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Research Article

The Fear of Being Wrong: How Error Sensitivity Shapes University Students' Classroom Participation

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Samadova Farzona Abduvohobovna
Uzbekistan State World Languages University, 2nd year student, Uzbekistan

Abstract

Making mistakes is a natural part of learning, yet the fear of giving an incorrect answer may influence how students participate in classroom activities. This study explores the relationship between fear of making mistakes and classroom participation among university students. A quantitative survey was conducted with 37 students from different academic fields. The questionnaire included 14 Likert-scale statements measuring students' concerns about making mistakes and their participation in classroom discussions, as well as one open-ended question about factors that could encourage participation. Descriptive statistics and correlation analysis were used to examine the responses, while the open-ended answers were reviewed to identify common themes. The results showed a mean score of 2.75 out of 5 for fear of making mistakes and 3.15 out of 5 for classroom participation. Pearson's correlation analysis revealed no statistically significant relationship between the two measures ((r = .043), (p = .803)). However, students' responses to the open-ended question highlighted the importance of a supportive and friendly classroom environment. These findings suggest that fear of making mistakes and classroom participation may not be directly related in a simple way. Although the small sample limits the generalisability of the results, the study offers an initial insight into students' experiences and highlights the need for further research into the psychological and classroom-related factors that shape participation.

Keywords

Fear of making mistakes, error sensitivity, classroom participation, university students, classroom environment.

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Introduction

Classroom participation plays an important role in university students' learning experiences. By answering questions, sharing opinions, and asking for clarification, students have opportunities to develop their understanding, communicate their ideas, and learn from others. However, not every student feels comfortable expressing their thoughts in front of classmates. For some students, the possibility of making a mistake can create anxiety and make participation more difficult.

The fear of being wrong may be influenced by several factors, including students' confidence in their knowledge, their expectations of themselves, and their perceptions of how teachers and classmates might react to an incorrect answer. Even when students know the answer to a question, they may hesitate to speak if they are worried about being judged. As a result, their classroom behaviour may not always reflect what they actually know or understand.

This issue is particularly relevant in university settings, where students are often expected to think independently, express their opinions, and take an active role in discussions. While making mistakes can provide valuable learning opportunities, students may not always see mistakes in this way. If they associate errors with embarrassment or negative evaluation, they may prefer to remain silent rather than risk giving an incorrect answer.

Although fear of making mistakes and classroom participation are closely related in theory, their relationship may not be straightforward. Some students may experience anxiety but still participate actively, while others may avoid speaking even when they feel reasonably confident. Classroom atmosphere, personal motivation, and the reactions of teachers and classmates may also influence these experiences. Therefore, the present study investigates the relationship between fear of making mistakes and classroom participation among university students from different academic fields. It also explores what students believe would help them feel more comfortable participating in class. By examining both questionnaire scores and students' written responses, the study aims to provide a clearer understanding of how students experience the possibility of making mistakes in academic settings.

Literature Review

Fear of making mistakes can be understood as a concern about giving an incorrect answer or being negatively evaluated after making an error. In educational settings, this concern may affect not only students' emotional experiences but also their willingness to take part in learning activities.

Dweck's (2006) work on mindsets provides a useful perspective for understanding how learners interpret mistakes. Students who view abilities as something that can develop through effort and learning may be more willing to treat errors as opportunities for improvement. In contrast, students who see mistakes as evidence of limited ability may become more concerned about how others evaluate their performance. However, students' responses to mistakes are likely to depend on several factors rather than on mindset alone.

Fear of making mistakes is also relevant to research on anxiety in language learning. Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986) explained that

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foreign language classroom anxiety involves feelings and beliefs associated with learning and using another language in classroom situations. Speaking a foreign language can make students particularly aware of possible errors in grammar, vocabulary, or pronunciation. As a result, they may hesitate to communicate even when they have something meaningful to say.

Nevertheless, fear of making mistakes is not limited to language classrooms. Students in other academic fields may also worry about providing incorrect information, receiving criticism, or appearing unprepared in front of their peers. This makes the issue relevant to university learning environments more generally.

METHODOLOGY

1. Research Design

The study employed a quantitative survey design with an additional open-ended question. This approach was selected to examine patterns in students' reported experiences and to explore their views on factors that might encourage classroom participation.

The quantitative component focused on two main variables: fear of making mistakes and classroom participation. The open-ended component provided an opportunity for participants to describe what they believed would help them feel more comfortable speaking in class.

3.2. Participants

The sample consisted of 37 university students from different academic fields. Of these participants, 22 studied English or foreign languages, eight studied business or economics, four studied IT or engineering, two studied other humanities subjects, and one studied natural sciences.

