Vietnamese teacher educators' perceptions of silence during online English as a Foreign Language classes

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ABSTRACT

Teacher educators in university English as foreign language (EFL) classrooms often emphasise verbal communication alongside teacher-student relationships, students' emotions, and the classroom climate. These factors all contribute to either encouraging or discouraging students' willingness to communicate verbally (Butler, 2011). Yet, an area with limited research is understanding the teachers' perspectives of students' silence during online learning throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. Utilising Redmond et al.'s (2018) conceptual model of cognitive, behavioural, and emotional engagement in online learning, we examine how three undergraduate EFL teacher educators in Vietnam interpret students' silence while teaching EFL through online Zoom classes. Drawing on three in-depth semi-structured interviews (n=3 hours), findings indicated that silence was experienced by the teacher educators in different ways; as a thinking/learning opportunity, as an indication of teachers' uncertainty, and as conscious disengagement.

1. Introduction

Silence is a complex phenomenon in the classroom. Depending on who is interpreting the communication strategy, silence can have either positive, negative, or neutral connotations (Maher, 2021). The use of silence in the English as a Foreign language (EFL) classroom has various interpretations from both the teachers' and students' perspectives (see Bao, 2021; King, 2013; Maher, 2021). More recently, understanding the use of silence in the teaching and learning process has been further complicated due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Worldwide, synchronous learning utilising online platforms, such as Zoom, has replaced face-to-face classes. Teachers and students have adapted their teaching and learning by utilising online platforms to continue the school experience (Maheshwari, 2021). Despite the potential benefits of virtual environments, some studies indicate teachers are wary of sudden changes that affect their teaching, particularly in the online environment (see Smith & King, 2020). While there are extant studies that provide significant insight into online learning (see Badia et al., 2018; Derakhshan et al., 2021; Lenkaitis, 2020; Rapanta et al., 2020), there is a need to comprehend more about teacher educators' understanding of silence in undergraduate EFL classrooms due to the exponential increase of online learning during the pandemic. Therefore, we ask the question: How do Vietnamese English as a Foreign Language teacher educators perceive undergraduate students' silence when teaching English on Zoom during the COVID-19 pandemic?

2.1 Students' silence amid the COVID-19 pandemic

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and the need for social distancing, there has been a rapid and urgent need to shift face-to-face classes to fully online learning. Some long-standing studies report on technology-related challenges. McBrien et al. (2009) claim that online activities are fundamentally different from classroom experiences, where all participants are required to exhibit appropriate technological abilities. Teachers who are not proficient at incorporating technology into their lessons may create a confusing non-verbal environment for students, possibly causing some awkward silences (Cheung, 2021; Lenkaitis, 2020). In addition, Derakhshan et al. (2021) found that during the COVID-19 outbreak, limited face-to-face interaction, a sedentary lifestyle, and a rapid shift to online learning without adequate preparation all contributed to students feeling bored, leading to silence. Significantly, the study dispels the assumption that teachers are entirely responsible for students' silence (Derakhshan et al., 2021). These studies direct attention to the technological challenges and the nature of online learning during the pandemic, which are problematic aspects that may contribute to periods of silence. Furthermore, teachers play a critical role in explaining what and how they perceive silence when responding to issues in online learning.

The integration of technology with EFL teachers' ideas and pedagogical techniques has been examined in the context of the COVID-19 epidemic. Cheung's single case study (2021) demonstrates that students' silence is due to teachers' didactic teaching strategies, school curriculum objectives, and lack of technical ability. Further, it is demonstrated that online teachers maintain classroom silence by muting students on Zoom, implying a more teacher-led pedagogy (Cheung, 2021). This reiterates teachers' opinions that selecting instructional strategies to satisfy curricular goals may conflict with the use of silence in language acquisition classes (Bao, 2021; King, 2013). Indeed, treating silence in virtual classes as a problem, or a source of control, rather than an opportunity for involvement in discussions, may be intrusive and hinder student engagement (Bao, 2021). Additionally, Adedoyin and Soykan (2020) found that interruptions from housemates or pets can lead to silent intervals. Thus, it appears that the importance of silence as a teaching tool and the different scenarios that result in students' silence can either support or hinder the engagement of students during online EFL classes.

