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## Testing the L2 WTC Pyramid in Business English: Anxiety, Boredom, Mental Toughness, and Resilience

<sup>1</sup>Abdul-Wasea Abdul-Ghani Saif Al-Mekhlafi, <sup>2</sup>Muneef Abdulwasea Abdulghani Almekhlafi, <sup>3</sup>Sayed M. Ismail

<sup>1</sup>Faculty of Business Administration, Prince Sattam bin Abdulaziz University, Al-Kharj, Saudi, Email: a.almekhlafi@psau.edu.sa | ORCID: 0000-0002-4145-6384

<sup>2</sup>Software College, Northeastern University Shenyang, Liaoning, China, 110169 Email: meinaifu@mails.neu.edu.cn ORCID: 0009-0000-3357-1940

<sup>3</sup>Prince Sattam bin Abdulaziz University, College of Science and Humanities, Department of English language and literature. Alkharj, Saudi Arabia. , a.ismail@psau.edu.sa <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6698-006X>,

Corresponding author: meinaifu@mails.neu.edu.cn

**ABSTRACT:** In Saudi Arabia, Business English courses often assess speaking, yet many undergraduates still avoid initiating classroom talk. Willingness to communicate (WTC) explains why students with adequate language knowledge may remain silent. This study tests an integrated model of Business English WTC by combining MacIntyre's L2 WTC pyramid with two emotion mechanisms (anxiety as threat; boredom as low value) and two coping resources (mental toughness; resilience). A cross-sectional survey is implemented in a College of Business Administration at a public university in Saudi Arabia. Students in credit-bearing Business English courses complete a scenario-based WTC measure and short scales for course-referenced situational self-confidence, desire to communicate, speaking anxiety, boredom, mental toughness, and resilience. Confirmatory factor analysis and structural equation modelling estimate direct effects, indirect effects via situated antecedents, and buffering (moderation) effects of coping resources. Anxiety and boredom are expected to reduce WTC directly and indirectly by lowering situational self-confidence and desire to communicate. Mental toughness and resilience are expected to predict higher WTC and to weaken the negative impact of anxiety and boredom. The study models two routes to reduced participation in an ESP setting—threat-based inhibition and value-based disengagement—within one pyramid-consistent framework, providing a replicable analytic blueprint for Saudi Business English programmes. WTC in Business English is a situated intention shaped jointly by emotions and coping resources, not language competence alone.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Business English is a high-stakes component of business administration programmes in Saudi Arabia. In many colleges, it is not treated as a general language elective; rather, it is embedded in professional preparation. Students are expected to participate in case-based discussions, contribute to group meetings, negotiate in role-plays, and present project outcomes. These speaking demands mirror workplace genres in which hesitation, avoidance, or minimal participation can limit learning and professional readiness.

However, classroom observation and instructor reports frequently point to a familiar gap: many students can complete written tasks and pass tests, yet hesitate to initiate spoken interaction. This gap matters because business communication competence is not only linguistic; it is also behavioural, interpersonal, and strategic. Students who avoid speaking lose opportunities to

receive feedback, develop fluency, practise pragmatic choices (e.g., hedging disagreement), and build the confidence needed for internships and workplace settings.

A central construct for understanding this gap is willingness to communicate (WTC). In second language research, WTC represents a learner's readiness to enter into communication when free to do so. The construct is valuable because it sits at the interface between competence and behaviour: it predicts whether learners will actually use the language they know. MacIntyre and colleagues proposed an L2 WTC pyramid in which immediate intention is shaped by situated antecedents such as situational self-confidence and the desire to communicate with specific interlocutors (MacIntyre et al., 1998). This model shifts attention away from global proficiency alone and toward the classroom conditions and psychological states that make speaking more or less likely at a given moment.

Despite the explanatory power of the pyramid, Business English in Saudi universities presents features that may intensify both inhibition and disengagement. First, speaking tasks are often evaluative (graded presentations, timed discussions, participation marks). Assessment salience can heighten anxiety and fear of negative evaluation, pushing learners toward avoidance even when they understand the content. Research in the Saudi EFL context indicates that anxiety is common and can undermine performance and classroom behaviour (Alrabai, 2014, 2015). Second, Business English courses can inadvertently produce boredom when speaking tasks become repetitive, overly scripted, or weakly connected to students' future professional goals. When tasks are perceived as low value or low autonomy, boredom can reduce attention and willingness to invest effort, leading students to disengage from interaction opportunities (Pekrun, 2006; Tze et al., 2016).

