

**Interactive digital tools: a confidence booster to reduce language learners' affective filter**

**Herramientas digitales interactivas: un impulso de confianza para reducir el filtro afectivo de los estudiantes de idiomas**

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**Abstract**

A high affective filter hinders language interaction, lowering learners' confidence and influencing interaction due to factors such as lack of motivation, anxiety, or boredom. (Hajiyeva, 2024). This study aims to examine how the implementation of interactive digital tools significantly reduces the affective filter among early adolescents in an online context. Thus, this research was conducted qualitatively, encompassing a systematic literature review to establish a strong theoretical framework. Additionally, empirical data were collected through the implementation of digital tools and classroom observations, as well as a qualitative satisfaction survey to understand learners' perceptions and emotional responses during the intervention. Using a thematic analysis approach enabled the identification of recurring patterns and the analysis of the impact of technological tools on students' emotions. Consequently, the findings highlight the perceived effectiveness of these tools in EFL lessons, allowing teachers not only to reduce the affective filter but also to boost learners' confidence in language interaction.

**Keywords:** Affective filter, Interactive digital tools, EFL, Language interaction.

**Resumen**

Un filtro afectivo alto dificulta la interacción en el aprendizaje de idiomas, disminuyendo la confianza de los estudiantes e influyendo en su participación debido a factores como la falta de motivación, la ansiedad o el aburrimiento (Hajiyeva, 2024). Este estudio tiene como objetivo examinar cómo la implementación de herramientas digitales interactivas reduce significativamente el filtro afectivo en adolescentes tempranos dentro de un contexto en línea. Por lo tanto, esta investigación se llevó a cabo de manera cualitativa, abarcando una revisión sistemática de la literatura para establecer un sólido marco teórico. Además, se recopilaron datos empíricos mediante la implementación de herramientas digitales y observaciones en el aula, así como una encuesta cualitativa de satisfacción para comprender las percepciones y respuestas emocionales de los estudiantes durante la intervención. El uso de un enfoque de análisis temático permitió identificar patrones recurrentes y analizar el impacto de las herramientas tecnológicas en las emociones de los estudiantes. En consecuencia, los hallazgos destacan la efectividad percibida de estas herramientas en las clases de inglés como lengua extranjera (EFL), permitiendo a los docentes no solo reducir el filtro afectivo, sino también fortalecer la confianza de los estudiantes en la interacción lingüística.

**Palabras clave:** filtro afectivo, herramientas digitales interactivas, EFL (inglés como lengua extranjera), interacción lingüística.

## Introduction

The acquisition of a foreign language is a complex process, as it requires not only the educator's guidance and predisposition but also a positive emotional response from the learner that improves motivation and engagement to achieve language interaction (Javaid et al., 2023). Therefore, emotions have been studied for many years by researchers, enabling the development of new strategies to stimulate positive affective responses in language learners and to improve class participation. This is due to the importance of creating safe classroom environments that foster enthusiasm to enhance their capacity as language learners (Ullah et al., 2024).

Furthermore, as adolescence is characterized by significant changes in emotional, cognitive, and psychosocial traits (Hadiyanto et al., 2022), it becomes more challenging to foster positive emotions that support language interaction. For this reason, factors such as anxiety, lack of motivation, nervousness, and low self-confidence form an invisible emotional barrier known as the "Affective Filter" that hinders participation and impedes learning (Du, 2009). Hence, in the educational process, it is necessary to consider students' emotions, as they can be both beneficial when positive and non-beneficial when negative. (Kiruthiga & Christopher, 2022).

According to Krashen (1982), in his affective filter theory, educators need to create a meaningful environment that supplies comprehensible input, enabling language learners to feel motivated and confident. Thus, EFL teachers need to make language as comprehensible as possible while using resources and strategies that stimulate positive emotions towards the content. This would enable learners to feel motivated in the learning process, and if those resources contribute to creating a safe environment, learners are more likely to feel confident in language interaction as well (Kempen et al., 2024).

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In addition, the teaching and learning process in an online context is more complex, as it becomes more difficult to get students to turn on their microphones and cameras for participation, which results in a lack of learners' responses (Sardi et al., 2022). This factor increases the chances of a high affective filter, as it makes students more nervous about class interaction. Therefore, it is necessary to come up with strategies and a plan to turn online English lessons into a meaningful process that empowers learners and stimulates participation.

