



THE ROLE OF SILENCE AS A COMMUNICATION STRATEGY IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING

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Abstract. Silence is a universal part of conversation but it is not viewed positively in foreign language learning classrooms. Students' inability to respond or initiate cannot be directly attributed to indifference, lack of knowledge or lack of preparation. There can be various and profound reasons for student silence as it can be construed as students actively thinking, searching for lexis, preparing an answer or formulating a response.

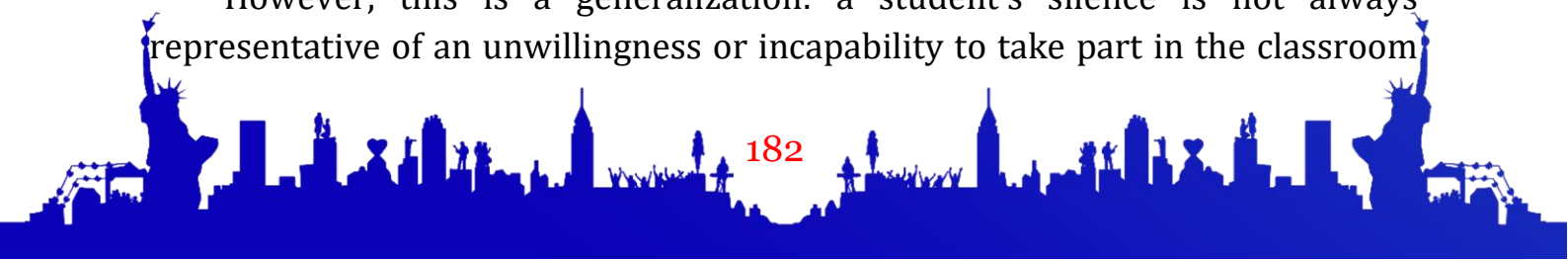
On the other hand, silence can be interpreted as an expression of stress, fear of making errors, loss of confidence and so on.

This paper looks at the notion of silence as a potential communicative strategy in the foreign language classroom and, specifically, the use and interpretations of student silence from cognitive, emotional, social and communicative points of view. It examines the role of the teacher with reference to the student's use of silence and attempts to argue that the student's inability to answer shouldn't be always seen as undesirable: a moment of silence provides students with an adequate processing and preparation time before speaking. Conversely, excessive and consecutive silence might significantly limit students' opportunity for practicing the target language. Hence it is vital for teachers to understand the different reasons for student's use of silence to achieve a more comfortable and conducive foreign language learning environment.

Keywords: silence, communication strategy, foreign language learning, EFL classroom, language anxiety, willingness to communicate, learner interaction.

For most people, communication in the foreign language classroom has something to do with the act of speech. Students are expected to answer teachers' questions, participate in group discussions, do presentations, and converse with each other in the target language, and as a result of this, silence in the class is interpreted negatively. A student who sits quietly without talking can be thought of as being too reserved, being ill-prepared, or lacking interest in the class.

However, this is a generalization: a student's silence is not always representative of an unwillingness or incapability to take part in the classroom





activities. A learner may be quiet due to the fact that they are searching for the correct word, as they may understand the question asked, but may need time to find the answer, or they may be too shy to expose an error. Hence, a student's silence does not necessarily mean a lack of engagement. The issue of classroom silence has been addressed by second language researchers. King (2013) in his new book "Silence in the Second Language Classroom: Understanding the Dynamics of Unvoiced Words" offers a critical exploration of the causes that lead learners to talk or not to talk, and argues that silence is associated with psychological, cultural and educational factors. (Springer Nature) The issue has been addressed more recently in academic contexts too.

Pham, Chong, and Wan (2023) investigated Vietnamese learners' experiences of silence in the face-to-face EFL learning context and revealed various dimensions of silence such as sociocultural and affective dimension, psycholinguistic dimension, interactive dimension, and individual dimension of silence. (Sage Journals) The following article aims at exploring silence as a communication strategy used in foreign language learning, and argues that we should not regard silence in an automatically negative light, but rather seek to better comprehend how it contributes or hinder second language learning for students in an EFL classroom environment.

What is 'silence' in the foreign language classroom?

It may be that it is easy to interpret 'silence' because silence means that someone is not talking. However, it is rather more complex.

It may be that the silence in two situations carries quite different meaning.

For example: The teacher asks the student a question in English and the student takes five seconds to think before giving the correct answer. Then, there may have been that 'thinking time' through which to give time. However, what if one student always keeps his or her mouth closed when being asked to speak even after having sufficient time to respond? This will be 'different' with reference to the former in meaning as he may have some kind of anxiety.

Therefore, silence must be perceived in association with what proceeds and follows.

