

**FACTORS INFLUENCING STUDENTS' LOW PARTICIPATION IN ELT CLASSROOMS:
A QUALITATIVE CASE STUDY OF SEMESTER 4 ENGLISH LANGUAGE EDUCATION STUDENTS**

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Abstract

Classroom engagement is commonly acknowledged as a critical component of effective English language acquisition; however, many tertiary-level ELT classrooms in Indonesia remain dominated by student quiet and inactivity. This qualitative case study looks at the variables that contribute to low classroom involvement among Semester 4A English Language Education students at FKIP Universitas Islam Riau. Data were collected using a descriptive qualitative case study design, with an essay-based open-ended questionnaire distributed via Google Forms to ten participants. The questionnaire covered eight indicators from constructivism, active learning theory, classroom participation research, participatory learning environment theory, and self-determination theory. The data were analyzed via Miles and Huberman's interactive qualitative analysis approach, which included data condensation, data presentation, and conclusion drawing/verification. The findings show that students' low participation is caused by a combination of internal and external factors: psychological barriers such as fear of making mistakes, anxiety, and low self-confidence; limited English proficiency in vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation; social pressure due to peer judgment; and external conditions such as lecturers' teaching strategies and classroom environment. The majority of participants felt that participatory, encouraging, and nonjudgmental teaching techniques enhanced their desire to communicate, whereas one-way, lecture-dominated training encouraged inactivity. A lower proportion of students appeared unaffected by social pressure or language barriers, suggesting that individual personality moderates the impact of these variables. The study finds that addressing low participation necessitates a comprehensive approach that affects both educational techniques and the psychological atmosphere of the classroom. Pedagogical implications include using collaborative and error-tolerant learning activities to help students feel more competent in English language courses.

Keywords: *classroom participation; ELT; qualitative case study; English language education; student passivity*

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1. INTRODUCTION

Classroom involvement is widely recognized as one of the most crucial components of effective learning, especially in English language training. Students who actively participate in classroom interaction develop not only linguistic skills but also critical thinking, confidence, and communicative abilities that are useful in real-world settings. However, the reality in many ELT classrooms, particularly at the tertiary level in Indonesia, paints a quite different picture:

students are frequently passive, unable to ask questions, express ideas, or participate in collaborative debate.

Low involvement is more than just a behavioral issue; it reflects underlying psychological, educational, and environmental variables. Students' silence in class may be due to a fear of making mistakes and being mocked by others, a lack of confidence in their English proficiency, insufficient motivation, or the absence of a learning environment that values student voice and agency. When these challenges are not addressed, they not only impede individual academic progress but also reduce the general quality of classroom engagement and instructional efficacy.

This issue is especially important for English language training at FKIP Universitas Islam Riau. Students who want to be English teachers must not only learn the language but also demonstrate and practice active, communicative involvement. Preliminary observations and informal interactions with lecturers, however, show that passive behavior during class discussions, limited voluntary responses, and avoidance of teacher-initiated involvement are frequent in many courses, including semester 4A.

This scenario necessitates a detailed and comprehensive qualitative analysis. Understanding why students choose not to participate, as well as the structural, social, and psychological factors that contribute to their inactivity, is critical for building learning environments that promote participation, diversity, and meaningful language use. This study is thus positioned as an attempt to give voice to students' own experiences and perspectives, with the ultimate goal of encouraging more interactive and responsive ELT instruction.

Based on this background, the research question posed in this study is as follows: what factors influence Semester 4A English Language Education students' poor involvement in ELT classes at FKIP Universitas Islam Riau? As a result, the purpose of this study is to identify and analyze the internal (psychological) and external (environmental and pedagogical) factors that influence students' low participation in the ELT classroom, as reported by Semester 4A English Language Education students at FKIP Universitas Islam Riau.