Currently, technology has become increasingly significant in education, for the advantages of digital tools have encompassed meaningful results in language learning. These resources enable teachers and learners not only to access a wide range of interactive materials for practice but also to serve as a motivational factor in the classroom environment (Al-Maashani & Mudhsh, 2023). In light of this, recent studies have demonstrated that interactive digital tools promote active learning and have emphasized their incorporation into teaching and learning. Thus, harnessing technological resources would allow teachers to provide a more supportive, interactive, and engaging learning experience. (Nosirova, 2023).

Hence, given the negative impact of the affective filter on language interactions and the benefits of technological apps in modern education, it is necessary to manage these variables together. This would enable us to analyze and explore the effects of interactive digital tools implemented in lessons as confidence boosters to reduce the affective filter among English learners. The study aims to examine how integrating these two main elements creates not only an appealing but also an effective class environment in which students feel motivated, self-confident, and less nervous. This leads us to state our research question: How does the use of interactive digital tools shape adolescents' emotional responses and language interaction in EFL online lessons to reduce the affective filter?

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## Literature Review

For many students, learning a new language can be overwhelming. This is due to anxiety and stress, which limit learners' capacity to acquire and produce the language (Abraham & Mishra, 2024). Thus, it is important to consider emotions and how they trigger obstacles in the teaching-learning process. Zhao (2022) mentions that students with self-confidence tend to be more participative in lessons and language practice. Therefore, it is essential to understand why emotional states play a significant role in the academic process.

Students' emotional states decisively influence their learning processes and success (Bao & Liu, 2021). For that reason, affective factors are increasingly essential to acknowledge in teaching. The Affective Filter Hypothesis examines the influence of affective factors on language instruction and learning. It suggests that they should not be ignored, as they play a significant role in this process. (Yulan & Yuewu, 2020).

Additionally, the Affective Filter hypothesis explains the relationship between affective variables and language acquisition. It claims that learners vary in the strength or level of their Affective Filters. In this regard, Krashen (1982) argues that certain attitudes or feelings, such as fear, anxiety, or embarrassment, can hinder language acquisition. Hence, it is necessary to create a positive environment in which those emotions can be mitigated, helping learners feel more comfortable during lessons. (Du, 2009).

Since the affective filter has a wide influence on language interaction. Students tend to remain silent, speak nervously, and forget words or expressions because of the anxiety or lack of motivation (Liu & Huang, 2011, as cited in Matute Campozano et al., 2022). Furthermore, when students feel excluded from the language-learning process or perceive the content as irrelevant to their interests, the affective filter may increase, leading them to disengage from the lessons.

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Consequently, target language acquisition will not be a fluent process, impeding students from participating actively and confidently in language interaction. Similarly, as Parrales and Dajely (2022) point out, other social, educational, and personality-based factors influence learners' attitudes toward language learning and interaction.

For this reason, it is necessary to implement lessons, strategies, and tools that are meaningful and motivating for language learners. Kyrpa (2023) stated that “engaging pupils in activities aligned with their passions boosts motivation by making the learning experience compelling and relevant to their lives” (p. 49). Therefore, educators must provide students with authentic, personalized lessons and tools aligned with their interests to foster a positive emotional connection to the content. On the contrary, Rashov (2024) asserts that “the integration of technology and digital resources has further enriched the learning experience, making language acquisition more accessible and engaging” (p. 164). Accordingly, interactive digital resources are a promising tool for enhancing teaching and learning, underscoring the need to address the existing research gap regarding how their implementation can boost learners' confidence and reduce affective factors.

In recent years, the use of digital tools in EFL classrooms has become fundamental to enhancing instruction through technology-enhanced lessons that offer interactive, dynamic, and meaningful experiences. According to Akkan et al. (2012, as cited in Abdullateef, 2021), digital learning tools are an effective resource that fosters engagement, self-confidence, autonomy, and ownership of learning.

Likewise, Danca et al. (2023) mentioned that “the use of different digital tools also provides actively engaged students with skills that improve their problem-solving, speaking, and critical thinking abilities” (p. 293), which demonstrates the significance of applying these interactive digital tools in lessons to increase the students' engagement and participation.

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Moreover, this fact helps them enhance their educational process and engage in a safe, supportive learning environment.

Furthermore, as reported by Rafiq et al. (2024), the effective integration of digital interactive tools helps students not only by facilitating interactions but also by enhancing meaningful, active participation, including collaborative group learning and the development of critical thinking.

