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EFL LEARNERS' PARTICIPATION AMONG PROFICIENCY LEVELS: INSIGHTS FROM STUDENTS AND TEACHERS

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Abstract: While prior research establishes that participation is affected by proficiency, instruction, motivation, and anxiety, few studies investigate participation by integrating observable classroom behavior with teachers' interpretations, particularly within Indonesian university EFL contexts. To bridge this disparity, this study aimed to describe how students with varying English proficiency levels participate in an English Intensive Program at an Islamic university in Surabaya, Indonesia, and to explore how teachers interpret students' participation in light of those proficiency levels. Data were collected through non-participant classroom observations and in-depth interviews with university students from two classes and five teachers, and were analysed using thematic analysis. The study found that students' participation appeared in many forms and was not limited to speaking. Higher- and intermediate-proficiency students tended to participate verbally, mostly when prompted by the teacher. Meanwhile, lower-proficiency students participated by listening, taking notes, following instructions, and completing tasks. Teachers interpreted participation by considering students' proficiency level, confidence, task difficulty, and classroom situation. Silence was often viewed as limited language ability or low confidence rather than a lack of interest. The study contributes to a deeper understanding of classroom involvement in EFL environments. The results support the notion that participation is dependent upon context and socially created, rather than just verbal. It also shows that observed stillness can indicate cognitive engagement rather than disengagement. By combining teachers' perspectives with observed students' behaviours, this study suggests that participation should be investigated through both behavioural and interpretive lenses. Future research should explore classroom participation and consider linguistic, nonverbal, affective, and contextual elements.
Keywords: *EFL students' participation; students' english proficiency levels; teachers' perspectives.*

INTRODUCTION

EFL classrooms at the university level are increasingly characterized by students with diverse English proficiency levels, which strongly influences how learners participate during lessons (Jamsri & Sukying, 2025; Cao, 2023; Lin & Wang, 2025; Dao, 2024; Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2024). In many higher education institutions, English Intensive Programs bring together students from different academic backgrounds, learning experiences, and levels of language exposure. This diversity creates both opportunities and challenges for classroom interaction, as students do not enter the classroom with the same linguistic resources or confidence in using English. As a result, participation patterns often vary significantly from one student to another. Ideally, EFL classrooms are interactive spaces where students actively communicate meaning, share ideas, and engage in learning. In reality, however, classroom participation is often uneven. Some students speak frequently and confidently, while others remain silent, hesitant, or participate in less visible ways (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2024; Iwashita et al., 2025; Hiver et al., 2025). Previous studies show that participation patterns are shaped not only by students' abilities but also by instructional design, classroom norms, and interactional practices

(Garcia-Ponce & Tavakoli, 2022; Adams & Oliver, 2023; Aksoy-Pekacar, 2024; King & Harumi, 2020; Nasir et al., 2019). Communicative and student-centered approaches, such as project-based learning and collaborative tasks, have been found to increase participation by giving learners more opportunities to interact and use English meaningfully (Simatupang & Yusuf, 2024; Cao, 2024; Ed-Dali, 2025).

Despite these positive findings, participation in EFL classrooms remains unequal. Research from different contexts shows that students with higher English proficiency tend to speak more, volunteer answers, and dominate discussions, while lower-proficiency students often hesitate, speak briefly, or remain silent due to limited vocabulary, slow processing, or speaking anxiety (Jiang, 2024; Cao, 2024; Xuan Mai et al., 2024; Ambawani et al., 2025). These differences suggest that participation is closely related to linguistic readiness, not merely to motivation or willingness (Namaziandost & Hwang, 2025; Ratri, 2025; Lohar, 2026). However, much of the existing research focuses on psychological factors such as anxiety or confidence rather than examining how participation actually occurs in real classroom interactions, including turn-taking, responding, questioning, listening, or remaining silent (Ozdemir & Papi, 2022; King & Harumi, 2020). As a result, participation is often reduced to speaking behaviour, which risks overlooking students—especially those with lower proficiency who participate through listening, note-taking, task completion, or peer collaboration (Pristiyaputri et al., 2023; Himmele & Himmele, 2026).

