

Classroom Silence and its Meaning in English Language Learning Contexts

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ABSTRACT

Classroom silence is a pervasive phenomenon in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning contexts, yet it remains insufficiently understood within mainstream language pedagogy. Classroom silence has long been perceived as a sign of disengagement or lack of competence in English language learning contexts. However, recent perspectives in applied linguistics suggest that silence may carry complex pedagogical, cognitive, and sociocultural meanings. This study aims to explore the forms, functions, and underlying meanings of classroom silence in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning environments. Employing a qualitative research design with a case study approach, data were collected through classroom observations, in-depth interviews with students and teachers, and reflective field notes.

INTRODUCTION

Classroom silence is a pervasive phenomenon in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning contexts, yet it remains insufficiently understood within mainstream language pedagogy. In many instructional settings, active verbal participation is commonly regarded as an indicator of successful learning, while silence is often interpreted as disengagement, lack of competence, or low motivation (King & Harumi, 2020). Such deficit-oriented interpretations, however, overlook the complex meanings and functions that silence may embody in classroom interaction.

Recent studies in applied linguistics and second language acquisition suggest that classroom silence can serve multiple pedagogical and cognitive purposes, including reflective thinking, language processing, emotional regulation, and identity negotiation (Bao, 2020; Sato & Loewen, 2022). From a sociocultural perspective, silence is not merely the absence of speech but a form of participation shaped by learners' beliefs, prior experiences, cultural norms, and power relations within the classroom (Wang & Littlewood, 2021). Learners may choose silence strategically to avoid negative evaluation, to maintain social harmony, or to process linguistic input before producing output.

Psychological and affective factors have also been identified as key contributors to silence in EFL classrooms. Language anxiety, fear of making mistakes, limited self-confidence, and perceived linguistic inadequacy often inhibit learners' willingness to speak, particularly in teacher-fronted or evaluation-oriented learning environments (Zhou & Chen, 2021; Oga-Baldwin & Fryer, 2020). In addition, classroom norms that prioritize accuracy over fluency may unintentionally reinforce silent behaviour, especially among learners who require more time to formulate responses in a foreign language (Sato, 2020).

Despite increasing scholarly attention, classroom silence continues to be largely framed as a pedagogical problem rather than a communicative resource. This narrow perspective risks marginalizing learners whose engagement manifests through attentive listening, note-taking, and internal processing rather than oral contribution (King, 2022). Furthermore, empirical research examining how learners and teachers interpret the meaning of silence—particularly in diverse sociocultural EFL contexts remains limited. As a result, pedagogical responses to silence often fail to accommodate learners' actual needs and interactional preferences.

Understanding classroom silence is therefore crucial for developing more inclusive and responsive language teaching practices. Recognizing silence as a multidimensional phenomenon can help educators move beyond speech-dominated interaction models and adopt pedagogical strategies that value both verbal and non-verbal forms of engagement (Harumi & King, 2023). Such reconceptualization is particularly relevant in contemporary English language classrooms, where learner diversity and affective well-being are increasingly emphasized.

In response to these gaps, the present study aims to explore the forms, functions, and meanings of classroom silence in English language learning contexts. Specifically, it investigates how silence is experienced and interpreted by learners and teachers, as well as the contextual and affective factors that shape silent behaviour. By adopting a qualitative approach, this study seeks to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of classroom interaction and to inform pedagogical practices that acknowledge silence as an integral component of language learning.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Conceptualizing Classroom Silence in Language Learning

Classroom silence has traditionally been perceived as a negative phenomenon in language learning environments, often associated with passivity, disengagement, or insufficient linguistic competence (King & Harumi, 2020). Within communicative language teaching paradigms, verbal participation is frequently equated with active learning, positioning silence as a deviation from ideal classroom interaction. However, recent scholarship challenges this assumption by conceptualizing silence as a meaningful and context-dependent communicative act rather than a mere absence of speech.

From an interactional and sociocultural perspective, silence functions as a mode of participation shaped by classroom norms, power relations, and learners' subjective interpretations of interactional expectations (Wang & Littlewood, 2021). Silence may indicate cognitive engagement, such as processing linguistic input, reflecting on meaning, or formulating responses, particularly in second or foreign language contexts where learners require additional processing time (Sato, 2020). This reconceptualization underscores the need to examine silence beyond deficit-oriented frameworks.

