



COPING WITH COMMUNICATION AVOIDANCE IN EFL LEARNERS: A PEDAGOGICAL PERSPECTIVE INFORMED BY EXPOSURE-BASED PRINCIPLES

VYHÝBANIE SA KOMUNIKÁCIU U ŠTUDENTOV ANGLIČTINY AKO CUDZIEHO JAZYKA: PEDAGOGICKÁ PERSPEKTÍVA INŠPIROVANÁ VYBRANÝMI PRINCÍPMI EXPOZIČNÉHO PRÍSTUPU

IVANA JURÍKOVÁ¹

¹ *Filozofická fakulta, Univerzita Komenského v Bratislave, Gondova 2, 811 02 Bratislava, ivana.jurikova@uniba.sk*

Abstract

Communication avoidance represents a persistent barrier to oral participation among many university-level EFL learners. It manifests as silence, withdrawal, or reluctance to initiate interaction and is often maintained despite adequate linguistic competence and instructional support. While research on foreign language anxiety has extensively documented the prevalence of such barriers, pedagogical responses have tended to focus either on prevention or on creating overly protective learning environments that may unintentionally reinforce avoidance. This conceptual paper offers a theory-informed pedagogical perspective on communication avoidance in young adult EFL learners. Drawing on insights from psychology, particularly exposure-based principles, it conceptualizes avoidance as a coping response to perceived communicative threat rather than a deficit to be eliminated. The discussion carefully translates selected exposure-based principles – such as graduality, predictability, repetition, and learner control – into educational contexts, explicitly distinguishing pedagogical application from therapeutic intervention. Rather than aiming to reduce anxiety directly, the article focuses on how classroom practices can support learners in coping with discomfort and engaging in communication despite it. Building on this conceptual framework, the article outlines three semi-conceptual activity types that illustrate how exposure-informed pedagogical design can reduce avoidance and strengthen learner participation. The proposed approach offers practical and theoretically grounded insights for addressing communication barriers in university-level EFL contexts.

Keywords

communication avoidance, foreign language anxiety, EFL learners, exposure-based principles, learner participation, pedagogical coping

Introduction

In university EFL classrooms, oral participation constitutes a key context in which learners are expected to engage with language through interaction, negotiation of meaning, and public use. Classroom interaction provides learners with opportunities to test hypotheses, negotiate meaning, and develop communicative competence through use rather than rehearsal. Yet for many EFL learners, speaking in class is experienced as demanding or threatening, leading to persistent patterns of avoidance. Such avoidance may take the form of silence, delayed responses, reluctance to initiate interaction, or withdrawal from communicative tasks, even when learners possess sufficient linguistic knowledge to participate.

Research on foreign language anxiety has long documented the affective challenges associated with speaking in a second or foreign language, particularly in evaluative or public settings (Horwitz, Horwitz, Cope, 1986; MacIntyre, Gardner, 1994), and more recent work has further highlighted the persistence and complexity of these challenges in instructed language learning contexts (Dewaele, MacIntyre, 2014). At the university level, these challenges are often intensified by increased performance expectations, heightened self-awareness, and concerns about competence, identity, and peer evaluation. Importantly, communication avoidance in this context does not necessarily indicate a lack of motivation or effort. Rather, it can be understood as a coping response to perceived communicative threat, aimed at reducing discomfort in situations that are experienced as emotionally demanding.



Pedagogical responses to communication avoidance have typically followed two main trajectories. One line of response has focused on prevention, seeking to minimize anxiety by creating supportive classroom climates and reducing perceived pressure. Another has emphasized protection, for example, by allowing learners to opt out of speaking tasks or by lowering participation demands. While such approaches may reduce immediate stress, they can also unintentionally stabilize avoidance by limiting opportunities for learners to engage with communicative challenges and develop confidence through experience.

