

Silence in English as a foreign language classrooms: Students' and teachers' perception of classroom interaction

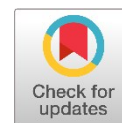
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ABSTRACT

Silence in EFL classrooms has the potential to influence the language acquisition process. This study examined teachers' and students' perceptions of student silence in Vietnamese EFL classrooms by triangulating data from videos of 91 students from four classes and semi-structured and retrospective interviews of eight students and three teachers. The findings reveal a disconnect between Vietnamese teachers' and students' perceptions of student silence, resulting in failure to address the issue. While students' silence reflects cognitive engagement or language processing needs, teachers tend to overlook this, reinforcing passive behaviors by quickly providing answers and focusing on maintaining classroom order. While students were silent due to the dynamic interaction of cultural and social norms, unproductive classroom management, and language proficiency, teachers viewed student silence as a reflection of their learning habits and test-oriented purposes, justifying their silence based on their fixed characteristics, learning attitudes, and test results. A contradiction was also found between teachers' preference for maintaining order in the classroom and their desire for students' active involvement. A training program that makes teachers' expectations and perceptions visible for questioning, challenging, and negotiating while considering the dynamics of teaching, learning processes, and students' fluid identities could improve teaching practices.



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1. Introduction

In English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom, interaction facilitates students' development of linguistic and communicative competence by affording them the necessary practice. The lack of interaction may impede English students' language learning. Previous studies find the presence of learners' silence during classroom interactions (Bao, 2013; Schultz, 2012). Such silence in educational settings is nuanced, carrying various implications, and is shaped by syllabus structure, classroom dynamics (Bao, 2013), subject matter, and peer dynamics (Nguyen, 2015). Observers, including teachers, classmates, and students themselves, might hold different perceptions of students' silence. Hence, contextualizing and construing this phenomenon necessitates a comprehensive exploration of the perceptions of all involved participants.

Vietnamese learners in English classrooms tend to keep silent and avoid responding to questions or expressing ideas during class activities (Bao, 2013; Nguyen, 2015; Yates & Trang, 2012). While silence is commonly observed, the question of whether it signifies students' intentional disengagement or other meanings and functions remains unresolved. This study examines how Vietnamese students and teachers perceive silence in teacher-student interactions within non-major English courses at the tertiary level in Vietnam. The central research question is:

How do teachers and students perceive students' silence during English classroom lessons?

2. Literature Review

2.1. Interaction in EFL Classrooms and Influential Factors

EFL classroom interaction helps improve learners' communicative abilities through negotiation and collaboration (Brown, 2000) while simultaneously modifying and developing their language system (Loewen & Sato, 2018; Walsh, 2011). When withdrawing from participating in classroom interactions, students might lose opportunities to develop strategies for handling the new language. Since English teachers play a central role in shaping and managing classroom interaction, the way they design and facilitate these activities can either support or hinder students' language development. Hence, educators need to encourage learners to partake in communicative activities or conversational interaction, thereby generating communicative outputs (Harmer, 2001) in English classrooms.

Different factors can impede classroom interaction under different contextual conditions. Learners are encouraged to employ strategies to prevent communication breakdowns (Ellis & Barkhuizen, 2005) and to be actively involved in both teacher-student and student-student interactions. The ways students perceive themselves and their peers influence classroom interaction (Lensmire, 2010; Wortham, 2004). Students' competence is found to shape interaction patterns, with highly competent learners more actively participating and raising questions compared to their less proficient counterparts (Good et al., 1987). Teachers' questioning techniques and talking patterns are also found to influence students' interactions in the classroom (Hall & Walsh, 2002; Thoms, 2012). Extended teacher talk is found to provide input, but it hinders students' opportunities for practice. In contrast, the proper use of questioning techniques, wait time, and appreciative responses can facilitate productive interactions among students (Hoang & Nguyen, 2020). This requires English teachers who manage classroom communication patterns (Walsh, 2011) to accurately and sensitively recognize and interpret influential factors to stimulate effective interaction.

