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Research Article

How EFL Learners' Identity, Speaking Anxiety, and Autonomous Learning Help to Shape English Speaking Proficiency: Through the Lens of Affective Filter Hypothesis

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Abstract
The present study is an exploration of the correlation between EFL learner identity, speaking anxiety, autonomous learning, and English-speaking effectiveness within the framework of the Affective Filter Hypothesis. The present study used a quantitative correlational research method, and the data were collected from 200 tertiary-level EFL students using a structured questionnaire and a measurement of speaking proficiency. The study investigates the relationship between the emotional and self-regulatory factors and the learners' oral communication in English. The results show that learner identity and autonomous learning are significant and positive factors affecting the English-speaking competency of learners, while speaking anxiety has a negative impact. In comparison with the other variables studied, the results indicated that autonomous learning is the most significant indicator of speaking competence, suggesting the crucial role of autonomous learning behaviors, autonomous practice, and learner responsibility in language learning. Additionally, the findings show that there is a positive correlation between the degree of student anxiety with the level of their speaking fluency and effectiveness of communication, and the degree of student's identity as a learner with the fluency and effectiveness of the speech. The study is based on the Affective Filter Hypothesis, which highlights the importance of emotional barriers and psychological factors in the outcome of language learning. The findings highlight the importance of using pedagogical approaches that are learner-centred in educational institutions, as well as by language teachers, in order to increase learner autonomy, decrease speaking anxiety, and reinforce positive identity of the learners. The significance of the study lies in the empirical evidence gained on the interactions between affective and cognitive aspects in improving English speaking ability of EFL learners.

Keywords: Feelings, Independence, Identity, Skills, Self-Regulation, Speaking Anxiety

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1. INTRODUCTION

Learning a second language (SLA) is a complex cognitive, social and affective process. Over recent years, SLA research has begun to emphasise the role of psychological and individual factors that impact language learning, particularly in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) (Alnefaie, 2024). In fact, factors such as identity, speaking anxiety, and autonomy affect English speaking skills. These variables not only affect how learners participate in the target language, but also their motivation to learn, confidence, and language use (Liu et al., 2023). In fact, identity has a vital role in language learning because it affects people's beliefs about their language learning identities and identifies them as language users in a community. When learners' EFL identities are stronger, positive effects on motivation and involvement in communicative practices are evident, leading to better speech performance (Afzal et al., 2025). Identity is dynamic, social,

and negotiated in social interactions (Khoso et al., 2024). Those who see English as an integral part of their identity as an individual and/or professional are more motivated to study English and participate in communicative practices. However, identity tensions - caused by the conflict between learners' broader identities and their learning of the target language - restrict language learning and confidence to communicate (Yessenbekova, 2024). But identity is influenced by sociocultural circumstances. Societal and institutional recognition of English provides a possibility for learners to identify as English speakers, while lack of social support can lower learners' motivation (Lambert, 2023). This perceived and actual language ability mismatch can lead to anxiety and affect language performance.

A further important affective factor that can hinder language learning is speaking anxiety. This can be described as a form of communication apprehension involving feelings of anxiety, fear, and dread when speaking in a foreign language (Pavlenko, 2013). This fear is often related to a fear of evaluation, fear of making mistakes, and low self-efficacy (Liu et al., 2023). Speaking anxiety can impact language learners as it may lead them to be reluctant to communicate, and this, in turn, slows language learning and delays fluency and proficiency (Darazi et al., 2023). These processes are theoretically in line with the Affective Filter Hypothesis, which states that when anxiety levels increase, the affective filter also increases and blocks language learning for learners (Alqahtani, 2024). On the other hand, reduced anxiety promotes language learning through engagement and unblocking of thoughts (Alqahtani, 2024). Classroom techniques that create a low-anxiety and enabling classroom environment have been reported to alleviate speaking anxiety and improve speaking ability (Sun, 2020).

Emotional and learner autonomy factors are crucial to language learning. Learner autonomy is a learner's ability to take control over their own learning processes, goal setting, strategy choice, and regulation (Chametzky, 2013). Learner autonomy results in engagement in opportunities to speak English outside the classroom through media exposure, language exchange programs, and language learning apps, all of which are necessary to build speaking skills (Khoso et al., 2022; Khoso et al., 2024). Learner autonomy supports metacognitive processes, allowing learners to reflect on their learning process. But autonomy needs to be facilitated through appropriate teaching strategies, motivation, and learning environments (Benesch, 2013). I believe motivated, positive, and confident learners are more likely to apply autonomous learning skills than anxious and less confident learners (Mafandala, 2020).

In summary, the links between learner identity, anxiety, and autonomous learning skills are intricately connected and influence English speaking proficiency. The Affective Filter Hypothesis offers a holistic explanation of these relationships and the impact of affective and motivational factors on language learning (Burhan, 2024). Learner identity motivates learners to engage; anxiety decreases to create a communication flow; and autonomous learning skills help learners practise and attain proficiency in speaking. However, a lack of learner identity and anxiety can hinder learning and cause learners to fail to attain proficiency (Lee, 2022).

While the significance of these factors has been increasing, research is needed on the inter-relationships between these factors and their influence on speaking proficiency, more specifically within higher education. Insight into the inter-relationships between identities, anxiety, and autonomy is required for pedagogic approaches and language policy and curriculum. This research, therefore, aims to explore the role of the inter-relationships between psychological and self-regulatory factors on English speaking proficiency, and provide evidence-based recommendations for SLA theories and practice.

1.1. Literature Review

A number of cognitive, social, and affective factors affect learners' language acquisition and communicative competence in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) (Alnefaie, 2024; Wang et al., 2024; Zheng & Guo, 2026). Learner identity, speaking anxiety, and autonomous learning, specifically, have been identified as important factors in predicting the English-speaking skills of students (Mardani & Ghareghani, 2024; Wang et al., 2024; Khoso et al., 2024). The previous studies have shown that these variables are not independent of each other, but they also interact with each other to influence speaking proficiency, in terms of the learners' motivation, confidence, and their SLL behaviours (Afzal et al., 2025; Zheng & Guo, 2026; Khoso et al., 2022). The Affective Filter Hypothesis (Krashen, 1981) provides an effective explanation of the influence of affective factors on language acquisition, including motivation, self-esteem, and anxieties

(Burhan, 2024; Zheng & Guo, 2026). Based on this theoretical view, the next section examines the relationship between learner identity, speaking anxiety, autonomous learning, and the performance of English-speaking in EFL contexts critically.

