

Classroom Participation in Beginner Arabic Courses: Barriers and Pedagogical Responses

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Abstract: Classroom participation in beginner Arabic courses is often interpreted through the number of students who answer questions aloud. This conceptual and practice-oriented paper argues that such a measure obscures differences between willingness to communicate, linguistic capacity, and the opportunity to participate. Drawing on research in Arabic learning, willingness to communicate, classroom discourse, interaction, and corrective feedback, it develops a barrier–indicator–response matrix for teacher decision-making. Six barriers are paired with provisional observable indicators, proportionate instructional responses, and limits on the evidence supporting each response. Three hypothetical Arabic classroom applications illustrate how the matrix can guide preparation, participation opportunities, and feedback without turning visible participation into a proxy for learning. The matrix is a heuristic rather than a validated diagnostic or intervention instrument. Future observational and intervention studies are needed to test its utility in beginner Arabic settings.

Keywords: Arabic as a foreign language; classroom participation; willingness to communicate; instructional decision-making; corrective feedback; beginner learners

Online publication: October 30, 2026

1. Introduction

Classroom participation is central to the organization of foreign language lessons, but the number of public responses is an incomplete account of what students do and learn. Beginners may understand familiar expressions yet struggle to produce a sentence in front of classmates. Their silence may arise from anxiety, limited language resources, unclear task requirements, or a lack of opportunities to contribute. A response based solely on encouragement may therefore miss the source of the difficulty.

The distinction between willingness and ability is established in the situational model of second-language willingness to communicate (WTC) ^[1]. Subsequent work conceptualizes the decision to speak as volitional and context-sensitive ^[2], while Zhang et al. ^[3] synthesize situational antecedents of WTC.

Classroom investigations likewise indicate that topic, task, interlocutor, and group arrangements shape communicative decisions ^[4]. Such work suggests that participation should be investigated in relation to instructional conditions rather than reduced to stable learner personality. Kang ^[5] demonstrates that situational willingness can fluctuate within a conversation, while Peng ^[6] identifies interacting personal and environmental influences in EFL classrooms. These findings caution against assigning a stable trait to a beginner from a single episode of silence.

Arabic-specific evidence provides a necessary qualification. Nassif ^[7] examined anxiety, noticing, and oral production among beginning learners of Arabic, revealing relationships more complex than a uniformly negative effect of anxiety. Zaharuddin et al. ^[8] reported an association between anxiety and WTC among Arabic learners, but its participant context should not be assumed to represent beginner Arabic classes, and correlation does not establish causation.

Essa ^[9] discusses hesitation, face concerns, linguistic security, and correction in Arabic education. The present paper does not restate that discussion. It instead asks how teachers might move from an observed participation difficulty to a tentative interpretation, a proportionate response, and an explicit statement of what cannot be inferred. Its distinctive contribution is a barrier–indicator–response matrix designed for pedagogical reflection, not a claim of a newly validated theory.

2. Conceptualizing Classroom Participation

Participation includes more than speaking during whole-class questioning. Learners may formulate a response silently, negotiate meaning in a pair, ask for clarification, or contribute a short phrase to a group task. These activities differ in visibility and linguistic demand. They should not be collapsed into a single count of spoken turns. Bernalles ^[10] distinguishes anticipated participation from students' reported classroom behavior, illustrating why expressed intention should not be used as a proxy for actual turns. For the present analysis, participation is therefore a task-specific event, not an enduring learner label.

Three dimensions are distinguished here. Willingness refers to a learner's readiness to enter communication; capacity refers to the language resources and task understanding available for a response; and opportunity refers to the interactional space provided by classroom arrangements. A learner may be willing but unable to retrieve an expression, able but apprehensive about public evaluation, or ready and able but denied a turn. MacIntyre et al. ^[1] and Zhang et al. ^[3] support a situated account of WTC; Kramsch ^[11] directs attention to discourse options and the organization of turns. Pawlak and Mystkowska-Wiertelak ^[12] and Pawlak et al. ^[13] likewise investigate variability in classroom WTC, supporting the decision to observe across moments rather than treating one answer as representative.