King (2013) discusses in detail 'silence' as a classroom phenomenon not just absence of speech as "learners silence relates to several elements of their experience of being in an EL classroom". (Springer Nature) Pham et al. (2023) concur with previous research findings that the students' experience of silence was not attributed to a single cause: they spoke of silence in the context of the emotions they felt, their language processing, interaction with other participants,





their own personal qualities, and sociocultural background experiences (Sage Journals). So, beware of this common misconception, you do not always think a silent pupil is an inactive pupil - sometimes thinking happens inside even though you don't see it happen.

Silence as thinking time.

One of the most evident functions of silence in second language learning appears to be that it is an extended version of the time learners take to think.

It is a well-known fact that, in addition to translating thought and words (as learners have to do this even in their L1 in some contexts), second language learners are also simultaneously learning about lexicon, structure, pronunciation and meaning, therefore they are expected to perform complicated mental calculations compared to their L1. An intermediate English learner may have to spend a few seconds before providing an answer when he/she is asked a simple question by the teacher; for example "What would you do if you could live in another country?" The student may have to recall what they are going to say before searching for the appropriate lexical items they have been instructed and then consider the structure; while the student is mentally calculating all this, he/she is silent, but learning is still going on.

A space of silence could in actual fact be helpful: if the teacher immediately repeats the question and eventually provides the answer or rephrases it to facilitate the student's process of finding the appropriate meaning or grammatical patterns, the learner may become accustomed to having to produce a quick response which can only lead to a greater reliance on the teacher rather than becoming an independent language user. This phenomenon appears to be particularly evident for those learners whose production skills, especially automaticity, have not been fully established yet and who therefore might be comforted by having a little extra time to organize their thoughts. A bit of silence may thus be considered as the boundary between interpretation and production, and does not appear to be the antithesis to interaction; for example: The following utterance implies both lack of thought in the student and understanding by the learner "....." Teacher: 'Can you guess what I mean?'. Student: '.....' teacher "yes...". Student "yes teacher...".

Emotional Factors Behind Student Silence.

Another potential trigger for student silence could be related to the student's feelings. Students might be aware of the correct answer to a question, yet be unwilling to answer out of concern about making an error and being corrected in front of the entire class or being criticized by their peers. In these cases, students





do not remain silent because of a lack of knowledge, but rather because of the inability to predict the reaction of their peers after producing an answer.

Specifically, there are time pressures when speaking in the FL class, which give learners very limited time to rephrase what they have produced. It might seem better for anxious students to remain quiet than to make mistakes in language structures and grammar that could make them feel uncomfortable. Anxious learners may be characterized by feeling scared, being uncertain about what others expect from them, and worrying about how other people perceive them (Springer).

Therefore, it is important for teachers to make an appropriate judgment about the cause of students' silence in class and avoid linking it only to a lack of interest in study or preparation. In some cases, learners may appear quiet in class but be very concentrated when performing the tasks. As such, an environment where students do not need to be too concerned about errors can help promote students' participation and decrease the frequency and duration of silence.

Silence, Confidence and a Desire to Communicate.

A key area to consider is the learner's Willingness to Communicate (WTC). Willingness to communicate, or WTC, is not an inherent trait, but rather a dynamic phenomenon. WTC can vary according to the content, audience, activity, classroom climate and a learner's emotions.

Hence, a student who has been enthusiastically communicative in one lesson may well choose to fall silent at other times.

A student falling silent does not necessarily represent the permanent absence of motivation to use the target language, but rather a temporary lack of it. For instance, a student who talks incessantly to a close friend may be quite silent during the lesson at school. Yet another, an individual student, may find a subject too difficult to handle and has insufficient confidence with it. The harder the vocabulary or language, the greater the silence is if the student is not confident enough to speak. A recent study of Japanese EFL students concluded that it is necessary to consider silence together with willingness to communicate because the relationship does not seem simple, as a learner's state and an actual communicative decision do not simply reflect a level of motivation but also some aspects of their mental state (Sage Journals). This suggests that teachers do not need to push every single silent student to start talking. Providing preparation time, group activities and less formal participation opportunities may help students feel more confident when speaking.

Social and Cultural Aspects of Silence.





Silence can also carry meanings related to social and cultural factors. Students do not enter the foreign language classroom without prior educational experiences. This may impact their expectations about how a student is supposed to behave, when to speak up, and how teachers should be addressed.

In their investigation of Vietnamese university students, Pham, Chong and Wan (2023) categorized various dimensions of silence as sociocultural, affective, psycholinguistic, interactive and individual dimensions of silence. According to the research findings, silence could not be explained by just one universal reason because it is a manifestation of learning on different levels (Sage Journals).

This seems crucial in multicultural or even international EFL classrooms. While silence may be perceived by teachers as disinterest, it could be considered by students as politeness, consideration, obedience, thoughtfulness or as “normality” in the classroom context. Thus, when considering classroom behavior, teachers must acknowledge students’ prior schooling and cultural background before passing judgment on classroom participation.

