

Addressing student silence in EFL classrooms: Factors, challenges, and effective strategies for engagement at junior high school in Yogyakarta

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ABSTRACT

This study explores various factors contributing to student silence in EFL (English as a Foreign Language) classes, including vocabulary limitations, sleepiness, incorrect pronunciation, classroom situation, lack of teacher approach, and homogeneity. In this study, the researcher obtained 9 students as participants to be used as subjects in the study, then interviews were conducted with research questionnaires that had been prepared by the researcher. Data collected through interviews and observations highlighted that students often have insufficient vocabulary knowledge, leading to difficulties in communication and active participation. Many students stated that they remained silent due to limited vocabulary, fear of mispronunciation, and lack of engaging classroom activities. In addition, sleepiness, often caused by lack of rest, further hindered their engagement. Observations revealed that the lack of engaging interactions and teacher approaches had a significant impact on students' confidence and willingness to participate. The study also examined the strategies students used to achieve learning success, such as utilizing the internet to learn English through games and songs and interacting with classmates in a flexible learning environment. Despite their silence in the classroom, students demonstrated the ability to learn English effectively outside the traditional classroom environment. This highlights the need for a more inclusive and dynamic classroom environment where students feel motivated and confident to participate. The findings suggest that fostering a supportive and interactive classroom atmosphere, as well as a caring teacher approach, can significantly improve student engagement and language acquisition in an EFL environment.

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1. Introduction

Silence in the classroom is a multifaceted phenomenon that can have a significant impact on the learning process, especially in the context of learning English as a foreign language (EFL). Huynh and Adams (2022) suggest that teacher educators experience silence in an online EFL classroom as an opportunity to think and learn, an indication of the teacher's insecurity, and a conscious disengagement. According to Li-da (2013), student silence in English classrooms is a widespread and difficult problem for teachers to address. Oral communication is crucial for foreign language learning. Xioa-mei (2011) Silence in the EFL classroom is an obstacle to students' comprehensive English proficiency, and strategies to overcome it are explored. Due to factors such as low English proficiency,

lack of self-confidence, and lack of preparation, silence in the classroom triggers negative thoughts, feelings, and emotions in students (Perkasa et al., 2022). Hanh (2020) stated that classroom silence is due to personal, impersonal, linguistic, and psychological factors, including student personality, language ability, teaching methodology, teaching content, and classroom cooperation.

Silence is also an important component of teacher-student communication. According to Al Jahdhami (2018) an important component in teacher-student communication, of course, contact between the teacher and students is very important in the learning process, otherwise, learning will become very passive. Students' failure to develop bonds with previous acquaintances, indifference, laziness, and lack of competence are some of the factors that contribute to their silence, which can lower their productivity. Indifference, laziness, and lack of competence are some of the factors that contribute to their silence, which can lower their productivity. According to Bao (2020), students' silence can also indicate students' verbal resistance to teachers.

In junior high EFL classrooms, silence is a multifaceted phenomenon influenced by various factors such as fear of mistakes, lack of confidence, and cultural norms. While silence can sometimes facilitate learning by allowing students to process information, it can also hinder active participation and language development. Understanding these dynamics can help educators create more supportive and effective learning environments. According to Hu (2021), Student silence plays a facilitative role in EFL/ESL students' success, promoting English language learning. Huda (2020) assumes that personal characteristics and classroom environment play a significant role in triggering good language learners to stay silent. High-achieving silent students are often called on by the teacher while low-achieving silent students are called on rarely, and they use silence to consolidate their positions as less capable (Sedova & Navratilova, 2020). Zafarina (2022) describes that students' silence in EFL classes hinders their comprehensive ability in English, and strategies to conquer it are explored. Silence can play a beneficial role in students' success and learning outcomes. It can serve as a facilitative element in English language learning, helping students process information and reflect on their learning. In response to the explanation above, the researcher found several things similar to the problems faced by students of SMP Yogyakarta during EFL class learning, therefore the researcher intends to conduct a study entitled Addressing Student Silence In EFL Classrooms Factors, Challenges, And Effective Strategies For Engagement At Junior High School In Yogyakarta. This study aims to find out the factors that cause the reasons for the silence that occurs in EFL class students, as well as knowing how to or the efforts they make to succeed in learning English in EFL classes even though they are silent, and not interacting in class.

