

BARRIERS THAT HINDER ENGLISH LANGUAGE ACQUISITION IN HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS. STRATEGIES TO OVERCOME THEM

**Barreras que dificultan la adquisición del idioma inglés en estudiantes de secundaria.
Estrategias para superarlas**

**Barreiras que dificultam a aquisição da língua inglesa em alunos do ensino médio.
Estratégias para superá-las**

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: English language learning has become a social necessity worldwide; however, Ecuadorian high school students still do not reach expected proficiency levels due to internal barriers such as low motivation, anxiety, fear of making mistakes, and apathy, as well as external factors including limited resources and insufficient teacher training. **Materials and methods:** A mixed-methods study with descriptive and explanatory design was conducted. The sample included 20 high school students and 5 English teachers, selected randomly. Data collection involved surveys, semi-structured interviews, and direct classroom observations, with triangulation of methods and sources to validate findings. **Results:** Surveys showed that 85% of students demonstrated low motivation; 90% identified anxiety and fear as barriers to participation, with speaking (70%) as the most affected skill. Interviews revealed that 80% of teachers recognized students' lack of motivation and that 100% had no specific training to address language barriers. Classroom observations confirmed the absence of systematic strategies to support students in overcoming anxiety, fear, and apathy. Based on these findings, three strategies were designed, integrating Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT), Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), and digital platforms/AI to reduce anxiety, encourage speaking participation, and increase engagement. **Discussion:** The findings align with previous studies identifying motivation and anxiety as critical barriers; however, this research provides a contextualized framework for Ecuadorian secondary education. **Conclusions:** Internal psychological barriers significantly hinder English acquisition. The proposed strategies offer pedagogical tools to transform emotional obstacles into learning opportunities, contributing to national English proficiency goals.

Keywords: English language, barriers in language learning, strategies

RESUMEN

Introducción: El aprendizaje del idioma inglés se ha convertido en una necesidad social a nivel mundial; sin embargo, los estudiantes ecuatorianos de bachillerato aún no alcanzan los niveles de competencia esperados debido a barreras internas como la baja motivación, la ansiedad, el miedo a cometer errores y la apatía, así como a factores externos que incluyen recursos limitados y capacitación docente insuficiente. **Materiales y métodos:** Se realizó un estudio de métodos mixtos con diseño descriptivo y explicativo. La muestra incluyó 20 estudiantes de bachillerato y 5 profesores de inglés, seleccionados aleatoriamente. La recolección de datos incluyó encuestas, entrevistas semiestructuradas y observaciones directas en el aula, con triangulación de métodos y fuentes para validar los hallazgos. **Resultados:** Las encuestas mostraron que el 85% de los estudiantes demostraron baja motivación; el 90% identificó la ansiedad y el miedo como barreras para la participación, siendo la expresión oral (70%) la habilidad más afectada. Las entrevistas revelaron que el 80% de los profesores reconocieron la falta de motivación de los estudiantes y que el 100% no tenía capacitación específica para abordar las barreras lingüísticas. Las observaciones en el aula confirmaron la ausencia de estrategias sistemáticas para

apoyar a los estudiantes a superar la ansiedad, el miedo y la apatía. Con base en estos hallazgos, se diseñaron tres estrategias que integran la enseñanza de idiomas basada en tareas (TBLT), la enseñanza comunicativa de idiomas (CLT) y plataformas digitales/IA para reducir la ansiedad, fomentar la participación oral y aumentar la implicación. Discusión: Los hallazgos coinciden con estudios previos que identifican la motivación y la ansiedad como barreras críticas; sin embargo, esta investigación proporciona un marco contextualizado para la educación secundaria ecuatoriana. Conclusiones: Las barreras psicológicas internas dificultan significativamente la adquisición del inglés. Las estrategias propuestas ofrecen herramientas pedagógicas para transformar los obstáculos emocionales en oportunidades de aprendizaje, contribuyendo así a los objetivos nacionales de dominio del inglés.

