

Research Article

Addressing the “Silent Classroom”: A theoretical perspective on language anxiety and communicative readiness among Vietnamese primary learners

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Abstract

This paper presents a comprehensive theoretical perspective on the complex interplay between Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety (FLCA) and Willingness to Communicate (WTC) within the landscape of Vietnamese primary education. Amidst the nationwide implementation of the 2018 General Education Program, the pervasive phenomenon of the “silent classroom” has emerged as a critical pedagogical challenge, where learners possess linguistic knowledge but lack the psychological readiness to engage in discourse.

Drawing upon a multi-dimensional synthesis of Krashen’s (1982) Affective Filter Hypothesis, Horwitz et al.’s (1986) tripartite construct of FLCA, and MacIntyre et al.’s (1998) Heuristic Model of WTC, this article analyzes how socio-cultural stressors specifically the collectivist imperative of “face-saving” and the fear of peer evaluation-act as psychological blockades. The study demonstrates that high levels of state anxiety effectively thicken the affective filter, causing a situational collapse of the WTC pyramid at the communicative antecedent level.

To address these barriers, the paper proposes a localized conceptual framework for pedagogical interventions, including the cultivation of “mistake-friendly” environments, gamification, and the strategic use of recasts. By establishing this robust theoretical foundation, the study provides a strategic roadmap for future empirical investigations including longitudinal and parental influence studies and offers actionable strategies for educators to transform the “silent classroom” into a dynamic, “low filter” environment conducive to natural language acquisition.

Keywords

Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety (FLCA), Willingness to Communicate (WTC), Affective Filter, Vietnamese Primary Education, Socio-cultural Stressors, Pedagogical Interventions.

1. Introduction

1.1. Contextual rationale

In the globalized landscape of 21st century education, English proficiency has transitioned from an elective advantage to a mandatory core competence. In Vietnam, this

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strategic shift is formalized through the 2018 General Education Program, which mandates English instruction as a compulsory subject starting from Grade 3. The period between ages 6 and 11 is widely recognized in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) research as the “golden age” for language development. This window of opportunity is characterized by high neurological plasticity and an inherent capacity for phonetic mimicry (Pinter, 2017). However, the transition of young learners into a formal academic environment introduces complex emotional variables. While the curriculum aims for communicative competence, the psychological readiness of the child often determines whether these educational goals are met or stifled.

1.2. The “Silent Classroom” phenomenon

Despite significant institutional investment and curriculum reform, a pervasive paradox persists in Vietnamese primary schools: the “silent classroom”. Many learners, despite possessing foundational linguistic knowledge, exhibit a profound reluctance to engage in spontaneous verbal interaction. This research argues that such silence is not merely a linguistic deficit or a lack of aptitude but a complex psychological manifestation.

According to Krashen’s (1982) affective filter hypothesis, emotional barriers most notably anxiety act as a psychological screen that blocks the processing of comprehensible input. In the Vietnamese context, this leads to a state of “communicative paralysis”, where the fear of performance outweighs the drive for expression. This silence is often reinforced by an accuracy-oriented tradition that penalizes errors, thereby raising the “filter” and preventing the internalization of the language.

1.3. Problem statement and objectives

While empirical research on foreign language classroom anxiety (FLCA) and willingness to communicate (WTC) is abundant regarding adult and tertiary learners, there is a conspicuous scarcity of theoretical frameworks specifically tailored to the Vietnamese primary education sector. Existing studies often fail to account for the unique socio-cultural stressors, such as the collectivist pressure of “saving face”, which deeply impact young learners’ psychological safety.

To address this gap, this theoretical paper aims to:

1. Synthesize the foundational theories of Horwitz et al. (1986) and MacIntyre et al. (1998) to provide a multi-layered explanation for communicative avoidance in children.
2. Analyze the socio-cultural stressors unique to the Vietnamese collectivist classroom, focusing on how peer evaluation and “face” influence the affective filter.
3. Propose a comprehensive pedagogical framework encompassing gamification, recasts, and “mistake-friendly”

environments designed to lower psychological barriers and stabilize the WTC pyramid.