1.1.1. EFL Learners' Identity And English-Speaking Proficiency

Learner identity is a growing concern in second language education, because it refers to people's self-views of their language use, and their positioning within sociocultural contexts (Duff & Uchida, 1997). Identity encompasses learners' ideas, perceptions, and views of themselves, which affect their language learning (Norton, 2013). Research has shown that learners with a positive language identity are more engaged and motivated in the language learning process (Mohammadi & Izadpanah, 2019). This leads to greater interaction in the target language and improved speaking skills. The social and cultural aspects of language learning are intertwined with identity, and it is negotiated and constructed in the process of interaction and learning (Teng, 2019). Students who view English as part of their personal or professional identity are more motivated to engage in authentic speaking experiences and make ongoing efforts to hone their speaking abilities. As Dörnyei (2009) points out, identity formation is influenced by social, educational, and cultural factors. As a result, language success and proficiency are greater when learners perceive the worldwide and occupational importance of English. On the other hand, identity issues can have a negative impact on language learning. Learners who experience an identity conflict between their L1 cultures and the target language (L2) culture may be unwilling to practice speaking tasks, which in turn impacts language learning (Zare-ee & Asgari Matin, 2014). The Affective Filter Hypothesis has proposed that a positive identity is related to a low affective filter that facilitates language input processing and speaking (Mardani & Ghareghani, 2024). Therefore, identity is a motivational and psychological language learning enabler. Lastly, more recent research stresses the interactive and dynamic nature of learner identity, which is constructed in EFL classrooms, where learners face language and psychological challenges (Zheng & Guo, 2026). For example, Debreli and Demirkan (2015) reported that learners who link their English language learning with their personal academic and career goals engage more and practise more, thus improving their fluency. But learners who experience difficulty in resolving their language and cultural identities have greater anxiety and a lower motivation to communicate (Dörnyei, 2009).

In terms of social identity, learners' perceptions of inclusion and social acceptance in English communities also play a role. According to social identity theory, people's feelings of inclusion or exclusion play a critical role in their communication (Kim, 2014). Second language learners who feel unsupported and pressured may become demotivated and lack confidence, which can result in unwillingness to speak and hence decreased speaking proficiency (Boonma & Swatevacharkul, 2020). What's more, research indicates that integrative (desire to join language community) motivation is more positively associated with speaking proficiency than instrumental motivation (Lamb, 2021). These findings emphasise the role of identity in language learning.

1.1.2. Speaking Anxiety and English Proficiency

Speaking anxiety is a critical psychological factor that can hinder language learning. This is characterised by a sense of fear, anxiety, and tension when speaking another language (Pavlenko, 2013). This can affect fluency, pronunciation and communicative skills, making it difficult to learn (Darazi et al., 2023).

Previous language learning studies have often linked language proficiency with cognitive processes, whereas recent research has emphasised the influence of affective factors on language learning (Woodrow, 2006). Students who have positive self-conceptions and language identities show greater motivation and engagement (Rahmat et al., 2020), while those who experience anxiety demonstrate avoidance behaviours that limit their practice (Afzal et al., 2025). This avoidance behaviour forms a vicious cycle by decreasing practice and confidence (Khoso et al., 2022). The Affective Filter Hypothesis can explain these phenomena by proposing that anxiety elevates the affective filter and prevents the processing of language input (Debreli & Demirkan, 2015). As a result, high-anxiety learners have difficulties in acquiring language structures and functioning in communicative situations (Debreli & Demirkan, 2015).

Recent studies also highlight the importance of cognitive load and stressors in determining learners' well-being and performance. For example, online distractions and stress from notifications have been found to increase cognitive load and have a negative impact on well-being and performance (Mukhdoom & Villarama, 2024). This implies that speaking anxiety in language learning scenarios may also restrict learners' cognitive resources, thus impairing their ability to understand and speak fluently.

Sociocultural influences also play a role in speaking anxiety. In many English as a foreign language (EFL) settings, English is considered a prestigious language, and students may feel compelled to perform well in front of their peers (Kitano, 2001). This is especially the case in collectivist cultures where there is a strong reluctance to experience embarrassment and loss of social face (Kitano, 2001). But creating a welcoming classroom and providing feedback and encouragement can reduce such feelings and enhance self-confidence (Liu et al., 2023). Anxiety also has physical symptoms such as increased heart rate, sweating, and cognitive block, which can also impact learners' ability to construct sentences and express them accurately and grammatically while speaking (Khoso et al., 2024). These studies demonstrate the multifaceted nature and prevalence of speaking anxiety and its effects on learning English.

1.1.3. Learner Autonomy And English-Speaking Proficiency

Learner autonomy has long been recognised as an important component in language proficiency development, especially in EFL contexts where there may be limited opportunities for language use. Learner autonomy refers to the process of taking responsibility for learning (goal setting, strategy selection and evaluation) (Boonma & Swatevacharkul, 2020). Learner autonomy involves self-selected practices which aid in sustaining language learning and improving speaking proficiency. Evidence indicates that learner autonomy is related to language learning outcomes. Those who independently engage in language learning activities in their own time, such as media viewing, conversation with native speakers, and e-learning tasks, are more proficient in their language skills (Kim, 2014). They also have greater learner autonomy, self-regulation, and persistence in the pursuit of their learning goals. Furthermore, self-learning has an effect. Students who take charge of their learning processes are less stressed as they feel in control of their learning (Khoso et al., 2022). Within the Affective Filter Hypothesis, autonomy is one of the factors that can reduce the affective filter through improving learners' self-confidence and intrinsic motivation (Majeed et al., 2022). This enables them to lower their affective filter to be more open to language input and to communicate.

But autonomy doesn't emerge naturally; learners' autonomy needs to be supported by teachers and in the classroom (Benesch, 2013). Teachers have a key role in supporting learners' autonomy through support, advice, and opportunities to engage in self-learning. Through the support of autonomy, learners can be engaged in communicative tasks, and this leads to development in speaking and language proficiency.

1.1.4. Identity, Speaking Anxiety And Autonomy In English Speaking

Learner identity, speaking anxiety, and learner autonomy are an integrated system (Wang et al. 2024). Positive EFL identity ensures students are motivated and avoid anxiety. This makes proactively engaging in language learning more likely. Low learner identity is caused by speaking anxiety because it creates doubts about language competence (Boonma & Swatevacharkul, 2020).

