



Students' Silence – Redefining What It Means to Participate in EFL Classrooms

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ABSTRACT

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Educators place a high value on the interaction between students and teachers. The amount of verbal interaction in the classroom is often highly valued, while silence is viewed as evidence of inactivity. In spite of the growing attention given to silence in the classroom by educators and scholars, little research has been conducted on how Vietnamese students respond to silence. This study surveyed 132 engineering students at Ho Chi Minh City University of Technology to explore the reasons behind low levels of oral participation. Additionally, semi-structured interviews were conducted to gain an understanding of students' towards classroom silence and suggest several implications for improving students' participation. Preliminary findings suggest that students commonly use silence to gain more thinking time and avoid embarrassment. These insights could inform strategies to enhance student engagement and learning outcomes.

Introduction

For several decades, silence has been viewed paradoxically, as both a positive pedagogical approach and a negative method of control. Silence is often interpreted as a sign of non-engagement in this "talky culture" (Glenn, 2014, p. 18). Certain scholars propose that active engagement in the classroom is highly desirable while passive participation is inferior (Canary & MacGregor, 2008). As well, Ollin (2008) and Hao (2011) emphasize that, in an educational environment, speaking under the teacher's control constitutes inappropriate silent behavior on the part of the student.

Nevertheless, several scholars have argued that a lack of verbal communication, or silence, may not always be detrimental to learning. In this "wait time," as defined by Zembylas and Micaelides (2004, p. 200), more opportunities for reflection and contemplation are given. During a period when students are required to think, Ollin (2008) notes that they should refrain from being intrusive, immediately responsive, or intervening with those around them. Additionally, silence can contribute to second language acquisition by providing a better environment for "attentive listening, thinking, and reformulating ideas" (Harumi, 2020, p. 39).

Though heavily influenced by Confucian principles, Vietnamese education, especially in the EFL community, has employed a variety of cutting-edge and creative pedagogical strategies.

Among EFL forums, workshops, and seminars, the communicative method is a common theme that emphasizes verbal participation to encourage students' participation. As a result, teachers in Vietnamese EFL classrooms do not commonly encourage silence as a method of participating in class (Bao & Nguyen, 2020). Instead, silence is viewed as a sign of respect and a routine part of students' behavior rather than an indication of engagement.

Due to a lack of literature on silence in Vietnamese classrooms, the researcher aims to study students' perspectives on the implications of their silence and its effects on their learning. Hopefully, this study may provide valuable insights into the role of silence and offer meaningful recommendations to enhance classroom discourse quality.

Literature Review

Class interaction and classroom participation

According to Wells (1981), *interaction* is a form of communication that involves the active participation of both a sender and a receiver in a specific context. It differs from other forms of communication because its dynamic nature makes it a vital part of the various social and educational settings within which it is embedded. In the classroom, interaction refers to a positive relationship between the teacher and the student, in which the teacher plays a significant role in cultivating a conducive educational environment. Based on Vygotsky's (1962) theory, students are more likely to reach proficiency in a foreign language if they feel like they belong to and are engaged in a comfortable and sociable environment.

For academic research, classroom participation is often treated as an indication of students' attendance. Zhou et al. (2021) point out, however, that there is a strong correlation between classroom participation and interaction since classroom participation should be interpreted more broadly than just the behavior of students during academic sessions. In addition to sending a query, responding to classmates, engaging in group discussions, or giving feedback, students may also offer suggestions. The term "classroom participation" will be used in this study as much as it embraces Zhou's definition.

Students' silence

Several communicative connotations are associated with students' silence, making its definition increasingly ambiguous. As a result of this complexity, scholars and practitioners have engaged in much controversy and debate.

Several critics of students' silence describe it as a lack of responsiveness, inattention, and disengagement on the part of students (Nakane, 2007; Choi, 2015). Silence in the classroom context, as defined by Bruneau (2008, p. 78), is not just an absence of communication but a refraining from speaking and a lack of interaction with others. As Granger (2004) highlighted, silence among students can sometimes be interpreted as acts of defiance, conflict, or misconduct. Students' silence may be seen as a passive response to a teacher's authority and a method of conveying negative emotions. In other words, silence in the classroom can also be regarded as a manner in which students indirectly communicate their emotional resistance to a teacher's authority.

