

# Silence is Gold?: A Study on Students' Silence in EFL Classrooms

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## Abstract

The current paper explores the silent behavior of students within EFL classrooms. It investigates reasons behind students' in-class silence, or lack of verbal participation, and then puts forwards several suggested solutions for more effective in-class conversation. The population for this study consists of 85 English-major students at a university of foreign languages in Hanoi, Vietnam and the data are collected via questionnaire and semi-structured interview. The findings indicate various causes of students' classroom silence: personal and impersonal, linguistic and psychological factors such as students' personality and language proficiency, teachers' methodology, lesson contents, and class cooperation. Together with the theoretical discussion, the empirical evidence revealed by this study can perhaps help applied linguistics practitioners/ teachers gain more heightened awareness and deeper understanding of students' silent behavior. The current study purposefully targets at enhancing both the English teaching and learning efficiency at this foreign-language university.

**Keywords:** in-class silence, interaction, communication, participation, EFL

## 1. Introduction

Although teachers have attempted greatly to involve students into English as foreign language (EFL) classroom activities and to boost their teaching effectiveness, many students tend to keep silent in class and unwilling to participate into class interactions. In fact, students' in-class silence becomes a common occurrence and it often leads to communication failure between teachers and students as well as among students themselves. Although silence itself in some educational contexts can have a beneficial influence on students as it creates space for extended cognition and deep reflection (Granger, 2004; Liu, 2005; Tatar 2005), many researchers claim that in the circumstance of a foreign language classroom silence presents a significant threat to successful language learning when it is characterized by an absence of oral communication and verbal responsiveness from students (Nakane, 2002; Tani, 2005; Tsui, 1996). In other words, students of foreign languages have to communicate so as to achieve progress with their foreign language improvement.

The verbal unresponsiveness of undergraduates in English as foreign language (EFL) classrooms has been mentioned in several past works (Liu, 2005; Nguyen Thu Hanh & Pham Thi Hoai Phuong, 2019; Schultz, 2012). However, it appears that little major empirical research has been conducted locating in-class silence at the heart of its analysis.

This paper investigates the silent behavior of learners studying English within foreign language classrooms at a university of foreign languages in Hanoi, Vietnam (hereafter FL University-Hanoi). The paper proceeds from diagnosing general trends of silence within EFL classrooms in this university and then critically analyses which factors students find most influential in their oral engagement and silence in EFL classrooms. It then concludes with suggestions on what actions teachers should perform to boost more verbal contribution in foreign language classes.

## 2. Theoretical Background

### 2.1 Silence in Education Contexts

According to Bosacki (2005), silence is considered as the absence of vocalization. In his view, the common conception of silence is a total lack of audible verbalization and that the notion of silence can be broadened to include a student failing to present a specific subject matter or to say what is requested. As for classroom silence, Granger (2004) associates it with disobedience, conflict, misbehavior, and, in the case of students taking a listener role, deception. He argues since that classroom silence enables students to hold onto performances and assumptions which may leave them vulnerable to their peers and teachers, it can be taken as a form of protection. What is more, silence in classrooms may be maintained by students as an emotional resistance against the teacher's in-class

authority and as a way of passively articulating negative emotions. Silence may bring educational merit in some cases because it enables learning, but when examined in relation to a student's academic achievement, it seems to be overwhelmingly evaluated by teachers as an unfavorable phenomenon. In his research, Teng (2009) states that college students' in-class silence can be seen as a form of psychological state and manner performed by a student in the level of thought, emotion and action. He stresses that silence only refers to the absence of talk, but not the absence of thought because it just denotes to limited engagement or inadequate involvement in classroom communication.

In conclusion, in-class silence happens when the teachers pose questions and there is no reply from students, or they are reluctant to express their ideas when the teacher calls for discussion or debate. It would appear that student's silent behaviors generally symbolize their negative reaction to the teacher and a hindrance to the process of language teaching and learning.