Learners develop personal strategies through autonomy, which enhances their capacity to speak with confidence (Gökgöz, 2008). Several studies support this interconnectedness. Peng and Woodrow (2006) discovered that English as a Foreign Language learners who maintained high levels of both self-confidence and personal control experienced reduced anxiety during speech activities as well as better speaking results.

Figure 1 shows the integrated framework of this study, which is based on the principles of second language acquisition (SLA). It is primarily based on the Affective Filter Hypothesis, which posits that emotional factors like motivation, confidence, and anxiety affect the efficacy of language acquisition by influencing the processing and assimilation of linguistic input. In this model, speaking anxiety is framed as an affective factor that elevates the filter and acts as a blockage to language learning, while learner identity is an affective factor that can reduce the filter to facilitate language learning. Self-regulated learning skills are proposed as a moderating factor between affect and language learning.

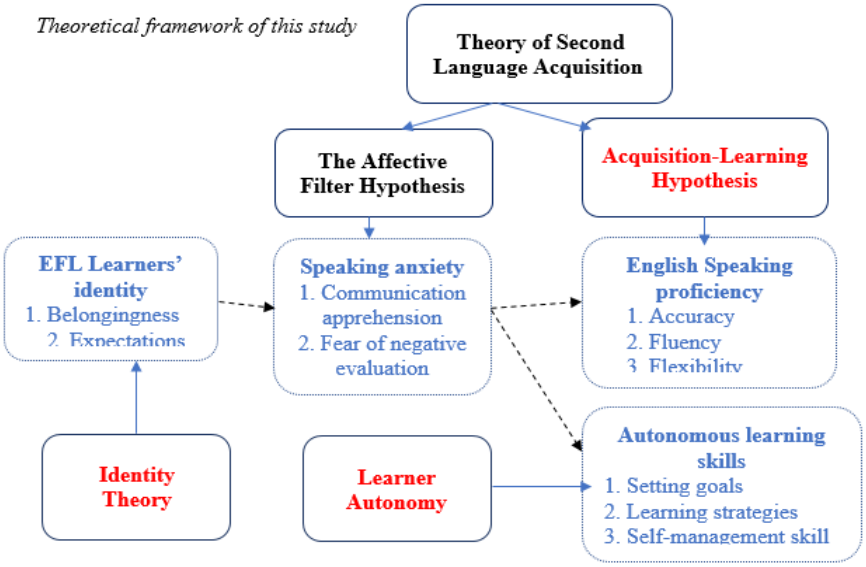


Figure 1. Theoretical Framework of This Study

The diagram illustrates the theoretical underpinning of research on EFL learners' speaking skills in English. It focuses on identity, anxiety, autonomy, and their relation to speaking skills within the context of second language learning theories.

In particular, EFL learner identity, based on Identity Theory, refers to learners' belongingness and expectations about becoming an English user. Positive identity is linked to higher motivation, pride in language use, and engagement in language learning tasks. By contrast, speaking anxiety, based on the Affective Filter Hypothesis, is a psychological barrier to input processing and performance in communicative tasks. Learner autonomy skills, based on Learner Autonomy Theory, allow students to independently manage their learning processes through goal setting, strategy selection, and self-regulation. In this research, autonomy is viewed as a mediating factor that converts learners' psychological states into language use and language proficiency.

Alongside the Affective Filter Hypothesis, this model is underpinned by views of SLA, particularly the significance of language output. Swain (2005) proposes three primary roles for language output: it focuses learners' attention on linguistic form, offers opportunities for hypothesis testing, and creates opportunities for learners to make conscious decisions about language use. Research also stresses the importance of output activities, such as speaking, for enhancing fluency and accuracy of language use, as they enable learners to detect gaps in their linguistic knowledge and adjust their language use accordingly (Izumi et al., 1999; Shen, 2021). So, speaking is not simply an outcome of language learning but also a part of the learning process by facilitating interaction, feedback and cognition (Shen, 2021).

The synthesis of these theories offers a view of English-speaking proficiency as the result of the interplay of affective, motivational and behavioural factors. Learner identity boosts motivation and decreases psychological resistance, thus decreasing the affective filter. On the other hand, speaking anxiety increases the affective filter, preventing effective communication. Autonomous learning skills play a key role as a mediator of these affective factors in language learning performance outcomes, as they allow learners to maintain practice, to seek opportunities for practice, and to self-regulate their learning. By doing so, autonomy links learners' internal psychological states to speaking proficiency.

While research on EFL learning is increasing, there are still some caveats. First, speaking proficiency of non-English major university students, especially in EFL countries like China, is rarely investigated despite evidence of low levels of general speaking proficiency. Second, while learning autonomy is acknowledged as crucial to language learning, little research has been done on the role of psychological variables such as identity and anxiety in the development of autonomy among EFL learners. Third, while there has been much research on affective factors in language learning, little has examined learner identity in the context of speaking proficiency in non-English major settings. Lastly, although speaking anxiety has

been studied as a predictor of language performance, few studies have looked at its mediating function or how it interacts with other factors within a theoretical framework.

The current work offers an integrated model that builds on the Affective Filter Hypothesis by adding learner identity as a motivational variable and autonomous learning as a mediator in order to get beyond these limitations. This study offers an integrated model to account for the impacts of affective and self-regulatory characteristics on English-speaking competency, in contrast to earlier research that examines these variables separately. Specifically, it investigates how autonomous learning skills regulate the direct and indirect impacts of speaking anxiety and EFL learner identity on speaking proficiency. This method enables the research to increase our understanding of the behavioural and psychological processes that underlie second language acquisition.

Figure 2 shows the study framework, depicting the relationships between the key variables. The conceptual framework has EFL learners' identity and speaking anxiety as independent variables, autonomous learning skills as a mediating variable, and English-speaking proficiency as the dependent variable. It shows both the direct and indirect effects of psychological and self-regulatory processes on learners' speaking proficiency.EFL learners' identity is defined as belongingness and expectations, which reflect learners' sense of belonging to the English-speaking community and their future language goals. Speaking anxiety is defined by two factors: communication apprehension and fear of negative evaluation, which represent the emotional factors that hinder learners' speaking performance. Self-directed learning skills are operationalized through learners' goal setting, learning strategies, and self-management, reflecting learners' autonomous learning skills. Speaking proficiency is operationalised by accuracy, fluency, and flexibility, which are dimensions of communication skills.