By establishing this theoretical foundation, the paper seeks to provide educators and policy makers with a roadmap to transform the “silent classroom” into a dynamic space of confident linguistic engagement.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1. Krashen’s affective filter hypothesis: The gatekeeper

Stephen Krashen’s (1982) affective filter hypothesis remains one of the most influential theoretical constructs in second language acquisition (SLA), particularly in understanding why some learners fail to acquire a language despite being exposed to high quality instruction. Krashen posits that the success of language acquisition is not solely determined by cognitive ability or the quality of “comprehensible input” but is heavily mediated by an emotional “gatekeeper” known as the affective filter.

2.1.1. The mechanism of the filter

The hypothesis suggests that for acquisition to occur, input must reach the Language Acquisition Device (LAD) the internal mental structure responsible for processing language. However, the Affective Filter can act as a psychological screen that blocks this input. According to Krashen (1982, 1985), the filter is influenced by three primary emotional variables:

1. Anxiety: High levels of personal or classroom related stress.
2. Motivation: A lack of desire or perceived need to acquire the language.
3. Self-confidence: Low self-esteem or a negative self-image as a learner.

When a student is anxious or lacks confidence, the filter is “up” (high filter), causing the learner to be “off the defensive”. In this state, even if the student understands the message, the input does not reach the LAD, and acquisition is effectively stalled. Conversely, when the filter is “down” (low filter), the learner is “on the offensive”, and the input can be internalized and transformed into acquired competence.

2.1.2. Application to the Vietnamese primary context

In the context of Vietnamese primary education, particularly under the 2018 General Education Program, the “silent classroom” can be interpreted as a manifestation of a “High Affective Filter”. For young learners aged 6-11, the transition to formal English instruction often occurs in a

high-stakes environment where accuracy is prioritized over fluency.

Vietnamese cultural norms, which emphasize social harmony and the avoidance of “losing face”, often inadvertently trigger the filter. As Garton and Copland (2019) note, young learners are particularly sensitive to the social atmosphere of the classroom. In a high-pressure environment where mistakes are viewed as failures rather than learning opportunities, the child’s filter rises as a protective shield. Consequently, the goal of pedagogical interventions in Vietnam must not only be to provide comprehensible input but, more crucially, to “lower the filter” by creating a supportive, “mistake-friendly” atmosphere. Only by neutralizing these psychological barriers can the linguistic input provided by educators effectively reach the students’ LAD.

2.2. Foreign language classroom anxiety (FLCA)

While general second language acquisition (SLA) research has long acknowledged the presence of emotional barriers, Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986) were the first to identify Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety (FLCA) as a “conceptually distinct variable”. They argue that FLA is not merely a transfer of other anxieties such as test or social anxiety to the language classroom, but rather a “distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors” that arises specifically from the unique demands of language learning.

For primary learners, who are still developing their cognitive and social identities, this anxiety often manifests as a “mental block” that impedes performance despite high levels of motivation or linguistic potential. According to Horwitz et al. (1986), FLCA is structured upon three psychological pillars that are particularly relevant to the “silent classroom” observed in Vietnamese primary education:

- **Communication apprehension:** This is a type of shyness characterized by a fear of communicating with others. In a foreign language setting, this is exacerbated because students are forced to communicate through a medium in which they possess only “limited facility”. For young learners, the knowledge that they will likely have difficulty understanding others or making themselves understood creates a “receiver anxiety” that leads to reticence.
- **Fear of negative evaluation:** This component involves apprehension about others’ evaluations and the expectation that one will be judged poorly. In the Vietnamese context, this is deeply intertwined with the cultural concept of “saving face”, where linguistic errors are perceived as social failures

rather than developmental milestones. Because language learning requires continual evaluation by the teacher the only fluent speaker in the room, students become acutely sensitive to real or imagined judgments from both the instructor and their peers.