## *2.2 Contributing Factors to Classroom Silence*

To date, various studies investigate the silent reticence of language students (Delima, 2012; Lui, 2005; Nakane, 2005; Tani, 2005). Studies on students' in-class performance have often targeted at identifying factors which contribute to such silence with the aim to prevent students' silence (Chen 2003; Cheng, 2000; Liu & Jackson, 2009). Earlier research on classroom involvement considered students' cultural backgrounds and personality as major factors adding to student silence (Lui, 2005; Nakane, 2005). Tsui (1996) named several factors causing student-reticence, namely students' failure to comprehend teacher's talk, not enough time to digest information, and students' fear of making mistakes and losing 'face'. Moreover, elements like students' target language competence, previous speaking performance in class, confidence level, and lesson contents are all potential reasons contributing to students' tendency to be silent in language classrooms (Liu & Jackson, 2009; Delima, 2012). Studies piloted on Asian learners studying in EFL classes also claimed their inherent shyness (Liu, 2005 & 2006), inadequate language input and output, and the negative impact of university entrance exams on speaking skills (Chen 2003; Cheng, 2000), resistance to a repressive education system (Tani, 2005) as significant factors leading to students' silence.

Other elements adding to students' reluctance to take an active part in EFL classroom can be a low level of motivation, high anxiety levels, that manifest as avoiding class participation. Many teachers find that teaching students with low motivation is one of the hardest tasks for them as a teacher (Otoshi & Heffernan, 2011; Miller & Aldred, 2000). If the students are motivated to study in EFL classes, they will try to engage in class activities regardless if their English speaking ability is not particularly competent. Another factor that might act as the reason students are unwilling to participate in EFL classroom activity is high levels of anxiety. According to Jackson (2002), anxiety is feeling of tension, nervousness, and concern related to an arousal of the automatic nervous system. EFL students are likely to feel more anxious because they try to use a foreign language, but do not use it competently. Reluctance to participate in class activities is one of the ways to avoid class participation. Some students habitually sit in the back rows because they do not want to actively participate in class, preferring to work in small groups because they feel more comfortable. These student behaviours support research by Liu & Littlewood (1997) who stated that big classes tended to discourage students to share their ideas, and heightened their anxiety to communicate in a foreign language fearing public embarrassment if they made a mistake in front of their peers.

Students' different personalities may have a considerable impact on their contribution to the language class activities (Cole & McCroskey, 2003). Students can be extroverted or introverted, optimistic or pessimistic, active or passive. Extroverted students tend to be more active in presenting themselves than introverted ones, since they are willing to share their ideas with others. In class, many introverts are quiet and not interested in class interactions and are reluctant to answer questions from the teacher.

The above findings indicate personal and impersonal, linguistic and psychological causes of students' in-class silence, namely students' personality and language proficiency, teachers' methodology, lesson contents, and class cooperation. The following sections will focus on silences that can be detected specifically within the research context of FL University-Hanoi, and attempt to identify some of the complex roots of silence within EFL classrooms.

## **3. Methodology**

### *3.1 Participants*

The research comprised a one-school year-long study which was carried out among four second-year English major classes of the English Department, FL University-Hanoi. The population for this study consists of 85 students, aged from 18-24, majoring in English who were at an intermediate level of English. They were invited to complete an in-class student questionnaire and a semi-structured interview on their belief and attitudes towards in-class silence.

Participation in the research was voluntary and anonymous, which meant that participation or non-participation would not affect the student's grade in the class. Pseudonyms were used to ensure the confidentiality of all participants.

### 3.2 Instruments for Data Collection

In order to gain a more complete understanding of the factors causing students' hesitance in EFL classes, the research triangulated three different method types, specifically a questionnaire, semi-structured interview, and class observation.

To achieve reliable quantitative data, the study used a systematic questionnaire which was intended to explore the students' intentions and interpretations of the functions of silence. The students' difficulties in expressing themselves and their intentions in using silence were explored. The questionnaire items were organized on a 5-point Likert scale, requesting students to specify their degree of agreement with the items from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*), or their frequency of silence behavior from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*always*). Likert scale was chosen for the present study because it is applicable for evaluating opinions, beliefs, and attitudes (DeVellis, 2003).