In comparison, a number of studies have emerged, showcasing the benefits of silence in an educational setting. Liu (2002) describes this phenomenon as a means of exhibiting respect towards both educators and classmates. Meanwhile, Meyer (2009) refers to this approach as an alternative form of communication. Silence is not interpreted as a lack of thought or interaction but rather as a tool for communication that can elicit responses and improve understanding

(Harumi & King, 2020).

Based on Kurzon's (2007) definition, there are two main types of students' silent behaviour: intentional and unintentional silences. As the name implies, intentional silence is an act performed consciously, whereas unintentional silence results from unconscious processes, often triggered by a strong emotion such as anxiety or shame.

The role of students' silence in classroom participation

It is common for students to be expected to participate in class orally, which promotes the teacher's commitment to the teaching session and determines whether the class period has been successful. In addition to a quiz or test, direct responses from students in the classroom can also be indicative of how they perceive and interpret what they have learned. Additionally, it enables teachers to adjust their teaching strategies at the right time to facilitate the process of learning and teaching. As a result, students' silence may be underestimated when it comes to the learning process.

In comparison, Dao et al. (2021) demonstrate that students' engagement is closely related to their silence in that silence is essential to a student's ability to achieve a higher degree of academic success. As explained by Guerrero (1999), learners' brains are stimulated in different ways during the learning process, which is characterized by seven major components: generating thoughts, recalling words, composing written language, applying linguistic principles, monitoring and correcting the use of language, imagining communication with others, and engaging in inner discourse. Simply put, silence facilitates the cognitive process and the internalization of language input during quiet periods. Students must also devote additional time to reflection and idea generation in order to understand complex information (Nijstad et al., 2010). Bao and Ye (2020) also point out that students resort to silence when confronting subjects they have no prior experience with since their ability to contemplate and draw upon previous experiences may be limited.

Additionally, mental processing plays a vital role in language rehearsal. During verbal communication, individuals employ linguistic self-repair mechanisms, such as pauses, hesitations, retracings, and corrections. It is important to note that this correction process occurs internally, within the individual's mind (Goodwin, 1981). Learners typically engage in self-talk, also known as metatalk or inner speech, for a significant duration before being able to express accurate and meaningful utterances (Guerrero, 1999). Therefore, allocating sufficient time for thoughtful engagement can enhance the quality of language output. This aligns with Tatar's (2005) observation that the silence of L2 students reflects their ability to concentrate and process information rather than a lack of competence. Likewise, Teng (2009) suggests that college students' silence in a classroom can indicate their level of cognition, emotions, and actions. Although this may lead to reduced participation, it does not necessarily imply that students are not contemplating the topic under discussion.

The effective use of silence in preparation for a verbal discourse can significantly enhance students' ability to listen actively and think critically. According to King et al. (2020), intentional silence provides students with the opportunity to review and enhance their thoughts, which is beneficial to their anxiety management. It has also been found that students in a less anxiety-prone environment are more likely to engage in classroom activities (King, 2014).

As a matter of fact, students' silence is common at the university in Vietnam. Having observed frequent students' silence, Vietnamese college teachers may have experienced some anxiety and insecurity, resulting in doubts about the effectiveness of pedagogical practices and students' behavior interpretations. Hence, to help students become less inhibited, it is crucial to

understand what causes speaking anxiety among non-major English students and what teachers can do to support students' learning experiences.

Research Questions

In order to achieve the study's purpose, the following questions were addressed:

1. What factors contribute to students' tendency to remain silent?
2. Is it reasonable to consider silence as an indication of non-participation?

Methods

Participants

The study was conducted on 132 engineering students from three different classes at Ho Chi Minh City University of Technology. The participants all spoke Vietnamese natively and had a pre-intermediate level of proficiency in English. In accordance with the results of the placement test administered prior to the course, students were randomly assigned to three different classes, thus ensuring the validity and reliability of the study.

Design of the Study

This study utilized a mixed-methods sequential explanatory design that involved the collection of both quantitative and qualitative data. Through the online survey, the researcher first collected the quantitative data from the participants. In the second phase of the research process, qualitative data were collected through the semi-structured interview to elaborate on the quantitative results obtained in the first phase and provide a general understanding of how the research problem can be approached. Due to its straightforward nature and excellent opportunities for further exploration of the quantitative results, this research design was highly regarded among scholars as, through qualitative analysis, quantitative results may be refined and explained by considering the perspectives of the participants (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998; Creswell, 2003).