- **Test Anxiety:** Stemming from a fear of failure, test-anxious students often impose unrealistic demands of “perfection” upon themselves. In primary classrooms where high cultural importance is attached to examinations as a reflection of “diligence and effort,” even the brightest students may “freeze” or “go blank” during oral exercises or formal assessments.

Application to the Vietnamese “silent classroom” The synthesis of these components suggests that the “silent classroom” in Vietnam is primarily driven by the fear of negative evaluation. As young learners transition into formal education, the pressure to maintain “face” and meet parental expectations regarding grades (test anxiety) thickens the affective filter. This filter, as conceptualized by Krashen, makes students unreceptive to input and inhibits the utilization of whatever fluency they have managed to acquire. Consequently, the anxious learner may appear indifferent or unprepared, when in reality, they are employing avoidance behaviors to alleviate the subjective tension of the classroom environment

2.3. Willingness to communicate (WTC)

In the field of second language acquisition (SLA), willingness to communicate (WTC) is a pivotal construct that encapsulates the likelihood of an individual initiating communication when given the opportunity. MacIntyre et al. (1998) defined L2 WTC as “a readiness to enter into discourse at a particular time with a specific person or persons, using a L2”. To illustrate the complex interplay of factors influencing this behavioral intention, they developed a Heuristic Model of WTC, depicted as a six-layered pyramid.

2.3.1. The hierarchical interaction of Anxiety and WTC

MacIntyre’s WTC pyramid model: the path to action to understand how anxiety translates into silence, we employ MacIntyre et al.’s (1998) heuristic model of willingness to communicate (WTC).

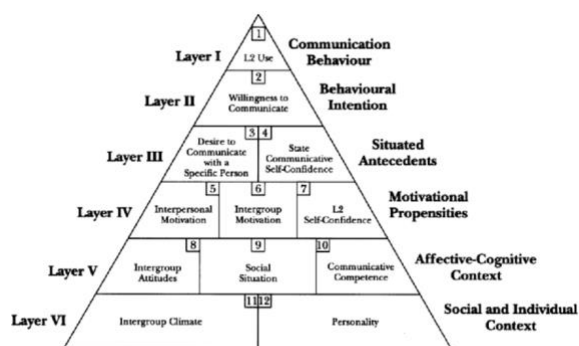


Figure 1: Heuristic model of variables influencing WTC

The WTC pyramid distinguishes between enduring influences (Layers IV-VI), which are stable personality and social traits, and situational influences (Layers I-III), which represent transient states at a given moment.

- Layer III (Situational Antecedents): This layer includes state communicative self-confidence, which is the immediate feeling of being able to communicate effectively.
- The Impact of FLCA: Horwitz et al.'s (1986) construct of state anxiety directly attacks this situational layer. When a student experiences high anxiety, it diminishes their momentary self-confidence, creating a psychological barrier that prevents the progression from "desire to speak" to the actual "act of communication".

2.3.2. WTC and the Vietnamese "silent classroom"

In the Vietnamese English as a foreign language (EFL) context, the interaction between FLCA and WTC is particularly acute.

- Socio-cultural constraints: Traditional Vietnamese classroom norms, characterized by collectivist orientations and a high value on "face-saving," often act as enduring distal influences (Layer VI) that predispose learners to silence.
- Situational collapse: Despite possessing foundational linguistic knowledge (Layer IV), Vietnamese primary learners often experience a collapse of the WTC pyramid at Layer III. The fear of negative evaluation, a core component of Horwitz's FLCA-triggers an elevated Affective Filter, leading to communicative paralysis.
- Exam-driven pressure: The accuracy-focused nature of the Vietnamese educational system reinforces test anxiety, which further suppresses a child's spontaneous WTC by shifting their focus from "meaningful interaction" to "linguistic

perfection".