Palabras clave: idioma inglés, barreras en el aprendizaje del inglés, estrategias

RESUMO

Introdução: O aprendizado da língua inglesa tornou-se uma necessidade social em todo o mundo; no entanto, estudantes do ensino médio no Equador ainda não atingem os níveis de proficiência esperados devido a barreiras internas, como baixa motivação, ansiedade, medo de errar e apatia, bem como a fatores externos, incluindo recursos limitados e treinamento insuficiente para professores. **Materiais e métodos:** Foi realizado um estudo com métodos mistos, descritivo e explicativo. A amostra incluiu 20 estudantes do ensino médio e 5 professores de inglês, selecionados aleatoriamente. A coleta de dados envolveu questionários, entrevistas semiestruturadas e observações diretas em sala de aula, com triangulação de métodos e fontes para validar os resultados. **Resultados:** Os questionários mostraram que 85% dos alunos demonstraram baixa motivação; 90% identificaram ansiedade e medo como barreiras à participação, sendo a expressão oral (70%) a habilidade mais afetada. As entrevistas revelaram que 80% dos professores reconheceram a falta de motivação dos alunos e que 100% não possuíam treinamento específico para lidar com as barreiras linguísticas. As observações em sala de aula confirmaram a ausência de estratégias sistemáticas para apoiar os alunos na superação da ansiedade, do medo e da apatia. Com base nessas descobertas, foram elaboradas três estratégias, integrando o Ensino de Línguas Baseado em Tarefas (TBLT), o Ensino Comunicativo de Línguas (CLT) e plataformas digitais/IA para reduzir a ansiedade, incentivar a participação oral e aumentar o engajamento. **Discussão:** Os resultados estão alinhados com estudos anteriores que identificaram a motivação e a ansiedade como barreiras críticas; no entanto, esta pesquisa fornece um contexto específico para o ensino secundário equatoriano. **Conclusões:** Barreiras psicológicas internas dificultam significativamente a aquisição do inglês. As estratégias propostas oferecem ferramentas pedagógicas para transformar obstáculos emocionais em oportunidades de aprendizagem, contribuindo para as metas nacionais de proficiência em inglês.

Palavras-chave: língua inglesa, barreiras na aprendizagem de línguas, estratégias

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INTRODUCTION

The learning of English at present has arisen as a social need for practically all individuals all over the world. Such necessity is based on the issue that this language remains as the “lingua franca” for global communication, science, and technology. Saez & Montalvo (2025) recognize the relevance of English for internationalization and scientific exchange in universities. English is also viewed as a dominant global language for communication, education, and business, which promotes equity and innovation in teaching (British Council, 2023). Sharma & Kaur (2023) highlight the points that English is the language of academia and culture. Accordingly, they explore modern techniques to enhance the learning of such a language.

Ahmed (2024) strengthens the fact that English proficiency enables access to international careers, and higher educational. The author also acknowledges the relevance of this language for cultural exchanges in an increasingly interconnected world.

For Ecuadorian high school students, learning English has become a crucial tool for academic and professional development. Ecuador is increasingly connected to global markets, international tourism, and educational opportunities abroad, and English proficiency provides students with access to these spaces.

Moreover, English is the language of science, technology and innovation. In a country where economic growth is associated to industries like tourism, commerce and technology, English proficiency enhances employability and competitiveness. High school is the ideal stage to build these skills, as students are forming their academic identity and preparing for future careers. Finally, learning English also strengthens cultural awareness and global citizenship. Ecuadorian students who can communicate in English gain exposure to diverse perspectives, literature and media. All this enriches their worldview. This not only benefits their

personal growth but also empowers them to represent Ecuador on international platforms. In short, English is more than a subject in school—it is a bridge to global opportunities, academic success, and cultural exchange, making it indispensable for Ecuadorian high school students today.

Despite the fact that English is included within the curriculum of high school students in Ecuador and that its relevance is recognized and accepted by governmental authorities and students as well, the levels of English language proficiency does not reach the expected levels yet. An initial exploratory study about this topic revealed, among the factors that hinder the development of such proficiency, the existence of some barriers that interfere with the adequate and systematic learning of English in high school. Such a study determined that anxiety, fear of making mistakes, apathy, and low motivation constitute internal factors that directly influence the outcomes of the students. In accordance with the results obtained in the initial exploratory study, the present work covers the pedagogical treatment given to the internal and external factors that influence the learning of English as a foreign language in Ecuadorian high school students. It is intended to offer new perspectives for overcoming the barriers detected and improving language acquisition in high school students.