In contrast, contemporary perspectives in psychology, particularly within cognitive-behavioural and exposure-based approaches to anxiety, suggest that avoidance is best addressed not by removing sources of discomfort, but by supporting individuals in approaching challenging situations in manageable and structured ways (Barlow, 2002; Craske et al., 2014). Exposure-based principles, originally developed within clinical psychology, conceptualize avoidance as a maintaining factor of anxiety and emphasize gradual, repeated engagement with feared situations under conditions that promote a sense of control, predictability, and manageable challenge (Craske et al., 2014). Although these principles were not designed for educational contexts, selected aspects of exposure-based thinking offer useful conceptual tools for re-examining how communication avoidance is addressed in language learning environments. The present article adopts a theory-informed pedagogical perspective on communication avoidance in university-level EFL learners. Drawing on psychological insights while remaining firmly situated within applied linguistics and language education, it explores how exposure-based principles can be carefully translated into classroom practice without crossing into therapeutic intervention. Rather than aiming to reduce anxiety directly, the focus is on how pedagogical design can support learners in coping with discomfort and engaging in communication despite it.

The article proceeds by first outlining how communication avoidance manifests in university EFL contexts and how it relates to established research on foreign language anxiety. It then introduces key exposure-based principles relevant to pedagogical settings and discusses the conditions under which they can be meaningfully applied in education. Building on this conceptual foundation, the article proposes three semi-conceptual activity types that illustrate how exposure-informed design can strengthen learner participation and resilience. In doing so, the article seeks to contribute to ongoing discussions of learner agency, participation, and coping in higher education language learning.

1 Communication Avoidance in University EFL Learners

Communication avoidance in foreign language classrooms refers to patterns of reduced, delayed, or absent participation in oral interaction, particularly in situations where speaking is expected or evaluated. In university-level EFL contexts, avoidance may manifest as prolonged silence, reluctance to volunteer responses, avoidance of eye contact, minimal contributions to pair or group work, or withdrawal from interaction altogether (MacIntyre, Dörnyei, Clément, Noels, 1998; King, 2014). Importantly, such behavior often occurs in learners who possess sufficient linguistic resources to participate, suggesting that avoidance cannot be explained solely in terms of limited proficiency.

Within research on foreign language anxiety, avoidance has been consistently identified as a behavioral response to perceived communicative threat (Horwitz, Horwitz, Cope, 1986; MacIntyre, Gardner, 1994). Speaking in a foreign language frequently involves exposure to evaluation, comparison with peers, and the risk of negative judgement, all of which can heighten emotional discomfort. For many university students, these pressures are intensified by developmental characteristics of late adolescence and emerging adulthood, including heightened self-consciousness, identity-related concerns, and increasing academic and performance expectations (Arnett, 2000).

Avoidance serves an important short-term function for learners by reducing immediate emotional discomfort. Choosing silence over speech or withdrawal over engagement allows learners to manage anxiety in the moment. However, from a longer-term perspective, such coping strategies can limit opportunities for meaningful language use and contribute to the maintenance of communication difficulties. Reduced participation restricts exposure to interactional feedback, diminishes confidence gained through successful communication, and may reinforce beliefs about one's inability to speak effectively in the target language (MacIntyre, 2017).

Crucially, communication avoidance should not be interpreted as a lack of motivation or willingness to learn. Research suggests that many learners who avoid speaking report strong investment in language learning alongside heightened emotional reactivity in speaking situations (Gregersen, Horwitz, 2002; MacIntyre, 2007). The discrepancy between learners' intentions and their observable classroom behavior points to the role of emotional regulation and coping processes rather than to deficits in effort or engagement.



At the university level, avoidance patterns may become particularly stable. Learners often enter higher education with a history of negative speaking experiences and well-established strategies for managing discomfort. When classroom practices inadvertently accommodate avoidance – for instance, by repeatedly allowing learners to opt out of oral participation – such patterns are likely to persist or become further established. Over time, avoidance may develop into a habitual response, maintained by repeated non-participation and the temporary relief it provides (MacIntyre, 2017).