Vietnamese students' silence is associated with several socio-cultural factors shaping classroom interactions, including Confucian values, power distance and hierarchical teacher-student relationship, and the fear of losing face. Confucian ideas have a significant influence on Vietnamese students' mindsets, fostering passivity and obedience, and discouraging them from challenging or questioning the knowledge provided by instructors (Thomson, 2009). Classroom hierarchy further reinforces Vietnamese students' passive learning styles, as teachers hold greater authority and control the distribution of learning opportunities during lessons (Hoang & Pham, 2019). In addition, the fear of losing face (Li & Liu, 2011) makes Asian students, including those from Vietnam, reluctant to raise questions or participate in classroom discussions. This creates a classroom environment in which any potential embarrassment must be avoided at all costs (Xuan Mai et al., 2024). These social and cultural traits reinforce Vietnamese students' perception that silence is acceptable or even expected behaviours in EFL classrooms.

2.2. Silence in Classroom Interaction

In classroom interaction, silence is commonly defined as a pause or gap occurring "between a teacher's expectation of a response and the time that the respondent takes to respond" (Bista, 2012, p. 77). This can also be observed when students use limited short utterances, rarely pose questions, or even withdraw from class discussions (Remedios et al., 2008). More broadly, silence in teacher-student interaction refers to "the lack of oral participation and verbal responsiveness" (King, 2013, p. 2) from the learners when they are expected to speak or engage.

While often associated with disengagement or communication breakdown, silence is, in fact, an integral aspect of classroom interaction (Walsh, 2011). It can be perceived in various ways: as an unfavorable response to teachers, an obstacle to effective language learning, a face-saving strategy (King, 2013), or simply a lack of verbal participation in classroom exchanges. In some cases, students'

withdrawal from verbal communication can be regarded as "a positive communicative item," enabling learners to "gain access, organize and absorb new material" (Jaworski & Sachdev, 1998, p. 286). Silence can facilitate learners' cognitive processing by providing time to think and revise what they have learned (Schultz, 2012). Thus, student silence is not necessarily negative, nor does it always indicate non-participation in lessons.

2.3. Perception of Students' Silence in Classroom Interactions

Perceptions of silence are affected by people's expectations in intercultural communication (Spencer-Oatey & Xing, 2005). Students are found to choose to keep silent relevant to their constraints, socio-psychological factors, the socio-cultural and educational aspects of their surroundings (Al-Ahmadi & King, 2023; Bao, 2014; Hu & Fell-Eisenkraft, 2013; Liu, 2005; Maher & King, 2022; Remedios et al, 2008) such as face-saving strategies and collectivist cultural values in which silence shows appreciation and respect to others' talks (Bao, 2014; Wiland, 2017). Silence is also reported to be related to students' proficiency level and personality (Liu, 2005), as well as their perceived reactions from teachers and peers (Nguyen, 2015).

1) *Students' Perception of Student Silence*

Students perceive silence as an opportunity to prepare for their talk and to connect new information with their existing knowledge (Bao, 2014). They do not consider verbal silence as a dearth of cognitive participation but rather as a tool to express disagreement with the teacher's way of graded participation (Meyer & Hunt, 2011) and as a passive protest or dissatisfaction with teachers' authority, without threatening their face (King, 2013). Silence serves as a "risk-free" option for Japanese learners to show respect to their instructor and display intolerance or discomfort with peers' silence or non-responsiveness to the teacher's questions (King, 2013). Silence can result from peers' silence or be related to the fear of being evaluated negatively by others (Maher & King, 2022). These findings demonstrate students' views of silence differ; it can be a learning strategy or a tool for confronting various surrounding factors, including teachers and peers.

2) *Teachers' Perceptions of Students' Silence*

Teachers might interpret their students' silence as negative if they construe it with cultural bias in intercultural teaching contexts (Ollin, 2008). Some view silence as disengagement if measured against "conventional understandings" (Bista, 2012, p. 81). Bao (2014) finds that teachers and academics tend to view silence as a sign of reticence rather than a learning mode. By contrast, teachers interpret silence positively as an indication of learners' engagement in "internal activity" such as "listening, cognitively processing, emotionally processing, emotionally withdrawing" (Ollin, 2008, p. 272) or as an indicator of reception and production of language knowledge (Nakane, 2007). Thus, silence can be decoded in different ways across contexts and cultures (Johannesen, 1974). These studies highlight the importance of a nuanced understanding of students' silence, considering both socio-cultural and linguistic factors.