A number of semi-structured interviews were administered to disclose student's central attitudes to, and personal practices of silence, in EFL classrooms. This qualitative element could broaden the investigation's scope and contributed to enhanced opportunities to clarify the EFL classroom silence at the selected university.

The whole aspects covering the students' engagement in the classroom activities and during the students' presentation in class conversations were observed. Apart from observation of the students' ability to master language elements such as pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, fluency and comprehension, classroom observation also focused on the following features: the students' active participation in the learning process; their ability to perform conversations in front of the class; their response to the teacher's questions, and their ability to give feedback to other peers.

### 3.3 Research Procedures

Prior to administering the questionnaire and interview, an informal meeting was arranged between the researcher and the participants to clearly describe data-collection procedures and to confirm the confidential nature of the study. The questionnaires were administered to the 85 participants, then they were collected and answers to each question were tallied and calculated. Open-ended questions were decoded and related responses were grouped together in the results. For the semi-structured interviews, they were conducted in a non-judgmental manner and constantly comforted student interviewees that there were no right or wrong answers prior to their recounting their own practices and opinions about silence in language classrooms. According to Boyd (2001), the number of two to 10 research subjects for the interview can be sufficient to reach saturation so 10 students were randomly called for the audio recorded interview more information and each interview lasted approximately 15 minutes.

## 4. Data analysis

The first section of the questionnaire intended to collect the data on students' English language class and their language competence. Generally, responses were positive with 68% of the participating students recounting the class as fun, interesting, relaxed, and for some, it was a good learning experience. One group of students (25%) pointed out that speaking was their favorite session of the class while listening was the most difficult (69%). A large number of students (75%) confessed they did not feel confident with their language skills, particularly speaking skill even though they loved communicating in English.

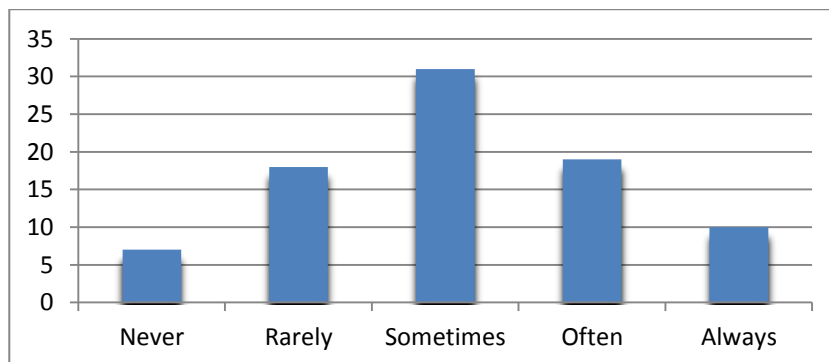


Figure 1. Frequency of oral participation

Students were questioned about the frequency of their verbal participation in class and the result was illustrated in Figure 1 above. Only 10 of the 85 students said that they spoke most of the time. These students gave various reasons for their speaking involvement such as: excitement, supporting learning progression, showing off skills, broadening experience, and a sense of achievement. One group (30 students) took very low frequency, saying that they only spoke when the teacher or seatmate asked them to do. Seven students confessed that they did not make any oral participation at all during the whole lesson because they were self-conscious, embarrassed or afraid to fail in front of their peers. They also mentioned inadequacy of skills or lack of self-efficacy. Three students blamed their reticence on fewer speaking chances due to the increased amount of other tasks and instruction going on in class.