Most participants were second-year students (28 participants), while five were first-year students, three were third-year students, and one was in the fourth year or above.

The sample included students from several academic backgrounds, although English and foreign language students represented the largest group. Therefore, the findings should be interpreted in relation to this particular sample rather than generalised to all university students.

3.3. Research Instrument

Data were collected through a questionnaire containing demographic questions, 12 Likert-scale statements, and one open-ended question. The Likert-scale statements used a five-point response scale ranging from 1 to 5, with higher scores indicating a stronger endorsement of the statement.

Seven statements were used to assess fear of making mistakes. These addressed nervousness about uncertain answers, concern about classmates' judgments, discomfort after making mistakes, concerns about teachers' reactions, and the tendency to remain silent because of the possibility of being wrong.

Five statements assessed classroom participation. These covered volunteering answers, sharing opinions during discussions, asking questions when something was unclear, participating despite uncertainty, and feeling comfortable expressing ideas in front of other students.

The final open-ended question asked participants what would help them feel more comfortable participating in class. This question was included to complement the numerical findings with students' own perspectives.

3.4. Data Analysis

The responses were analysed using descriptive statistics and correlation analysis. Mean scores were calculated for the fear-of-making-mistakes and classroom-participation measures. Standard

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deviations were used to describe variation in participants' scores.

The internal consistency of the two sets of statements was assessed using Cronbach's alpha. The fear-of-making-mistakes measure produced an alpha of .80, while the classroom-participation measure produced an alpha of .84. These values indicate acceptable internal consistency for the purposes of this exploratory study, although they do not by themselves establish the validity of the measures.

Pearson's correlation coefficient was used to examine the direction and strength of the linear relationship between the two variables. Statistical significance was evaluated at the .05 level.

Responses to the open-ended question were grouped into descriptive categories according to their main themes. These categories were used to summarise common suggestions rather than to make claims about the prevalence of attitudes beyond the study sample.

3.5. Ethical Considerations

Participation in the survey was voluntary, and responses were analysed for research purposes. The analysis focused on group-level patterns rather than individual participants. No individual response was used to identify or evaluate a particular student.

The findings are presented with consideration of the small sample size and the limitations of self-reported data. The study is exploratory and does not seek to establish causal relationships between fear of making mistakes and classroom participation.

Results

1. Descriptive Statistics

The first stage of the analysis focused on the overall levels of fear of making mistakes and classroom participation among the 37 participants. The two measures were analysed separately to understand students' reported concerns and their classroom behaviour.

The mean score for fear of making mistakes was 2.64 (SD = 0.80) on a five-point scale. This suggests that participants reported a moderate level of concern about making mistakes. The mean score for classroom participation was higher, at 3.50 (SD = 0.98), indicating that participants generally reported a willingness to take part in classroom activities.

The difference between these mean scores is worth noting. Although students reported concerns about giving incorrect answers, they also reported participating in discussions, asking questions, and expressing their ideas. This suggests that experiencing fear of making mistakes does not necessarily prevent students from participating in class.

Among the statements measuring fear of making mistakes, the highest mean score was recorded for preferring to remain silent rather than risk giving a wrong answer (M = 2.95). Nervousness when unsure whether an answer is correct also received a relatively high mean score (M = 2.81). These responses suggest that uncertainty about the correctness of an answer may be an important concern for some participants.

For classroom participation, sharing opinions during classroom discussions received the highest mean score (M = 3.73). Feeling comfortable expressing ideas in front of other students also received a relatively high score (M = 3.59). However, participating even when not completely sure of an answer had a lower mean score (M = 3.27). This difference may indicate that students are more comfortable expressing their ideas when they feel reasonably confident than when they are uncertain about their answers.

4.2. Reliability Analysis

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Cronbach's alpha was calculated to examine the internal consistency of the questionnaire items grouped under each variable. The seven items measuring fear of making mistakes produced an alpha coefficient of .80, while the five classroom-participation items produced an alpha coefficient of .84.

These values indicate acceptable internal consistency for an exploratory study. However, reliability coefficients alone do not establish that the questionnaire measures each construct perfectly. The items were grouped according to their content, and further research could examine the structure and validity of these measures in a larger sample.

4.3. Findings From the Open-Ended Question

The final questionnaire item asked participants what would help them feel more comfortable participating in class. Their responses were grouped into five descriptive categories.

