The Meanings of Silence in Indonesian EFL Classrooms

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the reasons for students' silence and the beliefs of students and lecturers about silence in EFL classrooms at Indonesian universities. It explores the perspectives of both students and lecturers on this issue. The participants are three students currently assigned as students in the second semester of an undergraduate program at one of the Indonesian universities and the students' lectures. The study used semi-structured interviews to collect the data. The study found that students' lack of confidence in speaking English was a significant factor contributing to their silence in the EFL classrooms. Some feared making mistakes or being judged by their peers, which hindered their willingness to participate in class discussions. Additionally, foreign language anxiety was identified as another significant factor, with students feeling overwhelmed and anxious about speaking in a language that is not their first language. Furthermore, the use of silence as a form of politeness was also observed, as students believed that interrupting or speaking out of turn was disrespectful. These factors not only affected students' participation but also impacted the overall classroom dynamics and communication. The study highlights the importance of addressing these challenges in EFL teaching. It suggests strategies such as creating a supportive and non-judgmental classroom environment, incorporating activities that promote confidence-building and oral communication skills, and providing opportunities for students to practice English in a safe and encouraging setting.

Keywords: Silence, EFL Classrooms, Communication Strategies, Student Participation, Pedagogical Implications.

1.   INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

This study aims to investigate the reasons for students' silence in Indonesian university foreign language classrooms. To deeply understand the meaning of silence, this study also seeks students' and lecturer's beliefs about silence. It is worth understanding silence in foreign language classrooms since, in linguistics, silence is also a mode of communication (Nakane, 2007) and a mode of developing critical thinking and comprehension (Kim Pham et al., 2023).

The phenomenon of silence is common in EFL classrooms, and it could make lecturers think whether silence is an expression of understanding or not. Bonvillain (2003) describes silence as a nonverbal communication that carries many types of meaning and depends on the interpretation of cultural norms. It is also argued that silence is the way to overcome mistakes that might happen (Harumi, 2023). Consequently, the appearance of silence in the EFL context can cause misunderstanding or misinterpretation among students and lecturers and even among students (Harumi, 2010). Silence is the challenge facing lecturers in EFL classrooms. Therefore, looking for the reasons for silence is essential for the lecturer to adjust the lesson plan and the classroom activities accordingly. In addition, understanding the problems related to silence can help the students to improve their language ability.

It is a widely held view that the phenomena of silence appear in Asian EFL classroom contexts. Bonvillain (1993) defines silence as a strategy that can carry various meanings through nonverbal communication but is affected by interpretation constraints. Accordingly, the silence among Asian EFL learners has continu123ally stimulated discussion that greatly emphasizes its sociocultural factor in learner participation (Harumi, 2010). To investigate the meanings of silence, it could be interpreted using 'the situation and the participants around' (Agyekum, 2002:49). In general, silence could express meanings like other types of communication. Therefore, silence in interaction plays a significant role in linguistics (Nakane, 2007).

The work 'The Power of Silence: Social and Pragmatic Perspectives' by Jaworski (1993) has contributed to the studies on silence. Jaworski states that silence can bring advantages and disadvantages in communication; therefore, it seems to be 'the most ambiguous of all linguistic forms' (p.16). He also contends that silence could become the politeness and conflict-avoidance strategy. On the other hand, it could be perceived as unfriendly behaviour (Jaworski, 1993). For example, some students have intentionally determined to avoid giving a speech (King, 2013). From those findings, it could be concluded that silence is also perceived as a method to communicate without speaking (Agyekum, 2002) and to cope with the situation based on the social and cultural factors within the community (King & Harumi, 2020).

For further explanation of intentional silence by King (2013), Nakane (2007) classifies silence into two categories: deliberate and unintentional silence. Nakane defines deliberate silence as the conscious way to avoid participating to avoid losing face, and unintentional silence is perceived as foreign language anxiety when students communicate with a native speaker. Research conducted by Soltani and Tran (2023) revealed that silence is experienced by students who position themselves as more unknowledgeable, position their friends as good language learners, and think that their friends have more authority and power. This means that silence is intentionally maintained to respond to immediate needs in the classroom.