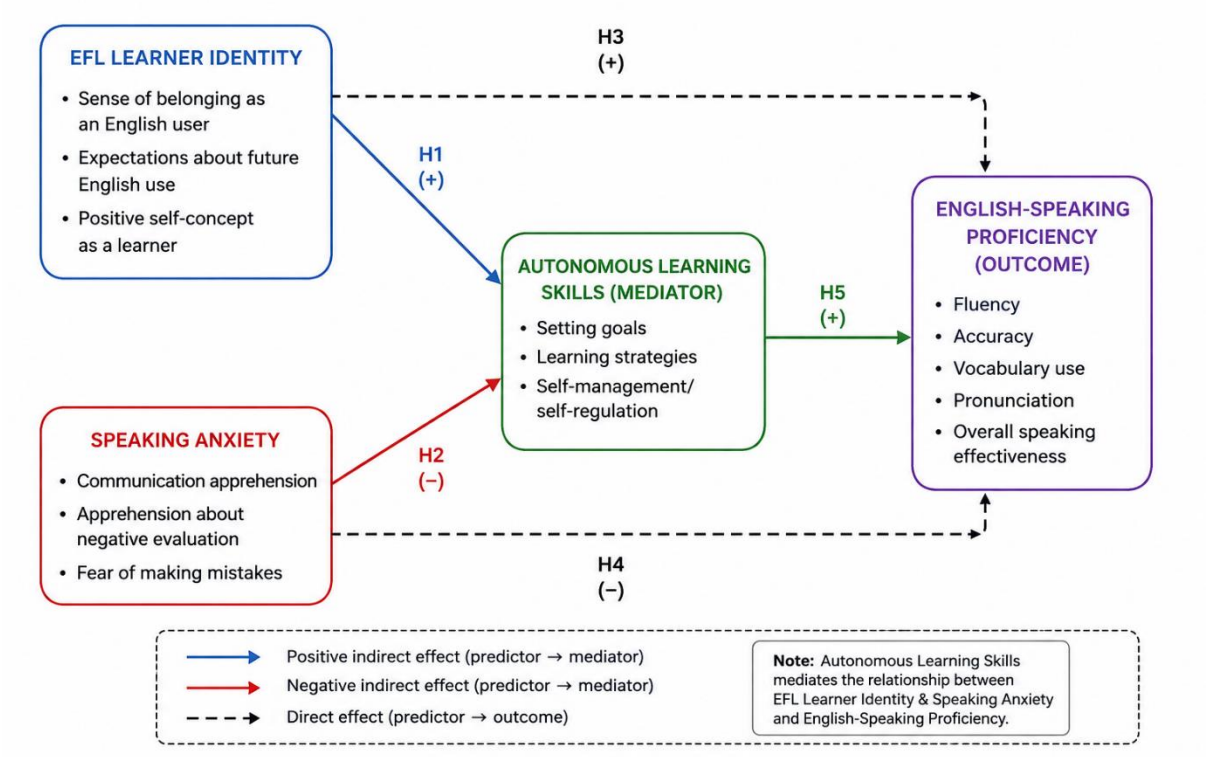


Figure 2. The Conceptual Framework of This Study

This model assumes EFL learners' identity has a positive impact on both autonomous learning skills and English-speaking proficiency, since learners with a strong sense of identity are motivated to learn and use English. Conversely, speaking anxiety is likely to have a negative effect on both autonomous learning skills and speaking proficiency, as anxiety reduces participation and speaking opportunities.

In addition, autonomous learning skills are expected to mediate the effects of the independent variables on English speaking proficiency. Specifically, students with a strong sense of identity are expected to have autonomous learning skills, which will enhance English speaking proficiency. However, speaking

anxiety is likely to have a negative effect on students' autonomy and thus speaking proficiency. Alongside the mediated effects, identity and anxiety will also impact directly on speaking proficiency.

To sum up, the conceptual model offers a framework to examine the relationships between the behavioural (autonomy) and affective (identity and anxiety) factors and English-speaking proficiency. The model is a holistic foundation for empirical studies and extends our understanding of the processes that underlie second language learning by providing direct and mediated effects.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1. Research Design

The relationship between EFL learners' identity, speaking anxiety, autonomous learning, and English-speaking competency is examined in this study using a quantitative research design. This study uses a correlational research design to examine the degree to which these factors predict speaking proficiency. Data were gathered using questionnaires and speaking tests, which allowed for statistical analysis of the relationships between variables. A cross-sectional design was adopted, in which data were gathered at one point in time. This approach permits the detection of relationships between variables in their natural environment. Quantitative approaches guarantee objectivity, replicability, and the identification of statistically significant associations that are instrumental in EFL learners' English-speaking proficiency.

2.2. Participants and Sampling

It is the undergraduate students who are studying English as a Foreign Language (EFL) at the universities in China that were the target population. Stratified random sampling was used to achieve representation based on key demographic and academic factors, such as gender and levels of English language proficiency (beginner, intermediate, advanced). A total of 200 undergraduate EFL students participated in the study. The participants ranged in age from 18 to 24 years ($M = 20.36$, $SD = 1.47$). There were 118 female students (59%) and 82 male students (41%). The subjects included in the study were not limited to any specific academic disciplines, but all of these registered students were in compulsory university English language courses. It was determined from previous applied linguistics studies that an appropriate sample size for the correlation and multiple regression analyses was provided.

The following inclusion criteria were used for selecting the participants:

- Non-native speakers of English.
- Studied foreign language (EFL) at the undergraduate level.
- Had studied English for two years or more.
- Gave consent to participate willingly.

Data were collected from February to March 2025. All participants were provided with an information sheet detailing the aims of the study, and an informed consent form was signed prior to the completion of questionnaires and the speaking assessment. This was done on a voluntary basis, and respondents were made aware that their answers would be anonymous and confidential and would only serve as a research tool.

Participant Recruitment: The researcher used the English language teachers from the participating universities to approach the students who were eligible to participate in the study by providing the Google Forms link to the eligible EFL students at their respective universities. Participation was voluntary and informed consent was obtained electronically prior to accessing the questionnaire. Responses were anonymous and were only used for academic research.

2.3. Instruments and Measures

All instruments in this study were adapted from scales that have been previously validated and widely used in second language acquisition research. To achieve clarity and context suitability for Chinese undergraduate EFL learners, minor wording changes were made to enhance the original constructs. The

questionnaire was pre-tested with 30 EFL students and three language teaching experts before the main survey, so as to be clear, content-valid, and readable. Pilot results showed good internal consistency, and all instruments showed good reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha \geq 0.70$).