From this perspective, the central pedagogical challenge is not whether anxiety should be eliminated, but how learners can be supported in participating despite discomfort. Shifting attention from prevention to coping allows for a more realistic understanding of communication barriers in higher education language learning. This conceptual reframing opens space for pedagogical approaches that draw on psychological insights while remaining grounded in educational practice. It is within this space that selected exposure-based principles become relevant for understanding and addressing communication avoidance in university EFL classrooms.

2 A Psychology-Informed View of Avoidance

From a psychological perspective, avoidance is commonly understood as a response to situations perceived as threatening or emotionally demanding. Rather than reflecting a lack of capacity or motivation, avoidance functions as a strategy for regulating distress by reducing exposure to uncomfortable experiences. In the context of communication, choosing not to speak, delaying participation, or withdrawing from interaction can provide immediate emotional relief, even when such responses may carry longer-term costs.

Research on anxiety-related processes has shown that avoidance plays a central role in maintaining anxious responses over time. By preventing individuals from engaging with feared situations, avoidance limits opportunities to revise threat-related beliefs and to gain confidence through successful experience (Rapee et al., 2010). Although this body of work originates in clinical psychology, its core insights are relevant for understanding behavioral patterns in non-clinical settings, including educational contexts where performance, evaluation, and public exposure are central features.

Importantly, avoidance is not a static trait but a context-sensitive response shaped by prior experiences, expectations, and situational cues. Individuals may avoid specific activities or settings while remaining fully engaged in others, depending on how threatening those situations are perceived to be. In language learning environments, speaking tasks that involve public performance, spontaneous production, or peer comparison are particularly likely to trigger avoidance, especially for learners with a history of negative communicative experiences (Gregersen, Horwitz, 2002).

A key implication of this perspective is that reducing discomfort in the short term does not necessarily lead to greater engagement in the long term. When avoidance is repeatedly supported or left unchallenged, it may become an established response pattern on which learners rely to manage emotional strain. Over time, this can limit opportunities for participation and reinforce expectations of difficulty or failure in communicative situations (MacIntyre, 2017).

Within psychology, exposure-based principles have been developed to address avoidance by encouraging gradual and repeated engagement with challenging situations under conditions that support a sense of safety and control. Exposure is not understood as forcing individuals into distressing experiences but as supporting approach behavior in a structured and manageable way. Core principles include graduality, predictability, repetition, and the reduction of safety behaviors that allow avoidance to persist (Craske et al., 2014).

It is crucial to note that exposure-based approaches were developed within therapeutic contexts and are not directly transferable to educational settings. The present discussion does not propose the use of exposure as a form of psychological intervention in the classroom, nor does it suggest that teachers should assume therapeutic roles. Rather, exposure-based principles are considered here as conceptual tools that can inform pedagogical thinking about how learners approach communicative challenges.

When translated carefully into educational contexts, these principles shift attention away from eliminating anxiety and toward supporting learners in engaging with discomfort in productive ways. The focus moves from protection and avoidance to participation and coping, emphasizing conditions under which learners can remain involved in communicative activity despite emotional difficulty. This perspective aligns with broader discussions of learner agency and resilience, in which agency is understood not as the absence of anxiety, but as the capacity to act meaningfully in its presence.



By adopting a psychology-informed view of avoidance, language educators and researchers can better understand why communication barriers persist and how pedagogical environments may unintentionally sustain them. At the same time, this perspective creates room for pedagogical designs that encourage gradual engagement, preserve learner control, and support repeated participation, without framing learners' experiences as problematic or deficient. The following section builds on this conceptual foundation by examining how selected exposure-based principles can be translated into pedagogical contexts in a theoretically responsible and ethically appropriate manner.

3 Exposure-Based Principles and Their Pedagogical Translation

Exposure-based principles originate in psychological research on anxiety and avoidance and are most commonly associated with therapeutic contexts. At a general level, however, these principles describe broader learning mechanisms through which individuals approach situations perceived as uncomfortable or threatening. In psychological models of anxiety, avoidance is understood as a key factor that maintains distress over time by preventing individuals from engaging with feared situations and revising their threat-related expectations (Barlow, 2002; Craske et al., 2014).