Data collection

This study used a systematic 30-item questionnaire in order to collect reliable quantitative data on students' intentions and interpretations of silence. As Gillham (2000) noted, questionnaires can facilitate the rapid and efficient collection of large amounts of data. As part of the survey, participants were asked to rate their level of agreement with each item on a Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Students participated in this research voluntarily and anonymously, and their participation did not affect their grades in any way. As a next step, the data obtained was analyzed using SPSS 20.0 and then presented in Microsoft Excel for further generalization.

After completing the questionnaire, ten students were interviewed in a semi-structured manner in order to establish a sense of partnership between the researcher and the participants (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). A random sample of students was selected from the list of students who indicated a willingness to participate in an individual interview on a voluntary basis. In order to gain a deeper understanding of their beliefs and attitudes regarding the in-class silence, the researcher employed open-ended questions and engaged interviewees in discussion to relate their personal experiences to the research topic. Additionally, each participant was further questioned to ensure their answers were comprehensive. The researcher translated the final extracts from Vietnamese interviews into English in the following phases. The interview

transcripts and notes were then transcribed into a digital format in order to discern the students' perspectives on silence. A judicious classification of the remaining statements was then conducted in accordance with the research questions. Following this, all data was meticulously gathered and organized for further analysis.

Findings

This study used descriptive statistics to determine the central tendency results for all factors contributing to students' silence. The analyses were conducted on a sample size of 132, with listwise deletion used to address missing data. Notably, Cronbach's Alpha values were found to range from over 0.8 to nearly 1.0, indicating a high level of internal consistency for the scale applied in this study. Based on these results, it can be concluded that the scale is reliable and valid for the assessment of students' silence. Additionally, the interview findings underwent meticulous analysis in alignment with the research questions. The thorough analysis involved comparing the results with those obtained from the questionnaires to identify similarities and differences, aiming to understand the findings comprehensively and derive meaningful implications later on.

Quantitative data

The data presented in Table 1 describes factors that may impede or discourage students from actively engaging in class discussions.

Table 1

Factors Contributing to Students' Tendency to Remain Quiet in the Classroom

Variable	Mean		Std. Deviation
	Statistic	Std. Error	Statistic
Demand for more thinking time	3.55	.096	1.108
L2 incompetence	3.51	.100	1.149
Shyness	3.11	.102	1.167
Afraid of failure	3.08	.107	1.227
No recognition from teachers	2.51	.101	1.162
No peers' raising hands	2.50	.089	1.023
No invitation from teachers	2.42	.091	1.049
Peers' negative feedback	2.41	.100	1.152
Peer's negative reaction to bad pronunciation	2.40	.104	1.191
Teachers' negative feedback	2.33	.103	1.183

Notably, the highest mean score of 3.55 pertains to the *demand for more thinking time*, indicating that students often feel pressured by the pace of the class and would benefit from additional time to formulate their thoughts. Moreover, the low standard error and deviation suggest a strong consensus among students, highlighting a widespread desire for a more contemplative classroom environment. *L2 incompetence*, with a mean of 3.51, underscores the challenges students face when they lack proficiency in the target language. It emphasizes the crucial role of language competence in students' confidence and ability to contribute verbally in class. Additionally, *shyness* represents another significant barrier, suggesting that personal discomfort in social settings can inhibit students' participation, while the mean score of 3.08 for being *afraid of failure* reveals the impact of performance anxiety on students' willingness to speak up. Lack of recognition from teachers, reluctance to raise hands, and negative social dynamics in the classroom all scored above 2, highlighting the importance of teacher-student interaction and positive classroom dynamics.