The three major terms used in this study are defined as follows. Classroom participation is the active participation of students in learning activities such as asking questions, reacting to the lecturer, and engaging in discussions. Low participation is a condition in which pupils rarely or never participate willingly in classroom interactions, marked by quiet and avoidance of debate. ELT (English Language Teaching) is a discipline of education that focuses on teaching and mastering the English language using a variety of classroom approaches and methodologies.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The theoretical foundation of this study rests on constructivism, as developed by Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky, which holds that learning is an active process in which students build knowledge through interaction with their environment and peers. In the ELT classroom, this means participation is not merely encouraged but pedagogically essential, as students must engage actively to develop linguistic and communicative competence. Supporting this view, Lewohl (2023) found that students prefer immersive, interactive, and personalized learning experiences, reinforcing the argument that meaningful participation is a prerequisite for genuine language learning.

Active learning theory further strengthens this position by asserting that students learn more effectively when directly involved in the learning process rather than passively receiving information. Fatika Sari and Roulina (2025), through a systematic literature review, confirmed that strategies such as peer discussion, cooperative learning, and problem-based learning significantly promote student engagement, while passive, lecture-dominated classrooms remain a primary contributor to low participation rates among university students. This suggests that instructional design plays a decisive role in either enabling or suppressing student involvement.

Beyond pedagogical methods, the psychological dimensions of participation are equally significant. Severe et al. (2024) revealed that the majority of students remain silent during whole-class discussions even when they possess relevant knowledge, with fear of negative evaluation, peer judgment, and low self-confidence identified as dominant inhibitors. Teacher responsiveness and classroom atmosphere were also found to mediate students' participation decisions, underscoring the centrality of learning climate as a variable in this study.

At the structural and motivational level, Kärner et al. (2026) describe participatory learning environments as spaces characterized by student autonomy, shared decision-making, and self-directed learning opportunities. This aligns closely with self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 1985), which proposes that motivation is driven by three fundamental psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. When these needs are met, students are intrinsically motivated and more likely to participate voluntarily; when unmet, withdrawal and passivity follow. Taken together, these perspectives indicate that low classroom participation is a multifaceted phenomenon requiring a holistic approach that simultaneously addresses pedagogical practices and the psychological climate of the classroom.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

This study takes a qualitative research approach with a case study design. A qualitative approach was chosen because the core phenomenon under investigation, student participation, is inherently subjective, experienced, and context-dependent; quantitative metrics alone cannot capture the complexities of students' ideas, attitudes, and behaviors regarding classroom involvement.

Specifically, this study uses a descriptive qualitative case study design. A case study is appropriate because it allows the researcher to examine a specific, bounded unit of analysis in depth and within its natural context (Yin et al., 2018). This design enables the researcher to explore the multiplicity of factors influencing participation within the lived reality of Semester 4A students. The open-ended nature of the questionnaire allows participants to narrate their own experiences, providing rich, descriptive data that can be analyzed thematically.

3.2 Research Setting and Participants

This study was carried out at the Department of English Language Education (Pendidikan Bahasa Inggris), Faculty of Teacher Training and Education (FKIP), Universitas Islam Riau (UIR), Pekanbaru, Riau, Indonesia, with the primary research site being the ELT classroom in Semester 4A.

Participants were students participating in FKIP UIR's English Language Education Program, Semester 4, Class A (4A). Ten students were chosen via purposive sampling based on their actual experience with the classroom participation dynamics under investigation, including both relatively engaged and relatively passive participants, to guarantee a diverse variety of opinions. Data was collected during the even semester of the 2025/2026 academic year, from May to June 2026, to ensure that participants' comments on classroom involvement were based on current and ongoing experiences.

3.3 Research Instrument

The principal instrument in this study was an essay-based, open-ended questionnaire sent online via Google Forms. This instrument was chosen because it allows participants to freely express their thoughts, feelings, and experiences without the constraints of fixed-choice options, resulting in rich, descriptive data suitable for qualitative analysis.

The questionnaire included eight items derived from the theoretical indicators established in the literature review. Table 1 shows the instrument blueprint, which links each facet to the associated indicator and questionnaire item.