Synthesis of the path to action consequently, the "silent classroom" in Vietnam is not merely a linguistic deficit but a result of state anxiety overwhelming the situational antecedents of WTC. Understanding this dynamic is crucial for educators; rather than solely focusing on linguistic drills the base of the pyramid, pedagogical interventions must target the lowering of anxiety at the situational level (Layer III) to trigger actual L2 use (Layer I).

2.4. Synthesis of the theoretical framework: The anatomy of the silent classroom

The phenomenon of the "silent classroom" in Vietnamese primary English education can be understood through a hierarchical integration of the three theories. While each theory offers a unique lens, their intersection reveals a systematic psychological blockade that prevents young learners from transitioning from "knowing" to "speaking."

2.4.1. The Interplay of Filter and Anxiety

The relationship begins with Krashen's (1982) affective filter. For the filter to be "down," a learner must feel safe and confident. However, in the Vietnamese context, the specific components of Horwitz et al.'s (1986) FLCA act as the primary triggers that pull the filter "up." Specifically, the fear of negative evaluation-rooted in the socio-cultural necessity of "saving face"- thickens the psychological screen. When a child perceives the classroom as a high-stakes environment where errors lead to social embarrassment, the affective filter becomes an impermeable barrier. This ensures that even high-quality comprehensible input is rejected before it can reach the language acquisition device (LAD), leading to a deficit in acquired competence.

2.4.2. From psychological blockade to communicative silence

The transition from internal anxiety to external silence is best explained by MacIntyre et al.'s (1998) WTC Pyramid. The "silent classroom" occurs when the pyramid collapses at Layer III (Situational Antecedents). Under the influence of high FLCA (Horwitz), the student's state communicative self-confidence evaporates.

According to the heuristic model, WTC is a "volitional process" (MacIntyre, 2007). In the Vietnamese primary classroom, even if a student has the enduring motivation to learn (Layer IV), the immediate presence of communication apprehension and fear of negative evaluation overrides that motivation. The result is a failure to reach Layer II (Intent to Speak), ultimately manifesting as the physical silence at layer I (L2 Use).

2.4.3. The integrated model

This paper proposes that the “silent classroom” is a state of communicative paralysis where:

1. Cultural stressors (saving face or Confucian heritage) fuel FLCA (Horwitz).
2. FLCA raises the affective filter (Krashen), blocking the internalization of language.
3. The resulting lack of confidence causes a collapse in the WTC Pyramid (MacIntyre) at the situational level.

Therefore, breaking the silence in Vietnamese classrooms requires a dual approach: providing comprehensible input while simultaneously utilizing pedagogical interventions to dismantle the anxiety-driven filter, thereby stabilizing the WTC pyramid for young learners.

To provide a structured overview of the theoretical foundations underpinning this study, Table 1 summarizes the seminal works that define the relationship between affective variables and communicative behavior.

Table 1: Summary of key influential studies on FLCA and WTC

Author(s) & Year	Key research focus	Major findings & contributions to the current paper
Krashen (1982)	Affective filter hypothesis	Introduced the “filter” concept: anxiety, low motivation, and lack of confidence block language acquisition. <i>Basis for our “Gatekeeper” concept.</i>
Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope (1986)	Conceptualization of FLCA	Identified three pillars of FLCA: Communication apprehension, Test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation. <i>Basis for our anxiety framework.</i>
MacIntyre et al. (1998)	Heuristic model of WTC	Developed the 6-layer pyramid model, distinguishing between enduring traits and situational triggers. <i>Basis for our communicative readiness model.</i>
Yashima (2002)	WTC in Asian EFL Context	Found that “International Posture” and L2 confidence significantly predict WTC in collectivist cultures. <i>Supports our</i>