For the purposes of this discussion, exposure is not treated as a therapeutic technique, but as a conceptual framework that explains how repeated engagement with challenging situations can reduce avoidance. Importantly, exposure-based approaches do not assume that anxiety must be eliminated prior to action. Rather, they emphasize continued participation despite discomfort, allowing new learning to occur through experience rather than reassurance (Craske et al., 2014).

When considered from an educational perspective, this logic resonates with research on communication in foreign language learning. Speaking in a foreign language frequently involves uncertainty, imperfect performance, and social evaluation, all of which may trigger avoidance responses (Horwitz et al., 1986; MacIntyre, 2007). While avoidance can reduce immediate discomfort, it also limits learners' opportunities to experience successful communication and develop confidence through use (MacIntyre, 2017). Exposure-based principles offer a useful lens for understanding how engagement can be supported even when anxiety remains present.

Several core principles are particularly relevant to pedagogical contexts. One is *graduality*, which refers to the careful sequencing of communicative demands so that engagement increases step by step rather than through abrupt exposure to highly challenging situations. Gradual engagement allows learners to approach communicative tasks in manageable ways while remaining involved in the learning process (Craske et al., 2014).

A second principle is *predictability*, which involves making communicative expectations, task structure, and participation demands transparent. Such predictable conditions reduce unnecessary uncertainty and help learners allocate attention to communication itself rather than to managing ambiguity (Barlow, 2002). In classroom contexts, clear expectations can support willingness to participate without eliminating challenge.

Repetition is a further key principle. Repeated engagement with similar communicative situations allows learners to accumulate experience and reduce avoidance through increased familiarity. In educational settings, repetition does not imply mechanical drilling, but recurring opportunities to participate in comparable interactional formats, enabling learners to build tolerance for uncertainty through experience (MacIntyre, 2017).

A closely related principle is that of *learner control*, which highlights the importance of perceived agency in approach behavior. When individuals experience some degree of control over how and when they engage, participation is more likely to be sustained over time (Bandura, 1997). In language learning, this aligns with views of learner agency that emphasize action under constraint rather than the absence of difficulty (Little, 1991).

At the same time, translating exposure-based principles into educational contexts requires clear conceptual boundaries. These principles were developed within psychology and are not directly transferable as intervention techniques in the classroom. The present discussion does not propose exposure as a form of psychological treatment, nor does it suggest that educators should aim to reduce anxiety directly. Rather, exposure-based principles are used here as design considerations that inform how participation is structured and supported in everyday instructional contexts (MacIntyre et al., 2020).

From this perspective, the pedagogical goal is not to remove discomfort, but to avoid reinforcing avoidance through overprotection or exclusion from participation. Emotional difficulty is acknowledged as a normal aspect of language learning rather than as a problem to be eliminated. This stance aligns with broader discussions of learner agency and resilience, which emphasize sustained engagement and coping rather than comfort or confidence alone.



By reframing exposure-based principles as conceptual guides rather than intervention tools, it becomes possible to draw on psychological insights while remaining firmly situated within applied linguistics and language education. The following section illustrates this translation through three semi-conceptual activity types that demonstrate how exposure-informed pedagogical design can support participation and coping in university-level EFL contexts.

4 Semi-Conceptual Activity Types for Supporting Participation

Building on the conceptual discussion above, this section outlines three semi-conceptual activity types that illustrate how exposure-based principles can inform pedagogical design in university-level EFL contexts. These activity types are not intended as instructional recipes or fixed classroom procedures. Rather, they serve as illustrative models that demonstrate how participation can be structured in ways that reduce avoidance and support coping with communicative discomfort.

Each activity type reflects selected exposure-based principles – such as *graduality*, *predictability*, *repetition*, and *learner control* – while remaining firmly situated within ordinary educational practice. The focus is not on eliminating anxiety entirely, but on creating conditions under which learners can engage in communication despite discomfort and gradually expand their participation over time.