Cognitive and Pedagogical Functions of Silence

Several studies highlight the cognitive role of silence in language learning. Silence can facilitate deeper processing, enabling learners to organize thoughts, integrate new information, and internalize linguistic structures before producing output (Bao, 2020). In this sense, silence operates as a pedagogical space that supports learning rather than hinders it. Learners may engage silently through attentive listening, note-taking, or internal rehearsal, all of which contribute to language development despite the absence of verbal expression (King, 2022).

Pedagogically, silence may also reflect instructional design and classroom interaction patterns. Teacher-dominated discourse, limited wait time, and emphasis on accuracy can restrict opportunities for learners to speak, resulting in increased silence (Sato & Loewen, 2022). Conversely, classrooms that encourage collaborative learning, provide extended wait time, and validate diverse participation styles tend to foster more meaningful engagement, both verbal and non-verbal (Harumi & King, 2023).

Affective and Psychological Dimensions of Classroom Silence

A growing body of literature emphasizes the affective and psychological factors underlying classroom silence. Language anxiety, fear of negative evaluation, and low self-efficacy are consistently identified as significant predictors of learners' reluctance to speak in English classrooms (Zhou & Chen, 2021). Learners who perceive their linguistic competence as inadequate may opt for silence as a self-protective strategy to avoid embarrassment or social judgment. Motivational factors further influence silent behaviour. Oga-Baldwin and Fryer (2020) found that learners with lower intrinsic motivation or weaker self-determined motivation are more likely to remain silent during classroom interaction. Additionally, emotional states such as fatigue, stress, or lack of psychological safety can suppress learners' willingness to communicate, particularly in high-stakes or evaluative learning environments (King, 2022).

Sociocultural and Contextual Influences on Silence

Silence in EFL classrooms is also deeply embedded in sociocultural contexts. Cultural norms regarding politeness, respect for authority, and turn-taking can shape learners' perceptions of appropriate classroom behaviour (Wang & Littlewood, 2021). In some contexts, silence is interpreted as attentiveness and respect, while frequent verbal interruption may be viewed as inappropriate. Such cultural orientations challenge Western-centric assumptions that equate participation solely with speaking. Contextual variables including class size, institutional expectations, curriculum demands, and assessment practices further mediate the meaning of silence (Bao, 2020). In large or examination-oriented classrooms, opportunities for spoken interaction may be limited, normalizing silence as an adaptive response rather than an indicator of disengagement. These findings suggest that silence must be interpreted within its specific educational and cultural context.

Silence as a Resource for Inclusive Language Pedagogy

Recent literature increasingly advocates for recognizing silence as a pedagogical resource rather than a problem to be eliminated. Harumi and King (2023) argue that valuing silence can contribute to more inclusive classroom practices by accommodating diverse learner identities and participation preferences. A silence-aware pedagogy encourages teachers to interpret silence reflexively, consider learners' perspectives, and design interactional spaces that respect both verbal and silent engagement. Despite these advancements, empirical studies that explore how learners and teachers jointly construct the meaning of silence particularly in English language learning contexts remain limited. Much of the existing research focuses on learners' reluctance to speak, with less attention given to silence as a deliberate, meaningful choice. This gap underscores the need for qualitative investigations that foreground participants' lived experiences and interpretations of classroom silence.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative interpretive research design to explore the meanings, functions, and interpretations of classroom silence in English language learning contexts. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate as the study aimed to capture participants' subjective experiences, perceptions, and contextualized understandings of silence rather than to measure its frequency or causal effects (Creswell & Poth, 2018; King, 2022). By adopting this design, the study sought to uncover how silence is socially constructed and pedagogically interpreted within classroom interaction.

Research Context and Participants

The research was conducted in an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom setting at the tertiary education level. The participants consisted of English language learners and their instructors, selected through purposive sampling to ensure relevance to the research objectives. Learners represented diverse levels of English proficiency and classroom participation styles, allowing for a nuanced examination of silence across different learner profiles. Teachers were included to provide pedagogical perspectives on classroom interaction and instructional decision-making.

Data Collection Methods

Data were collected using multiple qualitative techniques to enhance depth and credibility. First, non-participant classroom observations were conducted to document naturally occurring instances of silence, interactional patterns, teacher talk, and student responses. Observations focused on moments of extended silence, teacher wait time, and learners' non-verbal engagement, in line with recommendations for classroom-based discourse research (Sato & Loewen, 2022).