Another important limitation in the literature is the dominance of student-centered perspectives. Many studies explore participation through students' motivation, learning experiences, or perceived engagement (Mukarram et al., 2018; Garcia-Ponce & Tavakoli, 2022; Barus & Fadlia, 2022), but give the least attention to how teachers perceive and interpret students' participation. This is a critical gap, as teachers play a central role in observing classroom behavior, evaluating participation, and deciding how to respond instructionally (Saragih, 2024; Moskovich & Hershkovitz, 2024). Teachers and students may not share the same understanding of what counts as participation: teachers often associate participation with verbal responses, while students may view listening attentively, working on tasks, or giving non-verbal responses as meaningful participation (King & Harumi, 2020; Rocca, 2010). When teachers' perspectives are underrepresented, classroom participation is only partially explained, without considering how teachers' expectations, judgments, and instructional choices shape participation opportunities (Nasir et al., 2019; Bakshi, 2023; Kirmizi, 2025)

Furthermore, although previous studies confirm that participation is influenced by proficiency, instruction, motivation, and anxiety (Ambawani et al., 2025; Cao, 2024; Yuan, 2024), only a limited number of studies examine participation by combining observable classroom behavior with teachers' interpretations, especially in Indonesian university EFL contexts (Nasir et al., 2019; Saragih, 2024). Most research discusses participation in general terms, without clearly showing how students with low, moderate, and high English proficiency participate differently in real classroom situations. This gap underscores the importance of conducting research that views participation as a visible, contextual, and proficiency-sensitive process rather than as a single, uniform outcome.

Therefore, this study aims to address the following research questions (1) How do students with different English proficiency levels participate in EFL classrooms? and (2) How do teachers perceive and interpret students' participation patterns based on English proficiency levels? By combining real classroom evidence with teachers' views, this study offers a more grounded and practical understanding of classroom participation. This dual perspective is important for helping teachers recognize diverse forms of participation (verbal and non-verbal participation) as a meaningful form of participation and for supporting more inclusive and responsive teaching practices in university EFL classrooms.

METHOD

This study applied a qualitative case study design to explore how students with different levels of English proficiency participate in the EFL classroom and how teachers develop perceptions about these differences. A qualitative case study was chosen because the study concentrated on understanding classroom processes, meanings, and interpretations in a real educational context rather than measuring numerical outcomes (Creswell & Poth, 2023; Yin, 2018).

Students' participation cannot be separated from classroom interaction, instructional routines, and teachers' interpretations. Therefore, an in-depth qualitative approach was needed to describe and interpret participation as it naturally occurred in the English Intensive Program. This design

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allowed the researcher to explore a specific case within its authentic setting without manipulating classroom activities. The findings of this study are context-specific and are not intended to be generalized, but to provide a detailed understanding of participation patterns among students with different English proficiency levels.

This study is based on the concept that students' English proficiency levels influence their participation in the EFL classroom. Students with higher proficiency tend to participate more verbally and confidently, while lower-proficiency students may hesitate, remain silent, or show participation through non-verbal and behavioral actions due to language limitations or anxiety. Thus, proficiency level shapes both the type and frequency of classroom participation.

Classroom participation in this study refers to observable behaviors such as responding, questioning, sharing ideas, taking notes, working in groups, and showing engagement through attentive silence. Participation is understood as both verbal and non-verbal involvement in learning activities.

Teachers' perceptions form the second component of this framework. Dörnyei and Ryan (2015) argue that classroom interaction is relational. It means that teachers' interpretations influence students' behavior and vice versa. In this study, teachers interpret participation based on classroom observations, and these interpretations may shape feedback and instructional decisions.

