

Correlation Between Inhibition and Speaking Performance Among Vietnamese EFL Teenage Learners

Nguyen Ngoc Nguyen

Faculty of Foreign Languages, Van Lang University, Ho Chi Minh City, Viet Nam

nguyen.nn@vlu.edu.vn

Abstract

Inhibition, defined by anxiety or fear of unfavorable judgement, is a outstanding psychological obstacle to enhancing speaking skills. This quantitative research, together with multiple regression analysis, aimed to find out predictors of inhibition as well as explored the interrelation between inhibition and speaking performance among Vietnamese teenage learners of EFL (English as a Foreign Language). The participants were 190 Vietnamese EFL teenagers at the age of 13 to 18. Inhibition was examined via a 20-item Likert-scale questionnaire survey, while speaking ability was judged based on IELTS Academic Speaking Test scores. The findings indicated a notable negative correlation between inhibition and speaking ability, where increased inhibition correlates with decreased IELTS speaking scores. Multiple regression analysis revealed that cultural factors and peer pressure were prominent predictors of inhibition. After all, the outcomes proposed some helpful solutions for EFL teenagers to overcome these psychological barriers and to perform speaking better.

Received 23/01/2026

Accepted 06/04/2026

Published 28/04/2026

Keywords

EFL teenagers;
inhibition; multiple
regression analysis;
speaking performance.

© 2026 Journal of Science and Technology - NTTU

1 Introduction

Speaking skills play a key role in language acquisition, particularly in teaching and learning EFL (English as a Foreign Language) context. Regarding psychological factors, inhibition, widely known as anxiety, self-awareness, and fear of negative judgment, can dramatically prevent a learner from getting involved in speaking activities [1]. In Viet Nam's culture, the significance of preserving face and avoiding making mistakes in the crowd could restrict one's confidence to speak out naturally [2]. Although proficiency in English language is getting more and more pivotal for academic and career growth in Viet Nam, the majority

of EFL learners find the oral session of high-stakes tests challenging due to objective and subjective reasons.

Inhibition is widely recognized as a significant psychological barrier in language learning, especially in speaking. Anxiety and self-esteem influence a lot on how well students can learn a new language [3]. When being too shy, learners feel more anxious and fail to communicate well, which hinders their speaking skills [4]. Teenagers are especially sensitive to what others think of them and get demotivated about being judged. In Viet Nam, these feelings are made worse by the pressure to fit in and not stand out from the group. As

a result, Vietnamese EFL teenagers may feel self-conscious, which can be reflected through the way they perform in class discussions and other speaking activities [5]. By understanding these emotional factors, teachers can find ways to help their students feel more comfortable and confident to speak better.

The main purpose for conducting this study is to examine the interconnection between psychological inhibition and the speaking performance of Vietnamese teenagers as well as to find out possible predictors of inhibition using multiple regression analysis. By means of the IELTS Academic Speaking Test scores, speaking performance is carefully evaluated to provide insights into how psychological barriers affect language acquisition. Particularly, regarding psychological aspect, the research aims to find out the exact predictors of inhibition as well as to link psychological theory with pedagogical practice, recommending a variety of potential solutions to overcome such barriers and improve EFL teaching in Viet Nam.

2 Inhibition in Language Learning

2.1 Inhibition, language anxiety and communication apprehension

Inhibition, in the context of second language acquisition, is defined as the "psychological defenses or mental walls" that are set up to protect one's ego or self-identity [3]. Inhibition is different from language anxiety in the sense that, unlike language anxiety, which is a specific situational feeling of tension and apprehension related to a second language context, inhibition is a more general psychological mechanism that is characterized by "being self-conscious or fearful of negative evaluation." [3, 4]. In addition, communication apprehension is a general trait that is related to an individual's level of fear or anxiety about real or anticipated interaction with others [4], but in this study, inhibition is specifically defined in terms of the affective factors that prevent teenage learners from being willing to take risks in their oral production, particularly in a collectivist culture such as Viet Nam, in which the "face-saving" concept is related to the internal motivation to avoid mistakes in front of others, more so than the motivation to practice the language [5].