2.2 The value of students' silence in the EFL classroom context.

Studies show that there is value in privileging the use of silence in face-to-face EFL classrooms, as the practice can make a positive contribution to learning. It seems silence supports students' ability to process and construct content presented in classrooms (Bao & Ye, 2020; Ollin, 2008; Tatar, 2005), thereby enabling students to cultivate their individual learning styles and develop positive interactions with others (Harumi, 2010; Tatar, 2005). According to Dao et al. (2021), classroom engagement and silence are inextricably linked, as students require silence to deepen their cognitive processes, listen attentively to peers, and improve their speech content. Bao and Ye (2020) note that silence is used by students when unfamiliar content is drawn upon by the teacher, as the student's ability to reflect and draw on their prior experience may be limited. Understanding the relationship between engagement and silence may assist teacher educators in developing pedagogical tools that in turn assist learners in developing their knowledge and skill acquisition.

The teacher plays an important role in supporting EFL students' inclination to use silence and, in turn, solicits direction and empathy from other class members (Bao & Nguyen, 2020; Karas & Faez, 2020). Teachers who understand the learning process tend to scaffold students' verbal engagement by using linguistic prompts and selective guidance (Harumi, 2010; Karas & Faez, 2020). According to Bao and Nguyen (2020), these approaches help EFL students who are not confident about their language ability to feel more connected and motivated to study. Understanding this tension is crucial for teachers when dealing with students' silence in EFL contexts (Karas & Faez, 2020; Vassilopoulos & Konstantinidis, 2012). Yet, despite the value of understanding silence and utilising various pedagogical approaches, according to Maher (2021), silence can impact students' speaking performance, particularly if students are anxious and perceive their peers' evaluations negatively.

Internationally, using a cultural lens supports understanding the value of EFL students' silence. For example, Harumi (2010) highlights Japanese students' reliance on silence to acknowledge the teacher's authority and other students' vocal contributions. In Japan, silence is expected due to teacher-centred pedagogy and the understanding that to learn, students need to listen (Aspinall, 2006). To engage ESL students, Chinese teachers indicate that the psychological and language difficulties of students should be addressed, and the teachers showed limited willingness to understand the students'

use of silence (Karas & Faez, 2020). Tatar (2005) finds that non-native learners' silence is not a sign of incompetence, rather it is used by students to listen attentively to verbal content and process information. Bao and Nguyen (2020) note that there is limited discussion in Vietnamese EFL classrooms, and the use of silence by students is rejected by teachers as a form of participation. In the majority of these studies, it seems silence is understood as a marker of respect and is expected as an integral part of student behaviour in the classroom but is not necessarily understood as a form of participation. Despite the different countries these studies were situated in, one uniting factor is the complexity and uniqueness of each classroom, which is also present in online learning.

2.3 Use of silence in online learning

There are recent (Duran, 2020; Querol-Julian & Arteaga-Martinez, 2019) and longstanding studies (Vonderwell & Zachariah, 2005) regarding silence in synchronised online learning platforms. In line with previous research on silence in classrooms, Zembylas and Vrasidas (2007) argue that silent learners' nonverbal behaviours during online sessions should not be interpreted negatively. Their research shows that online teachers should be sensitive to students' nonverbal communication to evaluate their thinking and behaviours (Zembylas & Vrasidas, 2007). Even though visual cues are less visible in online environments, acknowledging students' concerns and uncertainties is a valuable pedagogical approach (Duran, 2020; Vonderwell & Zachariah, 2005). Querol-Julian and Arteaga-Martinez (2019) suggest that online students may form strong relationships with learning tasks through silence. To encourage students' virtual engagement with online activities and resources, blending silence with the strategic preparation of talk has been found to be a successful pedagogical tool (Bao, 2021; Hu, 2021). As a result, synchronous platforms may provide some students with opportunities to focus, and silent waiting time appears to help students process information in the same way that face-to-face learning does.

