

THE ROLE OF SILENCE IN TEACHER-STUDENT INTERACTION: IMPLICATIONS FOR CLASSROOM DISCOURSE

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Abstract

Silence in an academic setting is a complex tool of communication which could be seen as contemplation, cultural values, resistance or emotional expression. This qualitative investigation explores the meaning of silence in teacher student communications in English classrooms in the University of Education, Lahore. The data were collected by means of classroom observation (15 hours) and semi-structured interviews of 10 teachers and 30 students. The thematic analysis helped to identify three major themes, which include silence as a manifestation of reflection, silence as a manifestation of resistance, and silence as a manifestation of cultural expression. Findings suggest that teachers tend to perceive silence as a sign of indifference, and students tend to consider quiet behaviour to be an intentional mental or cultural behaviour. The paper presents pedagogical recommendations (pause-time, multimodal engagement, reflective exercises) and suggests a new conceptualization of the concept of participation to include silent forms of participation. Implications of teacher education and curriculum development are dealt with.

Keywords: silence, classroom discourse, pause-time, qualitative, thematic analysis

Introduction:

Even though oral speech has been the predominant mode of classroom communication, silence remains a very fundamental but often under-rated aspect of creating meaning in learning settings. It has already been argued by scholars whether silence is detachment or a problem of engagement (Jaworski, 1993; Nakane, 2007). It is significant because it has ambiguity in that silence may be understood in many ways like reflection, respect, hesitation, or subtle defiance, depending on the cultural and contextual circumstances. Silent moments are usually evident in the classroom following questions raised by the teachers. Some teachers discuss these pauses as the signs of confusion or the inability to be prepared but other discussers view these pauses as the possibility to process something in the mind and think more deeply (Harumi, 2011). So, there is a need to comprehend silence with a focus on what is spoken and what is not. It is in this context that the present paper examines the role of silence, pedagogically, communicatively and emotionally, in teacher-student interactions in the context of teaching of the English language in the University of Education, Lahore.

Literature Review:

The latest studies (2020-2025) have significantly widened and diversified our knowledge about silence in the communication in the classroom, either in the traditional or online form. As an example, Nguyen Thu Hanh (2020) found that silence among students in Vietnamese EFL language context was caused by a combination of factors like language anxiety, lack of self-confidence, pedagogy, and cooperation among peers. Based on this, Osman Juma et al. (2022) investigated the negative relationship between teacher immediacy (verbal and non-verbal behaviors that reduce psychological distance between teachers and

students) and what they refer to as active silence: the quiet behavior of students that is related to the absence of engagement and hopelessness.

Debbie GE Ho and others (2023) reported a significant reduction in verbal interaction in synchronous online courses in the virtual learning, which they partially attribute to the technology (e.g., mute and camera-off options) that introduce new interpretative ambiguities in the mind of the instructor. Moreover, cross-cultural research has highlighted the fact that the perception of silence is varied in terms of sociocultural backgrounds. As an example, a survey conducted among more than 1,000 university students in Shanghai (2022) revealed that migrant learners exhibited higher levels of such phenomenon as a protectively silent, which can be explained by a cultural distance and a reduced perceived level of learning results. Likewise, emerging research in Thailand (2025) indicates that silence may be culturally determined by deference, examination-based teaching and a hierarchical relationship between teachers and students, in which culturally responsive teaching is better than deficit explanations regarding student silence.

Moreover, current systematic reviews of the concept of wait-time (e.g., Annie Yun An Shiau et al., 2024) show that intentional extension of the teacher pause after giving a question leads to students giving longer and more detailed responses and a higher level of cognitive engagement. All of these inquiries provoke the reconsideration of silence not as the lack of speech or expression of indifference, but as an intricate interactional resource as a form of reflection, emotional processing, cultural position, or resistance, all of which is context-dependent, media-dependent, educator behavior-dependent, and socially conditional.

Methodology:

Research Design:

The qualitative design was used in this research in order to examine the diverse meanings and roles of silence in English language classroom interactions. The qualitative approach was selected because it would offer a detailed picture of experiences, perceptions and pattern of communication of the participants in real teaching and learning scenarios. The data collection was done using two main forms- non-participant observation and semi-structured interviews as the two methods were important in capturing the observable behaviors as well as the interpretation of silence by the participants. This design was able to support triangulation which increased the credibility and richness of the findings.