Therefore, the conceptual framework in this study simultaneously connects two aspects. The first concerns how different proficiency levels shape students' participation during English instruction in the classroom, and the second concerns how teachers notice these differences through their observations. As shown in the figure of the conceptual framework below:

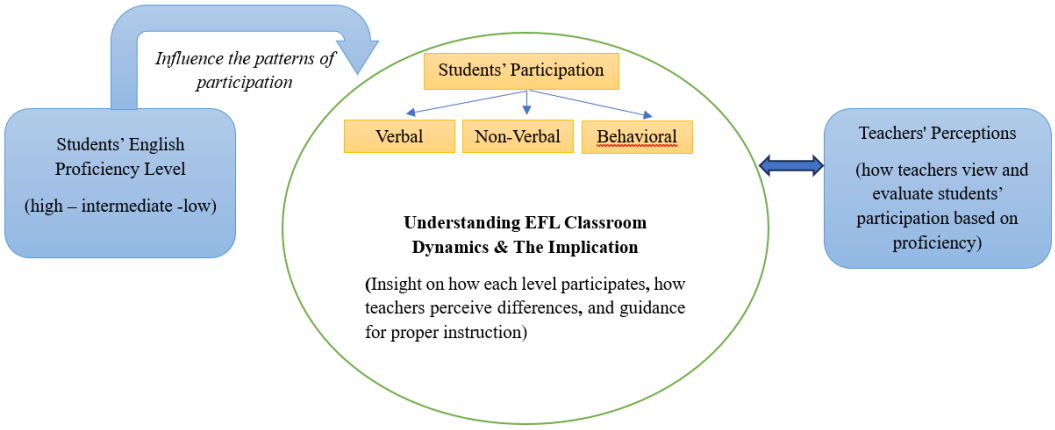


Figure 1. *Conceptual Framework (Adapted from Ambawani et al., 2025; Conner et al., 2025; Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015; Simatupang & Yusuf, 2024; and Xuan Mai et al., 2024*

This study was conducted at an Islamic university in Surabaya, Indonesia, where English is taught as a foreign language through a compulsory English Intensive Program during the first to second-semester. The program runs for two consecutive semesters and aims to improve students' English proficiency through regular face-to-face meetings. Students must complete the program to obtain an English certificate, which is required for registration of the undergraduate thesis.

Two classes of the English Intensive Program, A13 and B13, were selected as the focus of this study. To maintain objectivity, the researchers assigned two expert reviewers to validate the interview as well as the observation tool. They have at least 6 years of experience teaching speaking at a university in Surabaya, Indonesia, to students of varying proficiency levels. Each class consisted of approximately 23–27 students from different majors under the Faculty of Education and Teacher Training. These classes have mixed levels of English proficiency, which provided a suitable setting to observe differences in classroom participation.

This study involved fifteen participants, that comprises of ten students and five teachers. The students were selected purposively from the two classes to represent low, moderate, and high levels of English proficiency. The selection criteria of students included: (1) having completed the English Intensive Program, (2) representing different majors within the same faculty, (3) agreeing to be observed and interviewed, and (4)

representing different proficiency levels. To provide a coherent, organic picture of student participants, several important categories are added to the Table. 1 below that shows the demographic information of participants from students.

Table 1. *Demographic information of participants from students*

Participant's Code	Gender	Semester	Major / Department	Class in English intensive program	Participation Characteristics
S1	Female	2	Elementary Education	B13	Moderate proficiency, active in group or individual tasks
S2	Male	2	Islamic Education	B13	Low proficiency, never asking, and often coming late and absent
S3	Female	2	Early Childhood Education	B13	Low-moderate proficiency, enjoys group work, confident speaker
S4	Male	2	Science Education	B13	Low proficiency, very limited vocabulary, but still listening to the teacher's instruction
S5	Male	2	Islamic Education Management	B13	Low proficiency, very limited vocabulary, low motivation, often come late and absent
S6	Female	2	Arabic Education	A13	High proficiency, helps peers, and confident speaker
S7	Female	2	Math Education	A13	High proficiency, enjoys group or individual work, and confident speaker
S8	Female	2	Elementary Education	A13	Moderate proficiency, shy but motivated
S9	Male	2	English Education	A13	Intermediate proficiency, speaks only when asked, is active in group work, always listens to the teacher's instruction.
S10	Male	2	Islamic Education	A13	Intermediate proficiency, active in group or individual 2work and confident speaker