2.2 Predictors of inhibition

When it comes to learning a new language, there are numerous unavoidable factors that can challenge people. Elements like the norms of their culture, the influence of those around them, and how they feel about themselves can all play a major role [5]. In Viet Nam, where the group is more important than the individual, people may feel even more pressure to fit in and avoid standing out. This can make it harder for learners to speak up and get engaged in class. Understanding what is behind this hesitation is a must for applying effective strategies to help learners feel more comfortable and confident [2]. By recognizing these different factors, teachers can have some interventions that address the specific needs of their students and help them overcome their inhibitions.

2.3 IELTS academic speaking test as a measure of performance

The IELTS Academic Speaking Test is a standardized test assessing how well the test taker can speak in English, used widely in schools and at work. The international-valued test evaluates its applicants' speaking skills regarding fluency, coherence, lexical resource, grammatical range and precision, and pronunciation, with scores spanning from 1 to 9. Research indicates that the IELTS Speaking Test is a trustworthy and valid assessment of speaking skills [10].

2.4 Previous studies

The impact of inhibition on speaking performance has been a concern of many scholars and researchers. Students who get extremely nervous and want everything to be perfect often feel bad when they are forced to speak and that makes them do worse. For instance, research shows that those who have much anxiety and perfectionism have a tendency to feel negative when speaking, which affects their performance [6]. Similarly, Chinese learners of English who are very shy fail to be willing to communicate much. That leads them not to be very good at speaking [7]. Creating a friendly and fear-free speaking atmosphere where students feel confident is extremely essential to helping them feel comfortable to speak. One study found that when feeling at ease and

supported, learners are more likely to gain confidence and speak up better [8]. In Viet Nam, this is especially paramount since students might be afraid to speak if they think they will make mistakes in front of their friends [9].

2.5 Research gap

A number of previous studies have proved a significantly inverse relationship between psychological obstacles and language production. Particularly, those who always get nervous and want to do everything best often feel bad about themselves and that makes it hard for them to speak in front of others [6]. This is also true for EFL students in general and Vietnamese students in particular since when they are shy, they do not want to talk to others [7]. In addition, Viet Nam researchers have found that students get much more anxious when they think their friends are making a judgment on them and they also worry about what their culture thinks is right, leading them to be quite nervous in class. Consequently, learners fail to do well on speaking tests because of these psychological obstacles and language production issues [5, 9].

There are a variety of studies on language anxiety around the globe but not many focus on how cultural expectations affect speaking performance among Vietnamese EFL teenagers. Most research has been done on adults or in a particular school, which may not apply to Viet Nam's unique culture in which people value "face" and have a tendency to get along with the group. Few studies have used standardized tests like the IELTS Speaking Test to see how inhibition affects speaking skills in this age group. This study helps bridge that gap by looking at how cultural factors affect EFL teenagers' speaking test scores. The IELTS test is selected as a tool because it is widely recognizedly standardized and used. To be specific, the IELTS Academic Speaking Test is utilized to get a measure of the learners' speaking skills. By doing so, how much cultural norms and inhibition affect their speaking ability is revealed. Specifically, their test scores are compared with to the extent how inhibited they feel when speaking, to see how much psychological factors affect their speaking skills.

3 Research Method

This study was designed as quantitative research with the aim of figuring out the interconnection between inhibition and speaking performance among Vietnamese EFL teenagers. A 20-item Likert-scale questionnaire survey to measure inhibition as well as the IELTS Academic Speaking Test to assess speaking performance served as research instruments to collect data. A multiple regression model was also used to measure the impact of three main independent variables (cultural expectations, peer pressure and self-esteem) on the dependent variable (inhibition scores) based on the three hypotheses as follows:

- (H1) Cultural expectations, including face-saving, have a significant and positive effect on inhibition;
- (H2) Peer pressure from the classroom environment positively influences levels of inhibition;
- (H3) Self-esteem is a significant predictor of the learner's mental state.

The study employed a purposive sampling design to sample 190 Vietnamese learners from a range of secondary schools and language centers in Ho Chi Minh City. Purposive sampling was chosen as the most appropriate design because it enabled the researcher to select a group of people who were "information-rich" [11] in the sense that the participants were teenagers between the ages of 13 and 18, and were either in the process of preparing to sit the IELTS exam or had done so in the recent past. The learners in this particular research were described as EFL learners. This is a unique categorization of the learners that underscores the gravity of their learning of the language in the context of the Vietnamese socio-economic environment. Although the learners in this research were from a traditionally EFL environment, they were classified as EFL learners because they were often in intensive learning programs where the medium of instruction in a number of subjects was English or where the learning of the language was a requirement in their academic or migration pursuits. These EFL learners were teenagers ranging from the age of 13 to 18 and were in a learning environment where the learning of the language was a critical requirement in

their future professional or academic success and was thus a psychological pressure on their speaking performance as gauged by standard measures such as the IELTS exam.