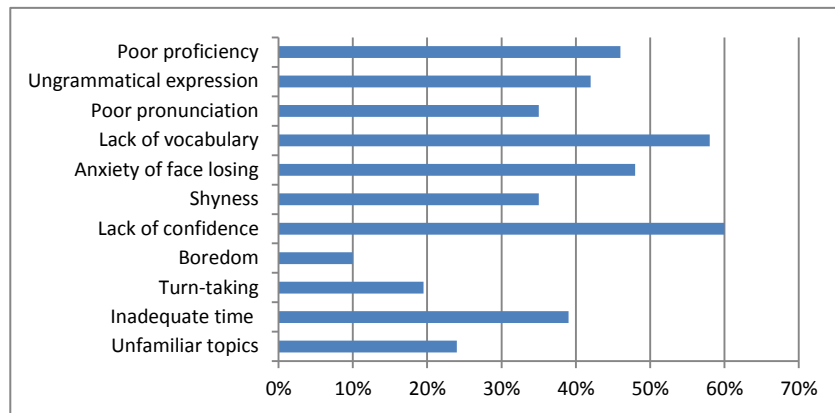


Figure 2. Contributing factors to students' in-class silence

Students were asked what difficulties they faced when they communicated in English with their teacher and classmates during the EFL lessons (see Figure 2). Most of the students declared that they have linguistic problems which can be lack of vocabulary (58%) or ungrammatical expression (42%) (students could tick on more than one option). Some students also experienced difficulties in making themselves understood. They provided two main reasons for this: 35% of them said that they had a problem with pronunciation and nearly half of them (46%) felt that they had difficulty in communicating in English. Students being interviewed then confessed “*only when the teacher is around, I speak English*” (S3) or “*It seems I lost my tongue, ...uh my mind becomes blank*” (S5). Here, the problem is a matter of how to construct their ideas in English, including the problem of translating their ideas from Vietnamese into English, unprompted responses, and the struggle to express themselves fully in English.

The other significant issue with in-class silence is a matter of psychological problems such as lack of confidence and anxiety of losing face. A large number of students (60%) more specifically stated that they lacked confidence in presenting themselves and maintaining communication for a certain amount of time. About 48% of the participants stated that they did not want to sound foolish or unintelligent in the presence of their peers. Therefore, they tended not to say anything when they were not sure whether their answers were correct, or if their ideas differed from those of others. In line with this, a dominant theme from the interview statistics was the range to which students worried about the dilemma of having to speak English publicly in front of their peers as they said “*I am concerned about what friends around me think of me. If I failed to give correct answers, um everybody knows the answer, then they would think I am stupid*” (S1) or “*I don't feel confidence in my answer, then I really don't feel comfortable on what my classmates judge (...) because they are watching you, you have to speak English well*” (S4).

Apart from linguistic and psychological factors, students also pointed out turn-taking, unfamiliar topics, boredom of the lessons... were contributing factors that hindered them from participating orally more. With regards to turn-taking in class, in total 19.5% of them experienced difficulty in claiming a turn. That is, they thought the turn was not allocated to them or there were occasions when they missed the speaking chance mainly because the topic already moved to the other. 10% of the participants admitted that their silence behavior was employed when they did not engage in the lesson due to its tediousness and repetition. The interview data indicates that even students who have a level of English knowledge good enough to deal with the lessons still chose to remain silent due to the boring and easy class activities: “*my teacher only asks us to do simple tasks ... sometimes too easy. I think my teacher mainly counts our attendance*” (S6).