In this study, students' English proficiency levels were measured using non- standardized tests using the scoring rubric from the lecturers. The students' proficiency levels were identified based on their classroom performance. Teachers grouped students into low, moderate, and high proficiency levels by observing several aspects, such as how fluently and accurately they spoke, how well they understood instructions, their vocabulary and grammar use, their confidence when answering questions, and how actively they participated in class and during discussions. Five teachers who actively taught in the English Intensive Program were also selected purposively. The criteria included: (1) actively teaching in the English training program, (2) having experience teaching students with different proficiency levels for at least 4 years, and (3) agreeing to participate in interviews. These criteria were used to select teachers as information-rich participants who could offer valuable insights into how students with varying English proficiency levels participated in classroom activities. Table 2 below introduces the demographic information of the participants from teachers taking part in this study.

Table 2. *Demographic information of participants from teachers*

Participant's Code	Gender	Role	Years of Experience	Class in English intensive program
T1	Male	English Intensive Program Lecturer	2 years of EFL teaching experience	Teaches Class A3 & B3
T2	Female	English Intensive Program Lecturer	10 years of EFL teaching experience	Teaches Class A10 & B10
T3	Female	English Intensive Program Lecturer	4 years of EFL teaching experience	Teaches Class A12 & B12
T4	Female	English Intensive Program Lecturer	5 years of EFL teaching experience	Teaches Class A16 & B16
T5	Female	English Intensive Program Lecturer	10 years of EFL teaching experience	Teaches Class A19 & B19

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Both students and teachers allowed this study to explore participation from dual perspectives. All participants provided informed consent, and they are free to withdraw at any time. Ethical approval for this study was obtained through formal permission from the Head of the Language Center and the faculty coordinator, where the English Intensive Program was conducted. Informed consent was obtained from all participants through WhatsApp messages, and their identities were kept confidential by using pseudonyms; all data were stored securely and used only for research purposes. Two main data collection methods used in this study: non-participant classroom observation and in-depth interviews. Non-participant classroom observation and covert observation were conducted during two semesters (one academic year). To avoid bias, the researchers did not take part in the classroom activities, and students were not informed that they were being observed to maintain the nature of the data (Creswell & Poth, 2023). The observations were conducted in three cycles in each semester: pre-observation (meetings 1–4), focusing on students' initial participation, whilst-observation (meetings 15–18, documenting participation during the middle of the semester, and post-observation (meetings 24–27), observing participation after most instructional activities had been completed. Four observation sessions were conducted in each cycle. Therefore, there were twelve observation sessions in each semester and twenty-four observation sessions in total during two semesters. Students' verbal and non-verbal participation, such as answering questions, initiating interaction, listening attentively, taking notes, participating in group work, or remaining silent, were recorded using observation checklists, field notes, and video recordings. The recordings allowed the researcher to review participation events carefully and reduce observer bias.

Each observation session lasted about 90 minutes, following the regular class schedule in the English Intensive Program. All observations were carried out by the same researcher to keep the data collection consistent. To reduce possible bias, the researcher used an observation checklist, wrote detailed field notes, and recorded the classroom activities on video. These recordings helped the researcher review the data more carefully and check the accuracy of the observations. The observation checklist was developed based on key ideas about classroom participation from previous studies. Before being used, the instrument was reviewed and validated by two experts in EFL teaching to ensure that it was clear, relevant, and appropriate for this study.