The proposed distinction is analytical rather than a validated three-factor scale. Indicators cannot uniquely identify underlying causes: long pauses may indicate processing, unfamiliar language, uncertainty, or deliberate reflection. Classroom observation should therefore be combined with low-stakes clarification and learner input. Furthermore, increased talk does not itself demonstrate acquisition. Accuracy, fluency, independent task performance, and retention require separate evidence. Research on task performance distinguishes complexity, accuracy, and fluency rather than treating them as interchangeable outcomes ^[14, 15]. A more defensible classroom inference compares at least two task conditions: for example, an unsupported public answer and a comparable response after private planning. A change in performance is evidence about the conditions of that task, not proof of an internal psychological cause.

3. Barriers to Participation in Beginner Arabic Courses

3.1. Psychological and evaluative conditions

Public response may involve concern about pronunciation, errors, or peer reactions. Foreign language anxiety has been conceptualized as a classroom-specific construct ^[16], and reviews connect anxiety with achievement while noting competing explanations ^[17]. Arabic studies warrant a differentiated interpretation: Nassif ^[7] examined noticing and production rather than simple speaking frequency, while Zaharuddin et al. ^[8] investigated learners beyond the beginner level. A teacher should not infer anxiety from silence alone. Kang ^[5] links situational willingness to perceived security and conversational conditions, whereas Zarrinabadi ^[18] reports students' accounts of teacher wait time, correction, topic choice, and support. Neither source establishes that the same conditions will produce identical effects among beginner Arabic learners.

3.2. Linguistic resources.

Beginners may recognize words yet lack the lexical access or syntactic resources required for spontaneous production. Arabic phonological and morphological demands may interact with task requirements, although their relative importance must be established locally. Vocabulary cues and partial sentence frames are reasonable scaffolds, but a completed response under heavy prompting does not establish independent production.

3.3 Instructional demands.

An open-ended prompt may simultaneously require comprehension, retrieval, sentence formation, and pronunciation. Task-based scholarship stresses the relation between task conditions and performance ^[15, 19]. Planning studies demonstrate that preparation can influence aspects of performance, but effects vary by task and outcome ^[14]. Consequently, preparation and staged questions are possibilities for reducing immediate demands, not guaranteed mechanisms of learning. In particular, the teacher should separate failure to understand the question from difficulty assembling an answer. Asking a learner to identify a pictured object, select a relevant verb, and then produce a sentence can locate the immediate bottleneck more precisely than repeatedly requesting a full answer. This is a proposed diagnostic teaching sequence, not a standardized test.

3.4. Social and interactional distribution.

When a few learners dominate whole-class exchanges, others may have little opportunity to speak. Classroom discourse shapes which contributions become possible ^[11]. Observational work on WTC also points to interlocutor and group size ^[4]. Structured turns may redistribute opportunity, but equal numbers of turns should not be mistaken for equal learning or identical needs. Peng ^[6] and Bernalles ^[10] further indicate that participation reflects classroom norms and situational expectations. A low public turn count is therefore ambiguous unless the teacher has also examined whether the learner was offered a feasible turn.

4. Pedagogical Responses to Participation Barriers

A useful response begins with a tentative account of the barrier, not with a generic instruction to speak more. Teachers can compare what happens during whole-class questions, supported rehearsal, and pair exchanges. Differences across conditions may help identify a workable next step, although such observations are not psychological diagnoses. The practical decision rule is conditional: first identify the observed pattern, next

test an alternative explanation, then select the least intrusive adjustment, and finally check whether the adjustment changes participation without treating it as evidence of lasting learning. This rule is proposed here and has not been experimentally validated.

4.1. Preparation before public performance.

Learners can first identify relevant vocabulary, build a short utterance, and rehearse privately or with a partner. For a daily-routine task, the teacher might provide a small verb bank and ask for two original sentences before inviting volunteers. The objective is to reduce unnecessary processing demands without supplying the entire answer. Research on planning and task conditions offers a rationale, not direct proof for this Arabic activity ^[14, 15].