		<i>socio-cultural analysis.</i>
Pinter (2017)	Teaching young learners	Highlighted that children (6-11) have unique social-ego vulnerabilities compared to adults. <i>Supports our focus on primary education.</i>
Viet, Loi, & Mai (2025)	WTC trends in Vietnam	A systematic review showing that WTC research in Vietnam is fragmented and lacks focus on young learners. <i>Identifies the “research gap” our paper fills.</i>

2.5. Proposed conceptual framework for empirical validation

Based on the preceding synthesis of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) theories, this paper proposes an integrated conceptual framework (see figure 2) designed to serve as a structural foundation for future empirical investigation. The model positions Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety (FLCA) as the primary antecedent of Willingness to Communicate (WTC), with the Affective Filter acting as the critical mediating variable that governs the transition from psychological state to communicative action.

2.5.1. The direct paths: From anxiety to the filter

In this model, the three psychological pillars identified by Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986)-communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and test anxiety-are hypothesized to exert a direct positive influence on the “strength” or density of the Affective Filter (Krashen, 1982). Within the Vietnamese primary context, the “fear of negative evaluation” is expected to be the most potent predictor, as the socio-cultural pressure of “saving face” significantly heightens a child’s self-consciousness. As these anxiety components intensify, they trigger a “high” filter state, effectively creating a mental blockade that prevents linguistic input from being processed and converted into acquired competence.

2.5.2. The mediating role of the affective filter

The framework suggests that the affective filter serves as more than just a barrier to input; it acts as a mediator that destabilizes the WTC Pyramid (MacIntyre et al., 1998). When the filter is “high,” it undermines the “situated antecedents” at Layer III of the pyramid-specifically, state communicative self-confidence. This theoretical trajectory posits that even if a student possesses high underlying motivation (Layer IV),

the immediate presence of a thick Affective Filter causes a situational collapse of the pyramid. This prevents the learner from forming the “intention to communicate” (Layer II), ultimately resulting in the observed communicative silence (Layer I).

2.5.3. Implications for quantitative modeling

By operationalizing these constructs, this framework provides a roadmap for future quantitative research. The proposed paths between these variables can be statistically validated using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM). Such an approach would allow researchers to measure the specific “path coefficients” to determine which aspect of anxiety (e.g., peer evaluation vs. test pressure) contributes most significantly to the “silent classroom” in Vietnam.

Ultimately, this model suggests that the silence observed in Vietnamese classrooms is not a permanent trait of the learners but a measurable outcome of emotional mediation. Consequently, any intervention aimed at increasing L2 use must first address the strength of the affective filter by mitigating the specific anxiety components that trigger it.

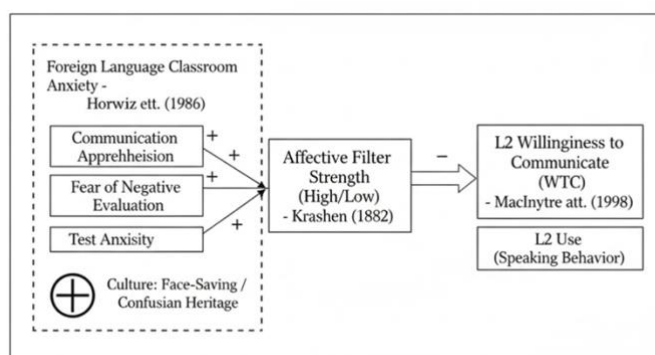


Figure 2: Proposed conceptual framework for empirical validation

3. EXPECTED OUTCOMES AND SOCIO-CULTURAL ANALYSIS

The respondents participated in this study are described. As this study proposes a conceptual framework for addressing the “silent classroom”, the following anticipated outcomes are derived from a synthesis of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) theories and the socio-cultural specificities of the Vietnamese educational context.