EFL Learner Identity: An adapted version of the Language Learning Identity Scale by Norton and Early (2011) was used to assess Learner identity. There were 15 items on a five-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree). The total scores were between 15 and 75 and were higher the more developed the English language learner identity. It took about 5 minutes for the participants to fill out the questionnaire. Some of the questions asked were "I consider English an important part of my future career" and "I feel confident identifying myself as an English language learner. Good construct validity and internal consistency were reported in previous studies, and the reliability in the present study was acceptable (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.88$).

Speaking Anxiety: The Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) developed by Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986) was used to measure speaking anxiety. A set of 33 items rated according to a 5-point Likert rating scale ranging from (Strongly Disagree) to (Strongly Agree). The possible scores ranged from 33 to 165, with higher scores indicating higher levels of speaking anxiety. This section took about 8–10 minutes to complete. Some of the example items were "I begin to feel panicked when I have to speak extemporaneously in English class" and "I feel nervous when I have to answer questions in English. The FLCAS has been proven from time to time to be highly reliable and construct valid in all contexts of EFL; the same is true in the present study, in which a Cronbach's α value of 0.91 was obtained.

Learner Autonomy: The Learner Autonomy Questionnaire (LAQ), which was adapted from Holec (1981) and developed by Kırmızı (Kırmızı & Kıraç, 2018), was used to assess learner autonomy. The instrument was made up of 20 items, which were rated on a five-point Likert scale from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree. The total scores ranged from 20 to 100, with higher scores representing more robust autonomous learning behaviours. Participants took about 6-7 minutes to fill out the questionnaire. Some examples of the sample items were: "I set my own goals for learning English" and "I regularly check how well I have learnt English. The instrument has been proven reliable and valid in previous studies, and in the current study the internal consistency was satisfactory (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.89$).

English-Speaking Proficiency: The language ability was measured using a structured speaking task that was created based on the IELTS Speaking Band Descriptors. Each participant was interviewed individually for around 10 – 12 minutes. They were judged on four criteria: fluency and coherence (1-9); lexical resource (1-9); grammatical range and accuracy (1-9); pronunciation (1-9), with higher band scores indicating higher levels of speaking ability. Each performance was assessed independently by 2 experienced English language teachers to ensure that all performances were scored consistently. To evaluate the reliability of the speaking assessment, Cohen's Kappa was used to determine the inter-rater reliability, which showed the two raters had substantial agreement ($\varkappa = 0.84$).

2.4. Data Analysis

Data were analysed on SPSS 26. Data on the demographic characteristics and the study variables were presented descriptively in terms of frequencies, means and standard deviations. Pearson correlation analysis was used to explore the relationship between the speaking anxiety of the EFL learners, their English-speaking ability, and their autonomous learning behavior, along with their identity. The Multiple regression analysis was used to find the predictive effect of the independent variables on English-speaking proficiency, and also to test the study hypotheses, and ANOVA was used to test the overall significance of the regression model. The p-value was set at $< .05$ for statistical significance. The necessary assumptions of normality, linearity, homoscedasticity, independence of errors, and multicollinearity were tested before the analyses. The questionnaires have been tested for internal consistency with Cronbach's alpha and the speaking assessment for inter-rater reliability with Cohen's Kappa.

3. FINDINGS

3.1. Descriptive Statistics

In order to provide an overview of distribution and central tendency of the various variables, the key characteristics of the data set were summarised using descriptive statistics. The participants' characteristics (age, gender, academic level and years of English study) were reported using descriptive statistics such as mean, standard deviation, frequency and percentage. Descriptive statistics were also used to assess the overall trends in identification of EFL students, speaking anxiety, independent learning skills, and English-speaking proficiency. This variable analysis enabled us to first understand the basic trends in the data before conducting further inferential statistical tests.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Study Variables

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
EFL Learner Identity	3.85	0.65	2	5
Speaking Anxiety	2s.95	0.8	1.5	4.5
Autonomous Learning Skills	4.1	0.72	2.8	5
English-Speaking Proficiency	3.6	0.85	2	5

The descriptive statistics in Table 1 revealed the key tendencies and spread levels of research variables which allowed the researchers to gather understanding about participant attributes. Most participants displayed moderate strength of identification toward English learning according to their mean score of 3.85 (SD = 0.65). Analysis indicated that speaking anxiety reached a moderate level of 2.95 with a standard deviation of 0.80, indicating diverse learner apprehensions. The participants displayed the most significant autonomous learning skills according to the mean rating results (4.10, SD = 0.72). Most participants exhibited intermediate-level English proficiency according to the mean of 3.60 (SD = 0.85), while their scores spanned from 2.00 to 5.00. The collected data show learner experience variation, which will help future statistical assessment of variable relationships.

The mean scores for four important factors in the context of EFL learning are shown in Figure 3: English-speaking proficiency, speaking anxiety, autonomous learning skills, and EFL-learner identity. An instant evaluation of each construct's relative status within the sampled population is made possible by the visual comparison. This gives an overview of participants' average perceptions of their anxiety, autonomy, identity, and competence.