Furthermore, in-depth interviews were conducted with ten students and five teachers to explore their experiences and perceptions regarding classroom participation. The data were collected through in-depth interviews guided by an interview protocol. The interview questions for students focused on how they participate in class, both verbal and non-verbal behaviors, the situations in which they are more or less active, and how their English proficiency influences their participation. Students were also asked about their personal experiences, challenges, and strategies in participating in classroom activities. Meanwhile, the teachers' interview questions focused on how teachers understand and identify students' participation, the differences in participation based on proficiency levels, the factors that influence participation, and the strategies they use to encourage students' involvement. The full interview guides for both students and teachers are provided in the appendix. The interviews allowed participants to explain how English proficiency influenced participation and how teachers interpreted students' participation patterns. Student interviews were conducted in Bahasa Indonesia to reduce misunderstanding and language anxiety, especially for those with limited English proficiency. The interviews were later translated into English during the analysis process. Teacher interviews were conducted in English, as they were professional English lecturers. The interviews were conducted online based on participants' preferences (Zoom, Google Meet, WhatsApp voice note, or Google Form). All interviews were conducted with prior consent, recorded, and transcribed word-for-word for analysis. Using both observation and interviews enabled data triangulation and provided a more comprehensive understanding of participation patterns. These methods were used to obtain a detailed understanding of students' classroom participation and teachers' perceptions of participation based on students' English proficiency levels.

Thematic analysis within a qualitative case study approach was applied in this study (Braun & Clarke, 2021). The analysis focused on identifying patterns of classroom participation based on students' English proficiency levels and teachers' interpretations. The unit of analysis was students' classroom participation, including observable verbal and non-verbal actions and teachers' interpretations. The analysis involved reading observation notes and interview transcripts,

identifying meaningful data, and using inductive coding to classify different forms of participation. The coding process was conducted by the researcher as the sole coder. To ensure consistency and trustworthiness, the coding and emerging themes were discussed with a peer experienced in qualitative research. Codes were then grouped into broader themes based on similarity and recurrence, and findings from observation and interview data were compared to ensure triangulation. Themes were developed when patterns appeared consistently across multiple data sources and were relevant to the research questions. To ensure trustworthiness, the study applied member checking and peer debriefing. Preliminary interpretations were shared with participants through WhatsApp to confirm accuracy. Peer debriefing was conducted with a qualified colleague who was not directly involved in the study to discuss coding and theme development. These procedures enhanced the credibility and consistency of the findings.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the findings based on classroom observations and in-depth interviews with students and teachers in the English Intensive Program. The results are organized according to the two research questions: (1) how students with different English proficiency levels participate in the EFL classroom, and (2) how teachers interpret students' participation based on those proficiency levels. The findings are explained and discussed by linking them with relevant theories and previous studies.

Students' classroom participation based on English proficiency levels

Participation beyond speaking

The findings show that classroom participation was not limited to speaking. Students demonstrated participation through verbal, non-verbal, and behavioral actions such as answering questions, listening attentively, taking notes, maintaining eye contact, and completing tasks. This supports the idea that participation includes both physical and mental involvement in learning (Anugrawan & Samad, 2025; Barus & Fadlia, 2022; Nasir et al., 2019; Sufian, 2024). Students with low English proficiency often showed participation through non-verbal behaviors. They listened carefully, followed instructions, and completed tasks, even though they rarely spoke. This finding aligns with Peng (2024), who explains that silence in EFL classrooms does not always mean disengagement. Many students were cognitively engaged but limited in expressing ideas verbally.

Previous studies mostly focus on oral participation and explain that limited vocabulary, anxiety, and low confidence reduce students' willingness to speak (Ambawani et al., 2025; Feng et al., 2026; Ye & Hu, 2025; King & Harumi, 2020; Kulsum & Ridwan, 2025; Kurniawati et al., 2024; Hajezi et al., 2023). However, this study shows that even when students speak less, they can still actively participate through observable non-verbal and task-based behaviors. Therefore, participation should not be judged only by how often students speak (Severe et al., 2024).

In terms of frequency, 8 out of 10 students showed dominant non-verbal participation such as listening, note-taking, and task completion, while only 3 students frequently participated verbally during whole-class interaction. This indicates that non-verbal participation was more common, especially among low-proficiency students.

Responsive rather than initiatory participation

Among proficiency levels, most students participated reactively rather than proactively. They usually spoke when prompted by the teacher instead of initiating interaction independently. Even students with intermediate or high proficiency, like S9, were found to usually speak when the teacher directly requested them, implying that students' participation was mostly responsive rather than initiatory. This was also reflected in the interview data, where students reported that they waited for the teacher's clues before participating. As S9 noted:

> "I usually answer when the lecturer asks me directly. Because sometimes there are moments when I want to add an example, but I'm afraid it's wrong. So, I wait to be appointed directly."