Table 1. Instrument Blueprint: Theory, Indicator, and Questionnaire Items

No	Aspect	Indicator	Questionnaire Item
1	Classroom Participation	Taking the initiative to ask the lecturer questions	What makes you rarely or never ask questions of your instructor during the ELT learning process?
2	Classroom Participation	Responding to the lecturer's questions	How do you usually feel when a professor asks the class a question, causing you to remain silent or not answer?
3	Low Participation	Internal factors (fear, anxiety, lack of self-confidence)	What is the main reason you feel reluctant or afraid to participate in English-language class discussions?
4	Low Participation	Language proficiency factors (vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation)	To what extent do your limitations in English proficiency (vocabulary, grammar, or pronunciation) influence your decision not to speak actively in class?
5	Low Participation	Social factors (fear of being judged or laughed at by peers)	How do you think your classmates' evaluations or reactions affect your confidence in participating?
6	English Language Teaching	Lecturers' teaching strategies/methods	How does the instructor's teaching style in the ELT class affect your interest in actively participating?

7	English Language Teaching	Classroom atmosphere and environment	How does the classroom atmosphere (class size, seating arrangement, or instructor-student interaction) affect your comfort level when participating?
8	English Language Teaching	Expectations for improved participation	In your opinion, what should instructors do to encourage students to participate more actively in ELT classes?

The questionnaire was distributed using a Google Forms URL (<https://forms.gle/8wAivbkJasfD2ynw8>) shared with the class WhatsApp group. Participants were given enough time to complete the questionnaire at their own pace, and anonymity was maintained to encourage honest and open responses.

3.4 Data Collection

Data for this study were collected using a single practical procedure: the dissemination of an online questionnaire. The researcher sent a Google Forms link to all participants via the class WhatsApp group. The form had eight essay-type questions, a brief introduction, a guarantee of anonymity, and directions for filling out the questionnaire. Participants completed the questionnaire independently at their leisure, and all results were automatically gathered and saved in Google Forms for subsequent analysis. This study included ten semester 4A students.

3.5 Data Analysis

The data collected through the essay-based questionnaire were analyzed using Miles and Huberman's (2014) interactive model of qualitative data analysis, which consists of three iterative stages: data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification.

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In the conclusion drafting and verification step, the researcher used the thematic display to derive interpretive findings about the causes causing students' poor involvement. To ensure accuracy, these results were cross-checked against the raw data, and member-checking was used as a way to increase the analytical trustworthiness and reliability.

4. FINDINGS

Based on an analysis of responses from ten Semester 4A students, this study identifies six interconnected themes that explain students' low participation in the ELT classroom at FKIP UIR: (1) fear of making mistakes, anxiety, and low self-confidence; (2) limited English

proficiency; (3) social pressure and peer judgment; (4) lecturers' teaching strategies; (5) classroom atmosphere and environment; and (6) students' expectations for improved participation. Each theme is addressed below.

4.1 Fear of Making Mistakes, Anxiety, and Low Self-Confidence

The most significant reason explaining students' limited engagement was psychological in nature. Almost all participants, including Gadis Ayu Safitri, Jeffry Agustyawan, Niken Ayu Lestari, and Belva Eldora, expressed similar concerns: they knew the answers or ideas they wanted to convey but chose to remain silent for fear of making grammatical or pronunciation errors, as well as being judged negatively by the lecturer or peers. Gadis Ayu Safitri, for example, revealed that she often felt worried and a little guilty for not responding, even when she knew the answer, since she was frightened of making a mistake while speaking up. Similarly, Niken Ayu Lestari expressed feeling nervous and unsure whether her answer was correct, so she chose to remain silent rather than risk being incorrect.