3.1. The anticipated negative correlation: FLCA and WTC

The primary expectation of this framework is a significant negative correlation between Foreign Language Classroom

Anxiety (FLCA) and Willingness to Communicate (WTC). Drawing from MacIntyre et al.’s (1998) heuristic model, it is hypothesized that higher levels of state anxiety will lead to a situational collapse of the WTC pyramid at Layer III.

As children transition from lower primary (Grades 1-2) to upper primary (Grades 3-5), this framework anticipates a developmental increase in anxiety. While younger learners typically possess a lower Affective Filter due to a primary focus on play and imitation, older children experience heightened self-consciousness regarding linguistic accuracy. This shift is expected to thicken Krashen’s (1982) Affective Filter, resulting in a quantifiable decrease in spontaneous L2 use as the perceived psychological risk of speaking begins to outweigh the drive for acquisition.

Recent empirical evidence in the Vietnamese context further supports this theoretical anticipation. For instance, Viet et al. (2025) highlighted that WTC among Vietnamese learners remains constrained by deeply rooted socio-cultural anxieties. Similarly, a study by Tran and Nguyen (2024) on primary learners confirmed a significant negative correlation between performance anxiety and oral participation, specifically noting that the dread of peer judgment often leads to communicative withdrawal. Furthermore, Nguyen (2024) demonstrated that while anxiety levels are inherently high in accuracy-focused classrooms, targeted interventions like gamification can effectively mitigate these barriers. These contemporary findings underscore the urgency of transitioning toward the “mistake-friendly” environments proposed in this framework.

3.2. Peer evaluation as the dominant socio-cultural stressor

A core theoretical proposition of this study is that the “fear of negative evaluation” (Horwitz et al., 1986) emerges as the most potent inhibitor of communication in the Vietnamese primary context, often surpassing teacher-related anxiety or test-driven pressure. In Vietnam’s collectivist society, the concept of “face” is not merely a personal preference but a critical component of social identity and familial honor. For young learners, this cultural mandate is compounded by specific developmental vulnerabilities.

According to Piaget (1932), children aged 6 to 11 are in the “concrete operational” stage, a period characterized by a significant transition from egocentrism to “sociocentrism”. As children develop the capacity for decentration, they become acutely aware of social norms and the perspectives of others. This cognitive evolution makes them hypersensitive to peer perception; a linguistic error in the L2 is no longer perceived as a private learning step but as a public threat to their social standing. This sensitivity is further explained by Vygotsky’s (1978) socio-cultural theory, which posits that a child’s self-esteem is fundamentally mediated by social validation

within their Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). In the Vietnamese classroom, public correction or peer mockery acts as a “socio-emotional blockade” that disrupts the ZPD. When the fear of social shaming outweighs the desire for interaction, the child’s “social ego” (Pinter, 2017) triggers a defensive withdrawal.

Consequently, the “silent classroom” in Vietnam should be interpreted as a strategic defense mechanism. Unlike adult learners who may possess the metacognitive tools to rationalize linguistic errors, primary students prioritize peer acceptance above all. By remaining silent, they effectively avoid the risk of social shaming and “losing face”. This reinforces the argument that Willingness to Communicate (WTC) in the Vietnamese primary context is a socially mediated construct, heavily dependent on the perceived psychological safety of the peer environment rather than just individual linguistic competence.

3.3. Impact of the 2018 General Education Program on WTC

The implementation of the 2018 General Education Program in Vietnam marks a significant shift from a grammar-translation approach to a communicative-oriented paradigm. However, this framework anticipates a “pedagogical lag” where the structural pressure to meet these new, rigorous standards may inadvertently exacerbate test anxiety among young learners. While the policy encourages active participation, the reality in many Vietnamese classrooms remains accuracy-centered, a factor that Viet et al. (2025) identify as a major constraint on students' spontaneous Willingness to Communicate (WTC).