4.1 Gradual Publicness of Oral Participation

Communication avoidance in university classrooms often stems from the sharp contrast between private preparation and immediate public performance. Learners are often expected to move directly from internal formulation to public speech, with few opportunities to ease into interaction. For learners who experience speaking as threatening, this sudden exposure can trigger avoidance, even when tasks are linguistically manageable.

An exposure-informed approach suggests that participation can be structured along a continuum of *publicness*, allowing learners to approach oral communication in incremental steps. Rather than treating speaking as a binary distinction between silence and full-class performance, pedagogical design can create intermediate participation formats that gradually increase visibility and social exposure.

In practice, this may involve sequences in which learners first articulate ideas in low-exposure contexts – such as silent formulation, note-based preparation, or brief exchanges with a single peer – before moving toward small-group discussion and, eventually, optional whole-class contributions. Importantly, progression along this continuum is not framed as a test of confidence but as a normal and expected feature of task design. Learners are not forced to perform at the highest level of exposure, but they are encouraged to remain engaged at a level that is challenging yet manageable.

From the perspective of learner agency, this activity type supports participation by preserving a sense of control while still requiring communicative action. Learners are not protected from speaking altogether, but they are supported in approaching it gradually. Over time, repeated engagement at increasing levels of publicness allows learners to build experience speaking in front of others, reducing reliance on avoidance as a coping strategy.

The pedagogical value of this approach lies not in immediate increases in fluency or confidence, but in the normalization of discomfort as an integral part of communicative activity. By participating repeatedly under conditions of increasing exposure, learners may come to view speaking as tolerable and meaningful even when anxiety is present. In this way, gradual publicness functions as a design principle that supports coping, resilience, and sustained participation rather than short-term comfort.

4.2 Predictable Participation Formats

Another factor contributing to communication avoidance in university EFL classrooms is uncertainty about participation expectations. Learners may be unsure when they will be expected to speak, how their contributions will be evaluated, or what counts as an acceptable response. For learners who experience speaking as emotionally demanding, such uncertainty can amplify perceived threat and increase the likelihood of avoidance.

An exposure-informed pedagogical perspective suggests that *predictability* plays a key role in supporting sustained participation. When learners can anticipate the structure of interaction and the conditions under which they will be asked to speak, cognitive and emotional resources can be directed toward communication itself rather than toward managing uncertainty. Predictable participation formats do not remove challenge, but they reduce unnecessary ambiguity that may otherwise intensify avoidance.



This activity type involves the use of recurring interactional patterns that remain stable across lessons or tasks. Instead of frequently changing participation formats, instructors may rely on familiar routines – such as regular short turns, consistent pair configurations, or clearly defined moments for voluntary contribution. Over time, learners recognize when speaking is expected, its form, and its duration. This familiarity supports engagement by making participation feel more manageable and less threatening.

From the perspective of coping, predictability allows learners to prepare mentally for participation and to regulate emotional responses more effectively. Knowing that a speaking opportunity will be brief, structured, and time-limited can reduce anticipatory anxiety without eliminating communicative demand. Importantly, predictability does not imply rigidity; rather, it provides a stable framework within which meaningful interaction can occur.

In terms of learner agency, predictable participation formats support action by creating conditions under which learners can choose how to engage within known boundaries. Learners may still experience discomfort, but they are less likely to rely on avoidance when expectations are clear and consistent. Repeated participation within predictable structures allows learners to accumulate experience with speaking, gradually reducing the emotional load associated with uncertainty.

As with the previous activity type, the pedagogical value of predictability lies not in producing immediate confidence, but in supporting continued engagement over time. By encountering similar participation demands, learners develop familiarity with speaking itself. This repeated exposure within stable formats can weaken the association between communication and threat, making avoidance a less necessary coping strategy.