Similarly, recent studies have demonstrated the effectiveness of digital learning tools in improving students' motivation and participation. Some researchers have enlightened the well-considered integration of technological resources, which enhances students' motivation, engagement, and autonomy. Consequently, the use of interactive tools encourages constructive participation and student-centered learning while creating a dynamic and supportive environment. (Abdullateef, 2021; Dennis, 2024; Negoescu & Mitrulescu, 2023). Although digital learning tools have enhanced classroom interaction, participation, and emotional connection to learning, their use in EFL classes not only supports students' language development but also fosters emotionally safe, interactive, and motivating learning environments.

On the other hand, the digital era has demanded a rethinking of the teacher's role in the classroom, as well as the students'. Therefore, both roles have evolved due to the introduction of new technologies in education. In light of this, many researchers have evaluated the affective filter hypothesis proposed by Krashen, and others have been studying the benefits of technology in education. Consequently, it is necessary to address the research gap unifying these two variables and examine how the affective filter can be reduced through the use of digital tools.

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## Metodology

### Study Design

This research employs a longitudinal action research to gain deeper insight into students' experiences during a five-month online learning process. Likewise, this work involves the effective application of several interactive and dynamic digital tools. The aim was to qualitatively explore and analyze how technological resources help lower students' affective filter and to understand how these strategies influence students' emotional responses, fostering a meaningful and enjoyable learning experience that supports students' knowledge and empowers language interaction.

### Participants

Purposive sampling was used to select 15 students who participated in this action research and served as the source of the empirical data. They were part of a private English academy. Their ages range from 10 to 15 years, and their current English level was A2 according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR).

### Data Collection Instruments

For empirical data collection, this study applied several interactive digital tools. Thus, observations, feedback, and information compiled during this process were recorded in a reflective journal. This enabled topic-based analysis of the effectiveness of each implemented technological resource, considering its benefits in reducing the impact of the affective filter. In addition, a satisfaction survey was administered to students to collect qualitative data using six open-ended questions. This enabled the identification of students' experiences, and their responses were analyzed in depth to understand participants' perceptions.

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### Data Collection Procedures

Specifically, the data collection was divided into three main phases. First, one month was dedicated to making observations and starting planning before applying any interactive digital tools. Subsequently, three months and three weeks were allocated to the intervention, implementing digital resources. Finally, one week of discussion and the identification of students' perceptions through a survey.

### Intervention

During the intervention, various interactive digital tools were implemented in accordance with the lesson plans, such as Canva, Genially, Voki, Wordwall, Educaplay, Kahoot, Quizziz, Jeopardy, Flippity, Interacty, Nearpod, etc. This was done with the objective of creating a safe environment that stimulated students' interaction and lowered the affective filter.

### Data Analysis

To analyze the previously collected data, a reflexive thematic analysis informed by the affective filter hypothesis was conducted using Braun and Clarke's six-phase method to identify, analyze, and interpret the data. (Willig & Rogers, 2017). This approach was also complemented by a methodological triangulation, which enables the interpretation of patterns among the observed data, learners' perceptions, and other sources.

### Ethical Considerations

Participants' anonymity was ensured at the beginning of the study. Given that they are minors, their legal guardians were required to sign a consent form confirming their agreement to the terms of this research and the anonymity of the results.

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## Analysis of results

Once all data collection phases were completed, the observation notes and students' survey responses were organized and codified in a database. This enabled the implementation of a thematic analysis where four major themes were identified: (1) Manifestation of the affective filter in language learning, (2) influence of interactive digital tools in the learning process, (3) boosting positive emotional responses and active participation, and (4) Increase of language interaction and practice. Each theme was revealed by a set of key codes in the observations and survey evidence, establishing a level of convergence between the information (strong, partial, or divergent).