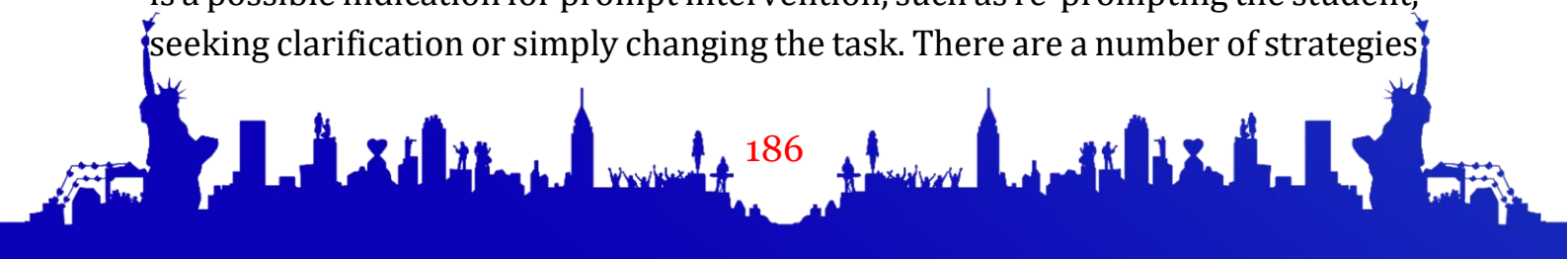
But cultural explanations should also be examined carefully. A student’s silence does not automatically result from their cultural background, although this factor may play a role sometimes. Students’ personality, language proficiency, anxiety and classroom environment could also be key factors that shape learners’ participation in both silent and active ways.

The Teacher’s Role in the Interpretation of Silence.

There can also be a role for the teacher in what makes silence ‘positive’ or ‘negative’. If the teacher asks a question and immediately repeats it, provides the answer or changes it after a short period of silence, students receive a message that an instant answer is expected. This can obviously be extremely hard for those learners who need extra time to process what is being asked.

Studies on second language wait time indicate that longer waits can alter classroom interaction. As the wait time increases beyond two seconds, the interaction can temporarily shift from the ‘typical’ Teacher Initiation–Student Response–Teacher Feedback structure towards more student-centered conversation (ScienceDirect).

This does not mean that you should never answer the question, but the teacher’s job is to determine whether this is a case of genuine communicative difficulty rather than simply thinking hard. Sometimes a short gap can indicate that the student is looking hard for the appropriate words, but an even longer gap is a possible indication for prompt intervention, such as re-prompting the student, seeking clarification or simply changing the task. There are a number of strategies





that can be used by the teacher, whose role in encouraging learners is considerable:

individual waiting time; giving students the opportunity to work in pairs and jot things down; and saying, "This could be just the minute you're waiting to gather your thoughts."

When Silence Can Become Problematic.

However, while silence can be beneficial for students, it can also result in reducing opportunities for students to practise the target language. When a student cannot stop being quiet and remains silent throughout most of the lesson, or for a long period of time in the classroom, this can become an interference for the interaction between the students in the class. Therefore, this means that the teacher ought to differentiate between some productive minutes of silence to complete a task and a total absence of involvement by the students.

Abedinpour (2026) states that different classroom interactions can result in silence being interpreted as problematic, making students have reduced opportunities for involvement.

This means we do not necessarily need to consider whether the students are or are not speaking too much or too little, but why they are being excluded from participation. We are not aiming to eliminate silence altogether, just to prevent it being an ever-present hindrance in the participation process.

Pedagogical Implications.

By investigating the various reasons that may cause learners to become silent, we could contribute to a more relaxed and supportive foreign language classroom. To begin with, learners should be given adequate processing time before expecting them to reply, and this becomes especially important if an unknown vocabulary item or a complex syntactic construction is used in a question.

Pair or group work can precede calling upon students to speak in front of the entire class. Doing so could ease their stress and allow them time to think before producing a fluent response. Silence holds different psychological, linguistic, social, and cultural meanings, as King and Pham et al. illustrate, and so teachers' actions and assumptions about why a learner is silent must take the particular learner and classroom situation into consideration.

Silence is a complicated aspect of foreign language classroom communication, and the reasons for it range from thinking and language processing to anxiety, lack of confidence, social expectations and resistance to communication. However, it cannot always imply a lack of interest, knowledge or





information. Therefore, this feature should not be perceived as purely negative, as it can have different functions in the learning process.

A brief space of silence is beneficial and can offer an opportunity for learner preparation and answer formulation, whereas extended silence can diminish learners' chances of engaging in target language practice. The teacher has the responsibility of differentiating between fruitful and problematic silence and offering proper support to learners when necessary.

Like in all other type of communications, language learners need space and speaking to have balance. Learners have to communicate and use and practice the target language, therefore they require speaking but they require space to assemble and structure their thoughts before responding, this way silence has beneficial contribution and usage in language learning and communication.

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