Consequently, the general objective is directed to improve the language learning of English in Ecuadorian high school students by overcoming the barriers that interfere with such a process. The specific objectives were: to determine the internal (psychological and motivational) and external (pedagogical and environmental) factors that hinder English learning in high school students and to propose strategies that integrate evidence-based strategies to reduce barriers and enhance English acquisition. The scientific question that was determined is expressed in the following terms: How to contribute to overcoming barriers that interfere with the English language proficiency acquisition in high school students of the Republic of Ecuador?

The research used was descriptive and explanatory. It focused on identifying the actual barriers that hinder language proficiency acquisition in high school students. Internal and external factors were determined. The investigation was also of a mixed type since it combined quantitative and qualitative methods. Triangulation of methods and sources was, as well, of great importance to validate the data obtained. The sample was selected at random. It included 20 students from high school institutions and five English teachers. Once they were selected, ethical aspects (consent, confidentiality, and voluntary participation) were taken into account. It guaranteed the validity of the information compiled.

This research contributes to the national educational goal of improving English proficiency under the Ministry of Education's standards. By identifying specific barriers and proposing practical strategies, this study offers feasible solutions for teachers, curriculum designers, and policymakers. It also enriches the academic discussion on English Foreign Language pedagogy in contexts where socioeconomic conditions, access to resources, and teacher training remain uneven.

The analysis of the theoretical sources related to the topic of the present paper starts from the study of the contemporary tendencies associated to the teaching-learning of English. It also analyzes present-day considerations about language barriers. Finally, since the proposal includes strategies, such term is discussed in order to assume a solid foundation for the elaboration of this practical contribution.

CURRENT TRENDS AND APPROACHES OF THE TEACHING-LEARNING OF ENGLISH

English has become the most widely studied second language globally, functioning as a lingua franca in domains such as science, technology, business, and education. The teaching-learning of English in the current international context is shaped by globalization, digital transformation, and the increasing demand for intercultural communication skills. As Motteram and Dawson (2025) emphasize, the past decade has witnessed profound changes in English Language Teaching (ELT), driven by technological innovation and the need to adapt to diverse learner populations. The use of online learning platforms leads to the readaptation of traditional teaching and learning environments. This highlighted both opportunities and challenges in ELT. Recent studies underline that interferences in instructional continuity have negatively affected language proficiency, particularly in contexts with limited resources (Poole & Sahakyan, 2024). Teachers are encouraged to combine techniques, giving priority to instruction focused on learners' needs and sociocultural realities. Khatoon (2024) states that ELT must balance global demands with local realities to ensure learners acquire communicative competence without losing cultural identity.

Among the most significant changes in ELT, the following should be mentioned:

- Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT). It emphasizes meaningful tasks that replicate real-world

communication. Learners engage in problem-solving, project work, and collaborative activities.

- Digital Transformation and Artificial Intelligence (AI) Integration. They both combine face-to-face instruction with digital resources. This has revolutionized ELT. Blended Learning and Online Platforms such as Moodle, Canvas, and Microsoft Teams have become an essential component of ELT. Mobile applications and AI-driven language assistants provide learners with access to authentic materials and interactive practice. Zhuo, Webb, and Mann (2025) highlight how teacher education programs are increasingly incorporating digital literacy, preparing educators to leverage technology effectively.
- The introduction of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). The CEFR's six proficiency levels (A1–C2) provide scales for describing language ability (Council of Europe, 2001). North (2014) underlines that such standardization has improved curriculum development and assessment reliability.

LANGUAGE BARRIERS

The learning process has always been a challenge to students, regardless of the level of education in which they are enrolled. When it comes to language learning, it may become even more stressful since they face communicative codes in a language that is not their mother tongue.

Tahang et al. (2019) argue that language barriers inhibit coherent communication between individuals. Among those barriers, the author includes lack of enthusiasm, limited study schedules, inadequate teaching resources, and insufficient student motivation (*idem*). Malik et al. (2021) add that the lack of EFL learning skills is also a factor that may become a barrier. Cummins (2018) stresses that language barriers can affect students from fully participating in class, leading to frustration, anxiety, and low academic performance.

Dewi & Rumiya Tiningsih Luwiti (2024) developed a case study by means of which they found some language barriers that prevent teachers from developing lessons entirely in English and have students actively participate during the lessons. The authors address that treating language barriers imply a multifaceted approach (*idem*). Guerrero Rodriguez & Moreira Baquerizo (2025) investigate about the challenges faced by teachers in order to foster proficient English speakers and the strategies they use to support their students. Among their findings, they highlight insufficient instructional time, a focus on grammar and writing over speaking, a shortage of qualified teachers, and low student motivation.