3) *Research gap*

Existing studies suggest that numerous factors influence student silence in classroom interactions; however, most current studies have not taken into account the views of teachers in triangulation with those of students. As silence is a part of classroom interaction, a shared understanding and interpretation between students and teachers about such silence is essential. Harumi (2011) identified a perception gap between EFL learners and both native and Japanese English teachers, noting that linguistic, psychological, and sociocultural factors, including communicative style, contribute to student silence and that teachers and students often interpret this silence differently. Nonetheless, its reliance on questionnaires as the sole data collection tool limits the depth of interpretation. This limitation highlights the need for additional tools that provide richer data sources. Moreover, most previous studies examine teacher and student perspectives separately rather than in response to the same instances of silence. This study thus addresses this gap by exploring the fit between Vietnamese students' and teachers' perceptions of student silence in the moment-by-moment classroom interaction to understand the complexity and nuances of the issue.

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants

Four English teachers and 91 students from four General English classes at a university partook in this study. The retrospective and semi-structured interviews involved three female teachers and eight students (five females and three males), whose information is provided in the following tables (Table 1 and Table 2). Their names are pseudonyms.

Table 1. The Descriptions of Students in Interviews

No	Name	Gender	Classroom teacher
1	An	Female	Anh
2	Binh	Male	Minh
3	Chi	Female	Minh
4	Duong	Female	Minh
5	Dao	Female	Minh
6	Phan	Male	Nhung
7	Giang	Male	Nhung
8	Hoa	Female	Hien

Table 2. The Descriptions of Teachers in Interviews

No	Teacher	Years of teaching	Gender
1	Teacher Minh	22	Female
2	Teacher Nhung	9	Female
3	Teacher Hien	12	Female

3.2. Data Collection

1) Audio-Visual Recording

To acclimatize students and teachers to the researcher's and camera's presence, the researcher made preliminary visits to the targeted classes, interacted with student participants, and conducted preparatory "dry-run" sessions before the video recording sessions. Although not used as data, these sessions helped familiarise students and teachers with the camera's presence, fostering a more natural classroom atmosphere. Thus, video-recorded data was expected to be more reliable (O'Brien, 1993).

2) Video Stimulated Recall Interviews (RI)

Stimulated recall interviews involve interviewees reconstructing classroom events captured on videotapes (Clarke, 2001). This allows interviewees to watch their recorded behaviours and reflect on their thought process during those instances (Nguyen et al., 2013). Leveraging the videotapes from previous English lessons, researchers probed students' cognitive processes during their moments of silence in the English lessons. Similarly, teachers' perspectives on their students' silence were explored when they watched videos of their lessons.

A set of queries suggested by Gass and Mackey (2000) were adapted and used to probe the interviewees when they paused the video or during specific segments, aiming to gain insights into their thoughts.

- What were you thinking here/at this point?
- Do you recall thinking anything when she said or repeated that?
- Can you remember what you were thinking when she said that/those word(s)?
- What did you think when the class was silent at that time?

Similar questions were adapted for teachers, including:

- What were you thinking here/at that point?
- Can you tell me what you were thinking when you looked at that student?

- Do you remember what you were thinking when that student/the class did not respond to your questions?

3) *Semi-Structured Interview (SI)*

Further questions (Mackey & Gass, 2021) were asked during semi-structured interviews to investigate the participants' perspectives on silent periods in class:

- What do you think about keeping silent in English lessons?
- What are the advantages and disadvantages of keeping silent in English lessons?
- What factors affect your decision to stay silent or to raise your voice in class?

The interviews were conducted in Vietnamese and had a total duration of 115 minutes. An independent transcriber transcribed the recordings, which were subsequently translated into English by a professional translator. The total corpus included 4895 words.

3.3. Data Analysis Methods and Procedure

Qualitative data underwent analysis following Miles et al. (2014) techniques. Data were read and reread, coded in an iterative process, and arranged into themes using both relevant concepts from literature and emerging themes grounded in the data.

4. Findings

Two different types of silence

In the observed lessons, students largely remained silent, offering limited responses to teacher queries, with many directing their attention to their textbooks, notebooks, or phones rather than to the teacher. Retrospective interviews revealed various reasons for students' silence, prompting an investigation into associated factors. From students' narratives and the explored factors, two types of silence emerged: productive, where students choose not to speak yet to process information, and unproductive when inhibitory factors hinder verbal participation. The following sections will provide a detailed discussion of how these features are demonstrated in classroom interactions.

4.1. Productive Silence: Teachers' Misunderstandings

In the stimulated recall interviews, students explained their silence for various reasons, one of which was related to their decision to remain silent for learning purposes.