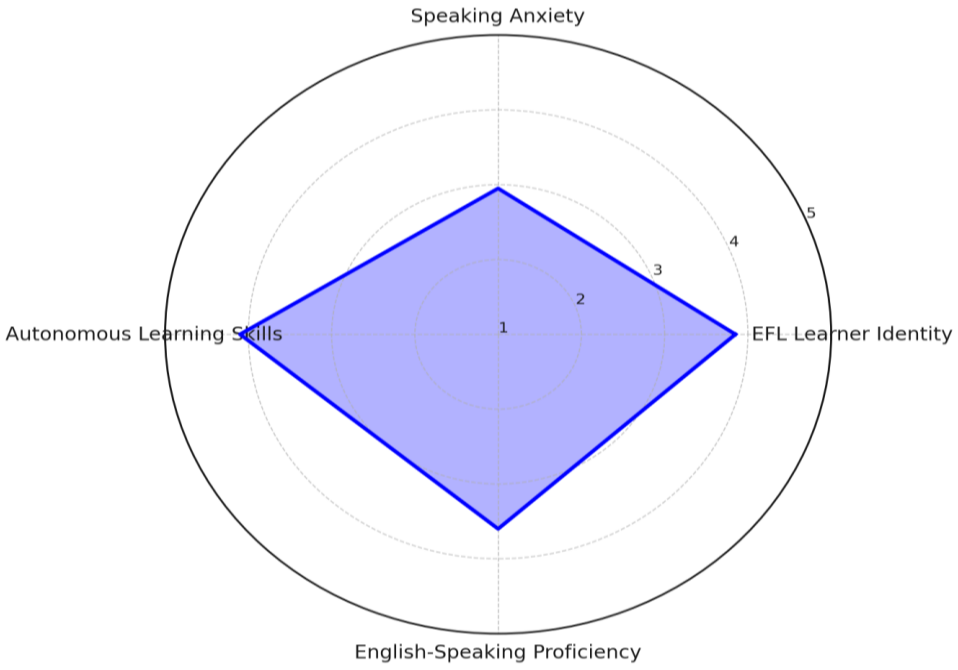


Figure 3. Average Results for Important Study Factors in EFL Education

The main variables studied in EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learning are the focus of the figure. The average scores for speaking anxiety, EFL learner identification, English competence, and autonomous learning abilities are compared.

Table 2. Correlation Analysis

Variable	EFL Learner Identity	Speaking Anxiety	Autonomous Learning Skills	English-Speaking Proficiency
EFL Learner Identity	1	-0.42	0.55	0.6
Speaking Anxiety	-0.42	1	-0.38	-0.5
Autonomous Learning Skills	0.55	-0.38	1	0.65
English-Speaking Proficiency	0.6	-0.5	0.65	1

As shown in Table 2, the study variables demonstrated meaningful correlations with each other, demonstrating their combined impact on English-speaking proficiency. The extent to which EFL learners express English identity matches their English proficiency level at $r = 0.60$ ($p < .01$). Higher speaking anxiety levels led to lower English-speaking proficiency according to the correlation analysis ($r = -0.50$, $p < .01$). Autonomous learning skills demonstrated positive relations with EFL learner identity ($r = 0.55$, $p < .01$) and English-speaking proficiency ($r = 0.65$, $p < .01$), thus emphasizing how self-directed learning improves speaking abilities. The strength of EFL learner identity and autonomous learning skills decreased among students who experienced increased speaking anxiety according to their reported data. The research strengthens the need to support positive learner identity development and autonomy, together with speaking anxiety reduction, to promote better English-speaking abilities.

3.2. Regression Analysis

Regression analysis was used in the study to assess the predictive relationships between EFL learner identity, speaking anxiety, and autonomous learning abilities toward English-speaking proficiency. The research design focused on measuring the effectiveness of independent variables to describe speaking proficiency changes and their respective contribution rates. Overview facts from the model summary show the effectiveness of the model, followed by ANOVA testing the model significance, while coefficients display individual variable effects on speaking proficiency levels. English-speaking proficiency receives positive influence from EFL learner identity in combination with autonomous learning skills but receives negative influence from speaking anxiety. The statistical significance values ($p < 0.01$) serve to validate the meaningful relationships between learner identity strength and autonomous learning ability and English-speaking proficiency reduction from speaking anxiety.

Table 3. Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	0.75	0.56	0.54	0.62

Table 3 presents key metrics that assess the effectiveness and prediction power of the regression system that forecasts English-speaking competency using EFL student identification, speaking anxiety, and autonomous learning abilities.

A strong positive relationship exists between the independent variables and speaking proficiency according to the provided correlation coefficient (R = 0.75). A total of 56% of the variance in English-speaking proficiency stems from EFL learner identity and speaking anxiety alongside autonomous learning skills, according to the R-squared value (0.56), with the unexplained portion amounting to 44%. The Adjusted R Square value (0.54) demonstrates the model is still highly explanatory despite including its number of predictors to minimize overfitting. A moderate level of prediction accuracy emerges from the model since the standard error of the estimate amounts to 0.62. Although other unknown factors may affect students' overall success rate, the variables under investigation play a significant role in predicting speaking proficiency.

Figure 4 highlights the association between EFL learner identity and English-speaking skill. The figure shows that as the level of student identity increases from "Low" to "High," there is a corresponding increase in speaking proficiency levels. This is an indication of a positive association between English speaking ability and the sense of EFL learner identity.

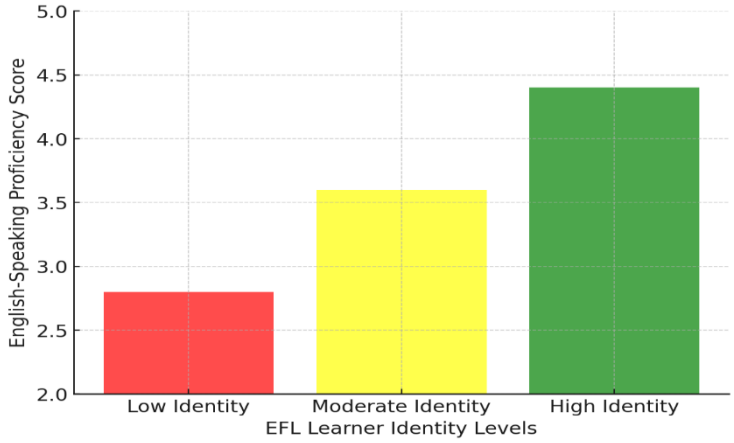


Figure 4. English-Speaking Ability at Various Learner Identity Levels

The association between EFL learner identity levels and English-speaking competency scores is depicted in the image. Proficiency scores at low, moderate, and high learner identity levels are compared.

Table 4. ANOVA Results

Model	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Regression	25.32	3	8.44	84.4	0.00
Residual	19.68	196	0.1		
Total	45	199			

