

Exploring Students' Participation in English Classrooms in Higher Education

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Abstract

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Students' class participation is essential in English learning, as it facilitates improvement in language proficiency. This study aims to explore how students self-assess their class participation and to ascertain the key determinants that deter students' active engagement in classroom activities at the higher education level. This study employed a mixed-method research design to investigate university students' perceptions and self-assessments of their participation in English language classrooms, involving 22 respondents within a single classroom setting. Data was collected through closed-ended and open-ended questionnaires. The results highlight notable barriers to in-class participation, including personal issues such as transportation to class, anxiety about asking or responding to questions, and limited English proficiency. The results also show how crucial a supportive environment, well-prepared lectures, and group discussions during learning are for encouraging participation. This study sheds light on how students engage in class and what motivates them to be active or passive participants, both for English teachers and lecturers.

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1. Introduction

The students' class participation has been considered to have a significant influence on their learning achievement. Both active and passive student participation play a critical role in facilitating students' understanding of learning materials and enhancing their performance. When students regularly attend classes, actively engage in discussions, ask

and respond to questions, and participate in learning activities, they tend to develop a deeper understanding of the subject matter. Previous studies indicate that class participation and feedback are critical factors in enhancing students' academic performance (Márquez et al., 2023). Similarly, in-class participation has been identified as a key determinant of learning and academic success (Esnashari et al., 2018). Through participation, students are given opportunities to clarify concepts, express opinions, and address misunderstandings that may arise in the absence of direct interaction. Empirical evidence further demonstrates that class participation is positively correlated with learning outcomes in higher education, particularly behavioral participation, which is strongly related to knowledge acquisition (Yao et al., 2024).

Because class participation is so important, English teachers and professors should pay attention to students' participation to make sure that everyone is actively taking part in class activities. Evaluating participation helps teachers find students who need more help or encouragement and find ways to make classroom interactions better. Furthermore, participation assessment fosters equitable learning opportunities by guaranteeing that engagement is evenly allocated among all students, rather than confined to a select few active participants (Simon et al., 2024). Through systematic assessment, teachers can gain a more comprehensive understanding of students' engagement patterns and learning needs.

In addition to teacher-led assessment, student self-assessment of class participation has gained attention as a strategy to enhance self-awareness, responsibility, and learning management skills. Through self-assessment, students can reflect on how their level of participation affects their learning outcomes and their peers' learning experiences. Previous research highlights that involving students in assessment processes increases engagement, fosters a sense of ownership, and enhances assessment literacy (Quesada et al., 2017). When students think about how much they participated, they become more aware of how much and how well they contributed to discussions, group activities, and interactions with teachers. This awareness helps them find ways to improve, like being more willing to ask questions or share their thoughts, and come up with plans for being more involved in future learning activities. This shows how self-assessment makes students more autonomous (Sánchez-Marín et al., 2018) and motivated in learning (Balaban, 2024).

Although there is ample evidence supporting the association between student participation and learning outcomes in English classrooms (Esnashari et al., 2018; Márquez et al., 2023; Yao et al., 2024), several key research problems do not receive enough attention. It is rather teacher-oriented, concentrating on what is visible in the classroom, such as attendance and number of responses made, hence, giving little attention to students' inner involvement or reflective awareness of their responses, and not considering students' perceived difficulties with class participation. Furthermore, despite the consensus on the positive effect of self-assessment as a metacognitive

strategy, which is beneficial to learner autonomy and involvement, little empirical work has been conducted on students' self-assessments of classroom participation in English learning at the higher education level. Few studies consider the role of self-assessment in students' awareness, motivation, and sense of agency, or look into factors at contextual and affective dimensions (e.g., language anxiety; learners' perceptions of teacher roles; classroom participation norms) that might prevent or support such active involvement. Filling in these gaps, this article investigates how English learners self-assess their participation in classroom activities and identifies some of the major constraints to active engagement in English learning activities. However, the present study has some limitations related to the fact that only students' self-reported attitudes in a particular higher education domain have been explored and may not be generalizable, and does not aim to establish causal relationships between self-assessment practices and learning outcomes, but rather to provide an in-depth understanding of participation as a reflective and student-centered process.