1) *Silence as a Learning Strategy*

Student silence was found to be associated with learning strategy because learners used silence as a cognitive tool to assimilate and internalize newly presented information. In this class discussion on Sports, when the teacher raised a question about English names of sports, no one responded, including Giang, who chose to look at his textbook. He shared that he decided not to raise his voice to respond to the teacher because he was pondering the most suitable answer using complete sentences, "including subject and predicate" (Giang, RI), rather than only one-word answers. This provided Giang time to consider and improve his answer before responding to the teacher's query. Saying a sentence in full is a productive learning strategy as students have a chance to practise not just vocabulary but also grammar. In the Vietnamese context, especially when communicating with people of higher authority, children are taught to speak in complete sentences as a sign of respect and well-behaved behavior. Those who say just a word or a few words without forming a complete sentence when talking to a senior are considered discourteous. In this case, we can see that Giang was actively learning, but his language proficiency and cultural beliefs prevented him from forming satisfactory responses in a short time.

However, his teacher did not see his silence as a learning mode. She considered her questioning techniques as the cause of her students' silence. She believed that her questions were "inappropriate," "difficult," and "not suggestive enough." She was right that the questions were complex and not suggestive enough. Then, she added that her questions were "not related to the exam," so her students did not care. Problematising her questions could have been facilitative to her teaching practices if the teacher had dug deeper into it to reformulate the questions, provided more wait time, supported learners with functional sentence structures, or suggested that students offer words rather than complete sentences. However, explaining it in terms of students' test-oriented purposes might have

prevented her from delving further into the situation. At that moment, she was observed not to do anything to encourage students to raise their voices.

Similarly, Chi and her peers remained silent during a listening lesson when her teacher was trying to elicit the content of an audio recording. Commenting on this episode, she expressed her need for time to recall the content and her difficulty in recalling the utterances. This shows that student silence can be related to a cognitive retrieval process. Silence created spaces for learners to retrieve information, reflect quietly, and engage in meaningful oral interaction, using her "think-time" (Gambrell, 1980). The pause occurs after a teacher's question and before a learner's response, facilitating the integration of novel information into their existing knowledge and serving as a prerequisite for students' responses (Gambrell, 1983). Therefore, silence may be an effective tool in supporting students' thinking and learning processes (Schultz, 2012).

Chi and her peers' silence, however, was considered by Ms. Minh to be a consequence of their limited English competence, as they were confused by questions requiring vocabulary knowledge and were not confident enough to answer. Although the teacher considered limited English competence as the reason for her student's silence, she was observed to continue the listening lesson with more teacher-posed questions instead of making any efforts to scaffold her weaker learners, leaving these students behind. She added that it was not worrisome as the students had good attitudes in learning. Good attitudes were seen in the students' non-disruptive behaviours, which seemed to be sufficient for the teacher to move on with the lesson.

If these students were given enough wait time to prepare their answers, they might have been able to speak. Nonetheless, the teacher overlooked such needs; instead, she immediately provided the answers and posed more questions to break the class silence to continue the lesson. Consequently, students like Phan, Giang, Chi, and their peers did not have the opportunity to speak. However, they were potentially able to contribute to the lesson if given enough wait time, scaffolding, and/or their fear of speaking incomplete sentences was addressed.

2) *Silence for Enhancing Learning Experience*

Some students were found to remain silent to listen to their teachers' and peers' answers. For Lan, silence provided an opportunity to gather ideas from classmates and synthesize them to improve her answers. Similarly, during a teacher-led discussion, Phan and Giang chose to stay silent to focus on reviewing and refining their work. Giang explained that he preferred listening to the teacher's explanation to correct his work rather than speaking up.

When commenting on such moments, Ms. Nhung attributed silence to her "ineffective teaching methods." She believed that students were silent because she could not encourage them to participate more and to be more interested in the lesson. However, she did not realise that, despite being unresponsive to her questions, her students were still in the process of improving their work and trying to learn from one another.

In certain situations, especially after teacher-posed questions and during peers' sharing or teachers' talk, silence can be a productive and effective condition for learning. Such silence demonstrates an active cognitive process, providing an opportunity to refine students' work and gain insights, as well as a means of retrieving information, all of which are integral to the learning process. The teachers did not identify the reasons behind their students' silence, raising the question of how teachers can recognise productive silence as a learning tool.