This finding partially supports Xuan Mai et al. (2024), who stated that higher proficiency leads to more verbal participation. In this study, higher-proficiency students indeed produced longer utterances and responded more confidently. However, their participation was still mostly responsive. This suggests that proficiency alone does not guarantee active classroom interaction. Participation is also influenced by classroom atmosphere and task design (Cao, 2024; Fadhilah & Warni, 2024; Simatupang & Yusuf, 2024; Yuan, 2024). Even capable students reduced participation when tasks were difficult, especially during grammar-focused lessons. Thus, proficiency

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supports participation, but it does not automatically lead to spontaneous interaction.

Based on observation and interview data, 7 out of 10 students tended to participate only when prompted by the teacher, while only 2–3 students occasionally initiated interaction on their own.

However, a few contrasting cases were also found. For example, a low-proficiency student sometimes started speaking during group work, even though most low-level students stayed quiet. On the other hand, a high-proficiency student could stay silent in several class discussions, even though they had good English ability. In addition, some moderate-level students were active in group work but still hesitant to speak in front of the whole class. These cases show that participation is not only influenced by proficiency, but also by situation, confidence, and classroom conditions.

Limited spontaneous use of english

Another important finding is that spontaneous use of English was limited. Students mainly used English when completing structured tasks, answering teacher questions, or giving presentations. Outside these moments, peer interactions mostly occurred in Indonesian. Spontaneous English was used mainly for short functional purposes, such as asking permission or explaining absence. This indicates that English was seen as a task requirement rather than as a natural medium for communication. Interview data greatly support the observation findings stated above. Some students explained that they used English usually when a task required it or when the teacher explicitly suggested them to use it. As can be seen from the expressions of S10 and S5,

> "The moments that I find difficult are … or when I am asked to speak spontaneously." (By S10)

> "When there was an assignment … it was in English." (By S10)

This finding is consistent with Zondag (2024) and King & Harumi (2020), who explain that students in EFL contexts often use English only when required by classroom activities, while their natural interaction tends to occur in their first language. Similarly, Cao (2024) argues that students' verbal participation is highly influenced by task structure and teacher control.

This finding shows that classroom participation in EFL settings is strongly shaped by instructional boundaries. Students' English use depends largely on the teacher's prompts and structured activities. Therefore, participation is closely connected to how learning activities are designed, as suggested by Garcia-Ponce and Tavakoli (2022) and Tang and Hew (2022), who emphasize that task design and classroom context significantly influence students' interaction patterns.

Silence, confidence, and linguistic constraints

Silence appeared differently among proficiency levels. For low-proficiency students, silence was mostly related to limited vocabulary and grammar knowledge. They often understood the lesson but struggled to express their ideas. For instance, S4 consistently listened carefully and completed tasks, but seldom spoke during whole-class interaction. This pattern was also confirmed by the interview data, where S4 explained that silence emerged mainly from linguistic difficulty rather than fear or unwillingness to participate:

> "I tend to be quiet and less active when a lecturer or teacher speaks or explains in English without giving the meaning of what they are saying, because there are some sentences or words that are still difficult to understand."

This supports Ambawani et al. (2025) and Kulsum and Ridwan (2025), who inform that language limitations can reduce verbal participation. However, this study shows that silence was often a conscious response to linguistic difficulty rather than a sign of low motivation. This aligns with Anugrawan and Samad (2025), who demonstrate that anxiety and language limitations influence observable classroom behavior.

For moderate-proficiency students, silence was often influenced by classroom situations, especially during whole-class discussions. For higher-proficiency students, participation decreased when tasks were perceived as difficult. This supports Yuan (2024), Simanjuntak & Simanjuntak (2025), and King and Harumi (2020), who argue that participation is dynamic and shaped by learning context. Therefore, silence should not be interpreted simply as passivity. It reflects the interaction between proficiency, task difficulty, and confidence.

