

WHY DO THAI EFL STUDENTS REMAIN SILENT? EXPLORING BARRIERS TO WILLINGNESS TO COMMUNICATE IN ENGLISH

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Abstract - This study explored the barriers that contribute to Thai EFL students' reluctance to communicate in English during classroom interaction. A qualitative descriptive design was employed with 30 Thai undergraduate EFL students selected through purposive sampling. Data were collected through observations of six classroom sessions, audio recordings, field notes, and semi-structured interviews with 10 students. The data were analyzed thematically. The findings revealed six major barriers: fear of making mistakes, low self-confidence and perceived English proficiency, fear of negative peer evaluation, teacher-related factors, classroom and instructional conditions, and sociocultural expectations. These barriers interacted to influence students' willingness to communicate and contributed to their decision to remain silent. The findings further indicate that silence should not necessarily be interpreted as disengagement, as it may reflect psychological, interpersonal, pedagogical, and sociocultural pressures. Supportive classroom environments and low-risk communicative activities are therefore recommended to enhance students' willingness to communicate.

Keywords: Thai EFL students; willingness to communicate; classroom silence; speaking anxiety.

1. INTRODUCTION

English has become an essential means of communication in contemporary education, employment, and international interaction, making the ability to communicate orally an important goal of English as a foreign language (EFL) learning. However, possessing linguistic knowledge does not necessarily lead learners to use English when communication opportunities arise. One important construct that explains learners' actual engagement in second-language communication is willingness to communicate (WTC), which refers to learners' readiness to initiate or participate in communication when opportunities are available. Recent research has increasingly positioned WTC as an important affective and situational dimension of language learning because learners who are more willing to communicate have greater opportunities to practice and develop their communicative competence (Dong et al., 2023; Lee & Chiu, 2023; Li et al., 2025). Nevertheless, WTC is not a stable personal characteristic. It may fluctuate according to learners' emotions, perceived competence, interlocutors, classroom conditions, task characteristics, and the immediate communicative situation.

In EFL classrooms, the gap between knowing English and being willing to speak English remains a significant pedagogical concern. Learners may possess sufficient grammatical or lexical knowledge but still avoid speaking because of anxiety, fear of negative evaluation, low self-confidence, limited perceived communicative competence, boredom, or lack of motivation. Recent studies demonstrate that affective variables are closely associated with learners' WTC. For example, anxiety and demotivation have been found to negatively affect learners' willingness to communicate in both face-to-face and online environments, while enjoyment and positive classroom emotions can facilitate communication. Similarly, research

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on achievement emotions indicates that enjoyment and anxiety play important roles in explaining learners' WTC (Feng et al., 2022; Li et al., 2025; Zarrinabadi et al., 2023). These findings suggest that students' silence should not automatically be interpreted as a lack of interest or academic disengagement; rather, it may represent a complex response to affective, cognitive, and contextual pressures.

The issue becomes particularly important in Asian EFL contexts, where classroom communication may be influenced by sociocultural expectations concerning classroom behavior, teacher authority, peer relationships, and the avoidance of embarrassment. Comparative research involving Korean and Taiwanese EFL students, for instance, found that WTC was lowest in classroom contexts and suggested that speaking anxiety, the English-learning environment, and teaching practices influenced students' communication behavior (Lee et al., 2022). A systematic review likewise demonstrates that students' WTC is influenced by a combination of internal factors, such as confidence, anxiety, motivation, and personality, and external factors, including teachers, peers, classroom environment, tasks, and learning opportunities (Dong et al., 2023). Consequently, understanding classroom silence requires attention not only to individual learner characteristics but also to the interaction between learners and their immediate educational environment.