4.2. Unproductive silence and Inhibitory factors

1) *Power Distance, Classroom Hierarchy, and a Trained Passive Learning Habit*

Students perceive talking aloud in class as inappropriate and interruptive. Phan opted for silence to be polite, although he knew the answer because he "was waiting to be called upon by the teacher." Hoa continuously mentioned that the reason behind her silence was to avoid interrupting her teacher. In such situations, student silence is required because the teachers, who hold a higher position of authority, are instructing, initiating activities, or exclusively distributing participation or learning opportunities (Hoang & Pham, 2019). Such classroom organisation and the assumption of who would be selected to participate prevented students from freely raising their voices. However, in the interviews and as observed in class, the students did not show any dissent or opposition to their teacher's approach.

Interestingly, Ms. Hien was able to recognise the reason behind Hoa's silence. She believed that it was normal because her students only spoke up when she called them directly, and they did not speak "disorderly without being asked." Ms. Hien's use of the word "disorderly" to describe spontaneous interactions from students indicates her preference for a classroom where the teacher maintains control over students' speaking opportunities. This could be associated with students becoming passive learners accustomed to limited interaction. Ms. Minh was also aware of her authority as a teacher to maintain discipline in the class, ensuring students remained silent until permitted to speak. Both these teachers and their students' perceptions of power distance and hierarchy contributed to the quiet atmosphere where active participation should have been encouraged. Both teachers and students recognised that the hierarchy in classroom interaction could foster passive learning habits among students; however, neither questioned the perception and the practice.

At times, teachers did not provide sufficient "wait time" (Walsh, 2011). Still, they immediately gave the answers to their queries to continue the lesson with other questions or activities. During the lessons, Ms. Hien was observed to directly call each student by name from the class list to break the class's silence after raising both open-ended and yes/no questions without receiving any response from the students. Commenting on this silence, the students explained that they were awaiting the teacher's invitation to speak. Then, they remained silent, listening to both the teacher and the selected student's response. The teacher's efforts allowed individual students to speak one by one, albeit passively, while others remained silent, resulting in limited opportunities for interaction. When one student proactively responded, Ms. Hien showed her praise for his willingness to communicate. This demonstrates the contradiction between the teacher's preference for maintaining order and her desire for students' active involvement.

Students' silence, unless being called upon, functions as a norm, becoming their learning habit. Both students and teachers in the observed classrooms perceived such silence as a learning style or habit. Lan described her habit of keeping silent and preparing answers to forthcoming questions in case she would be called upon. She, along with Hoa and Phan, added that even when they knew the answers, they remained silent unless the teacher addressed them directly or clarification was needed. Hoa explained that this was reinforced by the teacher's practice of providing answers if no one responded. This highlights how silence can become a trained behaviour in the learning process, and students might grow accustomed to it.

Ms. Hien viewed Giang's behaviour of waiting for the teacher to call on him as usual in her class. Ms. Minh attributed her students' silence to habitual learning styles without acknowledging any negative impact on their English learning experience. When asked about students' silence after eliciting responses, Ms. Minh relied on interpreting their attitudes and guessing their understanding from their expressions. Regarding Binh's silence, Ms. Minh attributed it to "his learning style," explaining that he only listened to what he liked or to "something new or special." She added, "That is his characteristic; of course, he also concentrates on important parts, but he does not have the habit of writing and does not like to write down." Despite Ms. Minh's recognition that Binh would actively participate in "new or special" activities, she still viewed his silence as a characteristic and learning habit. In these classrooms, the passive learning habit inhibited students' active oral engagement, with silence being accepted and even encouraged. Neither students nor teachers commented on how this silence might hamper students' learning opportunities.

2) Teachers' Teaching Methods and Classroom Management

The teacher's methods and classroom management can contribute to students' silence in the observed classes. Repetitive activities during lessons might make students like Binh, Chi, and Dao disengaged. Duong stated, "I was already bored and wanted to give up." In Ms. Minh's class, many students gradually became quiet as the lesson progressed. Lan occasionally looked around and admitted to being distracted by other thoughts. Phan confessed to playing video games during his silent moments. Binh, despite being competent, displayed little engagement due to discomfort from heat and thought about the air conditioner. This suggests the need for more varied and engaging teaching methods to energize and motivate students to participate actively in class activities.