However, not all pupils were equally affected by this psychological barrier. Annisa Zahra Putri indicated that she was not frightened to join in class debates and that her relative silence was solely due to a classmate having already responded. Isnaini Yuliandri stated that she did not worry about other people's opinions and saw making errors as a natural part of the learning process. This variance indicates that, while anxiety and low self-confidence are the most common barriers, individual personality moderates the extent to which psychological factors limit involvement.

4.2 Limited English Proficiency

Maysa Thahira and Isnaini Yuliandri recognized limited English ability, notably restricted vocabulary and concern about grammar in formal situations, as a major contributing factor. These constraints put pupils at a loss for words when attempting to explain their ideas, so they chose not to speak. Maysa Thahira noted that her limited vocabulary made it difficult for her to express herself because she frequently ran out of words. Isnaini Yuliandri also stated that, while she felt quite good in pronunciation and vocabulary, her competence became severely constrained when compelled to talk in formal contexts, since she was more skilled at spontaneous, casual communication.

Several additional participants, including Erin Julita, Gadis Ayu Safitri, Belva Eldora, Niken Ayu Lestari, and Jeffry Agustyawan, said that being unsure about vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation lowered their confidence and made them unwilling to speak up in class. Interestingly, Ilham Nurza Ramadhan said that his English competence was already acceptable and that he only needed to follow the class and listen more closely, demonstrating that language proficiency worries were not shared by all participants.

4.3 Social Pressure and Peer Judgment

Several additional participants, including Erin Julita, Gadis Ayu Safitri, Belva Eldora, Niken Ayu Lestari, and Jeffry Agustyawan, said that being unsure about vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation lowered their confidence and made them unwilling to speak up in class. Interestingly, Ilham Nurza Ramadhan said that his English competence was already acceptable and that he only needed to follow the class and listen more closely, demonstrating that language proficiency worries were not shared by all participants.

Nonetheless, a limited number of students, such as Annisa Zahra Putri and Ilham Nurza Ramadhan, were found to be relatively unaffected by social pressure, showing that personal characteristics also moderate the extent to which social factors impede class participation. Annisa Zahra Putri stated unequivocally that her classmates' comments did not make her uneasy or undermine her confidence, but Ilham Nurza Ramadhan indicated that he did not care how his classmates reacted because he simply wanted to share what he knew and ask questions about what he did not understand.

4.4 Lecturers' Teaching Strategies

Nonetheless, a limited number of students, such as Annisa Zahra Putri and Ilham Nurza Ramadhan, were found to be relatively unaffected by social pressure, showing that personal characteristics also moderate the extent to which social factors impede class participation. Annisa Zahra Putri stated unequivocally that her classmates' comments did not make her uneasy or undermine her confidence, but Ilham Nurza Ramadhan indicated that he did not care how his classmates reacted because he simply wanted to share what he knew and ask questions about what he did not understand.

Several participants, including Niken Ayu Lestari, Belva Eldora, and Jeffry Agustyawan, stated that an instructor who was personable, open to student feedback, and avoided overly formal or lecture-based delivery made them feel more secure and inspired to engage. This pattern shows that the lecturer's instructional style is one of the most effective external levers for enhancing student participation.

4.5 Classroom Atmosphere and Environment

Class size and seating arrangements were also identified as factors impacting comfort levels; however, numerous participants emphasized that the quality of classroom interaction was more important than the number of students themselves. Maysa Thahira explained that the quantity of pupils was not a barrier in and of itself but rather how their classmates behaved, which might make the environment more comfortable or uncomfortable. Isnaini Yuliandri claimed that her seating arrangement had a significant impact on her comfort, as sitting in the front row made her nervous for no apparent reason, presumably due to her proximity to the lecturer's direct stare.

Several participants, including Erin Julita, Gadis Ayu Safitri, Belva Eldora, and Jeffry Agustyawan, reported feeling more at ease speaking in smaller classes because the environment was less intimidating, whereas larger classes increased nervousness and fear of making mistakes in front of a large crowd. In contrast, Annisa Zahra Putri and Ilham Nurza Ramadhan reported feeling comfortable regardless of class size, citing a pleasant physical environment and friendly classmates, demonstrating the importance of individual variation in shaping students' responses to similar environmental conditions.