This concern is particularly salient in Thailand, where English is learned predominantly as a foreign language and opportunities for meaningful English communication may remain limited in many educational contexts. Thai EFL students have been reported to experience difficulties participating orally even when English is central to their academic programs. Chaiyasat and Intakaew (2022) found that Thai university students remained silent for multiple reasons, including personality, learned classroom behaviors, situational factors, teacher roles, teaching approaches, and cultural factors. Importantly, silence was not explained solely by students' language ability. Similarly, Hongboontri et al. (2021) identified the teacher, students and classmates, teaching materials, and classroom environment as interconnected causes of silence in a Thai university EFL classroom. These findings indicate that Thai students' silence is a multidimensional phenomenon that emerges from the interaction of psychological, pedagogical, interpersonal, and sociocultural factors.

Recent Thai research further confirms that classroom silence and reluctance to communicate remain persistent issues. Chaiyasat and Intakaew (2023) reported that the implementation of Communicative Language Teaching reduced students' classroom silence, suggesting that pedagogical approaches and classroom interaction can influence students' participation. Punyaporn and Soontornwipast (2022), meanwhile, examined Thai undergraduates' WTC in online EFL classrooms and highlighted the importance of students' perceptions and experiences in determining their readiness to communicate. More recently, Wangdi and Shimray (2025) investigated reticence among 472 Thai university students and found that students' reluctance was associated with affective factors such as lack of confidence, fear of peer judgment, shyness, anxiety, and poor peer rapport; cognitive factors such as difficulty understanding teachers' questions, translating ideas into English, and limited proficiency; and behavioral factors related to teachers' approaches.

Speaking anxiety represents another important barrier to communication among Thai EFL learners. Thai students have been found to experience anxiety when speaking English in both classroom presentations and regular instructional contexts. Kurakan (2021), for example, reported that Thai EFL engineering students experienced considerable nervousness and tension during English oral presentations, particularly in relation to performance evaluation.

Poolperm and Boonmoh (2024) further demonstrated that Thai students experienced speaking anxiety differently across onsite and online classrooms, highlighting the role of learning context in shaping emotional responses to oral communication. More recent evidence from Thai school students also shows that communicative tasks can reduce speaking anxiety while improving speaking performance, indicating that classroom pedagogy can potentially address affective barriers to communication (Wianwiset et al., 2026).

However, classroom silence should not always be equated with passivity or unwillingness to learn. Thai university students themselves have challenged the assumption that silence necessarily indicates disengagement. Chung (2021) found that Thai students sometimes used silence as a way of participating attentively and maintaining harmony with the classroom situation. Thus, silence may function both as a culturally meaningful form of participation and as a barrier to oral communication. This distinction is important because interpreting all silence as learner deficiency may overlook students' perspectives and the sociocultural meanings attached to classroom behavior. Paschal (2025) similarly argues that classroom silence in Thai EFL education can be related to cultural norms such as *kreng jai*, hierarchical teacher–student relationships, examination-oriented instruction, and teacher preparedness. Therefore, the phenomenon needs to be investigated from students' own perspectives rather than being explained simply through assumptions about low proficiency or lack of motivation.

The relationship between classroom conditions and WTC has also received increasing attention in recent EFL research. A supportive classroom environment can provide learners with psychological safety and opportunities to take communicative risks, whereas threatening or highly evaluative environments may intensify anxiety and discourage participation. Li et al. (2025) found that classroom environment influenced WTC through learners' emotional experiences, while Salbaş and Ekmekçi (2025) demonstrated the importance of classroom components in shaping learners' willingness to communicate. Teacher-related factors are also important. Recent research indicates that teacher enjoyment can positively influence learners' enjoyment and WTC, while teacher-supported opportunities for English use can strengthen learners' willingness to communicate (Jin & Zhang, 2024; Lee & Chiu, 2023). These findings reinforce the view that WTC emerges through an interaction between learner characteristics and the conditions created by teachers, peers, tasks, and the classroom environment.