4.3 Recurrent Communicative Roles and Low-Stakes Repetition

Another way in which exposure-informed principles can support participation is through *repetition under stable interactional conditions*. While repetition is often associated with mechanical practice, from an exposure-based perspective, its value lies in providing learners with multiple opportunities to engage in similar communicative situations, allowing familiarity to develop and avoidance to decrease over time.

In university EFL classrooms, communicative tasks frequently vary in topic, format, and participation demands. Although such variation can be motivating, it may also increase cognitive and emotional load for learners who find speaking threatening. When each speaking task feels novel or unpredictable, learners may struggle to build a sense of competence or control, increasing the likelihood of withdrawal.

This activity type involves the use of recurrent communicative roles or interactional positions that remain relatively stable across tasks or lessons. Learners may repeatedly engage in similar roles – such as initiating discussion, responding to peers, summarizing ideas, or asking clarification questions – within different topical contexts. The communicative content changes, but the interactional demands remain familiar.

From a coping perspective, role stability reduces the number of variables learners must manage simultaneously. Rather than facing a completely new speaking situation each time, learners encounter recognizable participation demands that allow them to draw on prior experience. Repeated engagement in similar roles supports familiarity with speaking itself, making participation less emotionally taxing over time.

Importantly, repetition in this sense is low-stakes. The goal is not performance improvement in the narrow sense, but sustained engagement across multiple encounters. Learners are not expected to demonstrate increasing fluency or confidence immediately; instead, the emphasis is on remaining involved in communicative activity despite discomfort. Over time, repeated participation under stable conditions can weaken avoidance patterns by reducing the novelty and perceived threat associated with speaking.

In terms of learner agency, recurrent communicative roles support a sense of continuity in participation. Learners are positioned as active contributors with recognizable roles in interaction, rather than as occasional speakers whose participation is exceptional or risky. This continuity can strengthen learners' perception of themselves as participants in communicative activity, even when anxiety remains present.

Taken together, low-stakes repetition and role stability illustrate how exposure-informed pedagogical design can support coping without resorting to pressure or protection. By allowing learners to encounter similar communicative demands repeatedly, this activity type promotes resilience through experience rather than reassurance, reinforcing participation as a normal and expected aspect of language learning.

While the three activity types outlined above capture central ways in which exposure-informed principles can be translated into pedagogical design, they are not intended to represent an exhaustive set of practices. Exposure-based thinking invites attention to a broader range of design features that shape how learners encounter



communicative demands over time. These may include, for example, the degree of choice learners have over topics or interaction partners, the availability of brief planning time prior to speaking, or the extent to which error, hesitation, and disfluency are treated as normal aspects of communicative activity rather than as indicators of failure.

Additional considerations may relate to how participation is distributed within the classroom, how turn-taking is managed, and how communicative effort is acknowledged independently of linguistic accuracy. From an exposure-informed perspective, such features matter because they influence the perceived controllability and predictability of communicative situations, both of which are central to learners' willingness to remain engaged despite discomfort. Importantly, these elements do not operate in isolation; their effects emerge through repeated experience within stable participation structures rather than through isolated instructional moves.

Framed in this way, exposure-informed pedagogy is less about the adoption of specific techniques than about the careful orchestration of conditions under which learners can encounter communicative challenges in manageable and meaningful ways. What supports coping and participation is not the presence of any single design feature, but the coherence with which communicative demands are introduced, sustained, and revisited over time. This emphasis on coherence highlights the role of pedagogical design in shaping learners' experience of communication, without positioning anxiety reduction or performance outcomes as primary goals.

5 Discussion

This article approaches communication avoidance in university-level EFL learning not as a deficit to be eliminated, but as a functional coping response to perceived communicative threat. By drawing on psychological insights while remaining firmly grounded in applied linguistics and language education, the analysis has sought to reframe avoidance as a process that is shaped by learners' experiences, expectations, and participation histories rather than by lack of motivation or ability. This reframing allows for a more nuanced understanding of why communication barriers persist even in supportive instructional environments.