4.6 Students' Expectations for Improved Participation

Participants regularly indicated a desire for lecturers to foster a learning environment free of the fear of making mistakes, to encourage collaborative activities, and to give more fair attention to all students rather than just those who speak up the most. Erin Julita and Belva Eldora both proposed that lecturers create a friendly, nonjudgmental environment and use participatory activities such as group discussions, presentations, and games while also providing positive feedback and recognizing students' efforts even when mistakes are made. Annisa Zahra

Putri especially advocated collaborative learning strategies such as Think-Pair-Share and role-playing, thought-provoking questions, and interactive game-based media to foster a safe environment in which students are not scared to make mistakes.

Other participants made more specific suggestions: Isnaini Yuliandri advocated for more fair attention so that all students, not just the most outspoken ones, are noticed, and Ilham Nurza Ramadhan proposed that lecturers deliberately ask less active students to sit at the front of the class. Taken together, these expectations indicate that students share a desire for a classroom environment that is psychologically safe, pedagogically interesting, and inclusive of all participation levels.

5. DISCUSSION

This study's findings demonstrate that students' limited engagement in the ELT classroom is the result of a complex interaction of internal and external factors, which is compatible with the theoretical framework presented in the literature review.

5.1 Psychological Barriers and Classroom Participation Theory

The dominance of fear, anxiety, and low self-confidence among participants strongly aligns with Severe et al. (2024), who identified fear of negative evaluation, peer judgment, and low self-confidence as the principal inhibitors of classroom participation. Most participants in this study, including Gadis Ayu Safitri, Niken Ayu Lestari, and Belva Eldora, described a similar pattern: possessing the knowledge or ideas needed to respond, yet choosing silence to avoid the risk of being judged. This finding suggests that low participation in this context is frequently not a matter of competence but of psychological inhibition, a distinction with direct implications for how lecturers interpret student silence.

At the same time, the presence of students like Annisa Zahra Putri and Isnaini Yuliandri, who reported feeling generally unaffected by fear of judgment, suggests that psychological vulnerability to classroom anxiety varies. This individual diversity lends support to the theory that participation outcomes are formed by the combination of situational classroom elements and stable personality qualities, rather than classroom conditions alone.

5.2 Language Proficiency as a Compounding Factor

Limited vocabulary, uncertain grammar, and pronunciation concerns emerged as a compounding rather than standalone factor: participants frequently linked language limitations directly to their fear of being judged, suggesting that proficiency and psychological confidence reinforce one another. This is illustrated by Isnaini Yuliandri's distinction between her relative comfort in spontaneous, informal speech and her hesitation in formal academic discussion, which suggests that the issue is not a uniform lack of competence but a context-specific gap between students' informal communicative ability and the more demanding linguistic register expected in formal classroom discourse.

5.3 The Role of Teaching Strategies: Active Learning and Constructivism in Practice

The strong and consistent preference among participants for interactive, discussion-based teaching over one-way lecture delivery directly supports active learning theory and the findings of Fatika Sari and Roulina (2025), who showed that active learning strategies such as peer discussion, cooperative learning, and problem-based learning significantly promote

student engagement, while passive, lecture-dominated environments suppress it. Participants such as Erin Julita and Belva Eldora explicitly contrasted their motivation under interactive teaching with their passivity under one-way instruction, providing direct empirical support for this theoretical claim within the FKIP UIR context.

This pattern is also consistent with constructivist principles, as articulated by Lewohl (2023), who found that students prefer immersive, interactive, and personalized learning experiences. When lecturers in this study were described as detailed, enthusiastic, or open to student opinions, as in the accounts of Maysa Thahira and Novi Anastasha, participants reported greater willingness to engage, reflecting the constructivist premise that knowledge construction through interaction is a precondition for active participation.