At the same time, learners differ in how they cope with pressure and setbacks. Two constructs that may explain these differences are mental toughness and resilience. Mental toughness refers to the capacity to remain committed and in control under demanding conditions, while resilience captures recovery and re-engagement after stress or failure (Clough et al., 2002; Smith et al., 2008). Although these resources are widely studied in performance domains, they are less often incorporated into WTC models for English for Specific Purposes (ESP) settings. If these resources shape whether learners can speak despite anxiety or boredom, they offer a promising, intervention-relevant pathway for improving participation.

This study develops and tests an integrated framework for Business English in Saudi Arabia that connects (a) anxiety as a threat-based barrier, (b) boredom as a value-based inhibitor, and (c) mental toughness and resilience as coping resources, to WTC through the pyramid's situated antecedents. The model is designed to be empirically testable using structural equation modelling and to be pedagogically interpretable for course designers.

In applied linguistics, WTC is increasingly treated as a practical outcome because it connects teaching decisions to observable classroom participation. From a programme perspective, improving WTC can increase the return on investment in language instruction: when more students speak, they practise more, receive more interactional feedback, and develop confidence for professional communication. Yet WTC is also sensitive to course design. The same student may speak actively in a supportive small-group meeting and remain silent in a high-stakes whole-class discussion. This sensitivity suggests that an explanatory model should identify both the emotions that constrain participation and the resources that allow learners to participate despite constraints.

The study is guided by three research questions:

1. To what extent do anxiety, boredom, mental toughness, and resilience predict Business English WTC?
2. Do situational self-confidence and desire to communicate mediate these relationships?
3. Do mental toughness and resilience buffer the negative effects of anxiety and boredom on WTC?

By addressing these questions, the study aims to (i) refine WTC theory for an ESP ecology, (ii) identify the most proximal psychological constraints on speaking in Business English, and (iii) provide a basis for targeted, evidence-informed interventions in Saudi higher education.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### 2.1 Business English as an ESP ecology

Business English is typically positioned within English for Specific Purposes (ESP), where instruction is guided by learners' target communicative needs and the genres of their academic and professional communities (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987;

Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998). In principle, ESP alignment should raise task value because learners can see how classroom speaking maps onto workplace communication. In practice, however, Business English syllabi may still rely on a narrow set of routines (e.g., repeated presentation templates, predictable role-plays) that reduce novelty and autonomy. Because ESP tasks often simulate high-visibility professional genres, they can also raise evaluative pressure and increase fear of losing face. An adequate model of Business English participation therefore needs to explain both threat-related avoidance and value-related disengagement.

## 2.2 L2 willingness to communicate as a situated intention

WTC links psychological readiness to actual language use. In the L2 WTC pyramid, distal influences feed into more proximal, context-sensitive determinants of speaking. Two situated antecedents stand closest to communicative intention: situational self-confidence and the desire to communicate with a specific person or group (MacIntyre et al., 1998). Situational self-confidence is an in-the-situation judgement that one can manage the interaction, not merely that one knows English. Desire to communicate captures approach orientation toward the interlocutor and task, including whether the learner expects a supportive or threatening social response. Empirical work shows that WTC fluctuates with task demands and interlocutors (Yashima, 2002; Peng & Woodrow, 2010). These fluctuations are especially salient in ESP because genres carry different risks (e.g., low-risk clarification questions versus high-risk disagreement in negotiation).

An important implication of this situated view is that WTC is shaped by classroom social norms. Peer responses, instructor immediacy, and assessment practices can shift the perceived safety of speaking, which in turn affects self-confidence and desire. In Business English, these social dynamics interact with genre expectations: some genres reward concise, decisive talk, while others reward collaborative turn-building. Therefore, modelling WTC in this context requires measures that specify scenarios and interlocutors, rather than relying on global statements such as 'I like speaking English.' This study responds to that need through scenario-based measurement and by modelling antecedents that are explicitly anchored to recent course experiences.

