boundary condition. Some learners continued participating despite relatively great evaluative concern when teachers normalised errors, provided preparation time, or created supportive peer interactions. Psychological flexibility appeared to reduce the behavioural dominance of evaluative fear, while classroom conditions influenced whether such fear translated into avoidant silence. The qualitative findings, therefore, explained and extended the longitudinal relationships but were not treated as an independent statistical test of mediation. The integrated quantitative and qualitative findings are summarised in Table 5.

Discussion

The negative flexibility–silence relationship extends EFL research on anxiety, competence and WTC. Prior work shows that anxiety and low confidence can discourage speaking (Cao et al., 2024), while participation also depends on learner, task, teacher and peer conditions (Peng

& Zhu, 2025). The present findings add a regulatory explanation: learners with decreasing or persistently low silence described accepting mistakes, focusing on meaning, and speaking because improvement mattered. Psychological flexibility may therefore function as an action-enabling capacity rather than merely an emotion-reduction resource.

Fear of negative evaluation partially accounted for the longitudinal flexibility–silence association, consistent with work linking evaluative fear and teacher or peer reactions to L2 speaking anxiety (Bárkányi & Brash, 2025; Jin et al., 2021). The study adds specificity by separating evaluative fear from broader anxiety and linking it to functionally defined avoidant silence. Learners described withholding speech because errors could expose pronunciation, grammar, or competence to judgement. The three-wave findings are consistent with the proposed order—flexibility preceding evaluative apprehension and evaluative fear preceding later silence—although the observational design does not establish causality.

Interviews also showed why evaluative fear may produce silence. Learners avoided eye contact, waited for others, or withheld answers even when they had a possible response. Such behaviour brought immediate relief but

reduced opportunities for successful speaking experiences. Avoidant silence may therefore operate as a negatively reinforced protective strategy, distinguishing it from reflective or strategically productive silence and from simply low WTC.

Partial mediation indicates that psychological flexibility may also operate through other mechanisms, including tolerance of uncertainty, recovery after feedback, attentional control, values clarity, self-efficacy or WTC. Future research can test these pathways. The present results nevertheless support fear of negative evaluation as one plausible proximal mechanism linking flexible responding to reduced protective silence.

Classroom context also mattered. Public correction, peer laughter, impatient responses and limited preparation intensified evaluative threat, whereas supportive feedback, normalising errors, preparation time and small-group interaction made participation more manageable. This aligns with ecological and dynamic accounts of L2 communication (Li et al., 2024; Peng, 2024) and suggests that classroom conditions may amplify or buffer the fear-of-negative-evaluation–silence pathway. Avoidant silence should therefore be understood as an interaction between learner processes and social conditions rather than solely an individual deficit.

Implications for Theory and Practice

The study contributes by positioning psychological flexibility as an upstream regulatory capacity, fear of negative evaluation as a proximal mediator, and avoidant silence as a functionally defined protective behaviour rather than a simple inverse of WTC. The longitudinal design provides temporal separation, while the qualitative phase explains how evaluative concern and classroom context shape participation decisions. Together, these elements support a process-based account of EFL participation that distinguishes distress, social-evaluative appraisal and behavioural withdrawal.

Because the study is observational, practical implications are directions for future testing rather than evidence of causal intervention effects. Teachers may consider preparation time, pair or small-group transitions, normalising mistakes, and respectful correction because participants described these conditions as making speaking more manageable. Learners may also benefit from recognising self-critical thoughts, tolerating temporary discomfort and taking small speaking actions linked to meaningful goals. These approaches require experimental or quasi-experimental evaluation before being treated as evidence-based interventions.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

Several limitations apply. Observational data support temporal ordering but not causality; intervention studies should test whether increasing flexibility changes evaluative fear and participation. Principal constructs relied on self-report, although teacher ratings provided supplementary evidence; future studies should add observations or experience sampling. The new EFL Avoidant Classroom Silence Scale requires independent validation against anxiety, unwillingness to communicate, and disengagement.

Convenience-cluster sampling from five universities in one province limits representativeness and generalisability. Finally, classroom conditions emerged qualitatively but were not quantitatively tested; multilevel studies could examine teacher support, peer psychological safety, and error climate as moderators.

Conclusion

The findings support a temporally ordered account in which greater psychological flexibility is associated with lower subsequent avoidant silence, partly through lower fear of negative evaluation. Flexible learners described tolerating discomfort without automatically withdrawing, whereas evaluative concern was linked to silence as short-term protection; teacher and peer conditions appeared to shape this translation into behaviour. The study's primary contribution is a process-based explanation that distinguishes avoidant silence from low WTC or anxiety alone and positions fear of negative evaluation as a proximal mediator between an upstream regulatory resource and later protective withdrawal. Future intervention research should test whether strengthening flexible responding and reducing social-evaluative threat changes observed participation.

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