Taha Ameen & Dian Najeeb (2023) revealed that socio-cultural factors, limited exposure to English-speaking environments, lack of motivation, and inadequate teacher training constitute barriers that affect language acquisition among the sample they studied. They also concluded that those barriers generate speaking errors, reluctance to engage in verbal communication (*idem*). Dewi Gobel, M., Malik, H., & Rumiya Tiningsih Luwiti, S. (2024) developed a case study by mean of which they determine some language barriers prevent students from actively participate during the lessons. The authors address that treating language barriers implies a multifaceted approach (*idem*).

Based on previous studies, it can be concluded that the presence of barriers has a significant influence language learning. Students often experience anxiety, fear of making mistakes, or lack of confidence when speaking English, which can reduce their willingness to practice and slow their progress. Motivation also plays a crucial role; without clear goals or encouragement, students may lose interest and fail to continue through difficulties. External factor such as, limited access to resources such as qualified teachers, language-learning materials, opportunities to interact with native speakers can restrict students' development. These barriers highlight that mastering English requires not only linguistic effort but also overcoming emotional and environmental obstacles.

STRATEGIES FOR THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH

The term strategy has been widely applied in education. It may cover several areas of the pedagogical process, depending on the nature and objectives that are studied. Lowell & Ureña-Rodríguez (2023) assume strategies as plans of a systematic character that integrate methods and techniques in order to reach an instructional goal. Rubenecia et al. (2026) consider strategies as pedagogical structures directed to encourage active involvement and critical thinking in the students. They also highlight that they should be focused on problem-solving on a basis and take students as the center of the process (*idem*). Costa & Reis (2025) widens the conception of the term under discussion since they view it as a crucial tool for developing students' motivation and consequently favor the acquisition of knowledge.

In the particular case of foreign language teaching, Carabantes & Beaumont (2026) consider it as a set of planned frameworks that include tasks, materials, and proper assessment to improve communicative competence. Ulla, Wakat, & Tarrayo (2026) define it as structured approaches, which include materials, cultural aspects, and focus on inclusivity in order to stimulate language awareness and identity formation.

Though the previous structure is applicable to practically all phenomena during the teaching-learning process of English, it may vary based on the particular problems students face. It may also be subjected to changes due to the objectives that are to be achieved and the dynamics of the class to which it will be applied.

METHODOLOGY

The study developed was of a mixed type. According to Sampieri et al. (2018), it interconnects quantitative and qualitative aspects. It is not a simple sum of the two previous types of research since it implies the interaction and empowerment of quantitative and qualitative methods and techniques (idem). The mixed approach is directed to process both quantitative and qualitative data with the objective of developing inferences (metainferences) about the object of study (DeCuir-Gunby y Schutz, 2017, referred to by Sampieri, 2018).

The scientific design was descriptive and explanatory. The descriptive design allowed for the identification of the main barriers that interfere with the process of English language acquisition in high school students. The explanatory one determined the causes and consequences that such barriers had on the development of the communicative competence of the students.

The population of the study was 60 high school students and ten (10) teachers of English at this level. The sample was selected at random and comprised 20 students and five (5) teachers. The investigation was developed over two months. Data gathering was obtained by means of the application of the following empirical methods: surveys, interviews, and direct classroom observations to both students and teachers in the sample. Data collection was directed to determine the existence of possible barriers that hinder the learning of English in high school students and the application of strategies to overcome such barriers. Triangulation of methods and sources was also used to confirm the results and reduce subjectivity in the analysis.

From the theoretical level, the methods analysis-synthesis and induction-deduction were used. They contributed to the establishment of the theoretical foundation of the research and the processing and inference of the results of the data collection.

RESULTS

The results derived from the application of the survey to students are the first ones processed. The analysis of them appears below.