## 2.3 Anxiety as threat-based inhibition

Foreign language anxiety is situation-specific apprehension related to communication, fear of negative evaluation, and test pressure (Horwitz et al., 1986). Anxiety raises the perceived cost of speaking by amplifying threat appraisals. Even with adequate linguistic resources, anxiety can narrow attention and encourage avoidance (Horwitz, 2010). Anxiety can co-occur with positive emotions such as enjoyment, and the balance of emotions shapes engagement (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014). In the Saudi EFL context, anxiety is common and is linked to classroom behaviour and performance (Alrabai, 2014, 2015). In Business English, anxiety may be intensified by public performance tasks and professional identity concerns. It can suppress WTC by lowering situational self-confidence and by reducing desire to communicate when interlocutors are perceived as evaluative.

## 2.4 Boredom as value-based disengagement

Control-value theory positions boredom as an achievement emotion that emerges when learners perceive low task value and/or low control, particularly in repetitive or under-challenging settings (Pekrun, 2006). Boredom predicts reduced attention, shallow processing, and withdrawal (Pekrun et al., 2010; Tze et al., 2016). In foreign language learning, boredom has been conceptualised and measured as a distinct construct that can coexist with anxiety and influence engagement (Li et al., 2021). In Business English, boredom may arise when speaking tasks are detached from authentic business problems, recycled without variation, or offer limited student choice. Boredom can reduce WTC by lowering perceived benefit and weakening approach orientation. Over time, disengagement may also erode self-confidence by reducing practice and feedback.

## 2.5 Coping resources: mental toughness and resilience

Mental toughness describes self-regulatory capacities—control, commitment, challenge, and confidence—that support persistence under pressure (Clough et al., 2002). Short measures can yield reliable information in applied settings (Dagnall et al., 2019). Resilience captures recovery and re-engagement after stress or failure (Smith et al., 2008). Within Business English, resilience may be expressed as speaking again after a difficult Q&A or critical feedback. Coping resources can predict higher WTC directly and indirectly through higher confidence and stronger desire to communicate, and they can buffer the impact of anxiety and boredom by shaping appraisal and recovery.

## 2.6 Synthesis

The literature suggests two routes to reduced participation in Business English: a threat route (anxiety suppresses WTC by lowering confidence and desire) and a value route (boredom reduces perceived benefit and weakens engagement). Mental toughness and resilience may sustain participation and buffer these routes. Testing these mechanisms in Saudi Business English can refine the WTC pyramid for ESP classrooms and inform targeted interventions.

## 3. CONCEPTUAL MODEL AND HYPOTHESES

The proposed model retains the core logic of the L2 WTC pyramid: willingness to speak in a given moment is primarily driven by situated antecedents. In the present framework, situational self-confidence represents the learner's perceived capability to manage recent Business English speaking tasks. This includes managing content formulation, turn-taking, and repair (e.g., paraphrasing when a word is missing). Desire to communicate represents an approach tendency toward speaking with specific interlocutors in typical classroom genres. Separating these two antecedents is important because a student may feel capable (high confidence) but still prefer not to speak with certain interlocutors, or may want to speak (high desire) but doubt their ability to do so successfully.

Two negative achievement emotions are positioned as inhibitors. Anxiety is treated as a threat-based barrier that increases the perceived social and performance cost of speaking. Boredom is treated as a value-based inhibitor that reduces perceived benefit and weakens engagement. Two coping resources are positioned as enabling factors: mental toughness (sustained control and commitment under pressure) and resilience (recovery and re-engagement after setbacks). These resources are included both as direct predictors and as moderators, because the same level of anxiety or boredom may lead to different behavioural outcomes depending on the learner's coping capacity.

Based on this framework, the study tests the following hypotheses:

- H1: Speaking anxiety negatively predicts Business English WTC.
- H2: Boredom negatively predicts Business English WTC.
- H3: Mental toughness positively predicts Business English WTC.
- H4: Resilience positively predicts Business English WTC.
- H5: Situational self-confidence positively predicts Business English WTC.
- H6: Desire to communicate positively predicts Business English WTC.
- H7: Anxiety negatively predicts situational self-confidence and desire to communicate.
- H8: Boredom negatively predicts situational self-confidence and desire to communicate.
- H9: Situational self-confidence and desire to communicate mediate the relationships between the predictors (anxiety, boredom, mental toughness, resilience) and WTC.
- H10: Mental toughness and resilience buffer the negative effects of anxiety and boredom on WTC.