2. Method

This study uses a qualitative case study research method to investigate the causes of students' silence in EFL classes at SMP Muhammadiyah 1 Depok Yogyakarta. This study aims to understand the factors that influence students' silence and their efforts in learning English despite their silence. This study involved 8th-grade students at the junior high school level. In obtaining the necessary data, the researcher used research instruments in the form of observation, field notes, and interviews. In the first stage, the researcher made observations in the EFL class. The classroom observation method is used to understand students' behavior, involvement, and proficiency in English, in the observation part, the researcher determines students who will be made participants for the next stage, namely interviews. From the results of the observation, the researcher found 9 students who looked passive and silent in class, who would then be interviewed to find out the causes and reasons for the silence they applied in the EFL class. The researcher also documented the findings during the classroom observation by taking pictures, videos, and relevant notes. The study involved detailed field notes and semi-structured interviews with students to understand the reasons behind students' silence in the EFL classroom. Field notes involved observing interactions between students and teachers, including students' responses to teachers' questions. Interviews were conducted with selected students identified through previous observations. A triangulation approach was used in this study, combining data from observations and interviews to increase the researcher's confidence and understanding of the issue under study. This combined strategy helped to strengthen the findings and provide a more comprehensive understanding of the research problem. Data analysis was conducted systematically throughout data collection to ensure the data was easily understood and could be shared with others.

3. Findings and Discussion

3.1. Findings

a. Factors that Cause Students' Silence in the Classroom?

1) Vocabulary limitations

Regarding the lack of vocabulary, the data obtained by the researcher shows that students possess insufficient vocabulary knowledge. Vocabulary is an important aspect that students must know and understand because mastering it will help them become good speakers and listeners. Additionally, students can construct good English sentences if they have a large vocabulary. This was expressed by students during interviews conducted by the researcher.

"I don't understand what the teacher is saying. There are a lot of vocabulary words that I don't know, so when I'm in class, I prefer to remain silent."

(Respondent S#H, January 24, 2024, translated by the researcher)

Some students mentioned that they find it difficult to remember new vocabulary, which hinders their participation in EFL classes. In class, students sometimes use Indonesian more frequently than English. The teacher does not restrict this because it is considered part of the language learning process.

2) Sleepiness

During the learning process in the EFL class, students often feel sleepy, which leads to silence and disengagement from the ongoing learning process. When the researcher conducted an interview, one student explained why he felt sleepy.

"I was sleepy while studying because I didn't get enough sleep last night and felt tired easily. Especially since the English lesson was during the day, I felt sleepy and sometimes fell asleep in class." (Respondent S#E, January 24, 2024, translated by the researcher)

Based on the researcher's observations, student E as occasionally seen yawning during the learning process and eventually fell asleep, only to be woken up by the teacher. Students who sleep in class exhibit poor behavior, so teachers need to find solutions to help students stay awake and engaged.

3) Incorrect pronunciation

Correct and clear pronunciation is essential when learning English. Good pronunciation significantly affects effective communication. During the learning process in EFL classes, some students choose to remain silent because they are afraid of mispronunciation or do not know how to pronounce vocabulary correctly. This hinders students from being active and participating in class.

"I think English is difficult, both in remembering the vocabulary and in the pronunciation of the words. Sometimes the writing is different from the way of reading, so I am not confident enough to speak in English in EFL class and therefore I prefer to be silent." (Respondent S#I, January 25, 2024, translated by the researcher)

Based on the observations made by the researcher, during the EFL class, students chose to be silent as a form of protection because they were afraid of making mistakes. In this context, especially in EFL classes, most students do not have the confidence to speak because they do not know how to pronounce certain words well, and thus they choose silence as their safe solution.

4) Classroom Situation

The classroom situation is crucial in the learning process, whether for English or other subjects. A good classroom environment supports effective learning and engages students. Students who choose to remain silent often do so because there is nothing in the classroom to

excite or motivate them to participate in activities. Therefore, in the teaching and learning process, especially in language learning, students need a classroom environment that is enjoyable and stimulating. This was expressed by students to researchers during interviews

"I prefer learning English in class if there are activities such as practicing English and games that can create a more interesting classroom situation, rather than just doing assignments from the book." (Respondent S#A, January 24, 2024, translated by the researcher)

During the observation process conducted by researchers, students appeared silent and only paid attention to the teacher's explanation. There was no engaging interaction, so students remained silent and focused solely on the teacher's explanation without any interaction in the classroom.

5) Lack Teacher Approach

A lack of a teacher approach to students can make them reluctant to interact in class because they are afraid of the teacher. Consequently, students are hesitant to speak in English class, fearing that making mistakes will result in an unfavorable response from the teacher, causing anxiety. This was stated by a student to the researcher during an interview:

"When interacting with teachers in EFL classes, I often feel hesitant and afraid. I fear doing poorly in class, which might cause an unfavorable response from the teacher. I also don't feel very close to the teacher and lack confidence in what I say." (Respondent S#B, January 24, 2024, translated by the researcher)

Based on observations made by the researcher, the closeness between students and teachers must be considered. Students sometimes appear afraid and reluctant to express their opinions. Therefore, the teacher needs to provide feedback and play an important role in the learning process, which significantly influences students' willingness to speak in the EFL classroom.