At the same time, recent scholarship suggests that WTC should be examined across different communicative situations rather than treated as a single generalized learner trait. Lee et al. (2022) demonstrated differences between in-class, out-of-class, and digital WTC, while Lee and Chiu (2023) emphasized the role of face-to-face and digital communication anxiety in explaining learners' willingness to communicate. A recent systematic review of WTC in online learning similarly identified intrapersonal, mediating, and situational dimensions, including affective factors, interactional processes, teacher support, and learning activities (Zhen et al., 2026). These findings are relevant to Thailand because the same learner may remain silent during whole-class interaction but become more communicative in peer work, online interaction, or less threatening communicative situations. Therefore, examining the barriers that operate within actual classroom interaction is necessary for developing a more context-sensitive understanding of Thai EFL students' WTC.

Despite the growing body of research on WTC and classroom silence, several gaps remain. First, much of the WTC literature has focused on identifying relationships among psychological variables such as anxiety, motivation, confidence, and WTC, while fewer

studies have examined how multiple barriers interact from learners' own perspectives within the Thai classroom context. Second, although Thai studies have documented silence, reticence, and speaking anxiety, these phenomena are often examined separately. Third, recent Thai research indicates that silence may result from an interaction of affective, cognitive, behavioral, interpersonal, pedagogical, and cultural factors, suggesting the need for an integrated investigation of why learners choose not to communicate. The continuing emergence of research on Thai classroom silence and reticence demonstrates that the issue remains relevant, but it also highlights the need to move beyond describing silence toward understanding the barriers that produce or sustain students' unwillingness to communicate.

Against this background, the present study explores why Thai EFL students remain silent when opportunities to communicate in English are available. Specifically, the study seeks to identify and interpret the psychological, linguistic, interpersonal, classroom, pedagogical, and sociocultural barriers that shape students' willingness or unwillingness to communicate in English. By foregrounding students' experiences and perceptions, the study aims to provide a more nuanced understanding of classroom silence as a complex communicative phenomenon rather than simply a manifestation of low proficiency or lack of engagement. The findings are expected to contribute to research on foreign language teaching and learning, classroom discourse, and second language acquisition by clarifying the factors that constrain Thai EFL students' participation and by providing pedagogical implications for creating more supportive, communicative, and psychologically safe English classrooms.

2. METHOD

The study employed a qualitative descriptive research design to explore the barriers that contribute to Thai EFL students' unwillingness to communicate in English during classroom interaction. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because the study focused on students' experiences, perceptions, and interpretations of classroom silence rather than on measuring the frequency or statistical relationships among predetermined variables. Similar qualitative investigations in the Thai EFL context have demonstrated that classroom silence can be understood through students' own accounts and classroom observations, revealing the influence of teachers, peers, instructional practices, learning materials, classroom environments, and sociocultural factors (Chung, 2021; Hongboontri et al., 2021; Chaiyasat & Intakaew, 2022). The study was conducted at a university in Thailand in an EFL speaking or communication course where students were expected to participate in English classroom activities.

The participants were selected through purposive sampling. The proposed participants consisted of approximately 30 Thai undergraduate EFL students who had regular opportunities to communicate in English during classroom activities. The selection criteria included students who were enrolled in an English language course, had participated in classroom speaking activities, and were willing to describe their experiences of speaking or remaining silent during English classroom interaction. A smaller group of approximately 10 participants was subsequently invited to participate in individual semi-structured interviews to obtain more detailed explanations of their experiences. Purposive sampling was appropriate because the study required participants who had direct experience with the phenomenon under investigation. Previous Thai studies examining classroom silence and willingness to communicate have similarly selected students who experienced English-medium or EFL classroom interaction as the primary source of qualitative evidence (Chung, 2021; Punyaporn & Soontornwipast, 2022; Rotjanawongchai, 2023).