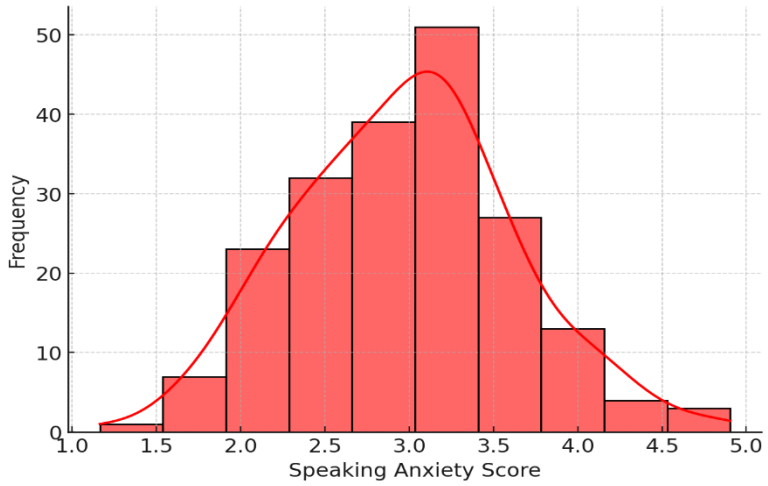


Figure 5. Participants' Speaking Anxiety Level Distribution

Table 4 shows the total significance of the regression model in its predictions regarding English-speaking proficiency when FLEL learner identity, speaking anxiety, and autonomous learning skills are analyzed. The independent variables explain 25.32 sum of squares (SS), while the unexplained randomness amounts to 19.68 SS. The three independent variables (df = 3) yield mean square values of 8.44, and the remaining 196 observations (df = 196) produce a mean square value of 0.10. The F-statistic shows statistical significance at $p < 0.01$ while holding a value of $F = 84.4$ as the model succeeds in explaining significant English-speaking proficiency variance using predictor variables. The association between learner identification and speaking competency and speaking anxiety and autonomous learning skills is validated by the Sig. value of 0.00, which shows that the model's predictive power is not dependent on chance.

A histogram showing the frequency of various self-reported speaking anxiety scores among study participants is shown in Figure 5. The vertical axis displays the frequency or number of participants reporting each score level, while the horizontal axis (Speaking Anxiety Score) runs from 1.0 to 5.0 to indicate the degree of anxiety.

The distribution of participants' speaking anxiety levels is the main focus of this figure theme. It displays the frequency of various speaking anxiety scores between 1.0 and 5.0.

Table 5. Coefficients Results

Model	Unstandardized B	Std. Error	Standardized Beta	t	Sig.
Constant	1.2	0.25		4.8	0.00
EFL Learner Identity	0.35	0.08	0.38	4.38	0.00
Speaking Anxiety	-0.28	0.07	-0.32	-4	0.00
Autonomous Learning Skills	0.42	0.09	0.41	4.67	0.00

The results of the regression analysis on the association between EFL learner identity and speaking anxiety, as well as autonomous learning abilities and English-speaking competency, are shown in Table 5. The constant value is English proficiency (1.2) if all the independent variables are zero. For example, students who have a high regard for their English learner identity tend to get higher scores for their English-speaking ability, which means the EFL learner identity ($B = 0.35$, $\beta = 0.38$, $p < 0.01$) positively impacted the English-speaking ability.

Anxiety in speaking lessens speaking efficiency, thereby having a significant negative effect on proficiency in speaking English ($B = -0.28$, $\beta = -0.32$, $p < 0.01$). In the research, independent learning ($B = 0.42$, $\beta = 0.41$, $p < 0.01$) skills positively influences speech proficiency. English speaking performance is improved by students seeking learning opportunities. Students' improved English-speaking proficiency is explained by the evolution of a positive learner identity with self-regulation and decreased anxiety, as shown by the significance ($p < 0.01$) of all variables. Figure 6 shows the relationship between anxiety and English-speaking skill. There are three bars or lines in this graphic that represent the anxiety levels: low, moderate, and high. An increase in anxiety level is inversely linked to English-speaking proficiency.

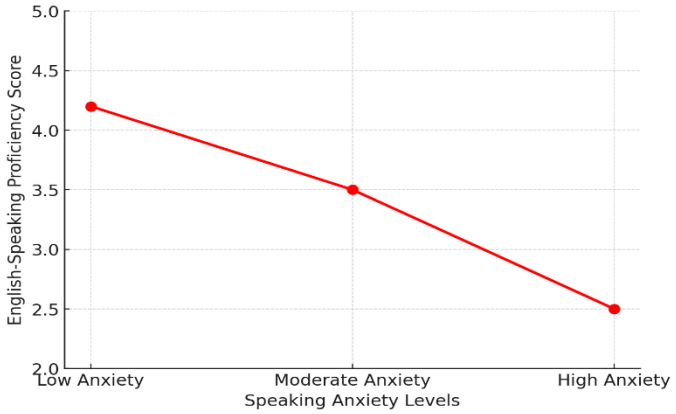


Figure 6. Rises in Speaking Anxiety and Drops in English-Speaking Proficiency

This graph shows that as speaking anxiety goes from low to high, English proficiency decreases. It indicates that there is a negative correlation between speaking anxiety levels and English-speaking ability.

4. DISCUSSION

The relationships between English as a foreign language learner identity, speaking anxiety, independent learning skills, and English-speaking proficiency were explored through an integrated theoretical approach. We found that speaking anxiety plays a significant negative role in predicting English-speaking competence, but that learner identity and independent learning skills play a significant positive role. The study's findings show that affective factors and motivation are important factors in language learning, which are in line with the Affective Filter Hypothesis. The results not only validate the theoretical

construct, but also indicate that we should look into the psychological and self-regulatory factors of EFL learners' speaking proficiency development.

The importance of identity as a key motivator in language learning is suggested by the significant positive correlation (r = 0.60, p <.01; B = 0.35, p <.01) between the identity of EFL learners and their fluency in speaking English. EFL learners are more likely to engage in communicative practices and speak up in language learning activities if they perceive English to be integral to their academic or professional identities. This finding is consistent with Norton's (2000, 2012) Investment Model, which predicts that students' involvement is associated with the benefits they anticipate from language learning. It is also in line with sociocultural approaches that explore the impact of identity on students' communicative participation.

The current findings suggest that, in contrast to purely cognitive theories of language learning that focus on language skills, identity is essential to students' motivation to speak and maintain involvement in language, and to improving their speaking proficiency.

Anxiety in speaking was found to be an important element in language performance as it was negatively correlated (r = -0.50, p < .01) and predicted (B = -0.28, p < 0.01) English speaking proficiency. This result is consistent with previous studies which indicate that anxiety raises the affective filter, blocks and decreases language learners' input processing (Teng, 2019; Zare-ee & Asgari Matin, 2014). The study also supports Young's (1991) Communication Apprehension Model, which predicts that speaking anxiety will result in learners avoiding speaking, hence limiting their speaking practice. This is in line with the idea of anxiety as a cognitive barrier to language learning and use proposed by the Affective Filter Hypothesis. This suggests the importance of maintaining a low-anxiety classroom environment, such as having helpful classroom activities (i.e., co-operative learning, speaking tasks and feedback).