Table 1 Survey Applied to Students (questions 1-3: motivation in English lessons, presence of barriers during the lessons and support given by teachers)

Scale	Motivation	Percent	Presence of internal factors	Percent	Strategies used by the teacher	Percent
Nunca	2	10,00	1	5,00	0	0,00
Casi nunca	8	40,00	1	5,00	4	20,00
A veces	9	45,00	10	50,00	15	75.00
Casi siempre	1	5,00	8	40,00	1	5.00
Siempre	0	0,00	0	0,00	0	0,00

Note: Personal elaboration based of the survey applied to students

The results shown in the previous table evidence that the levels of motivation in English lessons tend to be low. Notice that the most significant percents are concentrated on the “Casi nunca” and “A veces” indicators (40, 00 % and 45, 00 %, respectively). While exploring the causes for such demotivation, the common responses of the students were: “...lessons are boring...”; “exercises are very difficult...”; “I am afraid of making mistakes...”; “...my classmates make fun of me if I do something wrong...”; “...time is very short, I need more time to get ready to answer and to participate...”.

The presence of internal (mainly psychological) barriers was also detected through the application of the survey. The students’ answers were focused on the indicators “A veces” (50, 00 %) and “Casi siempre” (40, 00 %). The results illustrate that there are factors that hamper the learning of English during the lessons.

The results of question 3 show that students feel that they do not receive frequent support from their teacher to face the barriers that come out during the English lessons. The 95, 00 % of the responses of the sample agreed that they “Casi nunca” (20, 00 %) and “A veces” (75, 00 %) obtain help from their teachers to overcome their anxiety and fear to participate in the English lessons.

Table 2 Survey Applied to Students (question 4: abilities that generate anxiety and fear in the English lessons)

Abilities	Students' selections	Percent
Expresión oral	14	70,00
Comprensión de lectura	1	5,00
Escritura	1	5,00
Comprensión auditiva	4	20,00

Note: Personal elaboration based on the survey applied to students

The students' selection evidence that speaking (expresión oral) is the ability in which they face more barriers to participate in the lessons. The 70, 00 % of the students chose such ability as the predominant one as a source of being inhibited during the lessons. The selection of listening comprehension (comprensión auditiva) (20, 00 %) also emerged as a barrier for learning.

The results derived from the application of the interview to teachers are shown in the tables below.

Table 3 Interview Applied to Teachers (questions 1 and 2: students' motivation to learning and possible barriers that hinder the learning process)

Indicators	Yes	Percent	No	Percent
Students' motivated in English lessons	1	20,00	4	80,00
Students' not motivated English lessons	4	80,00	1	20,00
Apathy	2	40,00	3	60,00
Anxiety	5	100,00	0	0,00
Fear	5	100,00	0	0,00

Note: Personal elaboration based on the survey applied to students

The 80, 00 % of teachers agreed that, in general, most of their students are not motivated in their lessons. They consider that the main factors that lead to such demotivation are related to their low levels of communicative competence and, consequently, fear and anxiety of making mistakes and playing “a ridiculous role” in front of the whole class.

Such considerations are consistent with the teachers' answers related to the existence of barriers that become “hurdles” for the learning of English. The 100, 00 % of teachers consider that anxiety and fear have a negative influence on students' participation in class. The totality of teachers (100, 00 %) also coincided that when students face situations in which they have to participate orally (speaking), anxiety and fear of making mistakes become more evident.

Table 4 Interview Applied to Teachers (question 3: use of strategies to offer support to students and proper training to provide such support)

Indicators	Registers that prevailed
Students' motivation	Low motivation
Barriers found that hinder the learning process	Rejection and resistance to participation, insecurity, lack of attention
Strategies used by the teacher to overcome such learning language barriers	Unclear, spontaneous and poor limited strategies to deal with language barriers
Abilities in which students have more difficulties	In order of relevance: speaking, listening comprehension, reading comprehension and writing

Note: Personal elaboration based on the survey applied to students

Only one teacher (20, 00 %) explicitly answered that he use strategies to support students to overcome apathy, anxiety, and fear of participation in the English lessons. The rest (80, 00 %) were not able to provide concrete answers about the use of this type of strategies. During this moment of the interview, these four (4) teachers finally accepted that they do not have tangible strategies to help students deal with the barriers mentioned above. The totality of the sample of teachers agreed that they have not received any specific training for designing and applying strategies to help students manage language barriers.

The responses obtained in Question 4 of the interview to teachers revealed speaking as the ability that

brings more difficulties to students.

The results from the direct classroom observations are described below.

DISCUSSION

The present research corroborated that the learning of English in high school students faces some barriers that hamper adequate learning of such a language. These barriers, accordingly, do not allow the development of the expected levels of communicative competence for the students of that level of education.