Data were collected through classroom observations, audio recordings, field notes, and semi-structured interviews. Classroom observations were conducted across six regular English learning sessions, with each session lasting approximately 90 minutes. The observations focused on students' verbal and non-verbal participation, responses to teacher questions, interaction with peers, participation in pair and group activities, instances of silence, hesitation before speaking, use of the first language, and classroom situations in which students appeared more or less willing to communicate. Audio recordings were used to document naturally occurring classroom interaction, while field notes were used to record contextual information that could not be fully captured through audio recordings, such as students' facial expressions, classroom atmosphere, teacher responses, and interactional patterns. This combination of observation and interview data was appropriate because previous qualitative research in Thailand has shown that classroom silence is influenced by interconnected classroom, interpersonal, instructional, and learner-related factors.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with approximately 10 selected students after the classroom observations. The interviews focused on students' experiences and perceptions of speaking English in class, including situations in which they felt comfortable or uncomfortable speaking, fear of making mistakes, anxiety, confidence, perceived English proficiency, fear of peer judgment, relationships with teachers and classmates, classroom atmosphere, teaching practices, preferred classroom activities, and reasons for choosing to remain silent. Open-ended questions were used to allow participants to introduce barriers that might not have been anticipated by the researchers. This procedure was particularly important because Thai students' silence may have meanings that differ from simple disengagement. Previous research has shown that some Thai students perceive silence as a way of participating attentively, maintaining harmony, or responding appropriately to classroom situations (Chung, 2021), whereas other research has identified personality, learned classroom behaviors, teacher roles, teaching approaches, and cultural factors as reasons for students' silence (Chaiyasat & Intakaew, 2022).

The interview and classroom observation data were analyzed thematically using a reflexive thematic analysis approach. The analysis involved repeated familiarization with the transcripts and field notes, generation of initial codes, construction of potential themes, review and refinement of themes, definition and naming of themes, and production of the final analytical account. Braun and Clarke (2021, 2022) emphasize that thematic analysis is a flexible qualitative method for identifying and interpreting patterned meanings within a dataset, while the quality of the analysis depends on coherence between the research question, data, coding process, and interpretation. In the present study, coding was initially conducted inductively so that barriers could emerge directly from students' accounts and observed classroom interaction. The codes were then compared across interview and observation data and organized into broader themes. Potential themes included psychological barriers, linguistic barriers, peer-related barriers, teacher-related barriers, classroom-environment barriers, instructional barriers, and sociocultural barriers. The researchers continuously compared emerging interpretations with the original transcripts and field notes to ensure that the themes represented participants' experiences rather than researchers' assumptions. This iterative approach is consistent with contemporary guidance on reflexive thematic analysis, which emphasizes that researchers should move repeatedly between data, codes, themes, and interpretations rather than treating analysis as a strictly linear process.

To enhance the credibility of the findings, the study employed methodological triangulation by comparing evidence from classroom observations, audio recordings, field notes, and semi-

structured interviews. Triangulation enabled the researchers to examine whether students' reported reasons for remaining silent were also reflected in their actual classroom behavior. Member checking was conducted by sharing a summary of the emerging interpretations with selected participants and inviting them to clarify or confirm whether the interpretations accurately represented their experiences. An audit trail was also maintained throughout the research process by documenting decisions concerning participant selection, data collection, coding, theme development, and interpretation. These procedures were intended to strengthen the credibility, dependability, and transparency of the qualitative findings. Contemporary guidance on thematic analysis also emphasizes the importance of methodological coherence, reflexivity, transparency, and careful alignment between data and analytical claims when qualitative research is prepared for publication.