Second, semi-structured interviews were carried out with both students and teachers to elicit their interpretations of classroom silence, perceived causes, emotional responses, and pedagogical implications. Semi-structured interviews allowed flexibility for probing emergent themes while maintaining alignment with the research focus (King & Harumi, 2020). All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and transcribed verbatim. Third, reflective field notes were maintained throughout the data collection process to capture contextual details, researcher reflections, and interactional nuances that might not be fully evident in recordings alone (Harumi & King, 2023).

Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis, following the systematic procedures proposed by Braun and Clarke (2021). The analysis involved several stages: familiarization with the data, initial coding, theme development, theme review, and refinement. Coding was conducted inductively, allowing themes to emerge from the data while being theoretically informed by sociocultural and interactional perspectives on language learning and silence. To ensure analytical rigor, data triangulation was applied by comparing findings across observations, interviews, and field notes. This process helped validate

emerging interpretations and reduce researcher bias (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Themes were interpreted in relation to cognitive, affective, sociocultural, and pedagogical dimensions of classroom silence.

Trustworthiness and Ethical Considerations

The trustworthiness of the study was established through credibility, dependability, and confirmability. Member checking was conducted by sharing preliminary interpretations with selected participants to confirm the accuracy of representations. Thick descriptions were provided to allow readers to assess the transferability of findings to similar contexts (King, 2022). Ethical approval was obtained prior to data collection. Participants were informed about the research objectives, procedures, and their rights, including voluntary participation and confidentiality. Pseudonyms were used to protect participants' identities, and all data were securely stored.

RESEARCH RESULT

Forms and Meanings of Classroom Silence

The findings indicate that classroom silence in English language learning contexts constitutes a complex, meaning-laden communicative practice rather than a simple lack of participation. Silence emerged as a dynamic resource through which learners engaged in cognitive processing, emotional regulation, and interactional positioning within classroom discourse. Observational data revealed that students frequently remained silent while maintaining eye contact with the teacher, taking detailed notes, nodding in response to explanations, or following peer contributions attentively. These embodied behaviors suggest that silence often co-occurred with active engagement, challenging deficit-oriented interpretations of non-verbal participation. One student explicitly articulated silence as a cognitive space for language processing:

"When I don't speak, it doesn't mean I'm not thinking. Sometimes I need silence to translate ideas in my head before I can say them in English." (Student S4, interview, March 12, 2024)

This perception aligns with recent scholarship framing silence as an indicator of internalized meaning-making and reflective learning (King & Harumi, 2020; Harumi & King, 2023). Rather than signaling disengagement, silence functioned as a preparatory phase in learners' cognitive engagement with linguistic input. From students' perspectives, silence also operated as a strategic response to linguistic uncertainty and affective vulnerability. Several participants described deliberately choosing silence when they were unsure about grammatical accuracy, pronunciation, or pragmatic appropriateness. For instance, one learner explained:

"I know the answer, but I stay quiet because I'm afraid the sentence will sound strange. I wait until I'm more confident." (Student S2, interview, March 15, 2024)

Such accounts support sociocognitive perspectives that conceptualize silence as part of learners' strategic competence, enabling them to manage cognitive load and emotional risk in second language interaction (Sato & Loewen, 2022). Silence, in this sense, functioned as a protective mechanism that allowed learners to maintain face while continuing to participate internally in classroom activities. Importantly, teachers' interpretations of silence were not uniform. While some instructors initially associated silence with passivity, reflective interviews revealed a growing awareness of its nuanced meanings. One teacher noted:

"I used to think silence meant they didn't understand, but after observing more carefully, I realized many students are actually processing deeply." (Teacher T1, interview, March 20, 2024)

This shift in perception highlights the interactional nature of classroom silence, wherein meaning is co-constructed through the interpretive frameworks of both learners and instructors. Overall, the findings underscore that classroom silence functions as a context-sensitive, agentic practice, embedded within learners' cognitive, emotional, and social negotiation of English language learning.

Affective and Sociocultural Dimensions of Silence

The findings further demonstrate that classroom silence in English language learning contexts is profoundly shaped by affective variables, particularly foreign language anxiety, fear of negative evaluation, and learners' self-assessed linguistic competence. Many participants explicitly described silence as an emotion-regulation strategy employed to manage apprehension and protect self-esteem in classroom interaction. Rather than indicating disengagement, silence frequently functioned as a buffer against emotional exposure.

One student articulated this affective dimension clearly:

"I stay silent not because I don't know, but because I'm scared of being wrong and everyone noticing. Silence feels safer." (Student S6, interview, April 3, 2024).