Recent empirical evidence suggests that without addressing the internal emotional state of the learner, policy-driven curriculum changes may fail to break the silence. For instance, Tran and Nguyen (2024) observed that despite the communicative goals of the new curriculum, primary students still exhibit high levels of anxiety when faced with formal oral assessments, which they perceive as high-stakes events. This paradox suggests that the transition to a communicative curriculum can inadvertently thicken the affective filter (Krashen, 1982) if the assessment methods remain traditional and punitive.

Furthermore, Le and Pham (2023) emphasize that the success of the 2018 program is highly dependent on the teacher’s ability to act as a “psychological facilitator”. Classrooms that fail to adopt the “mistake-friendly” environments proposed in this study are expected to exhibit significantly lower WTC scores. This highlights a critical theoretical outcome: linguistic competence alone, as mandated by the new standards, is insufficient to trigger L2 use. Without a localized pedagogical strategy to lower anxiety, the “silent classroom” will likely persist as a strategic defense

mechanism against the increased performance pressure of the new national curriculum.

4. PROPOSED PEDAGOGICAL INTERVENTIONS

To mitigate the “silent classroom” phenomenon, this paper proposes a multi-dimensional pedagogical framework. These interventions are specifically designed to dismantle the psychological blockade by lowering the Affective Filter (Krashen, 1982) and stabilizing the situational layers of the WTC pyramid (MacIntyre et al., 1998) within the Vietnamese cultural context.

4.1. Cultivating a “mistake-friendly” classroom ecosystem

Foundational intervention requires a shift in classroom management from an accuracy-centered to a communication-centered paradigm. In the Vietnamese context, where the fear of “losing face” is a primary trigger for fear of negative evaluation (Horwitz et al., 1986), educators must de-emphasize linguistic perfectionism.

By reframing errors as “developmental milestones” rather than social failures, teachers can protect the child’s emerging social ego. This approach reduces the perceived psychological risk of participation, effectively lowering the affective filter and allowing students to move from silence to experimentation.

4.2. Gamification and storytelling as affective distractors

For learners in the 6-11 age bracket, cognitive development and engagement are inextricably linked to play and narrative immersion. This framework proposes the systematic integration of Gamification (the use of game-design elements in non-game contexts) and Storytelling as “affective distractors” to mitigate the “silent classroom” phenomenon.

4.2.1. The mechanism of affective distraction

According to the principles of Krashen’s (1982) affective filter, a high-anxiety state forces the learner to focus excessively on linguistic form and the social risk of error. Gamification and storytelling act as “affective distractors” by shifting the learner’s cognitive resources away from self-monitoring and toward the achievement of communicative or narrative goals. When students are immersed in a competitive game or a compelling narrative, they enter a state of “flow” a psychological state where the challenge of the task matches the learner’s skill level, leading

to intense focus and a loss of self-consciousness (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990).

4.2.2. Bypassing communication apprehension

This immersion effectively bypasses the communication apprehension identified by Horwitz et al. (1986). In a gamified environment, the “penalty” for an error is often localized within the game mechanics (e.g., losing a point or a turn) rather than being perceived as a personal or social failure. This lowers the perceived stakes of interaction.

From the perspective of MacIntyre et al.’s (1998) WTC pyramid, gamification provides the essential “situational antecedents” required at Layer III. By creating a playful and safe context, these methods foster an immediate sense of state communicative self-confidence. As the learner becomes more concerned with the outcome of the game or the progression of the story than with the judgment of their peers, the “fear of negative evaluation” is marginalized, thereby facilitating spontaneous L2 use and sustainable communicative readiness.

4.3. Strategic utilization of recasts and implicit feedback

To maintain communicative momentum without triggering test anxiety, educators should prioritize recasts, the implicit correction of a student’s error by repeating the correct form within the flow of conversation.

Unlike explicit, interruptive correction, which can heighten the affective filter and cause a student to “freeze”, recasts provide comprehensible input in a non-threatening manner. This strategy adheres to Krashen’s (1982) principle of maintaining a low-anxiety environment while ensuring the learner receives the correct linguistic model, thus sustaining the student’s willingness to continue the discourse.