Ethical considerations were addressed throughout the study. Participants were informed about the purpose of the research, the voluntary nature of their participation, the procedures for data collection, and their right to withdraw without academic consequences. Informed consent was obtained before classroom observations, audio recording, and interviews were conducted. Participants' names and other identifying information were replaced with pseudonyms or participant codes in the transcripts and research report. The recorded data and interview transcripts were stored securely and were accessible only to the research team. Ethical procedures were particularly important because the study involved students discussing potentially sensitive experiences related to anxiety, confidence, teacher behavior, peer judgment, and classroom participation. The study therefore prioritized participants' privacy, autonomy, and psychological comfort throughout the research process.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of classroom observations, audio recordings, field notes, and semi-structured interviews revealed six major barriers that contributed to Thai EFL students' reluctance to communicate in English: (1) fear of making mistakes, (2) low self-confidence and perceived English proficiency, (3) fear of negative peer evaluation, (4) teacher-related factors, (5) classroom and instructional conditions, and (6) sociocultural expectations. These findings indicate that students' silence was not caused by a single factor but emerged from the interaction of affective, linguistic, interpersonal, pedagogical, and sociocultural conditions. This finding is consistent with previous research in Thailand showing that classroom silence is a multidimensional phenomenon involving teachers, students, classmates, instructional materials, and the classroom environment.

The first and most frequently observed barrier was fear of making mistakes. During classroom observations, several students appeared hesitant to answer questions even when they seemed to understand the teacher's questions. They often paused for several seconds, looked at their classmates before responding, or allowed other students to answer first. Interview data indicated that students were particularly concerned about grammatical errors, pronunciation, and giving incorrect answers in front of their classmates. One participant explained:

"Sometimes I know what I want to say, but I am afraid that my grammar is wrong. When I speak and make a mistake, everyone can hear it, so I prefer to stay quiet. I feel safer when another student answers first." (Participant 3)

Another student reported:

"I usually understand the question, but I need time to make the sentence in my head. If the teacher asks me directly, I become nervous because I think my answer will be wrong." (Participant 7)

This finding suggests that silence can function as a strategy for avoiding potential embarrassment rather than indicating that students lack knowledge or interest. Similar findings have been reported among Thai EFL students, who identified personality, learned classroom behavior, situational factors, and cultural considerations as reasons for remaining silent.

The second barrier concerned low self-confidence and students' perceptions of their English proficiency. Observation data showed that students with limited confidence tended to participate less frequently in whole-class discussions and were more comfortable communicating in pairs or small groups. Some students also relied on Thai before attempting to formulate an English response. Interview findings suggested that students often compared their English ability with that of more proficient classmates, which reduced their willingness to speak. One participant stated:

"I don't think my English is good enough to speak in front of the class. Some of my friends can speak very quickly and use many vocabulary words, while I need more time. Because of that, I usually listen rather than speak." (Participant 5)

This result is consistent with research indicating that learners' perceived competence and confidence are important conditions underlying WTC. Research involving Thai EFL learners has also demonstrated that changes in instructional conditions can influence students' willingness to communicate, suggesting that low WTC may be responsive to classroom practices rather than being a fixed learner characteristic.

The third barrier was fear of negative evaluation from peers. Classroom observations indicated that some students were more willing to communicate during pair and group activities than during whole-class interaction. Students appeared particularly reluctant when they had to answer individually in front of the entire class. Interview participants explained that they were worried about being laughed at, judged, or perceived as less intelligent when they made mistakes. One participant stated:

"I am more comfortable speaking with two or three friends because they understand my English level. But when I have to speak in front of everyone, I become afraid that my friends will laugh if I pronounce a word incorrectly." (Participant 2)

Another participant explained:

"Sometimes I know the answer, but I don't raise my hand because I don't want to be wrong in front of the class. I would rather wait until the teacher asks another student." (Participant 9)

These responses indicate that peer relationships and the perceived social consequences of speaking influence students' WTC. The finding corresponds with previous Thai research showing that students' relationships with classmates and their perceptions of classroom social conditions can contribute to silence.