Motivation was determined as one of the most relevant barriers. This findings coincide with those of Liaquat et al (2025), Taha & Najeeb (2023), and Saed & Izadpanah (2020), who identified in their works motivation as a crucial barrier that has a negative impact in the English learning process. The causes for lack of motivation are multiple. Among them, it can be mentioned that there is no environment that makes students familiar with the language outside the classroom Akbari, 2015). As a result, students do not feel the direct need to learn English.

Another cause is based on the diverse cultural background of the students. Ecuadorian students access school from different areas, either rural or urban. The preceding training in English is not equal for both areas, and that brings about different levels of proficiency when they enroll in high school education. The effects may also be diverse. On one hand, it may result in frustration for not being able to cope with the level of the whole class; and on the other hand, it may lead to boredom since activities, for some students, can be too simple, cover already studied contents, and use irrelevant materials.

Apart from motivation, this investigation determined that anxiety, fear of participation (specifically to speaking), and apathy have a relevant negative influence on the students' language acquisition. The existence of these barriers leads to rejection, resistance to active involvement in the lessons, and hesitation to engage in language practice activities.

The above-mentioned facts coincide with Saed & Izadpanah (2020), who state that anxiety is generated due to students' fear of punishment by the teachers. Students can become anxious if they can't answer teachers' questions (ibídem) or can't play an active role with their classmates during a class-activity interaction. Since students are adolescents, their social acceptance and recognition are crucial for their integral psychological and biological development; any risk that may "damage" their social perception can lead them to anxiety and fear. This becomes even more significant when learning a foreign language since the mother tongue's codes and linguistic resources are different from those of the foreign language. Any mispronunciation, lexical or grammatical mistakes may generate laughter and the making fun of some students, which is potentially risky for creating an adequate teaching environment.

The results derived from the interview with teachers coincide with the findings obtained in the survey applied to students. This was also supported by the information gathered through the direct observation of English lessons. The triangulation of these methods and sources revealed motivation, anxiety, fear, and, in a less degree, apathy as the main barriers for language proficiency development in high school students.

The investigation also concluded that there are some external factors that act as barriers during the English lessons. It was noted that there are no specific strategies to support students in overcoming their anxiety and fear. The creation of a positive teaching environment is crucial for this goal. Confidence, then, becomes critical to create inclusive lessons (Adams, 2020), that provide positive feedback that enhances students' participation in class.

The observations carried out also exposed the presence of other external factors that negatively influence on the learning of English. The ones that come out as more significant are: limited time of English lessons, teaching materials (resources). These results correspond with the ones found by Surdiman & Gorontalo (2024), a pre-observation study developed to show significant challenges faced by English teachers in their lessons.

Finally, it was concluded that teachers need specific training to provide the necessary support students require to overcome the barriers found. One possible way to enhance such training is to provide teachers with practical tools that serve this purpose. In this sense, the elaboration of strategies focused on eliminating or reducing the impact of language barriers can constitute a step forward for the improvement of language proficiency in high school students.

DISCUSSION

This work proposes a framework of strategies. They are structured in the following way: objectives, teaching resources, interaction patterns, assessment and feedback, examples of activities that can be used, and activities for reflective practice.

The proposal contains three strategies. One for the pedagogical treatment of each of the barriers identified in the research: motivation, anxiety, fear, and apathy. Though they are presented in isolation, they can be combined, according to the particular characteristics and difficulties found in the class to which they will be applied.

The strategies, from the methodological viewpoint, are sustained by three approaches: Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT), the integration of digital platforms and artificial intelligence (AI), and the principles of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). Together, these approaches provide both theoretical grounding and practical tools to help learners move beyond emotional barriers and engage more fully in language acquisition.

One special distinction should be made about the use of Digital Platforms and AI in EFL Lessons. They reduce anxiety by offering safe practice, overcome fear of participation by scaffolding confidence, and reduce apathy by connecting English to students' interests. When combined with reflective practices and positive feedback, they create a supportive, motivating environment for high school learners. They offer learners flexible, personalized opportunities to practice language in low-pressure environments according to their specific needs. They also provide private spaces for practice without peer pressure, receive instant feedback, and gradually build confidence.

Through the combination of task orientation, communicative practice, and technological support, the strategies presented here can create a holistic learning environment. This integrated framework not only addresses the emotional barriers of anxiety, fear, and apathy but also empowers learners to develop resilience, confidence, and sustained engagement in their language acquisition process.