2. The literature review

2.1. Classroom Participations in English Language Classrooms

Student attendance and active engagement during class sessions have been identified as important predictors of academic performance. Research suggests that the combination of regular attendance and attentiveness in class can significantly predict students' performance on final examinations (Bekkering & Ward, 2021). In addition, enhancing students' emotional and cognitive participation has been shown to effectively promote creative thinking skills, including risk-taking, curiosity, imagination, and challenge, which ultimately contribute to improved academic achievement (Zhou, 2023). Active participation, especially in expressing opinions, also increases students' motivation to continue learning. When students perceive that their contributions are valued, whether through asking questions, providing answers, or sharing ideas, they are more likely to feel motivated and engaged in the learning process (Rodriguez-Largacha et al., 2015). This increased motivation encourages sustained effort and supports deeper learning.

In English language classrooms, student participation is critical, as it provides opportunities for meaningful language practice. Participation in asking and answering questions allows students to practice English in authentic communicative situations, contributing to the development of language proficiency. Interactive classroom activities have been found to enhance English proficiency by fostering engagement and encouraging effective oral production (Silva-Valencia et al., 2021). Responding to questions not only reinforces comprehension through immediate feedback but also increases learners' motivation and awareness of language use. This process supports self-correction and helps learners navigate linguistic nuances, thereby improving their oral language skills (Hickey & Nakata, 2017). Previous research noted the significant

relationship between class participation and students' academic performance (Esnashari et al., 2018; Márquez et al., 2023; Yao et al., 2024).

A previous study noted that the application of the information transfer technique in English classrooms by giving more questions to comprehend the English text and encourage students' motivation to involve in discussion improved not only the students' achievement of listening comprehension but also their active involvement in the teaching learning process (Ningsih & Mariyati, 2022). In addition, students' active participation can also be improved by fostering competitive but enjoyable classroom environments using technology tools such as Quizizz (Pramudita, 2023). These findings show that teachers or lecturers can utilize a variety of techniques to foster class participation.

2.2. Self-Assessment of Class Participations

Self-assessment of class participation supports the development of metacognitive awareness by encouraging students to reflect more holistically on their learning processes. Rather than focusing solely on test scores or outcomes, students are prompted to consider how their engagement in class contributes to their understanding and academic progress. This reflective practice supports independent learning by fostering a sense of responsibility for learning success and encouraging students to regulate their engagement and learning strategies actively (Sánchez-Marín et al., 2018). When students assess their own participation, they are more likely to feel valued in the learning process, which can increase motivation and lead to improved participation and learning outcomes. Therefore, self-assessment practices increase the students' sense of learning ownership (Quesada et al., 2017).

Furthermore, self-assessment helps students recognize their role within classroom dynamics and the broader learning community. By reflecting on their participation, students can evaluate whether their contributions support productive discussions and collaborative learning, or whether they need to make greater effort to support their peers. This reflective process contributes to the development of a more cooperative and inclusive classroom atmosphere. Overall, self-assessment of class participation is not only important for increasing student engagement but also for fostering independent, reflective, and responsible learners. This approach aligns with the principles of student-centered learning, in which students are positioned as active agents in managing and evaluating their own learning processes. Unlike traditional approaches that emphasize teachers as the sole assessors, student-centered learning encourages students to become active participants in assessment, thereby promoting learner autonomy and motivation (Balaban, 2024).

3. Method

The current study adopted a mixed-method research design to investigate how university students experience and evaluate their participation in English-language classrooms.

General trends of students' participation patterns were outlined by adapting quantitative descriptive analyses, while qualitative methods were used to explore both the interpersonal and internal stories of how participants experienced their engagement in classroom activities and what factors were perceived to affect this. Methodologically, a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods was adopted to gain an enriched and holistic view of participation as a form of both observable action and reflective subjective experience.