The strongest predictor of English speaking was self-directed learning (r = 0.65, p < .01; B = 0.42, p < .01), indicating that self-directed learning is a vital element of language learning and use. This is in line with the learner autonomy model proposed by Holec (1981) and indicates the importance of learner agency. It also confirms the research by Lee (2022), who found that language learners engaging in self-directed language practice (e.g., conversing with locals and accessing online resources) are more fluent. The findings also support the Self-Determination Theory (Burhan, 2024) that suggests autonomy leads to intrinsic motivation and engagement in language learning, which results in better learning outcomes. This study shows that for successful language learning, it is not just important to learn in the classroom, but also outside the classroom and for learners to self-regulate their learning.

A novel contribution of the current study is to show the inter-relationships between identity, anxiety, and autonomy. Our results reveal that learner identity is positively related to autonomous learning skills (r = 0.55, p <.01) and negatively related to speaking anxiety (r =-0.42, p <.01), which means that identity is a source of motivation that enhances autonomous learning skills, as it reduces psychological blocks. In contrast, speaking anxiety is negatively associated with engaging in autonomous learning activities, supporting the Weariness to Communicate Model (Mohammadi & Izadpanah, 2019), which emphasises the role of affective variables in willingness to communicate. This finding confirms the assumption that autonomous learning is essential to transfer the impact of affective factors onto speaking proficiency as modelled conceptually.

Overall, the results contribute to the field of SLA by providing a comprehensive view of the interaction of affective (identity and anxiety) and behavioural (autonomy) variables and their effects on language learning. By showing that these variables are not isolated, but are part of a system that includes motivation, emotion regulation and autonomous learning, this study shows that these variables help learners to achieve speaking proficiency.

Practically, the findings conclude that a holistic approach to teaching EFL will enhance learners' identity, lower their speaking anxiety, and autonomy. These should create a supportive learning environment that is conducive to learners' individual expression, offers opportunities for communication practice, and cultivates learners' autonomy. This will boost learners' confidence, motivation and speaking proficiency in English.

4.1 Future Research and Its Consequences

4.1.1. Theoretical Contributions

The study adds to the growing body of research on the affective and motivational aspects of language learning. The study offers empirical support for the Affective Filter Hypothesis by examining the effect of learner identity as well as speaking anxiety and autonomy on English performance. The research extends Identity Theory by considering the ways identity impacts self-regulation and anxiety in language learners.

4.1.2. Educational Consequences

The findings provide possible teaching methods to improve English speaking performance:

- Methods of identity promotion, such as project-based learning, where students speak English for meaningful purposes.
- Encouragement of independence through methods like technology, language portfolios, and self-reflection.
- Anxiety reduction strategies, like the use of mindfulness, exposure to anxiety-free speaking environments, and peer interactions.

5. CONCLUSION

The current investigation explored how EFL learners' identity, speaking anxiety, autonomous learning, and English-speaking proficiency are related by analyzing the relationship between these factors based on Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis. The results indicate that the positive relationship between learner identity and autonomous learning, and the positive effect on English-speaking proficiency, is statistically significant, while speaking anxiety has a significant negative effect on learners' oral performance. Of the predictors, autonomous learning proved to be the most significant in developing communicative competence, suggesting that self-directed learning behaviours play an important role in developing communicative competence. The result of this study offers empirical evidence for the Affective Filter Hypothesis in that the affective and self-regulatory aspects of learners influence second language acquisition and their speaking performance. The findings have several implications for classroom teachers and language teachers. Teachers need to use learner-centred teaching methods so that learners have a stronger sense of English language identity, are willing to participate in communication activities, and they are doing so in a positive atmosphere; provide constructive criticism, collaborate with others to learn, and make speaking activities easy to do so they do not fear them. The reflection learning, goal-setting, and self-assessment exercises can also help foster autonomy among learners while boosting their confidence in communication in English. The study also offers useful suggestions to curriculum developers and schools. English language learning programs should include opportunities for autonomous learning, critical thinking, and communication in the real world, not just teacher-centred teaching. Universities and language centres should create more platforms for students to practice spoken English, such as language clubs, conversation circles, technology-assisted learning platforms and other extracurricular speaking programs, to boost students' confidence and communication ability in English. In terms of policy, it is recommended that educational policymakers make learner-centred language education a reality by providing teacher training programmes for teachers to use effective strategies to overcome speaking anxiety, foster a positive or autonomous learner identity, and promote autonomous learning. The investment in digital language-learning materials, computer-assisted learning environments, and institutional support systems can be another means of enhancing English language learning and increasing the speaking ability of EFL learners.

Last but not least, this study is a significant addition to the field of second language acquisition studies through the development of an integrated model in which L2 proficiency is explained by the interaction between affective factors and L2 self-regulation. Further studies are needed to make causal inferences and to investigate these variables in other educational settings, age ranges, and cultural contexts using longitudinal and mixed methods designs. Other psychological and contextual factors, e.g., self-efficacy, motivation, classroom climate, and digital learning environments, are also possible factors to be explored in further investigations to gain a deeper understanding of factors that influence English-speaking proficiency.

5.1. Limitations and Future Research

This research delivers key findings regarding EFL learner identity in connection to speaking anxiety and autonomous learning skills and English-speaking proficiency, but researchers need to consider important limitations. The research utilized a cross-sectional design despite its constraints regarding causality in variable relationships, so upcoming research must use longitudinal methods to study temporal factor evolutions. The study heavily depended on students' reported answers about identity as well as anxiety and autonomy, which might be influenced by both deliberate and personal subjective influences; additional qualitative assessment techniques through interviews and class observation would deliver richer insights about student experiences. Researchers should examine these relationships further because the sample used university students, therefore limiting general findings for various educational levels, including elementary school EFL students and adult language learners in professional contexts. Current studies should evaluate how technology-based independent learning systems influence speaking skills development since digital tools alongside AI play an expanding role in language education. Research validity was increased when these current study limitations received proper attention because it enhanced our understanding of how EFL students can optimize English-speaking ability.

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Research Ethics: The study was performed following the applicable research ethics principles. All participants gave informed consent to participate, and no one was forced to participate in the study. All participants gave informed consent prior to data collection. Participants were told that their answers would be anonymous and confidential and would be utilised only for academic study.

Data Availability Statement: The data underlying this study are available on request from the corresponding author upon reasonable request. The data are not publicly available in order to protect the confidentiality and anonymity of the participants.

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