This is a non-probability sampling technique, and it is important because it ensures the participants have certain characteristics in common, such as a cultural background and academic aspirations. These participants were diverse in the range of English proficiency but homogeneous in the demographic category because the participants were adolescents, a category that is psychologically more susceptible to peer group pressure and self-consciousness.

The primary means of data collection was a Likert scale questionnaire of 20 items, designed to measure the extent of inhibition felt by the participants. This questionnaire was adapted from Dörnyei's theory of questionnaire design in second language research to guarantee it effectively addressed the anxiety, self-consciousness, and fear of negative evaluation experienced by the participants [12]. This questionnaire is also based on Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis, which supposes that emotional factors such as high anxiety and low self-confidence, serve as obstacles to the language acquisition [3]. Through assessing the level of psychological obstacles to language learning on a scale of 1 to 5, ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree, this survey offered a means for investigating the correlation between mental states and language proficiency, as evidenced by a high Cronbach's alpha of 0.85.

The data collection lasted for three months. The questionnaire was given offline in every EFL classroom, whereas the IELTS Academic Speaking Test was performed individually by authorized examiners. The speaking performance was obtained from the IELTS Academic Speaking Test, a globally recognized standardized examination. Participants were requested to provide their scores from their most recent official test sessions in the IELTS exam, which had been organized by British council or IDP

Education. This procedure was strictly employed to guarantee that the performance measure was both objective and reliable, regarding the four key areas of evaluation: fluency and coherence, lexical resource, grammatical range and accuracy, and pronunciation. Utilizing the official test scores rather than the results from a class test allowed the researcher to have a strong level of validity and reliability in evaluating the learners' true speaking abilities.

Data analysis was done by means of SPSS software. Cronbach's Alpha was computed to guarantee the reliability of the questionnaire. Descriptive statistics outlined the inhibition levels and IELTS speaking scores, while Pearson's correlation coefficient was used to examine the relationship between inhibition and speaking performance. Moreover, multiple regression analysis revealed key predictors of inhibition [13].

4 Findings and Discussion

In regard to the participation of 190 samples, the quantitative analysis was based on the responses from a 20-item Likert-scale questionnaire with Cronbach's alpha of 0.85, indicating high internal reliability. The results showed that the participants had a notable level of fear of speaking with an average score of 3.7, and their average IELTS English speaking score of 5.6. The figures showed that there was a connection between fear of speaking and speaking performance. Particularly, those who were more afraid of speaking had lower scores. This connection was indicated by Pearson's correlation analysis with $r = -0.52$ and $p < 0.01$. The study also found that expectations and pressure from friends were two major elements predicting fear of speaking. With a high score of 0.42 and 0.35 respectively, both cultural expectations and peer pressure had a remarkable impact on speaking performance. The study's model showed that 58% of the participants had a variety of inhibition levels, as shown by the equation: $R^2 = 0.58$. In other words, cultural and social factors are the prominent reasons for fear of speaking.

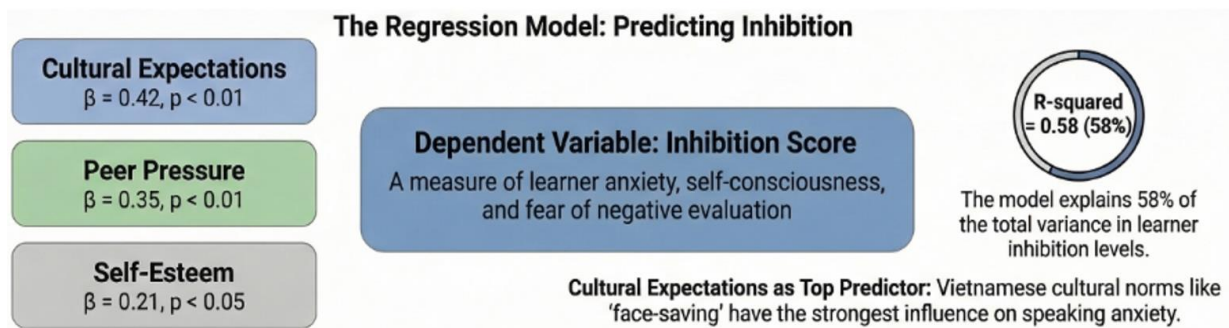


Figure 1 The Regression model

4.1 Reliability analysis

As an instrument for examining the participants' inhibition, the questionnaire was quite reliable, considering Cronbach's alpha value of 0.85, demonstrating strong internal consistency and reliability [14].