The most common response was the need for a supportive and friendly classroom environment, mentioned by 18 participants (48.6%). Seven participants (18.9%) identified greater confidence in their knowledge as an important factor. Four participants (10.8%) wanted more opportunities to practise speaking, while another four (10.8%) highlighted the importance of feeling less afraid of being judged by classmates. The remaining four participants (10.8%) emphasised teachers responding positively to mistakes.

These responses suggest that students associate comfortable classroom participation with both personal confidence and the social environment in which learning takes place. The prominence of supportive classroom conditions is particularly noteworthy because it highlights an aspect of participation that cannot be explained solely by students' knowledge or individual confidence.

However, these categories represent participants' stated preferences rather than experimentally tested influences. The findings therefore identify factors students believe could help them participate, but they do not establish that changing these factors would necessarily increase participation.

Discussion

The present study examined the relationship between fear of making mistakes and classroom participation among university students from different academic fields. The findings revealed a moderate average score for fear of making mistakes and a higher average score for classroom participation. Although Pearson's correlation indicated a negative association, it did not reach statistical significance. The supplementary Spearman analysis, however, identified a statistically significant negative association. These results suggest a possible relationship between students' concerns about mistakes and their classroom behaviour, although the evidence remains inconclusive.

One interesting finding is that students reported concerns about making mistakes while also indicating that they participated in classroom activities. This challenges the assumption that students who fear mistakes will necessarily avoid speaking. In practice, students may experience uncertainty or nervousness but still choose to contribute to discussions. Their willingness to participate may depend on the situation, the topic being discussed, and how confident they feel at a particular moment.

The results also suggest that uncertainty may be an important part of the experience. Students reported relatively high agreement with the statement about preferring silence to the risk of giving an incorrect answer. At the same time,

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participation despite uncertainty received a lower average score than sharing opinions during discussions. One possible interpretation is that expressing an opinion may feel less risky when students are familiar with the topic, whereas answering a question with a clearly correct or incorrect response may create greater pressure. This interpretation is plausible, but it would require further research to confirm.

The findings can also be considered in relation to previous work on classroom anxiety. Horwitz et al. (1986) described foreign language classroom anxiety as a distinct form of anxiety associated with language learning. Their work is relevant to understanding why students may feel uncomfortable when speaking in front of others, particularly when they are concerned about their performance. However, the present study included participants from several academic fields, so its findings should not be interpreted as evidence about language-learning anxiety alone.

MacIntyre et al. (1998) also demonstrated the importance of examining willingness to communicate in relation to both individual and situational factors. Their model provides a useful perspective for interpreting the present findings because students' willingness to speak may change depending on the circumstances. A student who is reluctant to answer a difficult question may still be comfortable sharing an opinion during a discussion. Therefore, classroom participation may be influenced by more than a general tendency to fear mistakes.

Another important finding emerged from the open-ended responses. Nearly half of the participants identified a supportive and friendly classroom environment as something that would help them feel more comfortable participating. This suggests that students do not view participation as a matter of individual confidence alone. Their responses also point to the possible importance of how teachers and classmates react when someone makes a mistake.

From a practical perspective, teachers may benefit from creating opportunities for students to express ideas without feeling that every contribution must be completely correct. Responding constructively to incorrect answers, allowing students time to formulate their thoughts, and encouraging respectful discussion may help make participation feel less intimidating. Such practices are consistent with the students' stated preferences, although their actual effectiveness was not tested in this study.

Overall, the findings support a cautious interpretation: fear of making mistakes may be associated with classroom participation, but the relationship is not straightforward. The inconsistent results across the two correlation methods and the exploratory nature of the study mean that no firm conclusion can be drawn about the strength of the association. The findings nevertheless highlight the value of considering both students' individual concerns and their perceptions of the learning environment.

Conclusion

This study explored the relationship between fear of making mistakes and classroom participation among 37 university students from different academic fields. The findings showed that participants reported a moderate level of fear of making mistakes alongside a relatively higher level of classroom participation. Pearson's correlation analysis identified a negative but statistically non-significant relationship, while supplementary Spearman analysis revealed a statistically significant negative association. These mixed results indicate that the relationship requires further investigation.

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The open-ended responses provided an additional perspective on the issue. Many participants identified a supportive and friendly classroom environment as an important factor that could help them feel more comfortable participating. This finding suggests that students' willingness to speak may be connected not only to their confidence in their knowledge but also to how they expect others to respond to their contributions.

Although the study cannot establish causal relationships or support broad generalisations, it offers an initial insight into students' experiences of making mistakes in academic settings. Its main contribution is to highlight the importance of examining fear and participation together rather than assuming that one automatically prevents the other. Further research with larger samples and more detailed methods could help clarify this relationship and identify practical ways to support students' active involvement in classroom learning.

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