The fourth barrier involved teacher-related factors. Observation data suggested that students' participation varied according to the teacher's questioning style, response to mistakes, and degree of encouragement. Students were more willing to speak when teachers provided sufficient response time, used supportive feedback, and treated mistakes as part of learning. Conversely, rapid questioning, repeated correction, or an intimidating classroom manner appeared to reduce students' willingness to respond. One participant explained:

"When the teacher is friendly and gives us time to think, I want to answer. But when the teacher asks very quickly and immediately chooses another student, I feel that I cannot speak English well enough." (Participant 4)

Another participant stated:

"I don't mind making mistakes if the teacher explains them kindly. But if the teacher corrects me in front of everyone, sometimes I don't want to speak again." (Participant 8)

This finding supports previous research demonstrating the importance of teacher characteristics in shaping learners' willingness or unwillingness to communicate. Recent research has specifically identified impatient, uninspiring, and intimidating teacher characteristics as potential contributors to L2 unwillingness to communicate.

The fifth barrier was related to classroom environment and instructional practices. Students tended to be more communicative during collaborative activities, pair work, and tasks with familiar topics, whereas teacher-fronted activities and unfamiliar or cognitively demanding topics were associated with greater silence. Field notes also indicated that students sometimes remained silent when classroom activities emphasized correct answers rather than communication. One participant explained:

"I like group activities because I can discuss the answer with my friends before speaking. When the activity is only the teacher asking questions and students answering one by one, I feel more nervous." (Participant 6)

Another participant reported:

"If the topic is familiar, I can speak more easily. When the topic is difficult, I don't know the vocabulary, so I just listen to the teacher and my friends." (Participant 10)

The finding indicates that classroom organization and task design can either facilitate or restrict students' opportunities to communicate. Previous research in Thailand has similarly shown that communicative language teaching can reduce classroom silence, while technology-mediated and differentiated activities have also been found to increase Thai EFL students' WTC.

The final barrier was associated with sociocultural expectations and students' understanding of appropriate classroom behavior. Several participants indicated that they were accustomed to listening to teachers rather than interrupting or voluntarily expressing their opinions. Silence was sometimes viewed as a respectful behavior, particularly when students were uncertain about whether it was appropriate to challenge or question the teacher. One participant stated:

“In my previous classes, we usually listened to the teacher and waited for the teacher to ask us. I don't feel comfortable speaking without being invited because I think it may look disrespectful.” (Participant 1)

Another participant explained:

“Sometimes I want to ask a question, but I think too much about whether it is a good question. I don't want to make the teacher feel that I am challenging them, so I just remain silent.” (Participant 5)

This finding suggests that classroom silence among Thai EFL students may have a sociocultural dimension and should not automatically be interpreted as disengagement. Previous research has similarly shown that Thai students may use silence as a meaningful form of classroom participation, while other studies have identified cultural factors as one of the reasons for students' quiet behavior in English classrooms.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that Thai EFL students' silence is a complex and situational phenomenon. The six identified barriers were interconnected: low confidence increased fear of mistakes, fear of peer judgment intensified anxiety, teacher behavior influenced students' perceptions of classroom safety, and instructional practices determined the extent to which students had meaningful opportunities to communicate. Thus, students who remained silent were not necessarily unwilling to learn English; rather, their silence often represented a response to perceived linguistic, psychological, interpersonal, pedagogical, and sociocultural risks. This interpretation is consistent with previous Thai research showing that silence can be reduced when classroom practices create more supportive opportunities for communication.

Discussion

The findings demonstrate that Thai EFL students' silence is a multidimensional phenomenon rather than a simple indication of low English proficiency or lack of motivation. Six major barriers emerged from the analysis: fear of making mistakes, low self-confidence and perceived proficiency, fear of negative peer evaluation, teacher-related factors, classroom and instructional conditions, and sociocultural expectations. This finding supports the view that willingness to communicate (WTC) is highly situational and shaped by the interaction between learner characteristics and the immediate classroom environment. Rotjanawongchai (2023), for example, found that Thai university students' WTC varied according to interlocutors, topics, perceived proficiency, classroom experiences, and social support. Similarly, research on Thai EFL learners has shown that classroom silence results from the interaction of student, teacher, material, and environmental factors rather than from one isolated cause.