Similarly, another participant emphasized the role of anxiety in shaping participation choices:

"When the teacher asks questions, my heart beats fast. I understand, but speaking English makes me nervous, so I prefer to stay quiet." (Student S9, interview, April 5, 2024)

These accounts corroborate recent empirical findings that position silence as a coping mechanism in response to emotional pressures in EFL classrooms (Teimouri et al., 2021; Gregersen & MacIntyre, 2022). Silence, in this context, enabled learners to regulate anxiety while remaining cognitively engaged with instructional content. Beyond affective influences, classroom silence was also deeply embedded in sociocultural norms and educational socialization. Several learners reported that their prior schooling emphasized attentive listening, obedience, and restraint in verbal participation, shaping their perceptions of

appropriate classroom behavior. For these learners, silence was not experienced as absence but as a culturally sanctioned form of participation.

One student explained:

"In my previous school, speaking too much was seen as rude. Listening quietly shows respect to the teacher." (Student S3, interview, April 7, 2024)

Teachers similarly recognized the sociocultural grounding of silence, noting that learners' communicative behaviors reflected broader cultural expectations regarding authority and classroom hierarchy:

"Some students are silent because that's how they were taught to show respect. It's not that they are passive; it's cultural." (Teacher T2, interview, April 10, 2024)

These findings reinforce interactional perspectives that conceptualize silence as a culturally situated communicative practice, whose meanings are negotiated within specific sociocultural and institutional contexts (King, 2022). Silence thus operates at the intersection of emotion, identity, and cultural norms, challenging monolithic interpretations of verbal participation as the sole indicator of engagement. Overall, the affective and sociocultural dimensions of classroom silence highlight the need for pedagogical sensitivity toward learners' emotional states and cultural backgrounds. Recognizing silence as an agentive, context-dependent behavior allows educators to create more inclusive interactional spaces that accommodate diverse forms of participation in English language learning.

Teachers' Interpretations and Pedagogical Responses

The findings also reveal a notable divergence between teacher and learner interpretations of silence. While some instructors initially perceived silence as lack of motivation or comprehension difficulties, reflective interviews indicated a growing awareness that silence can signify deeper engagement. Teachers who consciously incorporated extended wait time and open-ended questioning reported more meaningful learner responses over time. This finding aligns with pedagogical research emphasizing the importance of re-evaluating silence as a resource for interaction rather than an obstacle (Li & Curdt-Christiansen, 2023).

Teachers who adopted dialogic teaching strategies were more likely to interpret silence as a transitional phase within learning, allowing students to formulate ideas and gain confidence. Such pedagogical sensitivity supports recent calls to reconceptualize classroom interaction norms to better accommodate diverse learner participation styles (Zarrinabadi et al., 2021).

Implications for English Language Teaching

Collectively, the findings challenge deficit-oriented views of classroom silence and suggest the need for a more nuanced pedagogical framework. Silence should be understood as a dynamic interactional resource that can support language development when appropriately scaffolded. Recognizing silence as meaningful enables teachers to design instructional practices that balance verbal participation with reflective space, thereby fostering inclusive and psychologically safe learning environments.

These findings reinforce contemporary linguistic and educational scholarship that advocates for redefining participation in language classrooms beyond speech alone (King & Harumi, 2020; Harumi & King, 2023). By acknowledging silence as an integral component of classroom discourse, educators can better align instructional practices with learners' cognitive, emotional, and sociocultural realities.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study demonstrates that classroom silence in English language learning contexts is a complex and meaningful phenomenon that cannot be reduced to passive behavior or lack of engagement. The findings indicate that silence functions as a cognitive and interactional space where learners process linguistic input, regulate emotions, and negotiate participation. In this sense, silence emerges as an active component of learning rather than a communicative deficiency.

Classroom silence is strongly shaped by affective and sociocultural factors. Learners often use silence as a strategic response to anxiety, fear of negative evaluation, and limited self-confidence in language use. At the same time, culturally embedded norms regarding respect, politeness, and teacher authority significantly influence how silence is enacted and interpreted. These dimensions highlight that silence is not universally experienced but is deeply contextual and socially constructed.

The study suggests that educators should adopt a more nuanced understanding of silence in classroom interaction. Recognizing silence as a legitimate form of participation may contribute to more inclusive pedagogical practices that respect diverse learner identities and communicative preferences.

ADVANCED RESEARCH

Future research is encouraged to investigate classroom silence across different institutional contexts and through mixed-method approaches to further enrich theoretical and pedagogical insights.

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