The observation data also showed that low-proficiency students were often silent during whole-class activities. Moderate- and high-proficiency students spoke more. However, in general, non-verbal participation was still more common than speaking.

Peer interaction as support

Peer interaction played a significant role in encouraging participation at all proficiency levels. Students were more active during pair and group work than during teacher-dominated discussions. Low-proficiency students felt safer in groups and relied on peers to understand tasks. Moderate-proficiency students used peer discussion to build confidence. High-proficiency students became more active by supporting classmates. This is reflected by S4 explaining that discussing with peers helped him build confidence, even though he felt that his English ability was limited.

> "Discussions and presentations... it can directly train my speaking skills and mental courage to speak using English even though I am not quite proficient yet."

This finding is consistent with Barus and Fadlia (2022), Cao (2024), Rusda et al. (2023), and Simatupang and Yusuf (2024), who emphasize that collaborative learning promotes behavioral participation. It also supports Conner et al. (2025) and Garcia-Ponce and Tavakoli (2022), who argue that supportive environments increase student engagement. Thus, peer interaction functions as a bridge that reduces anxiety and supports participation across proficiency levels.

The results of the observation showed that peer interaction appeared in almost all sessions, with 9 out of 10 students showing more active participation during pair or group work compared to whole-class activities.

When comparing the two classes (A13 and B13), some differences in participation patterns were found. Class A13 showed more active in verbal participation because most students had moderate to high English proficiency score(around 75% high and 20% moderate). In contrast, class B13 had more low-proficiency students (around 85%). Thus, participation was more often non-verbal and group-based. This suggests that differences in proficiency levels influenced how students participated in each class.

Teachers' interpretations of students' classroom participation based on english proficiency levels

Participation beyond speaking

Teachers did not define participation only as speaking. They considered listening, taking notes, maintaining eye contact, completing tasks, and engaging in group work as valid forms of participation. T2 confirmed that participation includes effort, engagement, and non-verbal behavior. She stated:

> "Active participation is shown when students are mentally, verbally, and physically involved in the learning process. It does not only mean speaking, but also showing obvious engagement and effort during lessons. Non-verbal behaviors also strongly indicate active participation, especially for students who are less confident speaking English."

This view aligns with Barus and Fadlia (2022) and Garcia-Ponce and Tavakoli (2022), who define participation as physical and mental involvement in learning. It is also supported by Adams and Oliver (2023) and Philp and Duchesne (2016) who explain that engagement includes behavioral, emotional, and cognitive involvement, not merely verbal contribution.

Teachers recognized that some students who rarely spoke still showed strong engagement through non-verbal behavior. This supports Anugrawan & Samad (2025), who highlight the importance of non-verbal indicators of learning involvement. Similarly, Aksoy-Pekacar (2024) emphasizes that participation can be observed through interactional behavior beyond spoken output. By interpreting participation broadly, teachers avoided labelling quiet students as passive.

All five teachers shared this view and agreed that participation includes both verbal and non-verbal engagement.

Proficiency level as a reference for interpreting participation

Teachers used English proficiency as a general reference when interpreting participation. High-proficiency students were expected to speak more fluently and confidently, while low-proficiency students were expected to need more support. T2 explained how proficiency influenced verbal participation. She stated:

> "High proficiency students tend to speak more frequently and more confidently. They often answer questions voluntarily, express opinions in complete sentences, and lead group discussions."

This is consistent with Xuan Mai et al. (2024) and Cao (2024), who specify that proficiency influences verbal participation. Similar findings are reported by Philp & Duchesne (2016), who argue that language ability affects students' observable engagement in second language classrooms.

However, teachers did not rely on proficiency alone. They also considered task difficulty, lesson

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pace, and classroom atmosphere. When tasks were unclear or too difficult, participation decreased among proficiency levels. This finding supports Saragih (2024), who interprets that lesson design can affect students' opportunities to participate. It is also in line with Abdulayeva (2024), who argues that classroom interaction patterns are shaped by pedagogical design and task structure.