The participants were 22 fifth-semester university students ranging in age from 19 to 22 years old, enrolled in one English language class at a state university in Indonesia. These participants were selected deliberately because they had long received English training and classroom participation during their periods of learning, and they could therefore engage in reflection more systematically than the other participants. Furthermore, fifth-semester students were chosen as suitable participants because they had matured enough academically and analytically to be capable of reflecting on their own performance. All students in the classroom were invited to participate in order to achieve a representative sample regarding different participation dynamics (e.g., male/female, high/low performance) that may occur during instruction. This procedure enabled the investigation of participation as a collective classroom occurrence, rather than as individual performance.

Data was collected using a questionnaire consisting of both closed-ended and open-ended items. The questionnaires were adapted from Philips (2000), which originally measured eight aspects of classroom participation: attendance, asking questions, answering questions, participation in group work, participation in pair work, participation in whole-class discussion, active listening, and participation in peer reviews. To ensure contextual relevance and alignment with the actual instructional practices implemented during the semester, only six aspects were retained. Pair work and peer review were excluded because these activities were not incorporated into the observed classroom learning process. This adaptation was intended to enhance the validity of the instrument by ensuring that students assessed only participation behaviors they had genuinely experienced.

The closed-item responses were based on a Yes, definitely; Sometimes; and Not yet. We intentionally included the three-point scale to minimize ambiguity and prevent respondent fatigue, especially in self-report scenarios where participants may have trouble distinguishing between nuanced levels of agreement. The simplified scale also prompted students to make less ambiguous judgments about participation behaviors, resulting in greater self-reported response reliability. This minimum number was also deemed appropriate to allow the collection of students' real engagement in the task without eliciting overgeneralised or deflated responses that could be induced by broader Likert scales.

Descriptive statistics, such as frequencies and mean scores, were used to look at the quantitative data from the closed-ended items to find out how the class participated as a whole. The total scores were used to put levels of participation into four groups: High, Medium High, Medium Low, and Low. This made it easier to understand how much each student participated. Thematic analysis was used to look at the qualitative data that came from the open-ended questionnaire responses. The analysis adhered to a methodical procedure, involving multiple readings of the responses to achieve familiarity with the data, followed by manual coding of significant units about students' perceptions and self-evaluation of participation. Subsequently, codes with analogous meanings were consolidated into more extensive categories, which were subsequently refined into overarching themes. The categorization of thematic results was informed by the frequency of ideas in participants' responses and their significance to elements affecting classroom engagement. Some of the new themes that came up were a helpful classroom environment, the lecturer being ready, language anxiety, and feeling confident using English. This thematic classification facilitated the study's ability to identify patterns in students' reflective experiences while maintaining the depth of individual viewpoints.

The integration of quantitative participation levels and qualitative thematic findings allowed for triangulation of data, thereby strengthening the credibility of the results and providing a nuanced understanding of how students evaluate their own classroom participation and the factors that shape their engagement in English language learning.

4. Findings and discussion

According to the self-assessment questionnaire, students' class participation was classified as high, medium-high, or medium-low, with no students indicating a low level of participation. The detailed results are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Result of Class Participation Self-Assessment

Level of Class Participation	Students' Score Range	Frequency (Number of Students)
High	2.51-3.00	9
Medium-High	2.01-2.50	11
Medium-Low	1.51-2.00	2
Low	1.00-1.50	0

Table 1 demonstrates that among the 22 respondents, nine considered themselves as highly participating participants; eleven considered themselves medium-high, and two medium-low, with no one being on the lowest level. The lack of low participation ratings may suggest that engagement is overall positive within the classroom, but should be considered with caution as self-report data are vulnerable to response bias or the social desirability of a behaviour and students' overestimation of their own behaviours when

assessing them retrospectively. Previous research on self-assessment indicates that students' self-evaluations can be influenced by subjective factors such as their understanding of assessment criteria and perceptions of teacher expectations, rather than strictly by observable participation behaviours, which may partially explain why no participants classified themselves as low in participation in this study. Self-assessment accuracy is challenging for learners and can vary depending on internal standards and confidence in judgment (Nugteren et al., 2018).