Reda (2009) proposes two types of silence in the classroom context: silence that is implemented by teachers and that which students initiate. For the silence initiated by teachers, Muller (2022) implemented visual silence using the language portrait (LP) to support the students in declaring 'visually and discursively' their linguistic repertoire. This kind of silence can be beneficial since the teacher can trigger the students to practice speaking and help them break the resistance to learning a new language accordingly. However, teachers can also be the cause of silence. Based on the study by Zacharias (2014) in Indonesia, lecturers could be the main factor contributing to silence. Zacharias found that lecturers' domination of classroom interaction, such as "lecturers' lecturing styles and lecturers' lack of modified input," can influence students' participation in the classroom. Additionally, the method of teaching and assessment and the lesson materials created by the lecturer can be a factor of silence (King, 2013).

On the other hand, students' behaviour can cause silence. For instance, students' apathy towards foreign language learning that causes them disinterest in learning may influence their participation in classroom activities (King, 2013). King perceives this kind of silence as a measure to protest about the lecturer's pedagogical methods.

Other factors could cause silence to appear among students. Nakane (2006) found that Japanese students use silence to avoid humiliation or embarrassment in Australian university seminars. This means that silence is a risk-free option to avoid talk (King, 2013). Silence is also perceived as a means of carrying phatic expression (Ephratt, 2007), which, based on Jakobson's interpretation, maintains the channel of communication through instant interactions (Kulkarni, 2014). In addition, silence can also be used to manage relationships (Jaworski and Stephens, 1998). Therefore, a more recent study by Soltani and Tran (2023) suggested that silence should be understood as the strategy to adapt to the individual's new environments.

Furthermore, cultural, social, and psychological factors may also be attributed to silence (King, 2013: Lai & Wang, 2006). Based on a recent study, Yamat et al. (2013) find that silence

is used by students to express their identity. Additionally, in his comprehensive study on silence among Japanese students, King (2013) proposes some factors that contribute to silence, which are: "cultural factors such as child-rearing practices, social relationships, and empathy training, psychological factors such as excessive self-monitoring and hypersensitivity, pragmatic factors such as politeness strategies and turn-taking pauses, and cognitive factors such as learners' organizing difficulty and their lack of second language proficiency" (King, 2013).

Considering the problems related to silence, silence could have adverse effects in classroom activities, especially on students. Nakane (2006) recognised that Australian lecturers perceived silence as negative behaviour since it can result in a lack of rapport. Silence that continues long can cause 'isolation and disconnection' (Kim Pham et al., 2023). In addition, Jaworski (1993) found that silence can be regarded as a sign of unfriendly behaviour or 'dumbness' (p. 16). Therefore, based on those findings, silence may cause miscommunication between lectures and students.

To understand the case of silence deeply, Zhou et al. (2005) suggest paying more attention to the classroom context and process where silence appears and reappears. The finding reinforces this suggestion that although language skills and cultural knowledge have been improved, some students remain silent (Zhou, Knoke, and Sakamoto, 2005). Such an approach could address problems related to silence. Yashima et al. (2018) found that initiating turns between students by asking questions and listening carefully can engage quiet students in the discussion. In addition, structuring and facilitating debate should be given to lecturers to help students progressively develop interactional competence and confidence (Jackson, 2001).

To conclude this section, the literature identifies that silence is a part of communication that can have a variety of meanings. Attention to the classroom context and culture is essential to looking for silence. Every country with a different culture may have a different reason for being silent. Therefore, this study explores the reasons for silence in Indonesian EFL classrooms.

1.2   Research questions

Therefore, this present study proposes to answer two research questions: (1) Why do students remain silent in EFL classrooms at Indonesian universities? (2) How do students perceive their silence in EFL classrooms? (3) What beliefs do lecturers hold about student silence in EFL classrooms?

1.3   Significance of the study

This study lies in its potential to contribute substantially to the field of EFL pedagogy by elucidating the multifaceted factors that underpin student silence in Indonesian university classrooms. This research provides empirical insights that can inform evidence-based

pedagogical interventions by systematically investigating elements such as linguistic self-efficacy, anxiety related to foreign language acquisition, and cultural norms surrounding communication. These findings are instrumental in guiding educators to cultivate classroom environments conducive to increased student engagement and participation. Furthermore, the study advances theoretical understanding by integrating cultural dimensions into the analysis of classroom dynamics, thereby offering a nuanced perspective that enhances the broader discourse on language education. Ultimately, this research aims to optimize instructional methodologies and contribute to developing more culturally sensitive and effective EFL curricula, with implications extending to diverse educational contexts globally.

2. METHOD

2.1 Research Design

This study employed a qualitative approach, which takes place organically within classroom interactions. It was also interpretive, meaning the findings were derived from the researchers' interpretations and perspectives (Ary et al., 2010).