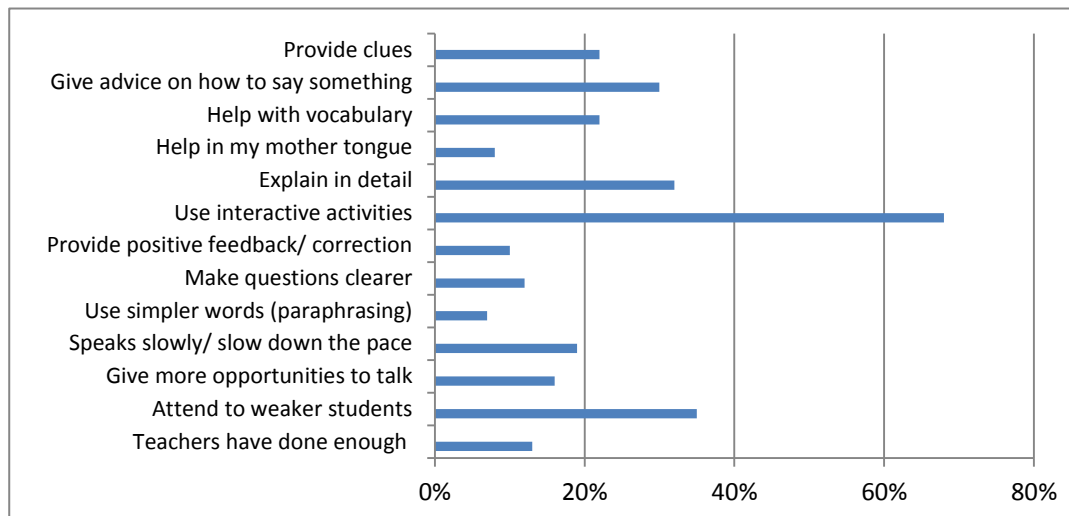


Figure 3. Teachers' methods to minimize students' silence behavior

When asked about what activities the teacher could take to inspire them to speak more in class, the participants provided various responses (see Figure 3). Most of the participants (68%) suggested using more interactive activities during the lesson such as language games, debates, role-play. Some students added that the teacher should attend more to the less confident students and offer them more chances to express themselves instead of calling on those students who volunteered (35%). One group (19%) stated that the teacher should give them more time to analyze the information as well as provide them with further explanation and support on the topic. To make it easier for them to express their opinions or ideas, students also wanted their teachers to give them more clues such as giving examples, helping with vocabulary, or explaining the task in detail. This means they seem to need some structured instruction in order to make them comfortable with sharing their thoughts. 13% of the participants believed the teacher has already done enough to engage them in the lesson.

## 5. Discussion

Having explored silence behavior by cadets of English in EFL classrooms at FL University-Hanoi both theoretically and practically, it can be understood that the existence of silence in classroom interaction has rooted from various reasons in educational contexts. Not only does the frequency of the occurrences differ, but there are occasions when their causes are interpreted differently.

One main finding was that the students' in-class silence originated not only from learner factors but also from teacher factors. In this section, several significant findings in the data obtained through the questionnaires and the interviews will be highlighted.

First, it is the silence of students' low self-confidence. Concerning about losing face is so common that some students failed to become confident, as they were always afraid of making mistakes or losing face so they decline to express their ideas. Another thing that concerned students very much was the risk of being laughed at by their classmates if they gave the incorrect answers, especially when the questions were quite simple. In general, students' lack of confidence is the prominent phenomenon due to the students' psychological fear and poor linguistic knowledge.

Second, it is the silence of students' inadequate language competency. Students stated that they remained silent simply because they did not know the answer or did not understand the question. Therefore, staying silent became their only escape in such a case or when they could not express their ideas. Each time, when unable or unwilling to respond to the teacher's question, students remained unfalteringly silent until the call was passed on the other students. It was observed that during the lesson, many students within the group required time in order to analyse information and then to verbalize it with an appropriate response. Lack of English language ability, unfamiliarity with topics/ tasks, misinterpretation of the teacher's instruction may all contribute to the learners' failure to verbally respond.

Third, it is the silence of students' learning demotivation. Students' silence can be rooted from their shyness or boredom because of the lack of spontaneous reaction and learning enthusiasm. Some students just kept silent in the classroom, grasped the teacher's saying and depended on the teacher's explanation. Some students stated that they

did not participate in class because they felt inferior to the others, or they lacked the essential knowledge and skills to perform the tasks well. Moreover, teachers should raise students' awareness of the importance of self-study and promote positive attitudes towards English learning.

Finally, it is the silence of unsuitable teacher-centered teaching methods. This form of silence was clearly associated with the lack of classroom engagement. The teaching method the teachers in class, together with their selection of teaching materials and activities, imposed an enormous impact on whether classroom discourse systems were pulled towards a pattern of non-participation. Teachers' performances and beliefs about language learning take an essential part here when a grammar-translation approach remains. Teachers' recognition to students' work demonstrates to be a solid element influencing their readiness to join verbally in EFL classes. Several students said they wanted positive feedback and complements from the teacher whereas others stated they had a desire to demonstrate their skills to their teacher and peers.