However, Ms. Minh, upon observing Binh's silence in the video, believed that it was a characteristic of his. Although she admitted that the teacher played a vital role in promoting teacher-student interaction and adjusting students' learning styles, she attributed this silence to the learner's personality as she believed that "once such a learning style had deeply ingrained in his personality, it

could be quite challenging to change, as he found his learning style effective and appropriate to him. I find his test results okay. He completes tests well." Initially, Ms. Minh viewed his silence negatively but later deemed it acceptable due to his good test results. Interestingly, the teacher did not attribute students' silence to the classroom dynamics, including teaching and learning activities, but rather to a relatively fixed attribute of the students, such as their learning style, habit, or personality. The words "style" and "habit" are used eight and ten times, respectively, by both teachers and students in the interviews. The student's "okay" test results further justified the choice of the students' silence and the teacher's teaching practice. Thus, both the attribution of students' learning to their chosen "deeply ingrained" styles and the satisfaction with the test results rationalise the current teaching and learning practices.

3) *Silent Classroom Atmosphere*

Peers and the classroom environment can significantly influence students' decision to remain silent. Students reported avoiding drawing attention to themselves in silent classrooms. Binh indicated that his decision to stay silent depended on his preference, environmental distractions, and boredom. Despite preferring a dynamic classroom, Hoa chose silence because in such silent lessons, "most students seem not to interact with one another," so she felt "constrained" and did not want to show her knowledge. Sharing the same perception, Giang talked about his silent moment in class, "the class was so quiet that I chose to keep silent (laugh). If I am studying in a dynamic classroom environment, I will follow suit and engage in a dynamic atmosphere, speaking aloud my thoughts. When learning in a silent class, if I talk aloud, I am afraid that I will be noticed." Despite recognising the drawbacks of a silent classroom, Giang hesitated to speak for fear of drawing attention from his teacher and peers. This perpetuated a lack of active interaction and language use opportunities, as students' silence was not only the reason for a silent class but also its consequence.

Ms. Nhung attributed Giang's silence to grammar weaknesses rather than acknowledging the role of the classroom dynamics. While she acknowledged various reasons for student silence, her teaching practices did not reflect this awareness, as she continued to pose questions without addressing the silence. This indicates a gap between teacher awareness and actual classroom practices.

4) *Peer Factor: Keeping Silent for the Sake of Others*

Students reported that their silence might contribute to creating a better learning environment for their classmates, especially for those who are more advanced in their English learning. Giang and Hoa chose to remain silent in class to facilitate their classmates' learning, believing it would create a more conducive learning environment where "students who understand the lesson will concentrate more to learn more" (Giang, RI). They saw silence as a responsibility to aid peers in concentrating and maintaining a comfortable atmosphere. Despite preferring a dynamic classroom, these students prioritized the benefits of others. This indicates divergent perspectives among learners on the ideal classroom atmosphere and behaviour. However, this raises questions about the potential impact of prioritizing others' learning and the teacher's role in creating an inclusive environment. Students' decision to maintain silence for the benefit of others cannot be recognised by the teacher, indicating a need for explicit discussion and negotiation of learning and teaching styles and methods between teachers and students.

5) *Limited English Competence and Anxiety*

Various other factors influenced students' decision to remain silent in class. Lan, with limited listening skills, struggled to keep up with the teacher's pace and hesitated to ask questions. Other students shared similar anxiety due to their lack of confidence in English proficiency. They faced challenges in understanding fast-paced spoken English and worries about grammatical correctness. Phan and Lan, who positioned themselves as "being weak in learning English" (Lan, RI; Phan, SI), feared more challenging follow-up questions from the teacher, further discouraging them from speaking up. They opted for silence to avoid potential embarrassment, sacrificing opportunities for active participation. This lack of confidence and fear of losing face hindered their willingness to engage orally, reflecting a reluctance to display weaknesses and hindering the language learning process.

Dao chose silence due to her fear of mispronunciation, even when capable of responding to the teacher. Chi's silence was linked to her perceived limited English proficiency and weak listening skills. While Ms. Minh attributed Chi's silence to shyness, she believed gentle encouragement could foster participation. However, Chi's limited English proficiency prevented her from speaking up despite the

teacher's efforts. This lack of understanding prevented the effective facilitation of less confident students, inhibiting their oral participation.