Table 1 Cronbach's alpha for inhibition questionnaire

Scale	Number of Items	Cronbach's alpha
Inhibition questionnaire	20	0.85

4.2 Descriptive statistics

Table 2 presented the descriptive statistics for inhibition and IELTS speaking scores. With the mean inhibition score of 3.7 (M = 3.7), the levels of inhibition among participants were moderate. Meanwhile, speaking proficiency was also at the moderate level with the mean IELTS speaking score of 5.6 (M = 5,6).

Table 2 Descriptive statistics for inhibition and IELTS speaking scores

Variable	Mean	Standard deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Inhibition Score	3.7	0.68	2.0	5.0
IELTS Speaking Score	5.6	0.95	4.0	7.5

4.3 Correlation analysis

Pearson's correlation analysis indicated a noticeable negative correlation between inhibition and IELTS speaking scores ($r = -0.52, p < 0.01$). In other words, higher levels of inhibition were associated with lower speaking performance.

Table 3 Correlation between inhibition and IELTS speaking scores

Variable	Inhibition Score	IELTS Speaking Score
Inhibition Score	1	-0.52**
IELTS Speaking Score	-0.52**	1

Note: Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

4.4 Multiple regression analysis

To identify prominent predictors of inhibition, a multiple regression analysis was taken advantage. Three variables including cultural expectations, peer pressure, and self-esteem were considered in the model. The results showed that cultural expectations ($\beta = 0.42, p < 0.01$) and peer pressure ($\beta = 0.35, p < 0.01$) were top predictors of inhibition, accounting for 58% of the variance in inhibition levels.

Table 4 Significant predictors of inhibition

Predictor	B	T	p-value
Cultural Expectations	0.42	5.68	< 0.01
Peer Pressure	0.35	4.89	< 0.01
Self-Esteem	0.21	2.85	< 0.05

4.5 Discussion and limitations

The findings spotted out a consequential negative correlation between inhibition and speaking performance among Vietnamese EFL teenagers. Specifically, cultural expectations and peer pressure were identified as striking predictors of inhibition due to the multiple regression analysis. This finding corresponds with previous research reporting how destructive psychological barriers are to language

learning, particularly in speaking skills [6]. Vietnamese teenagers may face increased shyness owing to cultural expectations ranging from the attention to group harmony to fear of losing face in front of peers. Such cultural norms may prevent learners from speaking activities involvement, resulting in ineffective performance in speaking [2, 5]. These results align with those of previous researchers [6], proposing some helpful implications for EFL educators. Firstly, cultural expectations and peer pressure must be taken into account to help EFL learners overcome inhibition and improve their speaking skills. To do so, English teachers are supposed to build a friendly classroom atmosphere, encourage constructive peer interactions, and giving constructive feedback [15].

However, the research is limited due to the fact that it solely relies on the self-reported IELTS results from the participants, leading to the remarkable impact on the results' overall accuracy. As a matter of fact, future studies should ask for more authentic official score reports directly from test centers to achieve stronger data validity. Furthermore, longitudinal study should be applied to examine long-term effectiveness of

targeted interventions in reducing psychological inhibition among learners.

5 Conclusion

The findings of this study support the hypothesis that inhibition such as the fear of embarrassment and under high-pressure learning environments prevents Vietnamese EFL teenagers from good speaking performance. In other words, the more learners feel anxious, the less they speak well. Meanwhile, cultural and social factors have a paramount contribution to inhibition due to the analysis of multiple regression. The research proposes proposed some practical solutions for EFL teachers to promote a fear-free and supportive teaching and learning environment where learners feel free to speak out and receive constructive feedback from their peers and teachers.

Acknowledgements

The author of this article highly acknowledged the participants of 190 Vietnamese EFL teenagers from Southern high schools and the support of Van Lang University, Ho Chi Minh City, Viet Nam.