Teachers also emphasized the role of confidence, that cause fear of making mistakes and decreased participation. This aligns with Xuan Mai et al. (2024) and Fadhilah & Warni (2024), who identify low confidence as a barrier to participation. Similarly, Yılmaz and De Jong (2024) notes that anxiety and fear of negative evaluation can limit students' oral participation. They were shy to express their ideas, resulting from their low vocabulary.

Four of five teachers clearly used proficiency level as a main reference when interpreting students' participation, although they also considered other classroom factors.

Interpreting silence carefully

An important finding is that teachers did not automatically interpret silence as disengagement. Silence was often seen as a response to linguistic difficulty, anxiety, or task complexity. As mentioned by T3 and T4,

> "Overly difficult or unclear tasks discourage it." (by T3)

> "While lower-level students remained silent or confused. Some activities were too difficult or fast-paced, and many lower-level students showed anxiety or lacked confidence, signaling the need for more scaffolding and supportive tasks." (by T4)

This interpretation aligns with Anugrawan & Samad (2025), King & Harumi (2020), Feng et al. (2026), and Ambawani et al. (2025). It also resonates with Ye & Hu (2025) and Sato (2024), who clarify that silence in language classrooms may reflect processing time rather than a lack of involvement.

Teachers understood that students might be silent during grammar explanations but more active during group work. This confirms Yuan (2024), Cao (2024), and Tang & Hew (2022), who assert that participation is shaped by classroom context. Rolin-Ianziti (2023) further explains that interactional opportunities vary depending on activity type and instructional goals. Therefore, participation was viewed as dynamic rather than fixed, suggesting that classroom engagement is shaped by multiple contextual influences (Kaihoi et al., 2023; Philp & Duchesne, 2016).

Over the two semesters, students slowly became more active. Students with lower English proficiency, in particular, showed more confidence and were more willing to join group activities in the later sessions. They often initiate the talks during the discussion with their group. However, they still participate less during the individual classroom presentation.

CONCLUSION

This study aims to examine how students with different English proficiency levels participate in EFL classrooms and how teachers understand these participation patterns. The findings show that students participate in different ways, including verbal, non-verbal, and behavioral forms. Teachers interpret participation not only based on proficiency level, but also by considering classroom context, task design, and students' confidence. Overall, participation is influenced by proficiency, classroom conditions, and teaching practices.

Several key findings emerged. First, participation is not only about speaking. Students also show engagement by listening, taking notes, and completing tasks. Second, participation is mostly responsive, meaning students speak when asked rather than starting the interaction themselves. Third, the use of English is limited and usually happens during structured activities. Silence is often caused by limited language ability or low confidence, not a lack of interest. In addition, peer interaction helps students feel more confident and supports participation. Teachers also understand participation in a broad way, use proficiency as a general reference, and interpret silence carefully.

Students with higher and moderate proficiency levels tend to speak more, but they are still mostly responsive. Meanwhile, lower-proficiency students often participate through non-verbal actions. Their silence usually happens because they lack vocabulary, feel uncertain, or need more time to think. Teachers need to consider many factors, such as proficiency, task difficulty, lesson pace, and classroom atmosphere. This shows that participation is flexible and depends on the situation.

The findings suggest that teachers should recognize different forms of participation, not only speaking. They are encouraged to use engaging activities such as group work, discussions, role-

play, and projects. Creating a safe classroom environment and giving clear support can help students participate more confidently. Institutions should also support teacher training for handling mixed-proficiency classes.

This study has some limitations. It was conducted in a university. Thus, the findings cannot be generalized widely. Furthermore, students' proficiency levels were based on teacher judgment, not standardized tests. External factors such as background and prior learning were also not explored. Future research can involve more contexts, use standardized measures, and examine other influencing factors.

In addition, to ensure trustworthiness, this study used data triangulation, member checking, and peer debriefing. However, the use of a single coder and non-standardized proficiency measures may limit consistency.

To conclude, this study shows that participation is not only verbal but also behavioral and contextual. Silence can reflect engagement, not disengagement. By combining teacher perspectives and classroom observations, this study highlights that participation should be understood from both behavioral and interpretive viewpoints.

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