Table 2 shows the average score of detailed aspects of class participation.

Table 2. *Average Score of Class Participation Aspects*

Aspects	Mean Score
Class Attendance	2.80
Asking Questions	2.20
Responding Questions	2.25
Group Work	2.81
Whole-class Discussion	1.88
Actively Listening	2.66

A more detailed examination of participation dimensions according to Table 2 indicates a complex level of involvement within different classroom activities. Attendance ($M = 2.80$), group work ($M = 2.81$), and active listening ($M = 2.66$) were classes ranked most highly, while participation in whole-class discussion gained the lowest average score ($M = 1.88$). Such a difference suggests that the degree of students' participation is context-dependent rather than a product of uniform level(s) of engagement across learning acts. Similar patterns have been reported in previous studies, where students demonstrate stronger participation in structured or collaborative settings than in open, whole-class discussions that require spontaneous verbal contributions (Brooks & Koretsky, 2011; Rohi & Muslim, 2023).

4.1. Class Attendance

Generally, class attendance is high, with a mean score of 2.80. "I have to skip class sometimes because of my health," one student respondent reported. Some students who occasionally come late to class mention many things that cause them to be tardy, including getting up late, lecture site away from their house, car breakdown, and traffic. Public transit and traffic are the main problems. Some students do not possess cars or motorbikes and can only commute through public transportation, but it is not always easy to find one. Student respondents with high attendance scores reported liking to attend class on time, or even early, because of the fun class atmosphere, which encourages them to contribute to the learning session. Therefore, they always try to come on time to class. This finding highlights the significance of enjoyable learning as a factor motivating

students to attend class. Previous research shows that a positive learning atmosphere enhances student motivation and engagement, which are crucial for regular attendance. Motivated students are more likely to participate actively in learning activities, leading to improved attendance rates (Li & Xue, 2023).

4.1. Asking Questions

The average score for asking questions in class is 2.20, which is medium-high. The student who frequently asked the lecturer questions said that he did so because he didn't understand the learning materials and that asking questions helped him clear up any confusion. According to a previous study, a good relationship between teacher and student (trust, open communication) makes students more likely to ask for help and clarification, which leads to better grades (Rizek, 2012). But some students thought it was easier to ask friends than the teacher. When students are with friends, they are more likely to ask questions, which creates a collaborative learning environment. Peer support can help people understand and remember what they learn. Some students who haven't asked the lecturer questions yet said that they were nervous about doing so, shy when they did, or already understood the material. Students' self-efficacy and confidence have a big effect on how willing they are to ask questions (Wang, 2023).

4.2. Responding Questions

The average score for class participation in answering a question is 2.25, which is medium-high. One student who answered said they didn't feel smart enough to answer questions. Another person said that he would rather answer the lecturer's question in his head and keep it to himself. Then, when others answered, he would check to see if his answer was right. Someone else said they would rather answer short questions, like yes/no questions, than questions that needed long answers or explanations. These occurrences indicate that certain students continue to exhibit reluctance or a deficiency of confidence when responding to questions in the classroom. A prior study underscores that the principal factors affecting students' responses to inquiries in the classroom encompass the instructor's personality, classroom size, peer perceptions, self-efficacy, self-confidence, preparation, and apprehension of errors (Rohi & Muslim, 2023). Some people would rather answer questions in a small group discussion. This indicates that certain students are more at ease speaking or sharing ideas in a small group as opposed to a large group. A prior study examines questioning and responding practices in small groups during collaborative problem solving, emphasizing how these interactions promote participation and learning, rather than addressing whole-class discussions or broader group dynamics in conventional classroom environments (Zhou et al., 2008).