Table 2*The Incidents Taking Place when Students Keep Silent*

Variable	Mean		Std. Deviation	
	Statistic	Std. Error	Statistic	
Put ideas into words	3.92	.063	.721	
Translate	3.79	.071	.811	
Do online search	3.77	.076	.879	
Rehearse mentally	3.75	.081	.928	
Discuss with partners	3.74	.073	.835	
Speak to oneself	3.64	.078	.901	
Write down the answers	3.61	.080	.913	

Table 2 illustrates that students may engage in a variety of activities despite not being verbally involved. This list of activities was not compiled randomly but based on a quick classroom interview conducted by the author at the beginning of each school year with students about learning methods. Students' ability to structure their ideas effectively and prepare themselves to articulate them, even when verbal communication is not available, was reflected in their average score of 3.92 on putting ideas into words. The process of translating texts, conducting online research, performing mental rehearsals, discussing ideas with peers, and talking to oneself are all vital components of consolidating ideas and facilitating internal repetition and material review. Although writing down answers is the least common activity among those listed, it still holds its own with a mean score above the midpoint, demonstrating its importance as a component of student silence activities.

Table 3*Factors Motivating Students to Produce Verbal Output*

	Mean		Std. Deviation	
	Statistic	Std. Error	Statistic	
Bonus	4.26	.073	.844	
Confirmation	4.17	.078	.892	
L1 use	4.07	.075	.867	
No negative feedback	3.98	.081	.933	
Teachers' recognition	3.98	.072	.824	
Confidence	3.81	.082	.942	
Peers' raising hands	3.80	.084	.969	
Peers' encouragement	3.71	.086	.985	
Peers' admiration	3.53	.080	.920	

The data from Table 3 underscores the effectiveness of extrinsic motivators like bonuses and confirmation in promoting verbal participation in class. *Bonus* emerges as a highly effective motivator, with the highest mean score of 4.26, indicating their universal potency in encouraging student participation. Students also highly value the affirmation of their ideas and answers as well as the comfort and confidence when resorting to their native language or expressing themselves without fear of criticism. Recognition received from teachers is another element that serves as positive reinforcement and validates students' efforts and contributions. Additionally, their peers' conduct can considerably impact their willingness to participate. The encouragement given by peers and the positive reaction observed from their peers' participation serve as other strong motivators for student engagement, underscoring the significance of social support and a collaborative learning environment. *Peers' admiration*, with the lowest mean score of 3.53, appears to have the most minor influence among the listed factors.

Qualitative data

The interview results indicated that a significant majority (80%) of the interviewees considered their active participation in class to be an indication of their maturity in making decisions and their capacity to exercise judgment. However, their primary difficulty appears to be expressing their thoughts appropriately in the target language, which causes them to prioritize thoughtful and meaningful responses over immediate ones. Further, the interviewees identified inherent characteristics as another contributing factor to verbal participation. They clarified that introverts might exhibit quieter and more reserved behaviors, which should not be misinterpreted as passivity or incompetence.

Furthermore, interviewees claimed that silence had a significant positive effect on their knowledge acquisition process as a result of their experiences. They revealed that they are actively engaged in a number of cognitive and preparation activities that make it possible for them to learn and comprehend the material, even when they are silent.

Additionally, the interviewees emphasized the significant role of the reward system, encompassing teachers' marks, compliments, and recognition, in motivating students to articulate their thoughts verbally.

Toan: I find that I am more motivated to present my ideas when there is an incentive, such as a bonus from my teacher....

Phuong: ...My teacher's ability to remember my name instills a sense of being acknowledged and valued....

Several interviewees indicated a preference for being addressed by their names. This preference is not driven by a desire to be coerced into participating but rather stems from a desire to receive attention from teachers, even if they are not the highest-achieving students in the class. They further underscored the importance of cultivating a positive classroom relationship between teachers and students, which fosters a supportive environment for expressing opinions. The feedback from interviewees affirms that they would get motivated to speak in the following situations.

Khanh: ...I love to learn English if the classroom environment is cheerful and my classmates are enthusiastic about participating in discussions...

Son: The teacher provides valuable assistance in refining my pronunciation and acquiring proficiency in L2 expressions....

Que Anh: I love to study English because I never receive criticism or get made fun of...

Discussion

What factors contribute to students' tendency to remain silent?