**Table 1.** *Summary of Themes, Codes, Evidence, and Level of Data Convergence*

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Key Codes</b>	<b>Observation Evidence</b>	<b>Survey Evidence</b>	<b>Level of convergence</b>
<b>Theme 1: Manifestation of the affective filter in language learning</b>	Nervousness, participation avoidance, Interaction struggle, lack of resources, anxiety	Obs. 1, 2, 6	S. 12, 8, 1	Strong
<b>Theme 2: Influence of interactive digital tools in the learning process</b>	Digital tools influence, engagement, motivation	Obs. 10, 11, 28	S. 1, 5, 11, 11, 10	Strong
<b>Theme 3: Boosting positive emotional responses and active participation</b>	Confidence, collaboration, interaction, positive emotional response	Obs. 3, 13, 17, 18	S. 1, 8, 10, 14	Strong
<b>Theme 4: Increase in language interaction and practice</b>	Language development, oral interaction, autonomy increase, collaborative practice	Obs. 14, 3, 30	S. 15, 7	Strong

### Theme 1: Manifestation of the Affective Filter in Language Learning

This theme emerged from a set of interrelated codes, such as nervousness, participation avoidance, interaction struggle, lack of resources, and anxiety. All these codes allowed the classification of the evidence from observations and a survey to identify the factors that increase the affective filter and hinder English acquisition.

Classroom observation notes made in the first phase of data collection before applying any interactive digital tools, revealed that students took a while to answer and interact when the class was dull, and no interactive tools were implemented (Obs. 1). Furthermore, Interactions felt a little awkward because some students showed nervousness in participation (Obs. 2). And finally, students did not show quite as much confidence in their responses (Obs. 6).

On the other hand, survey responses complement the observable evidence with learners' perspectives and experiences. One student stated, "interacting was a little difficult because I am shy" (S.12). Another mentioned, "At first, I felt nervous when teachers made me interact" (S.8). In addition, someone highlighted, "A class with no digital tools made me feel nervous" (S.1). For that reason, the convergence of observed speaking anxiety and reported nervousness caused by the lack of interactive resources reveals a strong alignment and convergence of the evidence from both data collection methods.

### Theme 2: Influence of Interactive Digital Tools in the Learning Process

The alignment of recurring patterns and codes, such as digital tools influence, engagement, and motivation established theme number two. These codes enabled the categorization of observations and survey responses that evidenced the benefits of applying digital tools in the language teaching and learning process.

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Observational evidence disclosed that students liked game-based activities created with interactive digital tools; they were happy, engaged, and found it meaningful (obs. 10). Additionally, the competitiveness and the dynamics of the digital activities made students engage more in participation (obs. 11). Therefore, it was also thanks to digital tools that the content was presented more interestingly and engagingly (Obs. 28).

On the contrary, survey responses highlight students' experience in learning and practicing with interactive digital tools. Students affirmed that "It was fun and interesting to practice with digital tools" (S.1), "the tools were fun and easy to use..." (S.5). While others stated: "I felt very motivated..." (S.11), "using digital tools increased my interest because the class became less predictable" (S.11); "English classes became more fun and less overwhelming" (S10). Thus, observations and survey evidence show a strong level of convergence, as both reveal that engagement and motivation increase through digital tools.

### Theme 3: Boosting Positive Emotional Responses and Active Participation

This theme was identified by the unification of related codes such as confidence, collaboration, interaction, and positive emotional response. Each code made it possible to categorize evidence that highlighted the positive impact of learners' emotions and participation by using interactive digital tools.

During the implementation of interactive digital resources, observation data indicated that students felt confident when it was their turn to participate (Obs. 3). Students seemed less anxious or less insecure when participating (Obs. 13). It was also revealed that some activities allowed students not just to feel more confident but also to be faster when giving the answers (Obs. 17), there were as well very fun game-based activity that helped learners to interact more (Obs. 18).

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Evidence from the survey report a student who asserts “I felt less nervous than usual...” (S.1). Others mention “Digital tools helped me lose my fear of participating because everything seemed like a game” (S.8), “... it made interacting fun” (S.10). While another states “I used to be very shy and did not participate because I was afraid of being teased, but with the games in English, it was more fun and easier” (S.14). These responses together with the observation data demonstrate a strong convergence. Both data disclose evidence of increased participation, confidence development, and lower levels of affective filter.

#### Theme 4: Increase in Language Interaction and Practice

Theme four was created in relation to four important codes: language development, oral interaction, autonomy increase, and collaborative practice. These were selected as a representation of evidence patterns related to the improvement of students’ content understanding, autonomous and collaborative practice, and classroom interaction.

Through observation data, it was identified that when implementing interactive digital tools, students seemed to understand the content better (Obs. 14), and the teachers could customize the digital activities to make the class more appropriate for the students’ needs (Obs. 3). Furthermore, assigning online activities stimulated students’ independent practice, and in-class activities to foster learners’ interaction (Obs. 30).