2.2 Participants

The participants of the study are three students who study at one of the universities in Indonesia. They are currently assigned as students in the second semester of their undergraduate program. To gain comprehensive data, the lecturer selected participants in order to get a purposive sample (King, 2013). This purposive sampling strategy aims to find specific categories of students who may have relevant perspectives and beliefs (Mason, 2002; Robinson, 2014). Moreover, Stephenson and Hall (2021) suggest that deep understanding can be obtained from observing advanced learners. Therefore, the criteria of the participants are having good ability in language skills, achieving good progress and being silent in the classroom. All students come from different subjects, and they are classified as advanced students in an intensive English program conducted by the language department of the university. This program has been running since the first semester in September 2017. In addition, the lecturer of those students also becomes a participant since it is essential to investigate the phenomenon from both the student's and lecturer's points of view to gain a deeper understanding (King, 2013).

2.3 Instruments

The data was collected using a semi-structured interview. It was conducted via WhatsApp voice call to make the participants comfortable sharing their ideas and experiences,

and the interview session was recorded using an audio recording device. All participants were given a consent form to consider their involvement in this study. After learning about their roles in the interview process, all participants signed the form and were given a copy of the signed form. The interview schedule, The Silence and Oral Participation Interview Guide (SOPIG) was adapted from King (2013, 192) with some modifications. Interviews were carried out using Bahasa Indonesia and lasted roughly 30 minutes for each person.

2.4 Data analysis

The interview data was carefully transcribed to facilitate analysis. Each session was recorded using an audio device and transcribed word for word to maintain the originality of the spoken language. The research team conducted multiple thorough reviews of the transcripts to gain a comprehensive understanding of the collected data. This iterative process enabled to closely engage with the content, identifying initial patterns, themes, and significant quotes. Through open coding, we systematically broke the data into distinct segments, categorizing each according to emerging themes associated with silence in EFL classrooms. The identified themes included a lack of confidence, highlighted by phrases reflecting self-doubt or fear of making mistakes. Foreign language anxiety was noted when students expressed concerns about their language proficiency or apprehension regarding peer judgment. Additionally, the use of politeness strategies was recognized when silence was employed to respect others' opportunities to speak or as a cultural norm.

Through Thematic Analysis (TA), the data was organized into dominant themes, including cultural norms and silence, psychological factors, and classroom dynamics. Each theme was analyzed in connection with established theories on silence in second language learning as mentioned. For instance, a lack of confidence was connected to psychological factors like excessive self-monitoring and hypersensitivity where students hesitate to speak due to fears of making mistakes or being perceived as foolish. Foreign Language Anxiety is linked to cognitive factors, where students prioritize accuracy over fluency. This often results in intentional silence, as they seek to avoid making mistakes and fear negative judgment from their peers. Additionally, Politeness Strategy can be understood in the context of cultural norms, where silence acts as a means of social control and relationship management. This reflects cultural values surrounding politeness and deference.

3.   FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Three common themes in interview data are recognised as the reasons for students' silence: lack of confidence, second language anxiety, and the politeness strategy. Considering

King's (2013) silence classification, the researchers separated lack of confidence from foreign language anxiety in these findings. Lack of confidence is a theme that is related to psychological factors such as 'excessive self-monitoring and hypersensitivity,' and language anxiety is related to cognitive factors (King, 2013). This part also presents and discusses the students' and lecturer's beliefs about silence.

Lack of confidence

In this study, the researchers have explored silence that appears in ESL classrooms in the Indonesian context. Based on the students' voices, it is indicated that a lack of confidence is the primary cause of silence among the students. This may happen because students have consideration before speaking English in a group discussion or asking the lecturer questions. A possible explanation might be that students sidestep the conversation or communication to avoid humiliation or embarrassment (Nakane, 2006). Their understanding of the learning materials can influence their confidence. Therefore, they perceive silence as a good choice in that situation. This phenomenon was found when Dina was interviewed. She worried about the importance of the question that they wanted to ask the lecturer:

> …I do not want to ask a silly question, and I will consider whether my question is necessary or not… (Dina, interview 1, February 23, 2018).

The interview result revealed that Dina and Tika had the same experience. Tika wanted to ask a question, but she doubted whether her understanding was correct. She looks worried and ashamed if her friends know that she has misunderstood what the lecturer said.