The model is estimated at the latent-variable level to reduce measurement error and to allow mediation and moderation to be evaluated within a single coherent framework. For transparency and replicability, the full questionnaire (scenario set and item wording), scenario-to-genre mapping, and analysis checklists are provided in Supplementary File 1.

## 4. METHODOLOGY

### 4.1 Study design and setting

The study adopts a quantitative, cross-sectional survey design. It is situated in Business English courses within a College of Business Administration at a public university in Saudi Arabia. Business English in this setting is taught as an ESP subject with regular speaking tasks (e.g., case discussion, meeting simulations, presentations), making it an appropriate context for modelling WTC as a situated intention. To preserve anonymity for blind review, the institution is not named in the main manuscript. Course context information focuses on contact hours, the weight of speaking in assessment, and the dominant speaking genres used in class.

## 4.2 Participants and sampling

The target population comprises undergraduate business students enrolled in credit-bearing Business English courses during the data-collection semester. Cluster-based recruitment is used by inviting intact classes to participate, reflecting the course ecology and reducing disruption. Participation is voluntary, and students complete the survey outside graded activities. Because the proposed model includes mediation and latent interaction effects, sample size planning prioritises stable estimation in structural equation modelling. Monte Carlo approaches are recommended for planning when mediation and interactions are included (Muthén & Muthén, 2002). A minimum sample of approximately 300 respondents is targeted, with larger samples preferred when the number of parameters is high or when class-level clustering is substantial (Wolf et al., 2013).

## 4.3 Measures

All constructs are measured using short, multi-item Likert scales with a 1–5 response format to balance psychometric quality and respondent burden. WTC is assessed using a scenario-based instrument tailored to Business English events, with scenarios specifying both the speech event and the interlocutor. Situational self-confidence and desire to communicate are assessed as course-referenced, state-like perceptions linked to recent speaking tasks. Speaking anxiety and boredom are measured as course-linked achievement emotions. Mental toughness is operationalised through the 4Cs framework (Clough et al., 2002) using an established short form (Dagnall et al., 2019), and resilience is assessed using a brief resilience measure capturing recovery capacity (Smith et al., 2008). Anchoring to the Business English context is implemented primarily through instructions rather than extensive rewriting of scale items.

## 4.4 Adaptation and validity safeguards

Item content is reviewed by ESP instructors to confirm relevance to Business English speaking experiences. Minor wording adjustments are made only when needed to clarify task reference. A pilot study checks comprehension and identifies ambiguous wording, and cognitive interviewing can be used to confirm that students interpret items as intended. If bilingual administration is used, translation and back-translation are implemented and discrepancies are resolved by a panel including an applied linguist and a bilingual ESP instructor. Full item wording and scenario mappings are provided in Supplementary File 1.

## 4.5 Data collection procedure

After ethics approval, instructors announce the study and share a survey link (or distribute paper copies where required). Participants read an information sheet, provide informed consent, and complete the questionnaire anonymously. Participation has no impact on course grades and results are reported only in aggregate form.

## 4.6 Data analysis plan

Data screening includes checks for missingness patterns, careless responding, and outliers. Missing data are handled using an SEM-appropriate method, and internal consistency is evaluated using coefficient omega. Construct validity is examined through confirmatory factor analysis to verify that latent variables are empirically distinguishable. The structural model tests direct effects on WTC and indirect effects through situational self-confidence and desire to communicate, with bootstrapped confidence intervals for mediation. Moderation is tested via latent interactions between coping resources and negative emotions, interpreted through simple-slope probing. Because students are nested within classes, standard errors are adjusted for clustering when possible. Model fit is evaluated using CFI, RMSEA, and SRMR.

Because the indicators are ordinal Likert responses, estimation should use an approach appropriate for categorical data (e.g., robust weighted least squares or robust maximum likelihood with suitable corrections), and assumptions should be stated explicitly. In addition, researchers may test measurement invariance across key subgroups (e.g., gender or academic level) to ensure that comparisons are meaningful. To strengthen credibility, analysis decisions (exclusion rules, estimator choice, handling of missing data, and model modifications) should be documented *a priori* or reported transparently.