Despite the evident benefits of using silence as a pedagogical tool, arguments about students' online participation continue to highlight perceived limitations. Kozar (2016) reveals that English teachers have a low tolerance for students' silence, which is perceived as disengagement from the session. However, with few visual cues in virtual classrooms, teachers need to understand if students are demonstrating apathy (Zembylas & Vrasidas, 2007). As explained by Querol-Julian and Arteaga-Martinez (2019), low tolerance relies on teachers' knowledge of students' presence, where providing hints or rephrasing words are typically implemented to encourage their engagement. Nonetheless, such efforts may conflict with students' objectives to use silence to enhance cognitive processing or cultivate critical reflection (Bao, 2021).

The online system of Zoom has been extensively utilised in EFL classes. Correia et al. (2020) found that Zoom offered a range of educational features to help teachers convey information and retain student interest, such as the chat feature, the whiteboard and sharing screens. These aspects seem to help teachers exert control over classroom activities and the online environment (Correia et al., 2020; Kozar, 2016). However, whether the teacher's use of these features encourages or constrains students' silence remains underexplored. Teachers' reactions to students' silence during online learning are significant as it requires teachers to critically reflect on their pedagogy.

3. Theoretical Framework

The current study draws on Redmond et al.'s (2018) online engagement framework (OEF). The framework was developed from an extensive literature review where a constant comparison method was used to identify recurring themes related to the term 'engagement'. There were five key elements of engagement drawn from Redmond et al.'s (2018) literature review; these included social, cognitive, behavioural, collaborative, and emotional engagement. We have refined Redmond et al.'s model and focus on cognitive engagement, emotional engagement, and behavioural engagement (see Table 1) in relation to teacher educators' perceptions of silence in the classroom.

As positioned in Redmond et al.'s (2018) study, the three concepts (cognitive engagement, behavioural engagement, and emotional engagement) seem to be distinct forms of engagement with few interrelated components. To advance this idea, we argue that using Vygotsky's (1998; 1994) cultural-historical theory that has a focus on learning and development enables the concepts to be viewed as interrelated (see conceptual diagram Figure 1).

Table 1. Online Engagement Framework for Higher Education (adapted from Redmond et al., 2018, p. 190)

Online engagement element	Indicators (illustrative only)
Cognitive engagement	Thinking critically Activating metacognition Integrating ideas Developing deep discipline understanding Distributing expertise
Behavioural engagement	Developing academic skills Identifying opportunities and challenges Developing multidisciplinary skills Developing agency Upholding online learning norms Supporting and encouraging peers
Emotional engagement	managing expectations articulating assumptions recognising motivations committing to learning

Vygotsky (1994) argues that emotion, behaviour, and cognition cannot be separated as they are interrelated psychological processes. Studying one in isolation does not provide a full understanding. The reciprocal relationship a person has with their environment contributes to their learning and development. Each person brings their own experience into the context and shapes the interactions. At the same time, the environment shapes the person depending on who else is involved in the interaction.
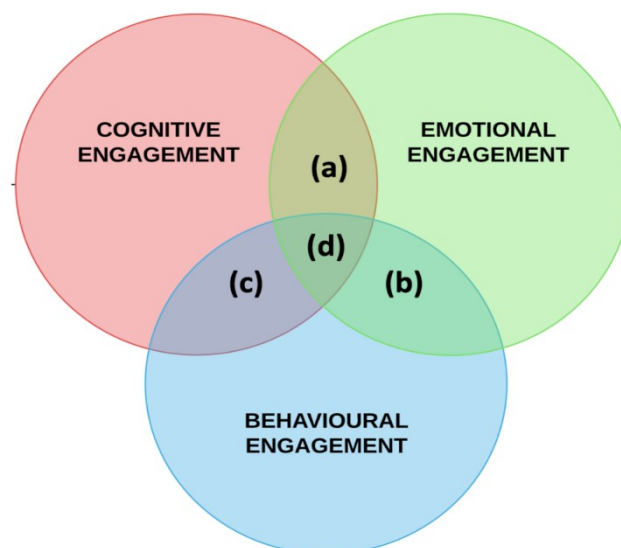