Interestingly, after watching the video, Ms. Minh recognised that Dao and Chi's silence was linked to their English proficiency, a realization aligned with the student's reflections. This shift in perception came after reviewing recorded lessons, indicating the importance of understanding individual student's challenges. Regrettably, Ms. Minh's initial failure to recognise these difficulties during class led to weaker students being left behind, as the lesson progressed without adequate scaffolding.

Various factors, such as cultural factors, contextual inhibitions, the roles of teachers and peers, students' limited competence and psychological challenges, contributed to unproductive silence, leading to unresponsive behaviours and limited oral interaction. These constraints result in predominantly silent classrooms, hindering language learning. Both students' use of unproductive silence and teachers' perceptions and teaching approaches can negatively impact language learning opportunities in English classrooms.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

While both teachers and students perceived students' silence as complex and multifaceted, the findings reveal a disconnect between students' and teachers' perceptions of silence, as well as between teachers' perceptions and practices, resulting in failure to address the issues. While teachers view and understand student silence in relation to the power distance in the classroom, students' fixed learning styles and characteristics, limited English competence, and teaching methods, students reveal more nuanced meanings that relate to the dynamic interaction among cognitive, cultural, managerial, and interactional factors.

5.1. Productive Silence Benefiting Language Learning Process

When students keep silent in class purposefully and actively, they perceive silence as a time for internal cognitive activities, aligning with Ollin (2008), who noted that it provides valuable "think-time" to process, internalize information, and understand learning materials—a crucial aspect of meaningful and productive learning. Students also used silence as a means to retrieve information and bridge their existing knowledge with the new one, which reinforces what was found by Bao (2014). In this context, silence functioned as a conscious and active choice by students regarding how they wished to participate in the learning process, indicating their strategic approach to learning. Silence was used to enhance students' learning experience as it gave them a chance to garner and synthesize their peers' ideas to prepare for better responses. The students utilised silence as a time for refining their work and gaining a better understanding, rather than spontaneously interacting orally with the teacher. This was also highlighted by Bao (2014, p. 147), in which "a clear relationship between productive use of silence and the quality of speech" was acknowledged. Therefore, silence, from the perceptions of learners, is not always negative for learning. However, teachers often failed to recognise this; they were observed to quickly provide the answer and focus on maintaining classroom order, reinforcing passive learning habits.

5.2. Unproductive Silence Inhibiting Learning Opportunities

Various intertwining factors including *cultural inhibitions* (power distance, classroom hierarchy); *personal factors* (trained passive learning habit and style, fear of making mistakes, limited English competence, mood); *contextual inhibitions* (silent classroom atmosphere, the decision to keep silent for the sake of peers); *teacher factor* (inappropriate teaching methods and classroom management) were found to hinder student active participation, contributing to the complexity of silence in EFL class.

Cultural and personal factors are interrelated in conditioning student silence. Students' self-positioning and cultural factors, such as power distance, led them to consider the teacher in a higher position in the classroom hierarchy (Hoang & Pham, 2019). Students believed that showing respect meant remaining silent until called upon, resulting in a classroom dynamic where students rarely participated. This assumption may have discouraged students from actively participating, fostered passive learning habits, and reduced their contributions. Teachers' perceptions of the desired learning environment may not align with students' expectations. A contradiction was also found between teachers' preference for maintaining order in the classroom and their desire for students' active involvement.

Student silence was related to students' fear of making mistakes (Al-Ahmadi & King, 2023) and is used as a face-saving strategy, as noted by King (2013) and Wilang (2017), especially when they lacked confidence in their English proficiency (Harumi, 2011). This study advances the literature by finding students' fear of appearing disrespectful when speaking in incomplete sentences, which is rooted in cultural beliefs. They hesitated to seek clarification when they could not understand English from their teachers or peers, negatively impacting their learning experience and hindering active participation. Although teachers recognise that limited English competency is an obstacle for students, they did not realize their students' fear of making mistakes or appearing disrespectful. The interpretation of silence was even more complicated considering students' different English competencies. Students, regardless of their ability, often choose silence after the teacher asks a question. Some are still searching for answers, while others silently wait for confirmation or are accustomed to being called upon. This results in a predominantly quiet atmosphere, which fosters a fear of speaking up and perpetuates silence. This dynamic hampers meaningful interaction and language learning opportunities, highlighting a problematic reliance on teacher-led activities and emphasis on accuracy.