4.2. Structured pair and group exchanges.

Pair work increases possible speaking slots but does not ensure that every learner participates. Clear roles, an information gap, and brief individual accountability may make contributions easier to observe. Sato and Lyster ^[20] studied peer interaction and trained corrective feedback with learners of English; their performance findings cannot be transferred directly to beginner Arabic participation. Classroom teachers should therefore monitor who speaks and whether utterances reflect meaningful choices. The interaction literature differentiates opportunities to produce language from demonstrated development: Mackey ^[21] reports developmental outcomes in ESL interaction, and Loewen and Sato ^[22] review the effects and moderators of interaction across settings. These studies justify treating interaction as potentially useful, not assuming that more pair talk automatically improves Arabic proficiency.

4.3. Graduated prompts and processing time.

Teachers may move from naming an item to completing a phrase and finally producing a sentence. Wait time can be useful when learners are formulating an answer; it cannot compensate for an unknown word or misunderstood task. Research examining teachers' effects on WTC identifies wait time, correction, topic decisions, and support as relevant contextual variables, without licensing one universal prescription. Zarrinabadi ^[18] provides qualitative evidence that students notice teacher wait time and topic selection. Accordingly, teachers can compare immediate and prepared responses while keeping the lexical content stable. An increase after planning suggests a processing constraint, but it does not exclude anxiety or differences in attention.

4.4. Context-sensitive corrective feedback.

Correction should be selected according to the instructional purpose and the error. A pronunciation-focused exercise may warrant an immediate prompt; an initial meaning-focused exchange may allow a teacher to prioritize comprehension before returning to selected errors. Lyster and Ranta ^[23] documented different feedback moves and learner uptake; Lyster et al. ^[24] review oral corrective feedback across settings. Neither source establishes that delayed correction is always superior. Sato and Lyster ^[20] also caution against assuming that untrained peer correction reproduces outcomes obtained in a structured study. Lyster and Saito ^[25] synthesize classroom research showing that oral corrective feedback can support language development, with effects varying across feedback types and measures. Feedback decisions in the present matrix are therefore contingent on the activity goal; a correction that is appropriate for form-focused rehearsal may interrupt an initial attempt at

meaning-focused exchange.

4.5. Equitable participation opportunities.

Teachers may rotate speaking roles, ask for brief paired exchanges before plenary reporting, or distribute follow-up questions across the class. These practices aim to improve access to turns, not to force identical public performances. Kramsch ^[11] offers a discourse-oriented rationale, while classroom WTC research underscores situational variation ^[4, 3].

Table 1 translates these considerations into a heuristic sequence. The indicator is a prompt for further inquiry; the response is an instructional option; and the final column prevents the option from being mistaken for a tested causal intervention. The matrix is organized around observable events rather than inferred learner traits. Its six rows are not a typology of students: one learner may face several barriers in the same task, and the same indicator can arise from different barriers. The teacher must therefore treat each row as a hypothesis to check, not a diagnosis to apply.

Table 1. Barrier–indicator–response matrix (illustrative; not validated)

Possible barrier	Provisional indicator	Instructional option	Evidential boundary
Fear of negative evaluation	Less public speech than paired rehearsal	Rehearse with a partner before plenary response	Pattern does not diagnose anxiety; Arabic efficacy untested
Limited linguistic resources	Understands prompt but cannot formulate answer	Offer lexical cues and incomplete frames	Prompted output is not independent proficiency
High task demands	Long pauses in open-ended activities	Stage the task into manageable responses	Performance depends on task and support
Insufficient processing time	Response improves after brief preparation	Allow wait time plus graduated questions	Time alone does not resolve misunderstanding
Unequal speaking opportunities	Few students dominate exchanges	Rotate roles and structure turns	Turn counts are not learning outcomes
Feedback-related hesitation	Withdraws after correction in a given task	Match feedback form and timing to task purpose	No universally optimal correction timing

Note. Indicators are provisional and non-diagnostic; suggested responses are not established causal effects in beginner Arabic classrooms.

5. Illustrative Classroom Applications

The following are hypothetical teaching examples, not observed or evaluated interventions.