One of the most prominent barriers identified in this study was fear of making mistakes. Students reported that grammatical errors, incorrect answers, and pronunciation problems made them hesitant to speak, particularly when they had to respond in front of the whole class. This finding suggests that students may perceive oral participation as a form of performance in which errors can expose their linguistic limitations to others. The finding is consistent with research showing that speaking anxiety can constrain Thai students' classroom communication. Poolperm and Boonmoh (2024), for instance, found that Thai students experienced speaking anxiety in both onsite and online learning environments, although the nature of the anxiety differed across contexts. More recent research involving

Thai EFL students also reports that speaking anxiety can negatively influence students' willingness to communicate and speaking performance, while communicative tasks can help reduce such anxiety. Thus, the present finding reinforces the importance of creating classroom environments in which errors are treated as a natural part of language development rather than as evidence of failure.

The second important finding concerns low self-confidence and students' perceptions of their English proficiency. Students who perceived their English ability as weaker than that of their classmates tended to participate less frequently, particularly during whole-class interaction. This finding is consistent with Darasawang and Reinders (2021), who demonstrated the relevance of second-language proficiency to learners' WTC and emphasized that proficiency can influence the types of activities and instructional support that teachers provide. It is also consistent with recent research showing that confidence and other affective variables are closely associated with learners' WTC across different communication environments. In the Thai context, Rotjanawongchai (2023) similarly found that students were more willing to communicate when topics were appropriate for their perceived proficiency while still providing an appropriate level of challenge. Therefore, students' silence may partly reflect a mismatch between their perceived linguistic resources and the communicative demands of classroom tasks.

Fear of negative peer evaluation also emerged as a substantial barrier. Students were more comfortable speaking in pairs or small groups than addressing the entire class because smaller groups were perceived as less threatening and more supportive. This finding suggests that WTC is influenced not only by the learner's individual confidence but also by the social consequences that learners associate with speaking. Rotjanawongchai (2023) found that interlocutors, familiarity with interlocutors, foreign-language anxiety, and social support from friends influenced Thai students' WTC. Likewise, recent research on foreign-language learners indicates that classroom peers and social relationships can affect learners' willingness or unwillingness to communicate. The present finding therefore suggests that collaborative activities may provide a psychologically safer environment in which students can rehearse ideas before participating in larger classroom discussions.

Teacher-related factors constituted another important source of students' unwillingness to communicate. The findings indicate that students were more willing to speak when teachers provided sufficient thinking time, encouragement, and supportive responses to mistakes, whereas rapid questioning, excessive correction, or intimidating behavior discouraged participation. This finding is strongly supported by recent research specifically examining teachers as potential "silencers" of foreign-language learners. The study identified three teacher profiles associated with unwillingness to communicate: impatient, uninspiring, and intimidating teachers. These findings are particularly relevant because they demonstrate that teacher behavior can directly influence learners' perceptions of communicative safety. Therefore, improving students' WTC requires not only learner-focused interventions but also attention to teachers' interactional practices, feedback strategies, and classroom discourse.

The findings concerning classroom environment and instructional practices further demonstrate that WTC is sensitive to the organization of classroom interaction. Students preferred pair work, group activities, familiar topics, and communicative tasks because these activities reduced the pressure associated with individual public performance. In contrast, teacher-fronted questioning and activities emphasizing correct answers were associated with greater silence. This finding corresponds closely with Hongboontri et al. (2021), whose

qualitative study in a Thai EFL classroom identified the teacher, students and classmates, teaching materials and content, and classroom environment as interconnected causes of silence. It is also consistent with recent Thai research showing that communicative tasks can reduce speaking anxiety while improving students' speaking performance. Thus, classroom silence may be reduced when instructional activities provide students with meaningful opportunities to negotiate meaning, collaborate with peers, and communicate without excessive emphasis on linguistic accuracy.