## 5. RESULTS

This article provides a reporting-ready structure for evaluating the proposed model in an empirical implementation. In line with the hypotheses, the expected pattern is that anxiety and boredom show negative associations with WTC, both directly and indirectly through reductions in situational self-confidence and desire to communicate. Mental toughness and resilience are



expected to show positive associations with WTC and to function as protective resources by weakening emotion-to-WTC links when communicative pressure is high.

To maintain transparency, future empirical versions of the manuscript should report: (a) descriptive statistics and reliability for all measures; (b) the measurement model (factor loadings, discriminant validity evidence, and fit indices); (c) the structural model (standardised paths, indirect effects, and fit); and (d) interaction effects with clear probing and interpretation. Supplementary File 1 includes templates and checklists to support consistent reporting.

In reporting, emphasis should be placed on standardised effect sizes and confidence intervals, not only *p*-values. Where mediation is present, both direct and indirect paths should be reported so it is clear whether emotions operate mainly through confidence and desire or also exert residual direct effects.

## 6. UNIQUE CONTRIBUTION OF THE STUDY

This study contributes to WTC scholarship and Business English practice in four specific ways.

First, it offers a mechanism-based explanation of silence by differentiating threat and value pathways within the same model. In many classroom discussions, anxiety is treated as the default explanation for limited participation. The present framework argues that boredom can suppress participation through a different logic: not fear of negative evaluation, but a judgement that speaking has low payoff. This distinction is theoretically important because it links two lines of research—L2 WTC and achievement emotions—without collapsing them into a single “affect” factor.

Second, the framework refines the pyramid for an ESP ecology by foregrounding genre and interlocutor specificity. Business English participation is not a single behaviour; it varies across meeting talk, negotiation, and presentation Q&A, and it depends on whether the interlocutor is perceived as supportive or evaluative. By using scenario-based WTC measurement and by conceptualising situated antecedents as course-referenced states, the study models the immediate psychological conditions that make these genre-specific speaking moves more or less likely.

Third, the inclusion of mental toughness and resilience extends WTC research into a more action-oriented space. Emotions such as anxiety and boredom are often discussed as constraints, but less attention is given to capacities that enable learners to act despite constraints. Mental toughness and resilience are treated here as resources that can support persistence and recovery, and therefore have clear implications for intervention and learner development. Even if these resources show modest direct effects, their buffering role would provide a practical rationale for embedding coping and recovery training into Business English curricula.

Fourth, the study provides a compact, replicable measurement and analysis blueprint that can be used in similar Saudi ESP contexts. Supplementary File 1 includes the questionnaire, scenario mapping, and reporting checklists that promote transparency in CFA/SEM studies. This responds to growing calls in applied linguistics for clearer reporting of measurement quality and model estimation decisions. Taken together, these contributions position the study as both theoretically informative and practically usable for programme improvement.

## 7. VALUE TO SAUDI HIGHER EDUCATION AND THE WIDER COMMUNITY

Business English competence has value beyond the language classroom because it supports employability, internship performance, and participation in professional networks. By identifying psychological mechanisms that limit speaking, the study supports programme-level decisions about where to invest instructional effort. If anxiety is the dominant barrier, resources may be directed toward feedback practices and assessment designs that reduce threat. If boredom is a stronger barrier, curricular redesign that increases task authenticity, autonomy, and relevance may be prioritised. Either way, the model encourages evidence-based improvement rather than relying on informal impressions about why students remain silent.

At a community level, improved communicative participation can support students’ confidence in public speaking and collaborative problem-solving—skills that extend to civic and workplace settings. Because the framework also considers coping and recovery, it aligns with broader educational goals of supporting student well-being and persistence under pressure. These outcomes are consistent with the development of a workforce that can engage effectively in multilingual, interdisciplinary, and internationally connected environments.

## 8. DISCUSSION

The integrated framework is designed to explain Business English participation as the outcome of both emotional constraints and coping resources. In an empirical implementation, support for the model would have several implications.

First, the framework distinguishes two routes to reduced participation that are often conflated in classroom discourse. When a student is silent, instructors may assume a lack of competence or motivation. The model suggests that silence can emerge either because speaking feels risky (threat route) or because speaking feels pointless (value route). Threat-based inhibition is likely to be accompanied by tension and heightened sensitivity to evaluation. Value-based disengagement is likely to be accompanied by low energy, minimal investment, and superficial task completion. Distinguishing these routes matters because the same instructional response will not address both.