> It happens if I do not understand the lesson that has been explained by the lecturer, but I feel confused. I do not know whether what I am thinking is correct or not. Then I decided to google the answer by myself (Tika, interview 3, February 25, 2018).

> Perhaps they felt discouraged when they looked at other students who could speak fluently and had a good understanding. I felt discouraged as well… (Raisa, interview 2, February 24, 2018).

Raisa feels inferior to her friends. When she recognised that her friends were better than her, she would keep silent. According to the case of Dina, Tika, and Raisa, silence might be used to avoid embarrassment caused by their understanding and ability. Moreover, the lecturer also confirms that students have excellent proficiency in English, but they could not demonstrate their language skills:

> As far as I am concerned, they lack confidence. They doubt their answer although their answer is correct. The lack of confidence is the main factor. (Lecturer, interview 4, February 28, 2018).

To respond to such a problem, the lecturer has attempted to design different activities in small groups to make students more active. However, some students remain silent. This means that feeling unconfident could be associated with communication in the large group and the small group of students.

Foreign language anxiety

Another significant finding of this study is foreign language anxiety (FLA). This reason could be linked to the previous finding, feeling unconfident. However, FLA places greater emphasis on second language ability. FLA grows when students pay more attention to the language they want to produce. Then, silence would be the right option to prevent embarrassment, and it is intentionally done by students (King, 2013). For example, Dina's friend did not answer the lecturer's question, although her friend knew the answer, and Raisa worried about her grammar when she wanted to speak:

> …I recognised that one of my friends had the correct answer, but when the lecturer asked us to answer it. My friend did not want to answer it…(Dina, interview 1, February 23, 2018).

> Yes, I have. But I asked my friends about the language that I would use. I was afraid that my sentence was wrong…(Raisa, interview 2, February 24, 2018).

Based on those excerpts, they pay more attention to accuracy than fluency. As Nakane (2007) contends, language anxiety may appear when a native speaker's peer surrounds learners; it is found that students may also keep silent because they are surrounded by friends who have excellent proficiency and fluency. Since the answer's accuracy or correctness is the consideration, silence would be the choice if they worry about their response. Therefore, silence is the decision to maintain a positive face (King, 2013). Moreover, this anxiety could prevent students from practicing their foreign language (Horwitz, 2010).

A Politeness Strategy

Data from students' interviews also suggests that silence is the way of a politeness strategy. Based on the lecturer's interview, there are no rules and regulations for participating in the classroom. All students can ask questions or contribute to the discussion whenever they want. A politeness strategy has been culturally constructed in the school. Dina decided to keep silent when she recognised that she should allow her friends to answer the lecturer's questions:

> Sometimes I keep silent to allow my friends to answer those questions because I am afraid that others will perceive me as arrogant… (Dina, interview 1, February 23, 2018).

Additionally, Dina's case was the same as Raisa's experience in which the purpose of her silence was to give other students a chance to ask a question when the lecturer ordered it:

> …so that I will not take many opportunities to ask questions. I will give others an opportunity to ask a question (Raisa, interview 2, February 24, 2018).

The silence that Dina and Raisa intentionally conduct can be perceived to be a strategy to avoid conflict (Jaworski, 1993) as well as to manage relationships (Jaworski and Stephens, 1998) with other students in the class. As the meaning of silence is complex, this phenomenon can be assumed that Dina and Raisa attempted to cope with the sociocultural situation (King and Harumi, 2020). Consequently, they keep silent to avoid dominating the classroom activities, although the lecturer allows them to ask and answer questions whenever they want. It is interesting to note that this kind of silence can also be understood as 'a means of social control' (Nakane, 2007) and the positioning strategies to adapt well to 'the social space' (Soltani and Tran, 2023).

In addition, there was unintended time to wait for others to speak when they kept silent, and it could be assumed that this reticence is the signal to ask others to take the opportunity to talk. During classroom activities, 'instant messaging interactions' such as by gesture or eye contact may appear (Kulkarni, 2014). These behaviors could also be attributed to a method to communicate without speaking (Agyekum, 2002).

Students' and Lecturer's Belief about Silence

Regarding students' beliefs about silence, some students suggest that silence brings advantages and disadvantages. Silence could be positive if it appears in the proper situation. Some students believe that silence is the process of learning. They decide to keep silent when they recognise the required condition. Additionally, students might want to give their friends a chance to participate in the classroom activities, and they do not want to dominate the discussion. Those phenomena show that silence is initiated to understand the lesson (Reda, 2009).