A central contribution of the article lies in its conceptual translation of selected exposure-based principles into pedagogical terms. Rather than importing therapeutic techniques into educational settings, the discussion has shown how ideas such as *graduality*, *predictability*, *repetition*, and *learner control* can inform the design of participation structures that support engagement despite discomfort. From this perspective, exposure-based principles are not interventions but a framework for understanding how classroom practices can either maintain avoidance or help learners cope over time.

Importantly, this perspective challenges pedagogical approaches that equate learner support with the removal of communicative difficulty. While supportive classroom climates are essential, the analysis suggests that persistent protection from speaking demands may inadvertently reinforce avoidance by limiting learners' opportunities to develop tolerance for uncertainty and to experience themselves as capable participants in interaction. From this viewpoint, participation becomes a developmental process that unfolds through repeated engagement rather than a prerequisite condition dependent on confidence or emotional readiness.

The discussion also contributes to broader debates on learner agency in language education. Agency is often associated with autonomy, choice, or confidence; however, the present analysis aligns with views of agency that emphasize action under constraint. Learners are agentic not because they feel comfortable, but because they are able to act meaningfully in situations that involve risk, imperfection, and emotional challenge. Framing participation as coping rather than performance foregrounds resilience and sustained engagement as central dimensions of agency in higher education language learning.

At the same time, the article underscores the importance of contextual and institutional factors in shaping learners' opportunities to participate. Communication avoidance does not emerge in isolation but within pedagogical environments that structure who speaks, when, and under what conditions. Exposure-informed pedagogical design thus shifts attention from individual learners to participation systems, highlighting how recurring interactional patterns, expectations, and norms shape learners' experience of communication over time.

Finally, by positioning exposure-based principles as design considerations rather than instructional prescriptions, the article avoids reducing complex affective processes to simple solutions. Rather than relying on specific techniques to increase participation, the focus is on how communicative demands are shaped and experienced across time. Such an approach recognizes emotional discomfort as a normal aspect of language learning while emphasizing learners' capacity to remain engaged despite it.



Overall, this discussion suggests that addressing communication avoidance in university EFL contexts requires a shift away from solely prevention-oriented thinking toward a focus on coping, participation, and resilience. Exposure-informed pedagogy offers one possible framework for supporting this shift, contributing to more theoretically grounded and psychologically informed discussions of learner participation in higher education language learning.

Conclusion

This article examines communication avoidance in university-level EFL learning through a psychology-informed pedagogical lens, proposing that avoidance is best understood as a coping response to perceived communicative threat rather than as a deficit or lack of engagement. By situating avoidance within broader research on foreign language anxiety and emotion regulation, the analysis highlights why communication barriers may persist even in supportive instructional environments and among learners with adequate linguistic competence.

Drawing on selected exposure-based principles, the article shows how pedagogical design can support learners in engaging with communicative demands despite discomfort. Rather than advocating therapeutic intervention or anxiety reduction, the discussion emphasizes participation, coping, and sustained engagement as central pedagogical concerns. The three semi-conceptual activity types outlined in the paper illustrate how graduality, predictability, repetition, and learner control can be embedded in ordinary classroom practices to reduce reliance on avoidance over time.

A key implication of this perspective is the need to move beyond approaches that focus solely on prevention or protection. While supportive learning environments remain essential, persistent accommodation of avoidance may unintentionally limit learners' opportunities to develop tolerance for uncertainty and to experience themselves as capable participants in communication. Framing participation as a process of coping rather than performance shifts attention toward resilience and learner agency under conditions of emotional challenge.

By translating psychological insights into pedagogical terms, this article contributes to ongoing discussions of learner participation and agency in higher education language learning. Understanding communication avoidance as a dynamic and context-sensitive response opens space for more coherent and theoretically grounded approaches to participation, supporting learners not by removing difficulty but by enabling engagement in its presence.