Fig. 1. Adapted from the conceptual Online Engagement Framework (OEF) in higher education developed by Redmond et al. (2018)

The model (Fig. 1) of three interrelated concepts of online engagement for higher education is modified from Redmond et al.'s (2018) study. Of particular importance is the way each concept is interwoven with the other (a, b, c) and together (d). Previous studies have indicated that students'

silence is informed by contextual factors and personal boundaries resulting from the need to reconsider the students' cognitive engagement, in-class behaviours, and emotions (Dao et al., 2021). However, rather than searching for strategies to improve student engagement, the framework is utilised for analysis to better understand teacher educators' perceptions of students' silence and associated indicators of online engagement.

4.1 Hermeneutic Phenomenology

A qualitative method is required to obtain participants' subjective experiences (Creswell, 2013; Hatch, 2002). As the study sought to obtain information about teacher educators' experience with online learning, we used a phenomenological approach, specifically hermeneutic phenomenology, which views lived experiences as an interpretive process involving both the researcher and participants (Creswell, 2013; Moran, 2000). By focusing on fully stated subjective perceptions, beliefs, and attitudes, Sloan and Bowe (sloan) argue that a better understanding of an individual's experiences may be obtained. Creswell (2013) sees such inquiry as a way to build consensus among all those who experience the phenomenon. This method enables the investigation of the 'what' and 'how' of each person's experience (Creswell, 2013; Sokolowski, 2000) in relation to silence in the Vietnamese English classroom.

4.2 Participant and setting

Purposive sampling strategies were used in this small-scale study. Firstly, purposive sampling, as understood by Bryman (2016), is a purposeful approach used by researchers to recruit knowledgeable or experienced individuals who exhibit the requisite traits for the phenomenon of interest. Additionally, purposive sampling examines the participants' desire and capability to clearly and expressively describe their experiences (Bernard, 2002). Therefore, the selection criteria for participants included:

required to be Vietnamese, presently employed in Vietnam as EFL teachers

have at least six months of experience teaching EFL undergraduate students online using Zoom

experienced a move from face-to-face instruction to online instruction due to Vietnam's COVID-19 restrictions

an interest in online student engagement and willingness to participate and share their experience concerning silence in online classrooms.

Utilising the selection criteria, a sample of three EFL teacher educators from a university, located in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam were invited into the study. The three participants were teaching several online English classes for undergraduate students. The participants were the first author's professional contacts. Once ethical permission was granted from the university by the ethics committee, all participants were contacted and provided with the explanatory statement and consent form.

4.3 Data Generation

Semi-structured interviews were used, as this type of interview helped the researcher build rapport with the participants (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Unlike structured interviews, semi-structured interviews allow interviewees to express themselves freely without being confined by pre-set questions (Smith & Osborn, 2003). During the interview, non-judgmental behaviours and active listening were employed to accurately capture expressed shared experiences (Alvesson, 2011; Creswell, 2013). The open-ended questions and discussion allowed participants to relate their experiences to the study themes. The interview questions were designed to be free of assumptions and guiding intents (Gubrium et al., 2012). Representative examples of the interview questions include:

- Can you describe some situations in which you experienced students' silence when teaching English on ZOOM?

- In your opinion, what are the positive aspects/ limitations of silence for students to learn English on ZOOM?

- How did you respond to students' silence on ZOOM? Can you share with me some examples of you responding to silent moments from students on ZOOM?

Due to the current COVID-19 pandemic, the interview took place on Zoom, as agreed by all participants. The interviews were held in English and lasted 60 minutes for each participant. Smith and Osborn (2003) argue that participants' lack of trust may impact the interview. As a result, participants were reminded of the study's purpose and length to confirm their readiness to participate (Creswell, 2013; Gubrium et al., 2012). Permission was sought to record the participants' discussion, and they were informed that they were able to leave the session at any time without any repercussions whatsoever (Bryman, 2016).