Strategy 1: Overcoming Anxiety in High School EFL Lessons

Objectives: Reduce anxiety by prioritizing communication and effort over accuracy through real-life activities

Methodological Approaches: Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) for learners to do meaningful, outcome-oriented tasks; the communicative Language Teaching (CLT) to place emphasis on authentic communication, fluency, and negotiation of meaning, and Positive Feedback Integration by means of which teachers highlight effort, creativity, and resilience.

Teaching Resources: AI chatbots, pronunciation apps, journaling platforms, role-play cards, worksheets, authentic materials (menus, schedules, articles), online resources: travel sites, shopping sites, collaborative tools (Padlet, Google Docs), audio/video clips for listening comprehension.

Interaction Patterns: Pair Work: AI chatbot practice, role-play dialogues, Group Work: Event planning, problem-solving tasks, Individual Work: Reflection journals, reading comprehension, Virtual Exchanges: AI simulations, online collaborative tasks.

Assessment & Feedback: Formative Assessment: Ongoing observation, peer feedback, AI progress reports; Summative Assessment: End-of-unit presentations, written reflections, group projects.

Feedback Practices: Positive reinforcement (effort, creativity), growth-focused comments (progress over time), and reflective prompts (self-assessment).

Suggested Activities with Reflective Practices

1. Plan a School Event (Speaking + Writing)

- Task: Groups design a cultural fair or sports day and present their plan.
- Interaction: Group work → class presentation.
- Positive Feedback: "Your group explained the event clearly and used English to share creative ideas."
- Reflective Practice: After presentations, students write a short reflection: "What part of speaking in front of the class made you feel more confident? What helped reduce your anxiety?"

2. Digital Reflection Journal (Writing)

- Task: Weekly entries about progress and challenges. AI highlights improvements.
- Interaction: Individual work → optional peer sharing.

- Positive Feedback: “I can see you’re using longer sentences now. That shows real progress.”
- Reflective Practice: Students compare early and later entries, noting improvements in vocabulary and confidence.

3. Find the Best Deal Online (Reading + Speaking)

- Task: Students compare options on a shopping or travel site and present their choice.
- Interaction: Pair or group work → class presentation.
- Positive Feedback: “You explained your choice clearly and justified it well.”
- Reflective Practice: Students write: “Did reading real websites make English feel more useful? How did that affect your confidence?”

Strategy 2: Overcoming Fear of Participation in Speaking Activities

Objectives: Encourage active participation in speaking tasks by creating supportive, low-pressure environments, build confidence gradually through real-life communicative activities, normalize mistakes as part of learning, reducing fear of judgment, and reinforce progress through positive feedback and structured reflection.

Teaching Resources: AI chatbots, pronunciation apps, journaling platforms, role-play cards, worksheets, authentic materials (menus, schedules, articles), online resources: travel sites, shopping sites, collaborative tools (Padlet, Google Docs), Audio/video clips for listening comprehension.

Interaction Patterns: Pair Work: AI chatbot practice, role-play dialogues, Group Work: Event planning, debates, collaborative presentations, Individual Work: Reflection journals, reading aloud, listening comprehension, Virtual Exchanges: AI simulations, online collaborative tasks.

Assessment & Feedback: Formative Assessment: Ongoing observation, peer feedback, AI progress reports, Summative Assessment: End-of-unit presentations, debates, or oral exams evaluated holistically.

Feedback Practices: Positive reinforcement (effort, participation), Growth-focused comments (progress over time), Reflective prompts (self-assessment).

Activities with Reflective Practices

1. “Introduce a Classmate” (Speaking + Listening)

- Task: In pairs, students interview each other and then introduce their partner to the class.
- Interaction: Pair work → class presentation.
- Positive Feedback: “You spoke clearly and gave interesting details about your partner.”
- Reflective Practice: Students write: “Did speaking about someone else make participation easier? Why?”

2. Solve a Problem Role-Play (Speaking)

- Task: Scenario: “Your bus is late, and you need to explain the situation to your teacher.”
- Interaction: Pair role-play.
- Positive Feedback: “You explained the situation clearly and stayed calm while speaking.”
- Reflective Practice: Students' journal: “What helped you keep talking even when you didn’t know the exact word?”