Regarding learners’ responses, it could be disclosed how meaningful digital tools were in the learning process. One student mentioned that “The content was very understandable. I liked how the teacher presented the class using slides, and we practiced with digital games” (S.15). In addition, another student asserted “Using the tools at home as homework was very useful, it allowed us to practice and improve, we could interact in class a lot” (S.7). Hence, the observed data and students’ perceptions reveal coherence and a strong convergence in relation of the codes established for the theme.

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## Discussion

The affective filter is an emotional barrier that can be influenced by the comprehensible input that the teacher creates. As reviewed previously, Krashen (1982) states that “The effective language teacher is someone who can provide input and help make it comprehensible in a low anxiety situation”. In light of this, the findings of this research highlight that even the simplest interactive digital tools can make learning more understandable and less intimidating for learners. This is because they provide a wide range of visual elements and features that make the language acquisition process more visually and emotionally engaging, thereby creating a safe environment that empowers learners’ interaction.

The findings point out the lack of interactive digital tools as one of the factors that increases the manifestation of the affective filter. Regarding observable data and survey responses, the affective filter tends to be higher when the teaching and learning process is dull and doesn’t integrate interactive activities. This aligns with Danca et al. (2023), who mention in their research that the disadvantages of a traditional teaching approach with no resources do not stimulate engagement, and cannot provide a better learning environment and faster assessment.

Therefore, the integration of interactive digital tools has a positive impact on the teaching and learning process. The observation data disclose an improvement in levels of engagement and motivation when activities with digital resources were used. This is complemented by students’ opinions, where they claim that lessons were more fun, interactive, meaningful, and less overwhelming. In relation, Vélez Sabando et al. (2022) state that implemented digital tools with a playful, gamified approach have proven to enhance learners’ motivation, improve the teaching-learning process, and engage students in an interactive environment where they feel engaged with the content.

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Furthermore, findings also show increasement in language interaction and language development. Through the observation notes and survey opinions, it could be identified that the use of interactive resources makes learning more meaningful, which motivates learners to participate more in lessons. On the other hand, not only does interaction increase, but also the comprehension and the active, autonomous, and collaborative practice that leads to improved learners' confidence. In favor, Yadav (2024) reveals in his study that the power of digital tools in education has become increasingly more accessible, effective, and meaningful.

Moreover, the evidence shows that when students perceive the learning environment as supportive and relevant to their interests, and they do not feel stressed, their emotional barriers are lowered. For instance, when digital tools are used to create authentic tasks, personalize content, and allow collaborative learning, students are more likely to feel confident and less anxious.

Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge that this research has only focused on studying learners in an online context. For that reason, this research has potential limitations, such as the short sample size, which might not represent a generalized result from a larger population of learners. Moreover, the empirical data were only collected in virtual lessons, and the results represent just the application of interactive digital tools when technological devices and resources are used. Therefore, in on-site contexts, the reality might be different.

For that reason, it is recommended that future research focus on how meaningful interactive digital tools would be in a larger sample and on-site context. This would be important information for EFL educators who seek to foster a supportive, safe environment employing digital tools strategically and to boost learners' class interaction.

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## Conclusions

According to Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis, which emphasizes the importance of emotional development in the language learning process, this research examines how digital learning tools could help foster an emotionally safe and motivating learning environment to empower learners' interaction. Thus, the findings of this study reveal that the integration of interactive Digital tools in online classes significantly helps to reduce the affective filter, fostering motivation, participation, and collaboration among the students, as well as creating meaningful experiences. Digital learning tools support an enjoyable learning process, so implementing these strategies in online classes reduces the affective filter and enhances students' outcomes.

Based on the four identified themes, the data triangulation disclosed a strong convergence between observation data and students' survey responses. The evidence from both sources highlights the positive impact of interactive digital tools in the teaching and learning process, as it improves motivation, engagement, interaction, and autonomous and collaborative practice. Hence, regarding the research question, using interactive resources contributes to stimulating positive emotional responses for getting more class interaction and reducing the affective filter.

Overall, the thoughtful and pedagogically sound application of interactive digital tools in online classrooms can transform the learning experience. These tools are not only effective in enhancing language skills, but they also serve as confidence boosters that lower the affective filter, allowing students to feel emotionally safe, valued, and motivated, supporting the idea that emotional well-being and technological innovation must go hand in hand in modern education.

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