5.1. Self-introductions.

A teacher notices that some beginners can complete written name and nationality prompts but do not answer publicly. Rather than diagnosing fear, the teacher checks whether students can produce the same expressions with a partner. A model, a limited expression bank, and paired rehearsal may then precede brief introductions. The teacher records who attempts an original utterance and who depends on a full model; neither observation alone establishes learning.

5.2. Asking for directions.

When an open question about a campus location produces few answers, the teacher separates place

vocabulary from question formation. Learners identify locations, construct questions such as أين المكتبة؟ and exchange information in pairs. Rotating asker and responder roles makes opportunities more balanced. A later unprompted exchange could provide separate evidence of developing independence.

5.3. Daily routines.

Students prepare two short statements using a small set of verbs and time expressions. They exchange information with partners before reporting one detail. A learner who remains silent during reporting may still have contributed in the pair task; the teacher checks this directly rather than assuming engagement. Corrections are selected according to whether the immediate objective is meaning exchange or accurate production of a target form.

Across examples, the matrix guides a decision sequence: observe the task-specific difficulty, check alternative explanations, select a limited response, and assess participation and language performance separately. A practical follow-up can record three distinct outcomes: whether a learner had an opportunity to contribute, whether the learner contributed under the given support condition, and whether the learner could later produce a comparable expression independently. These measures answer different questions and should not be combined into one participation score. This distinction is consistent with Essa's ^[26] conceptual account of post-support assessment, which separates assisted task performance from independently demonstrated learning; that framework does not itself establish effects on classroom participation.

6. Discussion and Pedagogical Implications

The matrix makes a modest but distinct contribution: it operationalizes the movement from an observed classroom pattern to a conditional teaching decision. This differs from a general argument that confidence and linguistic safety matter, already developed in Essa ^[9]. Its additional value is the requirement to state an evidential boundary for each proposed response.

The framework also avoids treating WTC, speech frequency, and learning as interchangeable constructs. Situated WTC models explain why the same learner may choose differently across tasks ^[2, 3]. Classroom discourse work directs attention to available turns ^[11]. Task-based research reminds teachers that the amount and quality of language produced vary with task conditions ^[14, 15]. These literatures jointly justify asking more precise questions; they do not validate the proposed matrix. Bernales ^[10] shows the relevance of learners' own accounts when interpreting silence, and Kang ^[5] demonstrates moment-to-moment variability. The matrix accordingly prioritizes repeated, context-sensitive observation over a fixed classification. Loewen and Sato ^[22] and Mackey ^[21] also make clear why interaction and subsequent acquisition require separate evidence.

The most useful next study would combine repeated classroom observations, short learner explanations, and independently scored Arabic performance tasks. Researchers could examine whether teachers using the matrix select different responses, whether participation becomes more widely distributed, and whether any changes correspond to later independent language production. Designs should distinguish participation outcomes from acquisition outcomes and should avoid attributing observed change to a strategy without an appropriate comparison. A feasible pilot could compare teachers' initial explanations of silent responses with explanations after brief learner checks, and document whether their chosen responses change. A subsequent study could test inter-rater agreement on the indicators and compare independent Arabic performance before and after a defined teaching period. These are research proposals, not reported results. For studies

incorporating GenAI-assisted beginner writing, Essa ^[27] additionally proposes documenting learner decision rights and human verification across writing stages; this is a conceptual design proposal rather than evidence that participation improves.

Limitations are substantial. The paper offers no original participant data, no psychometric validation, and no tested Arabic intervention. Much supporting evidence comes from English or other L2 classrooms, where tasks, proficiency, and participation norms may differ. The matrix is therefore a structured professional judgment aid, not a diagnostic checklist or universal intervention protocol.

7. Conclusion

Limited classroom participation in beginner Arabic courses may reflect readiness, linguistic capacity, or opportunity. Treating silence as a single problem invites mismatched responses. This paper proposes a barrier–indicator–response matrix that encourages teachers to investigate likely constraints, select proportionate practices, and state what their observations cannot establish. Preparation, structured interaction, graduated prompts, feedback, and turn distribution are pedagogical options rather than guaranteed treatments. Empirical work is needed to determine whether the matrix improves instructional decisions and whether broader participation is accompanied by independent language development.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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