Second, positioning boredom alongside anxiety broadens emotion research in Saudi EFL settings, where anxiety has received more attention. Because boredom is tied to perceived value and autonomy, it directs intervention toward curriculum design rather than only toward affect management. Raising authenticity, allowing topic choice, and varying genres may be more effective for boredom than anxiety-reduction techniques alone. In this sense, boredom is not simply a learner problem; it is also an instructional-design diagnostic.

Third, the inclusion of mental toughness and resilience provides an account of why some learners speak even when conditions are unfavourable. If these resources predict higher WTC, they represent protective factors that can be strengthened through pedagogy. If they moderate the anxiety/boredom → WTC relationship, this would indicate that improving coping capacity can reduce the behavioural consequences of negative emotions without requiring emotions to disappear. Such a finding would be valuable for classrooms where evaluative pressure cannot be fully removed.

Fourth, the model maintains the pyramid's mechanism-based logic by treating situated antecedents as mediators. Emotions and resources influence WTC because they shape immediate perceptions of capability and interpersonal orientation. This identifies proximal targets for classroom intervention, such as confidence-building rehearsal, explicit repair strategy training, structured turn-taking, and autonomy-supportive task design.

Finally, the framework illustrates an interdisciplinary logic aligned with the scope of *Ianna Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies*. It integrates applied linguistics (ESP and WTC), educational psychology (achievement emotions), and performance psychology (mental toughness and resilience) to generate testable claims about language-use behaviour in a professional-communication curriculum.

One practical implication concerns assessment. Participation marks are often intended to motivate engagement, but they can unintentionally intensify threat for anxious learners and reduce perceived autonomy for bored learners. A more supportive approach is to distribute speaking evaluation across multiple low-stakes opportunities and to assess process features (preparation, interactional strategies, improvement) rather than only polished performance. In addition, teacher development is relevant: instructors may benefit from training in feedback moves that protect learner face, in task design that increases autonomy, and in classroom interaction management that ensures equitable turn access. These adjustments do not require lowering academic standards; they require aligning standards with interactional learning processes.

### 8.1 Limitations and future directions

A cross-sectional survey cannot establish causal direction; longitudinal or experience-sampling designs would better capture temporal dynamics in WTC. Self-report measures may diverge from observed participation, so future work should triangulate survey reports with behavioural indicators and teacher ratings. Single-site sampling limits generalisability, and multi-site replication across Saudi universities is needed. Intervention studies should evaluate curriculum designs that raise task value and autonomy, and training modules that strengthen coping resources, using the same measurement framework.

## 9. KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

On the basis of the framework, three sets of recommendations follow for Business English programmes.

1. Reduce speaking threat (anxiety route). Use low-stakes rehearsal before graded speaking tasks, provide feedback that prioritises clarity and improvement over public correction, and model repair strategies that normalise mistakes. Transparent rubrics can also reduce uncertainty-driven anxiety.

2. Prevent boredom by increasing value and autonomy (value route). Vary speaking genres and interaction formats, connect tasks to authentic business problems, and allow students to choose topics, roles, or data sources where possible. Role rotation in meetings and real company cases can increase novelty without increasing workload.

3. Build coping and recovery resources. Teach short coping routines (goal-setting, reappraisal, and structured reflection after presentations) and create recovery opportunities (e.g., brief re-attempts after feedback) that signal setbacks are part of learning.

These recommendations should be tested and refined through empirical evaluation using the questionnaire and reporting templates provided in Supplementary File 1.

## 10. CONCLUSION

Business English courses in Saudi Arabia require sustained oral participation, yet many learners remain reluctant to speak. By integrating anxiety, boredom, mental toughness, and resilience into a pyramid-consistent model, this study explains how threat and low value can reduce willingness to communicate, and how coping resources may sustain engagement. The framework encourages researchers and practitioners to move beyond proficiency-only explanations and to design instruction that simultaneously reduces threat, increases value, and strengthens learners' capacity to cope with communicative demands. Within this approach, improved participation is not treated as a matter of forcing students to speak, but of redesigning the conditions under which speaking becomes both manageable and worthwhile.

The framework can also be adapted to other ESP courses where speaking is central. Because it specifies mechanisms (threat, value, confidence, and desire), it supports comparative work across disciplines and enables intervention studies that target the strongest constraint on participation in a given course.

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