4.4. Small -group collaborative learning: The “safe harbor”

High-anxiety students often suffer from the “spotlight effect” in whole-class settings, where the pressure of peer evaluation is at its peak. This paper proposes a transition toward small-group and pair-work collaborative learning.

These micro-environments serve as a “safe harbor” (Viet et al., 2025). Within these smaller clusters, peer support replaces peer pressure, allowing students to rehearse their linguistic output in a low-stakes setting. By reducing the number of potential “judges”, the fear of negative evaluation is diluted, providing the necessary situational self-confidence for students to eventually share their ideas with the larger class.

5. CONCLUSION

This theoretical paper has explored the intricate relationship between foreign language classroom anxiety (FLCA) and willingness to communicate (WTC) within the specific landscape of Vietnamese primary education. By synthesizing the foundational theories of Krashen (1982), Horwitz et al. (1986), and MacIntyre et al. (1998), this study identifies the “Silent Classroom” not as a lack of linguistic aptitude, but as a complex psychological byproduct of socio-cultural stressors. Specifically, the cultural imperative of “saving face” and an ingrained, accuracy-oriented pedagogical tradition create a heightened affective filter that paralyzes communicative intent.

The integrated framework proposed here suggests that unlocking the communicative potential of young learners aged 6-11 requires a fundamental shift in instructional priorities. Rather than increasing academic rigor or mechanical drills, the path to breaking the silence lies in the strategic lowering of emotional barriers. The analysis demonstrates that when the fear of negative evaluation is mitigated, the situational layers of the WTC pyramid stabilize, allowing acquired competence to manifest as spontaneous speech.

In light of the 2018 General Education Program, it is imperative for Vietnamese educators to transition from traditional authority figures to “psychological facilitators”. By fostering classroom ecosystems rooted in play, collaboration, and supportive feedback, teachers can dismantle the anxiety-driven blockade. Ultimately, this paper argues that creating a “mistake-friendly” environment is not merely a soft pedagogical choice, but a theoretical necessity for ensuring that the next generation of Vietnamese learners can engage with the English language naturally, confidently, and effectively.

6. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

6.1. Theoretical scope and empirical boundaries

As a conceptual and proposal-oriented paper, the primary limitation of this work is the absence of immediate empirical data. The synthesized framework and the hypothesized negative correlation between foreign language classroom anxiety (FLCA) and willingness to communicate (WTC) remain theoretical until verified through rigorous field research. Furthermore, while this paper addresses the Vietnamese context broadly, it does not account for the potential socio-economic disparities between urban and rural educational settings, which may influence the intensity of the “silent classroom” phenomenon.

6.2. Variables for future empirical investigation

To transition from this theoretical foundation to empirical validation, future research should prioritize the following variables within the Vietnamese primary EFL landscape:

- The dimension of parental influence: Given the collectivist and high-achievement orientation of Vietnamese society, future studies should investigate how parental expectations contribute to the “test anxiety” component of FLCA. Understanding the pressure from the home environment is crucial for a holistic view of the child’s affective filter.
- Longitudinal shifts in psychological barriers: There is a critical need for longitudinal observations to track how the Affective filter thickens as students’ progress. Comparative studies between the playful, low-stakes environment of Grade 1 and the high-stakes, assessment-driven environment of Grade 5 would provide valuable insights into the “critical period” where WTC begins to decline.
- The role of digital interventions (EdTech): Future research should explore whether educational technology can serve as a “low-anxiety medium.” Investigating how AI-driven speaking assistants or gamified platforms bypass the fear of negative evaluation-by providing a non-judgmental interlocutor-could offer new pathways to stabilize the WTC pyramid for anxious learners.

Regional comparative analysis: Field research should be conducted across diverse geographical regions to determine if localized cultural nuances or differing access to resources significantly alter the impact of psychological barriers on communicative readiness.

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