The ideal classroom environment was perceived differently by students, depending on whether they wanted to remain silent for their own sake or the sake of others. While Bao (2014) found that Chinese students kept quiet for the sake of less competent peers, this study also found that such silence was intended to create a better learning environment for their peers, especially those who were considered to be better learners. This means that the ways students positioned themselves and others might have led to their silent moments. This finding further supports the claims made by Lensmire (2010) and Wortham (2004), who suggested that learners' perceptions of themselves and others influence classroom interaction. Additionally, it aligns with Maher and King's (2022) findings, which found a relationship between silence and awareness of classmates.

Other contextual factors, including classroom atmosphere and teachers, had influenced students' decision to keep silent, which was in line with Remedios et al. (2008) and Bao (2014), further explaining findings in Hall and Walsh (2002) and Thoms (2012) that indicate teachers' questionings technique and talking patterns do influence interaction in classroom. Silent peers, a quiet learning environment, and repeated teacher-led activities were found to constrain students' active participation. In this case, student silence is not only a consequence of a silent classroom but also a cause that perpetuates it. This resulted in students being distracted by other surrounding factors.

The findings of this study suggest that, in addition to certain cultural factors, students' silence can be influenced by various interactive factors of moment-by-moment interaction rather than by fixed attributes. However, teachers' perception of students' silence as a learning style, habit, or characteristic, and their focus on students' test results, prevent them from recognising the potential unfavourable impacts of silence on students' learning. While students were silent due to the dynamic interaction of cultural and social norms, unproductive classroom management, and language proficiency, teachers viewed student silence as a reflection of their learning habits and test-oriented purposes, justifying their silence based on their fixed characteristics, learning attitudes, and test results.

5.3. Implications

Findings from the study suggest that teachers need to identify when and how silence is being used productively by students so that they can provide them with sufficient wait time to benefit their learning process. However, recognising productive silence is a real challenge for teachers because they have to navigate multiple tasks simultaneously in class, from teaching to managing activities and addressing the needs of a large class size. To harness the advantages of students' productive silence, instructors might consider reducing the use of teacher-led activities, teacher-posed questions, and a monotonous teaching style. This adjustment allows students more time for cognitive processing and reflection, creating a learning environment where students actively engage with the material and interact with their peers.

To address students' use of unproductive silence, instructors need to maintain a balanced approach to classroom management and learner engagement by effectively managing their authority, which can unintentionally prevent learners from actively participating in classroom activities. Next, teachers are suggested to create a safe and supportive learning environment where students feel comfortable expressing themselves without fear of judgment or ridicule. In addition, teachers should create inclusive classrooms and provide opportunities for open dialogue about the ideal classroom

atmosphere and expected behaviors to build mutual understanding and shared classroom norms among teachers and students. This approach creates a more inclusive learning environment that acknowledges diverse learner needs and fosters greater student agency. Teachers also need to be careful and sensitive when providing feedback to students during classroom interactions. More innovative and motivating activities are needed to encourage students to actively engage with the lesson content and draw their attention to it. The use of video-based reflection on teaching for teachers will enable them to make necessary adjustments to their teaching practices, thereby creating a more interactive and inclusive learning environment that empowers students in the learning process.

While students were silent due to the dynamic interaction of cultural and social norms, unproductive classroom management, and language proficiency, as well as moment-by-moment classroom interaction, teachers viewed student silence as a reflection of their learning habits and test-oriented purposes, justifying their silence based on their fixed characteristics, learning attitudes, and results. Thus, teachers need further training on classroom dynamics to recognise that students' identities are more fluid, depending on moment-by-moment interactions rather than fixed characteristics, which might help teachers devise better classroom interactions to facilitate learning.

Interestingly, when spending more time observing the lessons through video recordings, the teachers' perceptions gradually changed as they realised their influential role in shaping students' silence. This means that teachers' reflection on their lessons can contribute to their interpretation of reasons for their students' silence, from which implications can be drawn. The study highlights how teacher's interpretation of student silence may impact their adjustment to the teaching approach. It reveals a contradiction between teachers' desire to maintain class order and their expectation of students' active involvement. A training program in which teachers' expectations and perceptions could be made visible, allowing them to be questioned, challenged, and negotiated, taking into consideration the dynamic view of the teaching and learning process as well as the dynamic and fluid identity of students, would be helpful in redefining teaching practices. In many cases, students' decision to maintain silence for the benefit of others cannot be recognised by the teacher, indicating a need for explicit discussion and negotiation of learning and teaching styles and methods between teachers and students.

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