However, students' perceptions are different from the lecturer's beliefs. Tika, for example, said that some lecturers perceive reticence as bad behaviour when students do not understand but keep silent. The Lecturer confirmed that good language learners have good language skills and dare to practice them. The interpretation of cultural norms could cause this difference (Bonvillain, 2003). The lecturer may expect active learning. On the other hand, some students need time to understand the explanation, and some attempt to accommodate their friends' abilities.

Looking at more detail about the lecturer's point of view, she argues that silence makes it difficult for lecturers to evaluate the student's current abilities and students' weaknesses. This argument could be associated with difficulty for the lecturers in solving silence-related problems (Harumi, 2010). The difficulty in building rapport could also be why lecturers perceive silence as negative behaviour (Nakane, 2006). However, the problem of silence cannot be focused on the student's actions. Having known the reasons for silence, the lecturer should be able to solve the problem by evaluating the aspects of teaching, such as the teaching method, assessment, and learning materials (King, 2013). This could prevent feelings of disconnection and isolation students face (Kim Pham et al., 2023).

4.   CONCLUSION

4.1 Conclusion

Various factors behind the reticence have been indicated by exploring the reasons for silence in ESL classrooms in the Indonesian context. This study suggests that a lack of confidence is the primary reason for being silent. Silence is the alternative way to avoid humiliation or embarrassment. Another significant reason is foreign language anxiety. This kind of problem is classified into cognitive-related factors. Although students have good English skills, they still worry about the correctness of the sentences they want to use in conversation. Students may feel inferior because of the excellent language proficiency of the students surrounding them. Interestingly, the politeness strategy could also be the reason for silence. This study finds that students' silence is to allow classmates to ask or answer lecturer questions. This means that silence is used to avoid conflict and to maintain the relationship. The last reason for silence indicates that silence also plays an essential role in classroom interaction.

Based on the interview process, students seem to consciously recognising their silence. In addition, students perceive silence as both a good and bad thing because they perceive that silence is needed when the condition requires them to do so, such as giving others a chance to ask or answer questions. However, because of the students' silence, the lecturer found it challenging to evaluate the students' current abilities and students' weaknesses. Therefore, the lecturer perceives silence as hostile behaviour, and it can cause a lack of rapport.

The limitation of this study is that the data is obtained only through a semi-structured interview. As a result, this method does not allow seeing and observing the real situation in the classroom. Since silence is a means of communication, future research should be conducted through classroom observation.

4.2 Implications

This study has pedagogical implications, providing some suggestions for educational intervention regarding encouraging students to be more active and confident in ESL classroom activities. First, lecturers can structure and facilitate discussions to build students' confidence. Within this discussion, lecturers can intervene and allow students to take turns. Second, lecturers should employ various types of classroom activities such as small group work discussions and presentations. Teachers can also encourage student interaction by designing custom-made learning materials that are based on their observations in their classrooms. Third, the result of the findings shows that students have a problem with their confidence and anxiety. This means the lecturer should provide positive encouragement, such as constructive feedback and scaffolding.

4.3 Suggestions

Based on the findings of this study, several strategic recommendations are proposed to address the issue of student silence in EFL classrooms at Indonesian universities. It is imperative to encourage a classroom environment that is both supportive and non-judgmental, thereby justifying students' anxieties about making errors and alleviating foreign language. This can be facilitated by integrating pedagogical interventions focused on confidence-building and enhancing oral communication skills, such as structured group discussions and interactive speaking activities. Additionally, educators should be mindful of cultural norms that perceive silence as a form of politeness and, thus, should encourage participation that aligns with these cultural values. Providing structured opportunities for students to practice English in a psychologically safe environment significantly enhances their willingness to participate. Furthermore, professional development for educators focused on student silence's cultural and psychological dimensions is recommended to address these challenges effectively. Collectively, these strategies aim to augment student engagement and optimize the efficacy of EFL instruction within this context.

For future research, it is recommended to expand the scope of the investigation to include a larger and more diverse sample of participants across various Indonesian universities to enhance the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, longitudinal studies could examine the long-term effects of implementing strategies to reduce student silence and improve participation in EFL classrooms. Future research could also explore the role of technology and digital tools in facilitating communication and engagement among students who may be hesitant to participate in traditional classroom settings. Furthermore, comparative studies involving different cultural contexts could provide deeper insights into how cultural norms influence

student participation and silence in EFL settings globally. By addressing these areas, future research can contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the factors affecting student silence and the development of more effective pedagogical strategies.

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