Participant	Teaching experience	Experience with Zoom	Data gathered
Peter	Approximately 5 years of teaching undergraduates Prior to the pandemic, the majority of the teaching was face to face	Generally positive experience First Zoom class in 2020	60 minutes
Kate	Approximately one year of teaching undergraduates Prior to the pandemic, the majority of the teaching was face to face	Generally positive experience First Zoom class in 2020	60 minutes
Tom	Approximately 3 years of teaching undergraduates Prior to the pandemic, the majority of the teaching was face to face	Generally positive experience First Zoom class in 2020	60 minutes
Total			180 minutes

4.4. Transcription

Transcription was employed through Otter.ai, a computer-aided transcription tool. The transcript and collected recording were checked for accuracy multiple times. Moreover, according to Friesen et al. (2012), handwritten notes allow the researcher to catch important aspects like chuckles and pauses. These observations aided the study's phenomenological interpretation (Gubrium et al., 2012; Smith & Osborn, 2003).

4.5. Data analysis

Data analysis in phenomenological research requires strategic planning, precise organisation, and appropriate methodology (Creswell, 2013; Smith & Osborn, 2003). According to Moustakas (1994), when evaluating in-depth interview data, attention is directed towards key statements or quotations that help describe the phenomenon. To maximise the richness of data, the researchers aim to attend to statements or expressions that explain the participants' experiences (Smith & Osborn, 2003). In certain cases, the researchers strive to understand the data by reflecting on the participants' personal experiences, in addition, the researchers draw on prior theoretical knowledge (Creswell, 2013; Holroyd, 2007). Thus, the data analysis used in this study was holistic, addressing key phases that highlighted the interpretive nature of phenomenology.

The data were analysed in a three-stage iterative process. First, each transcript was read numerous times, which helped familiarity with the account and cultivation of new thoughts (Smith & Osborn, 2003). Notes, initial themes and titles were placed on the documents which established theoretical links between the first and subsequent iterations of analysis (Creswell, 2013; Smith & Osborn, 2003). The themes were linked across participants, which indicated cluster meanings and subordinate themes. Subordinate themes were emergent themes that described the organising concept of the participants' interview extracts (Smith & Osborn, 2003). A table of themes and sub-themes was constructed (see Table 2). At this level, concepts that were related were prioritised and formulated into a coherent document with direct quotes to maintain authenticity of the participants' experiences in relation to silence.

Table 2. Examples of teacher educators experiencing students' silence

Themes	Subordinate	Example extracts from participant interviews
Silence as thinking and learning	Thinking and interacting with tasks	Peter: the students get to think more about the questions being asked
		Kate: silence is a chance for students to stay focused on what they are doing the task.
	Reflect on prior knowledge	Kate: students reflect on and absorb knowledge
	Learner autonomy	Tom: I strongly encourage autonomy and reflection in the classroom.
		realise their strengths and weaknesses
Silence indicates teachers' uncertainty	prolonged silence when checking understanding	Peter: ...when I was trying to elicit the background knowledge from students. And there was a complete dead silence right there for like five minutes to 10. At first, I tried to wait. I thought it could be the problem with the Internet. I thought it could be because they were trying to think.
	affects teachers' emotions and self-beliefs	Kate: didn't know why they just kept silent.
		Kate: in the online classroom, when the students were silent, I have to admit that I was a bit upset...I feel like I am a loser.
		Tom: I felt very confused when they stayed silent, sometimes, I was quite emotional.

5. Findings

The interviews regarding the phenomenon of silence in online teaching with EFL teacher educators from Vietnam revealed two important findings. First, the teacher educators understood silence as a way for students to use time to construct their thinking and pose answers perceived as acceptable to peers. Second, there was tension in the teacher educators' understanding of silence depending on the length of silence, with long silences, the teachers expressed their uncertainty. New to our understanding was the use of silence as consciously disengaging due to the influence of peers and contextual limitations of online learning during the pandemic nature.