References

1. Horwitz, E. K. (2001). Language anxiety and achievement. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, 21, 112-126. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0267190501000071>.
2. Tran, T. T. (2007). *The influence of "face" on communication in Vietnamese EFL classrooms* [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. Victoria University of Wellington.
3. Krashen, S. D. (1982). *Principles and practice in second language acquisition*. Pergamon Press.
4. MacIntyre, P. D. (1999). Language anxiety: A review of the research for language teachers. In D. J. Young (Ed.), *Affect in foreign language and second language learning: A practical guide to creating a low-anxiety classroom atmosphere* (pp. 24-45). McGraw-Hill.
5. Nguyen, T. H. (2012). An investigation into Vietnamese learners' perceptions of EFL speaking classroom anxiety. *Journal of Language and Learning*, 7(2), 141-156.
6. Gregersen, T., & Horwitz, E. K. (2002). Language learning and perfectionism: Anxious and non-anxious learners' reactions to their own oral performance. *The Modern Language Journal*, 86(4), 562-570. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1540-4781.00161>.



7. Liu, M., & Jackson, J. (2008). An exploration of Chinese EFL learners' unwillingness to communicate and foreign language anxiety. *The Modern Language Journal*, 92(1), 71-86. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4781.2008.00687.x>.
8. Young, D. J. (1991). Creating a low-anxiety classroom environment: What does language anxiety research suggest? *The Modern Language Journal*, 75(4), 426-439. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4781.1991.tb05378.x>.
9. Nguyen, T. H. (2014). The impact of language anxiety on speaking performance of Vietnamese learners. *International Journal of Language and Linguistics*, 2(2), 65-72.
10. Taylor, L. (2001). Revising the IELTS Speaking Test. *Research Notes*, 5, 2-5.
11. Cohen, L., Manion, L., & Morrison, K. (2018). *Research methods in education (8th ed.)*. Routledge.
12. Dörnyei, Z., & Taguchi, T. (2010). *Questionnaires in second language research: Construction, administration, and processing (2nd ed.)*. Routledge.
13. Field, A. (2018). *Discovering statistics using IBM SPSS statistics (5th ed.)*. SAGE Publications.
14. Tavakol, M., & Dennick, R. (2011). Making sense of Cronbach's alpha. *International Journal of Medical Education*, 2, 53-55. <https://doi.org/10.5116/ijme.4dfb.8dfd>.
15. Bailey, K. M. (2006). *Issues in teaching speaking skills to adult ESOL learners*. Cambridge University Press.

Mối tương quan giữa sự tự ti và khả năng nói của thanh thiếu niên Việt Nam học tiếng Anh như ngoại ngữ

Nguyễn Ngọc Nguyên

Khoa Ngoại ngữ, Trường Đại học Văn Lang, Thành phố Hồ Chí Minh
nguyen.nn@vlu.edu.vn

Tóm tắt Sự rụt rè, được định nghĩa là sự lo lắng hoặc sợ hãi bị đánh giá tiêu cực, là một rào cản tâm lý đáng kể đối với việc phát triển kỹ năng nói. Nghiên cứu định lượng này, cùng với phân tích hồi quy đa biến, nhằm tìm ra các yếu tố dự báo sự rụt rè cũng như tìm hiểu mối tương quan giữa sự tự ti và khả năng nói của thanh thiếu niên Việt Nam học tiếng Anh như ngoại ngữ (EFL). Đối tượng nghiên cứu là 190 thanh thiếu niên người Việt Nam ở độ tuổi từ 13 tuổi đến 18 tuổi. Bảng hỏi 20 câu, thang đo Likert 5 cấp độ đo sự tự ti, và điểm số bài kiểm tra nói IELTS học thuật đo khả năng nói có vai trò là công cụ nghiên cứu. Kết quả cho thấy mối tương quan nghịch đáng kể giữa sự tự ti và khả năng nói, với mức độ tự ti cao hơn liên quan đến điểm nói IELTS thấp hơn. Phân tích hồi quy đa biến cho thấy các yếu tố văn hóa và áp lực từ bạn bè là yếu tố dự báo nổi bật của sự tự ti. Cuối cùng, kết quả đề xuất một vài giải pháp hữu ích cho thanh thiếu niên học tiếng Anh như ngoại ngữ vượt qua rào cản tâm lý và nói tốt hơn.

Từ khóa Người học tiếng Anh như ngoại ngữ ở độ tuổi thiếu niên; sự tự ti; phân tích hồi quy đa biến; khả năng nói.