5.4 Classroom Atmosphere, Autonomy, and Self-Determination

The finding that classroom interaction quality mattered more to several participants than class size alone resonates with Kärner et al. (2026), who emphasize student autonomy, shared decision-making, and self-directed learning as defining features of participatory learning environments. Maysa Thahira's observation that the number of students was less important than how classmates reacted illustrates that the social-relational quality of the classroom, rather than its physical scale, shapes students' willingness to engage.

These findings can also be interpreted through self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 1985), which posits that motivation depends on the fulfillment of autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Students who described supportive, non-judgmental classroom climates, such as Niken Ayu Lestari and Jeffry Agustyawan, appeared to experience greater relatedness and competence, which in turn increased their willingness to participate voluntarily. Conversely, students who described formal, lecture-dominated, or unsupportive classes reported diminished motivation to speak, consistent with the theory's prediction that unmet psychological needs lead to withdrawal.

5.5 Individual Variation as a Moderating Factor

This study's main contribution is the consistent existence of a small group of people, particularly Annisa Zahra Putri and Ilham Nurza Ramadhan, who appeared to be unaffected by social pressure, language limits, or classroom size. While the theoretical framework used in this study primarily explains participation through cognitive, social, and environmental mechanisms, the experiences of these two participants indicate that individual personality traits, such as general self-assurance or lower sensitivity to social evaluation, can act as a moderating variable, shielding students from the very conditions that suppress peer participation. This adds to the majority findings but qualifies them, noting that interventions targeted at increasing classroom involvement should take into account individual differences rather than presuming uniform psychological reactions across all students.

5.6 Pedagogical Implications

Overall, these data indicate that increasing classroom involvement in the ELT context necessitates a dual approach. First, lecturers can use more interactive, discussion-based, and collaborative teaching tactics, such as Think-Pair-Share, role-playing, and small-group discussions, as proposed by participants like Annisa Zahra Putri. Second, at the psychological level, lecturers can work to reduce students' fear of making mistakes by providing constructive feedback, distributing attention more equitably among students, and creating a class

environment in which errors are treated as a normal part of the learning process rather than a source of embarrassment. This strategy meets both the constructivist requirement for meaningful engagement and the self-determination demand for psychological safety, autonomy, and relatedness.

6. CONCLUSION

This qualitative case study sought to identify and analyze the factors that contribute to low classroom involvement among Semester 4A English Language Education students at FKIP Universitas Islam Riau. Based on interviews with ten students, the findings show that low participation is mostly caused by internal psychological reasons such as fear of making mistakes, anxiety, and low self-confidence, which are exacerbated by limited English competency in vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation. Social pressure based on peer judgment reinforces these psychological obstacles. At the same time, external conditions, particularly lecturers' teaching strategies and the classroom environment, play an important mediating role: interactive, supportive, and nonjudgmental teaching consistently increased students' willingness to participate, whereas one-way, lecture-dominated instruction encouraged passivity.

The study also discovered that a small number of students were relatively unaffected by social pressure or language barriers, implying that individual personality influences the degree to which these factors reduce involvement. This finding emphasizes that low participation cannot be addressed through a single, uniform intervention; rather, it necessitates a holistic approach that transforms both pedagogical practices and the psychological climate of the classroom, in accordance with the constructivist, active learning, and self-determination perspectives that underpin this study.

Pedagogically, the findings suggest that tertiary-level ELT lecturers should prioritize interactive and collaborative teaching methods, provide constructive and encouraging feedback, distribute attention equitably among students, and foster a classroom environment in which mistakes are accepted as a normal part of the language learning process. Such measures could assist in turning passive ELT classrooms into more participatory and inclusive learning settings.

This study's small sample size of 10 participants from a single class at one institution limits the generalizability of the findings. Future study could broaden the field of inquiry by involving several classes or institutions, combining classroom observation with self-report data, or using a longitudinal design to investigate how students' engagement habits evolve over the course of an academic semester.

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