5.1. Silence for thinking and learning

The three teacher educators (Peter, Kate and Tom) all had similar experiences with students' silence on Zoom. The discussion revealed the teacher educators experienced students' use of silence as positive and as a way that students clarified their thinking, reflected on their knowledge and finally as a way to support student autonomy.

Peter acknowledged that students needed extended silent moments to think about the questions and did not feel intimidated when teachers waited for a response.

> I will say that students, they will not feel intimidated when teachers wait for some...kind of...like an extended period of time... and also the students get to think more about the questions being asked. It is more comfortable on the student's side when they actually keep silent and think because they don't really have pressures coming from the teacher's side

Kate commented that in her experience, each person needed silence to think and focus on the task at hand.

> I think everyone of us needs some silence so that we can focus on thinking about something…It (silence) is a chance for students to stay focused on what they are doing

Kate purposefully incorporated timing strategies into her lesson plans and believed that silence was vital in the learning process because it allowed students to *'reflect on and absorb knowledge'*.

Tom clarified his thinking on the phenomenon of students' silence. Drawing on his own experience, Tom commented that silence is a way for students to be efficient when reflecting on their learning and the pauses contribute to developing learner autonomy. *'I think I also give them some silent time…. because I strongly encourage autonomy and reflection in the classroom'*. Tom further

elaborated on silence as reflection time and how it helped students to *'realise their strengths and weaknesses'*. Tom asserted that giving students silence in space and time allowed them to hone their thinking while completing online tasks.

5.2. Understanding the effect of student's silence on teacher educators

Although the teachers provided explanations and respected students' silence, all three teacher educators felt some form of emotion when experiencing extended silence from students during online teaching, with all indicating they did not fully comprehend why students remained silent.

Peter struggled to identify why students were silent in some circumstances and indicated feeling confused about long moments of students' silence.

> ...when I was trying to elicit the background knowledge from students. And there was a complete dead silence right there for like five minutes to 10. At first, I tried to wait. I thought it could be the problem with the Internet. I thought it could be because they were trying to think.

Peter commented that he could not identify *'students' facial expressions'* on Zoom and he sought to engage students to respond, *'I was asking to confirm if they had fully understood the feedback or not… they were silent'*. The students' prolonged silence made Peter confused and initiated some self-doubt concerning his teaching, *'I was confused if I was making a mistake'*, which made him *'start to feel uncomfortable…it actually takes a toll on teachers' confidence.'*

Similarly, Kate indicated that students often turned off their cameras so she could not see what the students were doing. Kate felt emotional when she was unable to interpret students' silence: *'in the online classroom, when the students were silent, I have to admit that I was a bit upset…I feel like I am a loser'*. Kate indicated that she *'didn't know why they just kept silent'*.

In a similar way, Tom struggled to identify an appropriate way to cope with silent moments when teaching online. He expressed his feelings, *'I felt very confused when they stayed silent, sometimes, I was quite emotional'*.

Students' prolonged silence seems to impact teachers' emotions. The three teachers reported *'feeling like a loser'* (Kate) being 'confused' (Peter, Kate and Tom), *'uncomfortable'* (Peter) and becoming *'quite emotional'* (Tom) and not knowing if he was '*making a mistake*' (Peter) in relation to his feedback. All three indicated that prolonged silence in online zoom classes affects their self-confidence. There seemed to be tension between the teacher educators' own experience of students' silence and their understanding of contextual factors such as students' conscious choice to remain silent.

Students' conscious choice to remain silent

Peter perceived that his students made a conscious choice to be silent due to personal challenges related to cultural norms: *'Some Vietnamese students don't feel comfortable sharing ideas; as an individual, they like to detach themselves out of the group.'* Peter also reported that students' conscious choice of silence was because students were *'accustomed to the feeling of keeping their inner talk inside'*.