4.3. Group Work

The average score for the class's participation in group work is 2.81, which is high. This finding shows that group work is a useful way for students to learn by doing. Students

said that it was important to be helpful and involved in group work. Some people also said that even though they don't play a big role in the group, they do what they need to do and try to help with group work. They also thought that working together would help them understand each other better by sharing ideas. Group discussions make students more active, help them build mental models, and help them understand ideas better. After a discussion, students often choose the answer that most people agree on, which boosts their confidence, even if the answer is wrong (Brooks & Koretsky, 2011).

4.4. Whole class discussion

The student's participation in the whole-class discussion resulted in a mean score of 1.88, which is considered medium-low. This finding indicates that whole-class discussion occasionally permits only specific students to engage actively. Some of the students who answered said they like to be quiet in class and listen to what other students are saying. Someone else said they thought there were too many people in the class, so they would rather listen than talk about things. Students who are actively involved in the discussion like to say what they think if it is different from what was said. Previous research has indicated that students' engagement in whole-class discussions is affected by a range of factors, encompassing both individual traits and contextual variables. Students may be afraid of being judged or embarrassed if they speak in class, which can make it hard for them to participate (Damman, 2007; Zhao et al., 2020). Students' self-assurance and personality characteristics, including introversion or extroversion, significantly influence their propensity to participate in discussions (Rohi & Muslim, 2023; Wei, 2024). Students' readiness to participate is influenced by both their perceived and actual communicative competence, with those who feel more capable being more inclined to contribute (Wei, 2024). A supportive environment, marked by respect and encouragement from both peers and instructors, increases levels of participation (Pimentel & H., 2012; Rohi & Muslim, 2023). The way the teacher teaches and what they think about discussion can affect how people participate. Teachers who use a dialogic approach tend to get their students more involved (Pimentel & H., 2012). Smaller class sizes and well-organized discussions give students more chances to talk, which makes them more likely to participate (Rohi & Muslim, 2023).

4.5. Actively Listening

The average score for the class's active listening is 2.66, which is high. Some students who answered said that the main reason they actively listen is that they want to understand the information and materials they are learning. They thought that if they focused on listening, they would be able to understand what the lecturer was saying. One student, however, said that doing multiple things at once, like reading the slides and taking notes while listening, could make them miss some of the explanation. But active listening in class is still less common than group work. This demonstrates the importance of collaborative efforts as a highly effective method for fostering student engagement in the

learning process. A prior study emphasizes that elements affecting active listening in the classroom encompass student engagement, enthusiasm, interest in lessons, effective teaching strategies, classroom dynamics, and concentration capacity (Ambubuyog et al., 2023).

In general, high attendance rates were mostly due to a positive classroom environment and students' natural desire to learn in fun ways. Students said that even though transportation and traffic problems sometimes made them late, a supportive and fun learning environment made them want to go to class every day. This finding is consistent with Li and Xue (2023), who contend that emotional engagement and perceived enjoyment in the classroom are critical indicators of consistent attendance and ongoing participation. However, students' favourable self-evaluation of attendance may also indicate normative expectations that attendance represents a fundamental academic obligation, potentially leading to exaggerated self-assessments.

Students rated their participation in asking and answering questions as medium-high, but qualitative responses show that there are some hesitations that make these numbers harder to understand. Students often said that they were too nervous, scared of making mistakes, or not confident enough to speak up, especially when answering questions in front of the whole class. Some students favoured internal processing, responding to inquiries mentally or participating in small-group discussions, where they perceived a reduced exposure to assessment. These results align with previous research emphasizing the influence of self-efficacy, language anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation on classroom interactions, particularly in second-language acquisition settings (Damman, 2007; Wang, 2023; Zhao et al., 2020). So, even though students may think they are moderately active, they are often still careful and picky about how they get involved.

Group work was the most engaging activity, which suggests that working together in a safe and responsible way can help people feel less anxious and more willing to contribute. Students said they felt comfortable contributing based on their roles, even if they weren't the leader of the group. This confirms previous research that shows that learning in groups makes people more engaged, confident, and able to understand concepts by spreading the need to communicate among peers (Brooks & Koretsky, 2011). Group work seems to ease the stress of speaking in front of a group of people in a second language, which might be why it always gets higher participation ratings than whole-class discussions.