The final finding, concerning sociocultural expectations, provides an important explanation for why silence should not automatically be interpreted as disengagement. Some students reported that they were accustomed to listening to teachers, waiting to be invited to speak, and avoiding behavior that might be perceived as challenging or disrespectful. This finding is consistent with recent scholarship on Thai EFL education, which identifies cultural norms such as *kreng jai*, hierarchical teacher-student relationships, examination-oriented instruction, and teacher preparedness as factors related to classroom silence. Earlier qualitative research also demonstrated that Thai students may remain silent because of personality, learned classroom behaviors, situational factors, teacher roles, teaching approaches, and cultural factors. Consequently, silence needs to be interpreted within its sociocultural context rather than automatically categorized as a negative classroom behavior.

An important implication of these findings is that Thai students' silence should be understood as both a psychological and interactional phenomenon. A student may know the answer but remain silent because of anxiety; anxiety may be intensified by the presence of highly proficient peers; peer evaluation may become more threatening when the teacher requires individual public responses; and these factors may be further influenced by culturally established expectations about appropriate student behavior. This interconnectedness is consistent with the broader WTC literature, which conceptualizes communication readiness as emerging from the interaction of individual, interpersonal, and situational factors. The Thai qualitative literature likewise emphasizes that WTC-related factors overlap rather than operate independently.

Overall, the findings suggest that addressing Thai EFL students' silence requires a shift from asking "Why do students not speak?" to asking "What classroom conditions make students feel able and willing to speak?" Teachers can potentially increase WTC by providing low-risk speaking opportunities, using pair and small-group interaction before whole-class participation, allowing sufficient planning time, selecting appropriately challenging topics, responding constructively to errors, and developing a classroom atmosphere characterized by psychological safety and peer support. Recent evidence from Thailand supports this pedagogical direction: communicative tasks have been shown to reduce speaking anxiety and improve speaking performance, while qualitative research emphasizes the importance of supportive classroom conditions and social relationships for WTC. Therefore, the present study contributes to EFL teaching and classroom discourse research by showing that Thai students' silence is not simply a learner deficit but a context-dependent response shaped by affective, linguistic, interpersonal, pedagogical, and sociocultural conditions.

4. CONCLUSION

The findings indicate that Thai EFL students' silence during English classroom interaction is a complex and situational phenomenon influenced by multiple interconnected factors. Six major barriers were identified: fear of making mistakes, low self-confidence and perceived

English proficiency, fear of negative peer evaluation, teacher-related factors, classroom and instructional conditions, and sociocultural expectations. These barriers interact with one another, creating situations in which students may understand the learning content but still choose not to speak. The findings also show that silence should not always be interpreted as a lack of motivation or disengagement because some students perceive silence as an appropriate way to participate, maintain classroom harmony, or avoid embarrassment. Therefore, EFL teachers should create psychologically safe learning environments through supportive feedback, sufficient thinking time, pair and group activities, familiar and appropriately challenging topics, and opportunities for low-risk communication. Such practices may reduce students' anxiety and increase their willingness to communicate in English.

Ethical considerations

Prior to data collection, formal permission was obtained from the relevant university authorities in Thailand. All participants provided informed consent and participated voluntarily, with the right to withdraw at any time. Participants' identities were anonymized, and all collected data were kept confidential and used solely for research purposes. The researchers ensured participants' privacy, autonomy, and psychological comfort throughout the study.

Statement on the Use of Artificial Intelligence

The authors acknowledge the use of artificial intelligence (AI)-assisted tools during the preparation of this manuscript. AI was used solely to support language editing, grammatical correction, sentence refinement, and improvement of the clarity and readability of the manuscript. AI tools were not used to generate, fabricate, alter, or manipulate research data, interview responses, classroom observation records, coding results, themes, or research findings. All qualitative data analysis, thematic interpretation, verification of findings, and scholarly conclusions were conducted and critically reviewed by the authors. The authors take full responsibility for the accuracy, integrity, originality, and final content of the manuscript.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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