Similar to Peter, Tom believed that students' silence was the result of peer pressure, he suggested that students were influenced by their peers both behaviourally and emotionally. Tom interpreted students' silence as a *'face-protecting act'*, meaning students were afraid to be judged by *'asking silly questions'*. In Tom's lived experience, silent students tended to *'feel shy'*, and *'lose their face in front of the whole class…they don't want to respond to the teacher'*.

Similar to Peter and Tom, Kate believed that students were shy and afraid of making mistakes, leading to some students remaining silent. Kate indicated students' unwillingness to speak was linked to the reliance on their peers' verbal contribution and the students' self-belief. She expressed, *'students don't want to answer it…As a student, I still wait for my peers to say something'*.

All three teacher educators mentioned the impact of the pandemic on their students' choice of silence by referring to students' living conditions and feelings. Peter said: *'they might have some family*

problems…some students don't have their own room…some live in a neighbourhood where things are very busy'.

Kate commented that *'Their house...their learning environment is too noisy,'*. She discovered that some students lived in close proximity to others and often shared a room with other family members who were producing noise or potentially interfering with their study, implying that students were unable to maintain a vocal presence in class. Additionally, her observations indicated that students muted their zoom microphones to address emerging concerns such as package delivery or to wait for the teacher and other students to resolve technological difficulties. Kate was concerned that the pandemic-related difficulties would have an effect on students' online learning experiences.

Tom also expressed his concerns about the rapid change to online learning where not all teachers were well-prepared, which in turn influenced each student's decision to stay silent. He shared his view that limited internet connection created problems of silence. He mentioned that *'their mic had problems and they couldn't respond',* implying that access to technology in Vietnam for some students was not of high quality. Tom also reported that *'due to the lack of interactions among students staying at home',* his students appeared to be less social, which might deter them from expressing their ideas verbally.

Students' conscious choice to use silence in online learning seemed to stem from contextual limitations such as crowded living arrangements, everyday activities, and invisible peer pressure.

Understanding the meaning of silence

Interestingly, even though Kate gave several examples of students' silence that explain her uncertainty, she refused to *'jump into any conclusions'* that there was a single justification for students' silence. In this respect, it is essential to note that Kate's perception of silence gradually changed towards a more positive attitude, she said: *'I gradually accepted that truth (the silence), I do not feel annoyed anymore'.*

Furthermore, Tom displayed his uncertainty when understanding the meaning of silence used by students when learning on Zoom.

> It's quite hard, it is sometimes impossible for me to really know the meaning of silence. Sometimes the silence may mean students don't know, or it may mean they are doing something else

An intriguing note is the phrases *'quite hard' and 'impossible'* that Tom used to describe his thoughts on the kind of silence students were expressing. Again, this case of silence also shared by other participants seemed to appraise the teacher's uncertainty.

6. Discussions

6.1. Silence for thinking and learning

Incorporating silence into online classroom activities is important as students develop their thinking skills and foster their self-reflective learning (Bao, 2021; Tatar, 2005; Ollin, 2008). From the interviews, it is clear that all three participants shared the belief that students' silence functioned as a cognitive tool and supported some emotional engagement that facilitated their thinking and encouraged positive feelings. The teacher educators indicated that using silence enables students to feel at ease while interacting with online learning materials and provides time for students to consider the difficulty of the task. This aligns with Querol-Julian and Arteaga-Martinez (2019) study, which indicates the importance of creating an interactive online space by using silence for students to think about the task, particularly when a higher level of thinking is required.

In addition to the use of silence as a cognitive tool and for emotional support, all three teacher educators agreed that students' reflection time during online sessions could be well-nurtured when silence was privileged. These findings support other studies, indicating that using vocalisation when paired with silence can stimulate reflective learning as students need time to draw upon their previous experiences (Bao, 2021; Harumi2010; Yates and Nguyen, 2012). This finding suggests the interrelationship between cognition, emotions and behaviour as perceived by the teachers and can be drawn on to support students thinking and learning.