## **6. Pedagogical Implications of the Study**

The current study proposes a number of practical implications to language education, including English teaching and learning. This project finds compelling evidence that there appears a clear and common tendency towards silence within the EFL classrooms of English-majored students at FL University-Hanoi. Based on the concepts discussed throughout the paper, a number of practical educational suggestions would be proposed as follows:

First, lack of self-confidence can hinder students from acquiring English so it is important for teachers to boost students' confidence. To do so, teachers need to assist students have a fuller understanding and an appropriate valuation of themselves, and make them believe that by working hard, they can master English well. Teachers need to reassure students not to fear for mistakes, but to learn from their mistakes or failures. Also, it is necessary for teachers to express tolerance and consideration for students so that students can dispel their fear and anxiety during EFL classes. Only when students feel confident to communicate in the classroom, did they willingly take part in the activities and tasks tailored for them.

Second, it is necessary to improve students' language competency because it has been shown to have a facilitative impact on classroom interactions. As students gain some triumphs in the language, their confidence will increase and so will their amount of oral participation. Therefore, teachers should stir up learners' interests and create as many chances as possible for students to produce the target language by implementing various activities for classroom interaction. Students should be often provided with motivation and inspiration to linguistically present themselves in front of class. Linguistic knowledge such as grammatical structures, vocabulary, word collocations, and phonetics should be emphasized by teachers in the classroom so that students should know how to express themselves in English correctly. Students should establish the routines of listening to English speaking channels for the enhancement of their language performance.

Third, the harmonious and comfortable learning environment is a fundamental requirement of the classroom interaction, which is an important role in attaining effective teaching. To create a non-pressing and relaxed classroom atmosphere, teachers need to give students more time and freedom for their class participation. The roles of the teacher move from the dominator and controller, into the organizer, instructor, facilitator, helper and evaluator who create a supporting environment for students to be engaged in. In such a harmonious classroom, the students should feel less nervous and anxious about participating in class activities. Only by promoting teacher-student empathy and peer empathy, can students' contribution to classroom interactions be enhanced and classroom silence be interrupted.

Finally, teaching methods have a great effect on students' in-class performance so teachers should encourage students to ask questions, organize them to collaborate to get answers, and always be ready to support to them, which is beneficial for nurturing student' interaction abilities. Teachers should try to motivate students to challenge themselves to answer questions in class without giving them negative feedback. Positive comments can be much more beneficial than negative ones in changing students' behaviors. Also, to increase students' language output, more activities should be employed such as group discussion, role-play, and debates. By adopting various effective teaching methods, teachers can stimulate students to get involved in class activities enthusiastically so that the classroom silence can be broken.

## **7. Conclusion**

In EFL classrooms, silence is a common phenomenon and an obstacle in the teaching and learning process, which troubles both teachers and learners. Classroom silence can be rooted from many factors such as linguistic and psychological factors and some other impersonal elements as well. For linguistic factors, lack of vocabulary, poor pronunciation, ungrammatical expressions, and low-level proficiency can be the major reasons for the students to

maintain silence in class. For psychological factors, contributing elements which prevent the students from orally participating in class interaction may include their lack of confidence, shyness, and particularly their feeling of losing face or sounding silly before their teacher and classmates. Meanwhile, several other factors, namely inadequate time for information processing, turn-taking, and unfamiliar topics are also believed to be responsible for the student's silence behavior.

In order to avoid students' silence in EFL classroom at university level, the following suggestions are made: boosting students' confidence in expressing themselves, increasing students' language skills, employing communicative teaching methods and building up friendly classroom atmosphere. Together with these proposals, teachers need to change their teaching strategies and renew their teaching s to stimulate students' learning interests, and therefore, to minimize in-class silence and promote more engagement so that they can eventually attract more students to classroom interactions and develop students' English competence.

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