A significant finding from this study was that most of the students found it more comfortable with the extended preparation time since they were not confident about their ability to speak L2 effectively. L2 competence plays a vital role in influencing students' self-confidence and how they perceive their chances of success. Likewise, Liu (2006) finds that the more proficient students were in English, the less anxious they seemed to be when responding to their teachers. According to Tran (2022), the students' self-perceived language competence also influenced their state of being reluctant to communicate in the second language, leading to a lack of confidence in the language. In light of this finding, there is a need for additional preparation

time, particularly for those with lower proficiency levels.

Additionally, the supportive and encouraging academic environment can serve as a motivating factor for students to speak up more often during class. Tartar (2005) also emphasizes that the climate of the classroom is a dominant factor in determining whether a student is likely to participate. The negative comments made by their peers and the recognition they receive from their teachers are of great concern to students. It is in line with Zhou et al.'s argument (2005) that there is a reluctance among individuals, even those with the correct answer, to respond due to concerns about how their teachers and peers might react. Pabro-Maquidato's research (2021) also indicates that students are uneasy and anxious about their ability to present their ideas, cautious about others' perceptions of their language performance, and concerned that their audience might negatively evaluate their performance.

In addition, the teacher's attitudes in the classroom have a great deal to do with class participation. According to Harumi (2011), students are more likely to respond better to teachers who empathize with the way they utilize silence in class (p. 288). Likewise, Morita (2004) and Kim (2008) also agree that when teachers take a sincere interest in students and acknowledge the contributions they make to their lessons, it is likely to result in an increased sense of belonging in the classroom community and an increase in oral participation.

Is it reasonable to consider silence as an indication of non-participation?

According to Bista (2012), "When students are silent, one cannot assume that they are not learning" (p.81). The study results revealed that the majority of the survey respondents and interviewees valued silence and found it comfortable to prepare their verbal output in quiet moments. Several previous studies have indicated that quiet students utilize silence to gain access to, organize, and absorb new material. Tomlinson (2001) states that learners may develop internalized speech in their target language during the silent period before they are able to communicate verbally. This process also helps learners utilize explicit knowledge of L2 structure to construct utterances (Ellis, 2005) when they encounter difficulties producing language output beyond their current ability. During the learning process, students take initiative and control their learning process (Schacter et al., 2011). It can be reinforced further by Armstrong (2012), who contends that learners are motivated to learn when they have control over both what they are learning and how they are learning it. In this way, learners will benefit most from the process when they are given the opportunity to choose how they wish to learn, as opposed to being directed to learn in a particular manner by their teacher.

According to Fivush (2010), "Talk does not always imply voice," since some students feel more comfortable with a period of silence than making a constant effort to avoid it. Simply put, active engagement does not always require verbal communication (Kim, 2008).

Based on this finding, it may be more appropriate to allow students to remain silent as long as they exhibit other positive signs of active participation instead of forcing them to speak purely for the sake of speaking (Brown, 2008). Rather than forcing students to produce language, speech production should emerge as the acquisition process progresses (Krashen & Terrell, 1983, p. 58). By observing the patterns of classroom participation between the teacher and peers, as well as among peers, students can better understand how to react to such behaviors in the future.

Conclusion

Silence is common in EFL classrooms, stemming from various linguistic, psychological, and interpersonal factors. Despite the misconception that quiet students are disengaged, they exhibit engagement in diverse ways. This perspective aligns with the notion that silence can signify engagement (Bao, 2020) and supports the concept that vocal expression and silence are closely interconnected (Bao, 2019).

Several important pedagogical implications can be derived from this study. In the first instance, silence in the classroom should not be perceived as a source of discomfort or confusion but rather as an opportunity for learning. Silent reflection and mental rehearsal are important strategies for students to internalize information. As a result, instead of feeling ashamed or frustrated in a quiet classroom, teachers should take silence for granted and allow students to process information in the classroom at their own pace. However, to reduce the silent periods, teachers can establish clear learning expectations and set time limits for their students' activities to encourage them to quickly turn inner speech into verbal output. It is also important to provide a supportive educational environment for students in order to motivate them to become more engaged in the classroom. With the willingness to provide support, sympathy towards students' errors, and recognition of students' accomplishments, teachers can efficiently facilitate their students' learning process.

Nevertheless, this study has certain limitations, especially in terms of sample size, which may limit the generalizability of its findings. As a result, future research may incorporate a broader and more diverse sample of students to yield a more comprehensive and detailed analysis.

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Biodata

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