On the other hand, whole-class discussion was found to be the least participatory part. Students identified significant class size, the predominance of a few vocal peers, and individual inclinations towards listening rather than speaking as primary factors inhibiting engagement. These results support previous studies indicating that whole-class discussions frequently perpetuate participation disparities, benefiting confident and

extroverted students while sidelining quieter or more anxious learners (Rohi & Muslim, 2023; Wei, 2024). The way a teacher teaches and the rules in the classroom are also very important. For example, dialogic and inclusive teaching methods have been shown to get more students involved (Pimentel & H., 2012).

When asked about what makes them participate in class, students talked about things that make them want to be there. Students said that a good atmosphere is the main thing that makes them want to learn actively. Students enjoy the lessons because they are fun and interactive, the learning spaces are comfortable and helpful, and the teacher is kind. Students are happy with their learning when the teacher is patient and always explains the lesson all the way through. Students learn more when their teacher always lets them ask questions and gives clear answers. The teacher who always respects everyone's opinions and answers questions patiently also makes it easy for students to ask questions and share their thoughts. A good mood in the classroom makes it easier for students to take part.

Well-prepared lectures are the second most important thing. Students said that the way the lecturer knew the material, spoke clearly, and explained things made learning fun and easy to understand. The lecturer's thorough, easy-to-understand answers to questions also make students want to learn more. Interactive learning, mainly through discussions and working together with classmates on tasks that are related to the material, is seen as necessary to get more people involved. Students are also more likely to be interested in learning when they have tasks that are appropriate and not too hard. Technical elements, like the teacher's voice, which can be heard clearly from the back of the room, also help students pay attention and even join in discussions.

A prior study indicates that key factors affecting students' responses to classroom inquiries encompass the instructor's capacity to engage attention, the suitability of their vocal delivery, the timing of questions, and the general motivation and encouragement offered to promote critical and creative thinking (Ghafar & Hazaymeh, 2024). Teachers should do things in their classes that help students learn how to participate and think creatively. To help students think creatively in class, teachers can make the room a good place to be, encourage everyone to speak up, and give them a variety of resources. They should ask questions that make students think, encourage teamwork, and give clear feedback. It is important to make time and space for exploration, encourage curiosity, and teach tools for creative thinking (Zhou, 2023). The results indicate that students view themselves as relatively active participants; however, their engagement is influenced by emotional, contextual, and instructional factors. Consequently, their self-assessments should be regarded as subjective perceptions rather than objective indicators of participation.

5. Conclusion

This research investigated university students' self-perception of class participation in an English language classroom and discussed possible factors contributing to their participation. The results suggest that, on the whole, students believe they are engaged to a moderate or high degree, but engagement varies depending on interactional context. Interactive collaborative activities (especially group work) were related to a greater extent than whole-class discussion to increased participation, which was also sometimes suppressed by language anxiety and confidence or class dynamics. The lack of low participation ratings supports the need for caution in interpreting self-assessing data, as student evaluations may be based on what they think is expected and not what can actually be observed.

The study has significant implications for English language teaching, despite recognizing several limitations. The results derive from a limited sample of participants at a single higher education institution and are self-reported, potentially constraining generalizability and introducing subjective bias. Future research should employ more heterogeneous and larger samples, incorporate additional data sources, such as classroom observations or teacher evaluations, and investigate the correlation between self-assessment and subsequent participation behavior. The study pedagogically contributes to the exploration of task-supported autonomy by highlighting the potential advantages of self-assessment in enhancing students' metacognitive awareness and learner autonomy. English teachers are asked to make classroom activities that encourage everyone to participate and work together, such as whole-class discussions and group work. This study enhances English language education by establishing self-assessment as a reflective pedagogical approach that fosters more inclusive and effective classroom interactions.

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