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THE FEAR OF MAKING MISTAKES IN LANGUAGE LEARNING: PSYCHOLOGICAL BARRIERS AND STRATEGIES FOR OVERCOMING THEM

The fear of making mistakes is a common obstacle in language learning, often rooted in perfectionism and fear of judgment. This anxiety can lead to avoidance behaviors, where learners may shy away from speaking or engaging in conversations due to the worry of saying something wrong or being corrected in a way that feels discouraging. According to *Positive Words Research*, this fear creates a psychological barrier that can make the language-learning process feel overwhelming. Anxiety in language learning is closely related to the concept of "communication apprehension," where the learner feels so self-conscious about making errors that they lose the confidence to express themselves. This challenge is often seen in adult learners, who may be more self-critical compared to children and thus have a heightened fear of judgment.

The fear of making mistakes can significantly impact the quality and speed of language acquisition. According to the *Golders Green College* website, anxiety and fear can interfere with memory recall and focus, which are essential for learning a language effectively. When learners are preoccupied with the possibility of making mistakes, they can become distracted, which inhibits their ability to process new information and engage in meaningful practice. In language learning, making mistakes is a natural part of development. Yet, fear can create a loop where the learner avoids practice to minimize mistakes, but this lack of practice then slows their progress, reinforcing their self-doubt and hesitation. In many cases, learners may even convince themselves they lack the ability to learn a new language, which diminishes their motivation and commitment to regular practice.

Effective strategies to overcome the fear of mistakes include building a supportive learning environment, setting small, achievable goals, practicing in low-stakes settings, and adopting a growth mindset.

One of the most effective ways to combat the fear of making mistakes is to foster a supportive and non-judgmental learning atmosphere. Teachers and peers can play a critical role by offering constructive feedback that emphasizes learning over performance. According to *Positive Words Research*, positive reinforcement and encouragement are vital in helping learners feel safe to experiment and grow in their language skills.

Breaking down the language-learning process into smaller, manageable steps can reduce the sense of overwhelm. Instead of aiming for fluency, learners might focus on mastering basic conversational phrases or building vocabulary on specific topics. Achieving these smaller goals provides a sense of accomplishment, helping to build confidence gradually. Realistic goal-setting can also help learners avoid the perfectionistic trap that often fuels fear and anxiety.

Language learners can benefit from low-pressure practice opportunities, such as language exchange meetups, conversation clubs, or online communities where making mistakes is seen as part of the learning process. Speaking in front of other learners, rather than native speakers, can make the experience less intimidating and provide the chance to practice without fear of judgment. As noted on *Golders Green College* website, a friendly environment can encourage learners to take risks and grow comfortable with mistakes, which is essential for achieving fluency.

Embracing a growth mindset, which views learning as a journey rather than a destination, can shift a learner's perspective on mistakes. Psychologist *Carol Dweck's* research on mindset (2006) shows that when individuals view challenges as opportunities to improve, they become more resilient and open to feedback. In language learning, adopting a growth mindset encourages learners to see mistakes as normal and beneficial, as each error offers valuable insights for improvement.

Learning a new language requires patience and the willingness to make mistakes along the way. Self-compassion is essential, as it allows learners to acknowledge their limitations without feeling discouraged. When learners treat themselves with kindness, they become more resilient and are better able to accept feedback without taking it personally. As language experts often point out, developing fluency involves stumbling and missteps, and those who forgive themselves for errors are often the ones who make the most progress. Encouraging self-compassion in language learners can also help reduce "imposter syndrome," where they may feel they are not capable of truly mastering the language. Celebrating small victories, such as successful communication in simple situations, reinforces the idea that progress is achievable even if perfection is not. Consistency in language practice builds familiarity and reduces fear over time. By setting a routine – such as practicing 15 minutes daily or joining a weekly language exchange – learners gradually desensitize themselves to the fear of making mistakes. Each practice session serves as a reminder that language learning is a process, not an immediate achievement. As noted on *Golders Green College* website, learners who incorporate consistent practice into their routines often report feeling more comfortable and less fearful of mistakes as they grow more accustomed to using the language.

Overcoming the fear of making mistakes is a central aspect of successful language learning. By addressing psychological barriers and employing strategies such as supportive environments, realistic goal-setting, low-stakes practice, and self-compassion, learners can reduce their anxiety and improve their confidence. Embracing mistakes as part of the learning journey not only enhances fluency but also enriches the experience, turning language learning into an empowering and fulfilling process.

References:

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