3. Plan a School Event (Speaking + Writing)

- Task: Groups design a cultural fair or sports day and present their plan.
- Interaction: Group work → class presentation.
- Positive Feedback: “Your group worked well together and explained the plan clearly.”
- Reflective Practice: Students reflect: “Did working in a group make speaking less stressful? Why?”

Strategy 3: Overcoming Apathy in High School EFL Lessons

Objectives: Increase motivation and engagement by connecting English learning to students’ real-life interests, promote active participation through meaningful, task-based activities, encourage autonomy by

integrating digital platforms and AI for personalized learning, and reinforce progress and effort through positive feedback and reflective practices.

Teaching Resources: AI chatbots, gamified apps (Duolingo, Quizlet), collaborative platforms (Padlet, Google Docs), Authentic materials: menus, schedules, news articles, videos, music lyrics, Classroom resources: role-play cards, worksheets, projector/whiteboard.

Interaction Patterns: Pair Work: Interviews, role-plays, AI chatbot practice, Group Work: Event planning, debates, collaborative projects, Individual Work: Journals, reading comprehension, listening tasks and Virtual Exchanges: AI simulations, online collaborative tasks.

Assessment & Feedback: Formative Assessment: Ongoing observation, peer feedback, AI progress reports, Summative Assessment: End-of-unit projects, presentations, written reflections.

Feedback Practices: Positive reinforcement (effort, creativity), Growth-focused comments (progress over time), and Reflective prompts (self-assessment).

Activities with Reflective Practices

1. Music & Lyrics Analysis (Listening + Reading + Speaking)

- Task: Students listen to a popular English song, read the lyrics, and discuss its meaning in groups.
- Interaction: Group work → class discussion.
- Positive Feedback: “You connected the song’s message to your own ideas—great engagement!”
- Reflective Practice: Students write: “Did analyzing music make English feel more enjoyable? Why?”

2. Create a Social Media Post (Writing + Speaking)

- Task: Students design a short English post (Instagram caption, TikTok script) about a topic they enjoy.
- Interaction: Individual writing → pair sharing.
- Positive Feedback: “Your post was creative and showed your personality in English.”
- Reflective Practice: Students reflect: “Did writing about something you like make English feel more useful?”

3. AI Chat Practice: Favorite Hobby (Speaking + Listening)

- Task: Students use an AI chatbot to talk about their favorite hobby, then share highlights with classmates.
- Interaction: Individual AI practice → pair sharing.
- Positive Feedback: “You spoke confidently about your hobby and kept the conversation flowing.”
- Reflective Practice: Students discuss: “Did talking about your hobby make speaking in English less boring?”

Contributions and originality of the study

The investigation provided an initial diagnosis of the barriers that hinder the learning of English in high school students. The research also proposes strategies directed to overcome the language barriers found during the development of the study. Such strategies are designed to reduce anxiety, fear of participation in class and apathy. The strategies include the use of digital resources during the teaching-learning process. This conception generates an innovative connotation to the research since it widens the use of such platforms. They, apart from promoting language learning, are now viewed as potential tools to overcome learning barriers.

Practical implications

From the practical view, the strategies proposed can become a model to follow for offering support to students during the learning of English as a foreign language. They provide teachers with methodological guidance to reduce the impact of language barriers in English lessons for high school students.

Furthermore, the research can contribute to the national educational goal of improving English proficiency in Ecuador. By identifying specific obstacles and proposing practical strategies, this study offers feasible solutions for teachers, curriculum designers, and policymakers.

CONCLUSIONS

The integral analysis of the work leads to the conclusion that there are barriers that interfere with the process of language acquisition in high school students. It was also detected that there are insufficient strategies to reduce the influence of such obstacles in the teaching-learning process of English as a foreign language. This problematic situation demands the implementation of strategies focused on diminishing the presence and impact of those barriers on the students.

The study comprised a limited sample, and it was developed in only one school. Future lines of investigation could cover the study of external factors that become barriers for language acquisition in order to obtain a more integral view of all the obstacles that interfere with the process of language acquisition of English as a foreign language.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

Declaration of responsibility of authorship

We, the authors of the aforementioned manuscript, DECLARE that we have directly contributed to its intellectual content, as well as to the genesis and analysis of its data; therefore, we are able to take public responsibility for it and accept that their names appear on the list of authors in the order indicated. Furthermore, we have complied with the ethical requirements of the aforementioned publication, having consulted the Declaration of Ethics and Publication Malpractice.

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