Setting and Participants:

The study was conducted in the University of Education, Lahore, with the subject undergraduates in English courses. There were teachers and students with the various academic and social backgrounds. The participants were ten teachers (six females and four males) who volunteered to participate in the study and had between 2 and 15 years of teaching experience. Purposive sampling that was used to select thirty students (18 female and 12 male, 18-23 years old) in six English classes meant direct and consistent involvement in classroom communication in English. This teacher student interaction provided a balanced perception of silence in different teaching dynamics.

Data Collection:

Structured classroom observation and semi-structured interviews that were extensive in nature were used to compile the data during a period of two months. The researcher performed approximately 15 hours of a non-participant observation in six classes, with the emphasis made on teacher-student dynamics, tendencies of response, and silent moments in the classes. Specific documentation was recorded using field notes and audio recordings (with consent). Semi-structured interviews followed after the observations with all the participants (a group of 10 teachers (35-45 minutes each) and a group of 30 students (20-30

minutes each) respectively). The perceptions of silence, emotions of quiet situations, and contextual factors that led to such behaviors were the focus of these interviews.

Data Analysis:

Theme 1: Silence as Reflection:

A significant part of learners saw silence as one of the thinking processes which would be enacted internally to create answers, a translation of ideas or practise a language. Student A (female, BA English) said: Sometimes I need a couple of seconds to think in Urdu and then find the appropriate English words- I remain quiet, I must think how I can organize my ideas. It was also observed by teachers that pauses made at the right time produced more reflective responses. As Teacher 4 remarked: Students usually have longer answers to wait, that is why I wait, students have time.

Theme 2: Silence as Resistance:

Other students employed silence as a tactic of resistance or withdrawal particularly when they found the teaching approach to alienate them. Student F mentioned: In case I do not agree with the teacher speaking to us, I like to keep quiet, it is easier to do it than to fight. Teachers observed that intractable silence was a common phenomenon and was in most cases, accompanied by little eye contact or non-participation in group activities.

Theme 3: Silence as Cultural Expression:

The interpretation of silence was influenced by cultural traditions. Some of the students that belonged to collectivist families explained that being quiet is a sign of respect. Student K said: In my family, it is a sign of respect to listen quietly, I do not say anything until I am asked. The teachers were aware of these cultural influences but they also raised that certain quietness concealed understanding problems.

Cross-Cutting Observations:

- 1. Interpretive mismatch:** Teachers often interpreted silence as apathy, but students attributed cognitive causes of it.
- 2. Importance of pause-time:** Teachers who prolonged their wait-time regularly had a more extended and better response.
- 3. Multimodal communication:** Silent periods were used when students used writing, gestures and small group interaction.

Discussion:

The results are consistent with the recent studies in which the silence is defined as the interactional and culturally mediated phenomenon (Hanh, 2020; Juma, 2022; Ho, 2023). Personal reflection by way of silence helps in processing the mind, particularly in language learning where translation as well as lexical search constitute parts of the process. Resistance silence asserts the problems of equity and classroom relations since consistent silence might be an indicator of alienation that needs attention. Culturally induced silence implies that the norms of participation should be modified to cultural diversity as opposed to uniformity. Pedagogical, silence may be utilized by teachers with the help of structured wait-time, reflective writing activities, and various channels of participation.

Conclusion and Recommendations:

This paper confirms that, silence in English classrooms at the University of Education has various dimensions that include; cognitive, cultural and social aspects. The recommendations put forward are as follows:

- Introduce purposeful wait-time following questions (2–5 seconds or as needed).
- Introduce reflective silent tasks (think write share) in case the contemplation is to be transformed into a tangible result.
- Provide multimodal participation options (written input, polls and group summaries).

- Educate teachers of trains to recognize the different types of silence and react positively, but not forcefully.

Limitations:

The study is limited and contextualized; hence, it is not likely that the findings can be generalized widely. Future researches can be extended to other institutions or cross-cultural comparisons in order to increase validity.

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