

10 Signs a Language Learner May Be Masking

A practical guide for online and classroom language teachers working with learners of all ages.

What you're seeing may not be what's happening. Masking is the conscious or unconscious suppression of neurodivergent traits to fit in, meet expectations, or avoid judgment. In a language classroom—where performance is constant and mistakes are visible—masking is especially common and especially costly.

WHAT IS MASKING?

Masking (also called camouflaging) is a coping strategy used by many neurodivergent individuals—particularly those with ADHD, autism, anxiety, or dyslexia—to appear "neurotypical." In language learning, it often looks like effort, politeness, or compliance. It is, in fact, a significant

cognitive drain that competes directly with the mental resources needed to acquire and use a new language.

The 10 Signs

SIGN 1

Participates actively but retains little

The learner answers questions and appears engaged, but struggles to recall what was covered. The mental effort of appearing "on" leaves little capacity for actual encoding.

SIGN 2

Inconsistent across task types

Scripted exercises go well, but open conversation or unexpected questions trigger visible anxiety or shutdown. Masking works best when the environment is predictable.

SIGN 3

Extreme fatigue after class

Masking is metabolically expensive. A learner who looked cheerful in class may crash completely at home afterward.

SIGN 4

Rehearsed-sounding responses

Uses memorized phrases smoothly but freezes when asked to go off-script. They may repeat the same sentence patterns regardless of context. This is a workaround, not fluency.

SIGN 5

Avoids asking for help

The learner nods and moves on even when they clearly don't understand. Asking for help risks exposing what they're working to hide.

SIGN 6

Strong reaction to correction

A small correction produces distress, shutdown, tears, or anger disproportionate to the situation. For a masking learner, a correction is evidence that the mask slipped.

SIGN 7

Mirrors language closely

Echoes phrasing, tone, and even vocabulary from whoever is speaking. Mirroring creates the impression of comprehension and social fit.

SIGN 8

Camera always off (Online)

In virtual settings, consistent camera-off behavior with minimal voluntary participation may signal they are managing significant sensory or social load.

SIGN 9

Difference between one-on-one and group settings

The learner thrives in individual sessions but withdraws, underperforms, or over-controls themselves in groups. The social monitoring required in a group setting consumes resources that would otherwise go toward language use.

SIGN 10

Excels in writing but struggles in real-time speaking

Written work is strong, thoughtful, and accurate. But spoken tasks—especially unrehearsed ones—are markedly weaker. The processing time that writing allows removes the social performance layer.

IMPORTANT DISTINCTION

These signs do not confirm a diagnosis. They are signals that a learner may be spending significant cognitive energy on social performance rather than language acquisition. Your role is not to diagnose—it is to adjust your environment and approach so that masking becomes less necessary. That alone changes outcomes.

What to do when you recognize these signs

Reduce performance pressure

Offer more written, async, or private response options alongside spoken tasks. Make silence an acceptable part of processing.

Make errors safe

Model your own mistakes. Correct implicitly rather than explicitly when possible. Create a class norm where errors are expected and unremarkable.

Give advance notice

Share what's coming in the next session. Let learners prepare. Predictability reduces the cognitive cost of showing up.

Offer private check-ins

A brief message after class—"how did today feel for you?"—often surfaces what a learner would never say out loud in a group.

Separate comprehension from performance

Find ways to assess understanding that don't require real-time spoken response. Written summaries, drawings, or choice-based tasks all work.

Refer when appropriate

If patterns persist and significantly affect learning, share your observations with parents or coordinators and suggest an evaluation. You don't diagnose—but you can open the door.