References

- ARNETT, Jeffrey J. 2000. Emerging adulthood: A theory of development from the late teens through the twenties. In *American Psychologist*. 2000, Vol. 55, No. 5, pp. 469–480. ISSN 0003-066X. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.55.5.469>
- BANDURA, Albert. 1997. *Self-efficacy: The exercise of control*. New York: W. H. Freeman, 1997. 604 pp. ISBN 0-7167-2626-2.
- BARLOW, David H. 2002. *Anxiety and its disorders: The nature and treatment of anxiety and panic*. 2nd ed. New York: Guilford Press, 2002. 704 pp. ISBN 1-57230-744-9.
- CRASKE, Michelle G. – TREANOR, Michael – CONWAY, Christopher C. – ZBOZINEK, Tim – VERVLIET, Bram. 2014. Maximizing exposure therapy: An inhibitory learning approach. In *Behaviour Research and Therapy*. 2014, Vol. 58, pp. 10–23. ISSN 0005-7967. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.brat.2014.04.006>
- DEWAELE, Jean-Marc – MACINTYRE, Peter D. 2014. The two faces of Janus? Anxiety and enjoyment in the foreign language classroom. In *Studies in Second Language Learning and Teaching*. 2014, Vol. 4, No. 2, pp. 237–274. ISSN 2083-5205. <https://doi.org/10.14746/ssllt.2014.4.2.5>
- GREGERSEN, Tammy – HORWITZ, Elaine K. 2002. Language learning and perfectionism: Anxious and non-anxious language learners' reactions to their own oral performance. In *The Modern Language Journal*. 2002, Vol. 86, No. 4, pp. 562–570. ISSN 0026-7902. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1540-4781.00161>
- HORWITZ, Elaine K. – HORWITZ, Michael B. – COPE, Joann. 1986. Foreign language classroom anxiety. In *The Modern Language Journal*. 1986, Vol. 70, No. 2, pp. 125–132. ISSN 0026-7902. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4781.1986.tb05256.x>
- KING, Jim. 2014. Silence in the second language classrooms of Japanese universities. In *Applied Linguistics*. 2014, Vol. 35, No. 3, pp. 325–343. ISSN 0142-6001. <https://doi.org/10.1093/applin/amt043>



- LITTLE, David. 1991. *Learner autonomy: Definitions, issues and problems*. Dublin: Authentik, 1991. 134 pp. ISBN 0-907079-96-2.
- MACINTYRE, Peter D. 2007. Willingness to communicate in the second language: Understanding the decision to speak as a volitional process. In *The Modern Language Journal*. 2007, Vol. 91, No. 4, pp. 564–576. ISSN 0026-7902. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4781.2007.00623.x>
- MACINTYRE, Peter D. 2017. An overview of language anxiety research and trends in its development. In GKONOU, Christina – DAUBNEY, Martin – DEWAELE, Jean-Marc (eds.). *New insights into language anxiety*. Bristol: Multilingual Matters, 2017, pp. 11–30. ISBN 978-1-78309-772-2.
- MACINTYRE, Peter D. – DÖRNYEI, Zoltán – CLÉMENT, Richard – NOELS, Kimberly A. 1998. Conceptualizing willingness to communicate in a L2: A situational model of L2 confidence and affiliation. In *The Modern Language Journal*. 1998, Vol. 82, No. 4, pp. 545–562. ISSN 0026-7902. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4781.1998.tb05543.x>
- MACINTYRE, Peter D. – GREGERSEN, Tammy – MERCER, Sarah. 2020. Language teachers' coping strategies during the Covid-19 conversion to online teaching: Correlations with stress, wellbeing and negative emotions. In *System*. 2020, Vol. 94, Article 102352. ISSN 0346-251X. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.system.2020.102352>
- RAPEE, Ronald M. – SCHNIERING, Craig A. – HUDSON, Jennifer L. 2010. Anxiety disorders during childhood and adolescence: Origins and treatment. In *Annual Review of Clinical Psychology*. 2010, Vol. 6, pp. 311–341. ISSN 1548-5943. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.clinpsy.121208.131505>