6.2. Silence experienced and the teacher educators' feelings of uncertainty

During their experiences with teaching English on Zoom, all three participants found it challenging to identify the students' purpose when using silence in some circumstances. Unlike face-to-face classrooms, where teachers are able to see students' behaviours, the Zoom platform does not enable this to occur when students turn off their cameras (Correia et al., 2020; Kozar 2016). All participants agreed that due to the lack of visual clues and opportunities to read students' facial expressions, their perceptions of silence eventuated in uncertainties with their pedagogy, which was linked with varied emotions. Significantly, students' prolonged silence may exert limitations on the teachers' interactivity with their students while conducting the class virtually.

The effect of prolonged silence on the teacher educators varied as they all experienced different emotions such as struggling to understand why students were silent (Peter, Kate, Tom), feelings of confusion (Kate), feeling quite emotional (Tom) and self-doubt with their teaching (Peter). However, rather than enact changes in teaching strategies, they waited for students to respond which impacted their emotional feelings. This is an example of the interrelation between thinking (cognition), emotion, and behaviour (Vygotsky, 1994). This finding supports different responses of teachers and in some cases, teachers indicated they struggled emotionally and were unsure as to whether or not to encourage participants without verbal presence and decided to unmute students, indicating a didactic teaching approach (Cheung, 2021). Such findings suggest that teachers' emotions should be considered in situ while responding to students' silence, as this influences students' cognitive, emotional, and behavioural engagement in online learning.

The tension all teacher educators experienced rested between their own emotions and how they perceived students' silence. All educators understood that there were contextual factors that contributed to students' silence. The participants' perceptions of students' silence on Zoom seemed to be perceived as conscious disengagement from verbal participation during class discussions. The teacher educators proposed three main reasons 1. The influence of peers, 2. Cultural factors that lead to students' conscious choice to be silent and 3. Contextual limitations such as noisy living environment. These findings are significant, as Harumi (2010) found silence could be used to show appreciation for others' vocal contributions. By contrast, all three participants in the current study agreed that students tended to wait for others' answers rather than verbally offering their answers. It is interesting to note that the three teachers from this study indicated students were shy and did not want to make mistakes in front of their peers, which resulted in their decision not to talk. As Redmond et al. (2018) indicate peer-related factors influence students' emotional and behavioural engagement, fear of peer judgment may be a contributor to silence. Teachers are aware of the silence and students' self-positioning when interacting with others online.

Furthermore, students' conscious disengagement may be related to the Vietnamese collectivist culture-related factor of 'collectivist' individuals. The teachers discussed the ways their students seemed to prioritise others' ideas over their contributions. While this seems to confirm the association between cultural elements of EFL learners and silence choices in Harumi's (2010), it raises the possibility that without careful thought from the teachers, it may be assumed that silent students could be neglected and assumed as lacking participation as a whole (Bao & Nguyen, 2020).

7. Conclusion

The study contributes to the literature on silence and online student engagement in distance education by studying Vietnamese teachers' perceptions of students' silence in online learning Zoom during the pandemic. The study's findings indicate that the three teacher educators experienced students' silence in similar ways. The participants perceived that silence was used by students for thinking and learning. Each teacher experienced students' prolonged silence with emotion and indicated feeling uncertain, annoyed, or quite emotional. Further, the teacher educators experienced tension between their feelings and the student's silence as they perceived silence may be conscious disengagement due to contextual factors, such as invisible peer pressure, or more practical concerns such as accepting packages, or close living environments.

Theoretically, the initial findings begin to highlight a link between cognitive, emotional, and behavioural engagement for teacher educators in this study. Silence is important in each aspect of engagement for both teachers and students. The study has limitations of the study, which include the small-scale, and all participants being situated in Vietnam. Therefore, the study is not generalisable to

other settings (Slekar, 2005). However, our contribution to the literature has theoretical and practical implications.

We call for more research on teachers' perceptions of online silence in diverse circumstances and educational levels to understand the significance of online silence for students and teachers. More studies are needed that consider teachers' interwoven emotions, cognition, and behaviours through the use of silence when learning online.

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