



FACTORS INFLUENCING STUDENTS' RELUCTANCE TO PARTICIPATE IN
CLASSROOM DISCUSSIONS

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Abstract: Student participation is widely regarded as an important element of successful learning, particularly in language classrooms where communication practice supports language development. Even so, many students choose not to participate during classroom discussions despite understanding the lesson and knowing the correct responses. This study explores the main reasons behind students' reluctance to speak during classroom activities.

The study employed a mixed-method research design involving 45 eighth-grade students. Data were gathered through questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. Quantitative data were analyzed using percentages, while qualitative responses were examined through thematic analysis.

The findings revealed that fear of negative evaluation (64.4%) was the most influential factor affecting participation. Other important factors included low self-confidence (55.6%), speaking anxiety (51.1%), and classroom environment (40.0%). The study suggests that emotional and environmental factors affect participation more strongly than students' academic abilities. The findings highlight the importance of supportive classroom environments and encouraging teaching practices in increasing student engagement.

INTRODUCTION

Participation in classroom discussions is an important part of the educational process. Through active participation, students are able to exchange ideas, improve communication skills, and become more involved in classroom learning. In foreign language education, participation is especially necessary because speaking activities provide students with opportunities to practice and develop language fluency. However, in many classrooms, students remain passive and avoid speaking activities. Foreign language anxiety is one of the most common difficulties experienced by language learners. Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986) describe it as feelings of nervousness and tension connected to language learning situations. Students experiencing anxiety often avoid speaking because they fear making mistakes or forgetting vocabulary while communicating.

Fear of negative evaluation refers to learners' fear of criticism or judgment from teachers and classmates. Students may worry that others will laugh at their mistakes or think negatively about their speaking abilities. Because of this concern, many learners avoid classroom participation.

MacIntyre and Gardner (1994) argue that fear of negative evaluation is strongly connected to communication avoidance. Even academically successful students may hesitate to participate if they fear embarrassment. Previous studies suggest that anxiety can



reduce learners' confidence and negatively influence classroom interaction. Young (1991) explains that anxiety may increase because of teacher correction, peer reactions, or pressure to speak publicly in front of classmates.

Self-confidence plays an important role in determining students' willingness to speak in class. Learners with higher confidence levels are usually more active in communication activities because they trust their abilities. In contrast, students with low confidence often remain silent even when they know the correct answers. MacIntyre et al. (1998) explain that willingness to communicate depends greatly on learners' self-perceived competence and emotional readiness.

Understanding why students avoid classroom participation is important because communication activities contribute directly to language development and academic progress. Therefore, this study aims to identify the major factors influencing students' reluctance to participate in classroom discussions and to suggest possible ways of improving participation.

2. Methods

This research used a mixed-method approach in order to obtain both numerical and descriptive data. Combining quantitative and qualitative methods helped provide a broader understanding of students' participation behavior.

The participants were 45 eighth-grade students from a secondary school. The students represented different participation levels and academic backgrounds.

Two research instruments were used in this study.

Questionnaire

A structured questionnaire was distributed to all participants. The questions focused on speaking anxiety, confidence, fear of mistakes, and classroom atmosphere.

Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with selected students to explore their personal experiences and feelings regarding classroom participation.

The quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, particularly percentages. The qualitative interview data were analyzed through thematic analysis to identify recurring ideas and common patterns.

3. Results

The analysis of the data provided clear evidence that affective factors are the primary drivers of student reluctance to participate. Quantitative results showed that the majority of students feel a significant emotional burden when asked to speak in front of their peers. Table 1 outlines the specific percentages of participants affected by various deterrents.

Table 1. Factors Influencing Students' Participation

Influence Factors	Percentage (%)
Fear of negative evaluation from others	64.4%
Low self-confidence in speaking ability	55.6%
Language-related speaking anxiety	51.1%
Classroom environment/Teacher behavior	40.0%

The data show that fear of negative evaluation was the strongest factor influencing participation. Many students stated that they avoided speaking because they feared making



mistakes and being embarrassed in front of classmates. Low self-confidence was identified as the second most significant factor. A large number of students reported that they doubted their speaking abilities and therefore preferred to remain silent.

Speaking anxiety was another common issue. Students explained that they felt nervous when answering questions in front of the whole class. Although classroom environment received the lowest percentage, it still had an important influence on participation. Students mentioned that supportive teachers and friendly classmates helped them feel more comfortable speaking during lessons.

Table 2. Selected Interview Responses

Theme	Student Response
Fear of mistakes	"I worry that others will laugh if I say something wrong." "I feel nervous when everyone looks at me." "Sometimes I know the answer, but I am afraid to speak." "I participate more when the teacher encourages us politely."
Anxiety	
Lack of confidence	
Positive teacher support	

The interview responses show that emotional concerns strongly influence communication behavior in the classroom. Most students connected silence with fear, nervousness, or lack of confidence rather than academic difficulties.

4. Discussion

The findings of this research underscore the critical importance of the 'Affective Filter' in language learning. The high prevalence of the fear of negative evaluation suggests that the classroom is often perceived as a social stage where mistakes carry a high price. This aligns with Horwitz et al. (1986), who identified that language anxiety is distinct from general performance anxiety because it directly challenges the learner's self-concept and social identity. When students feel that their social status among peers is at risk, they default to silence as a protective mechanism.

The discussion also highlights the role of self-confidence and its relationship with willingness to communicate. Students with low self-confidence often underestimate their actual linguistic knowledge, leading to a gap between what they know and what they express. Furthermore, the study suggests that teacher behavior is a key variable in modulating these emotional barriers. Harsh error correction or a lack of encouragement can solidify a student's reluctance, whereas a supportive environment can lower the affective filter. Consequently, pedagogical strategies must focus not only on linguistic accuracy but also on creating a psychologically safe space. Using collaborative group work and providing constructive, delayed feedback instead of immediate correction are recommended to de-escalate the anxiety associated with classroom speaking tasks.

Conclusion

This study concludes that student reluctance to participate in classroom discussions is primarily an emotional and psychological issue rather than a purely cognitive one. Fear of evaluation, lack of confidence, and language anxiety are the dominant factors silencing



students in EFL classrooms. Since these barriers are more influential than academic knowledge, it is imperative for educators to address the emotional climate of the classroom.

By promoting a supportive, non-judgmental atmosphere and using interactive teaching methods, teachers can help students overcome their hesitations, thereby maximizing their linguistic potential and overall learning experience.

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