6) Homogeneity

Every student's level of proficiency is different. Especially in EFL classes, students can easily feel inadequate when they see more proficient classmates. Their solution is often to remain silent, allowing other students to participate in the class. This was revealed by a student to the researcher during an interview:

"I prefer to be silent rather than participate in class because I feel my English is weak, and I let other students participate and be active in class." (Respondent S#C, January 23, 2024, translated by the researcher)

During observations, the researcher noticed that some students remained silent in the classroom, allowing their peers to interact with the teacher. In EFL classes, where students' proficiency levels vary, those with lower proficiency levels may feel overshadowed by more advanced peers.

b. How Students Achieve Their Learning Success in EFL Classes

1) Learn English via the Internet

Students learn English not only at school but also outside the classroom, often via the internet, such as through games and listening to English songs. Students say that English cannot be learned solely through school material.

"In my opinion, learning English is not only when we are in class, but also from the things around us, and I prefer to learn English through English song lyrics." (Respondent S#F, January 23, 2024, translated by the researcher)

Based on observations made by the researcher, students appear silent and reluctant to interact in class. However, when asked by the teacher to answer questions, they can respond correctly. This is because students are used to learning English via their cell phones.

Therefore, students who are silent are not unable to speak English; rather, it is a choice they make when in class.

2) Flexible Learning Environment

In the learning process, students need an environment that encourages and helps them learn English. When students are reluctant to interact with the teacher, they often choose to interact with their classmates. This interaction can support students in learning English in class.

“When I have difficulty understanding the lesson explained by the teacher, I prefer to ask my classmates. I think my classmates helped me understand and learn English in the EFL class.” (Respondent S#E, January 24, 2024, translated by the researcher)

Based on observations made by the researcher, students who remain silent face their obstacles. They are reluctant to interact with the teacher and prefer to ask their classmates for clarification.

3.2. Discussion

a. Vocabulary limitations

Students' limited vocabulary is one of the causes of silence in the EFL classroom, significantly hindering students' ability to express their thoughts clearly in the EFL classroom. When students lack the words necessary to convey their ideas, they may struggle to participate in discussions, respond to questions, or engage in meaningful conversations. As a result, their communication becomes fragmented and less effective, impacting their overall confidence and fluency.

Similarly, Andayani et al. (2002) stated that students' readiness to communicate in the EFL classroom is influenced by their perceptions of their speaking ability and their attitudes toward oral activities. Lack of vocabulary is one of the main factors that make students feel uncomfortable when speaking in English. A similar finding was also revealed by Karakoç and Köse (2017) that vocabulary knowledge has a significant impact on EFL learners' reading, writing, and proficiency scores, with receptive vocabulary knowledge greater than productive vocabulary knowledge.

b. Sleepiness

Students who feel sleepy in the EFL classroom can adversely affect their ability to learn and participate effectively. Researchers have also revealed that sleepy students can decrease concentration, reduce retention of new vocabulary and grammatical structures, and reduce motivation to engage in classroom activities. This problem often arises during the day when students are tired, they may struggle to follow lessons, participate in discussions, or complete assignments, resulting in a passive and less productive learning experience which leads to drowsiness in EFL classrooms. The same statement also Indayati et al., (2020) found that students in morning classes scored higher on achievement tests than those in afternoon classes, students felt sleepy in afternoon classes due to students depleted energy and differences in teaching methods. Sleepiness can be caused by various factors, such as lack of rest and lost enthusiasm for learning, so to overcome this, teachers can carry out more dynamic and interactive activities so that students' sleepiness can be distracted.

c. Incorrect pronunciation

Mispronunciation in EFL classrooms can pose a big challenge for students when communicating in learning. This problem also happens to students in EFL classes, leading to silence in the classroom. Students think that when they mispronounce words, it can cause misunderstanding and hinder effective communication, causing frustration and embarrassment. Students become self-conscious and hesitant to speak. In addition, persistent mispronunciations can hinder the development of listening skills, making it difficult for students to accurately recognize and understand spoken language.

In their research, Shojaee and Khodabandehlou (2016) mentioned that pronunciation is the error that most disrupts the communication process of EFL/ESL learners, and is often overlooked in ESL/EFL classrooms. By creating a supportive environment that encourages practice and

emphasizes the importance of correct pronunciation, educators can help students build confidence and improve their overall language proficiency. according to Nadia (2018) that poor pronunciation affects learners' confidence, social interactions, and professional opportunities.

d. Classroom Situation

The classroom situation in EFL classrooms is very important in shaping the learning experience and outcomes for students. In this study, students said that an interesting learning situation builds enthusiasm and increases their desire to participate in the EFL class. Thus, it can prevent silence in the EFL classroom. Interactive and dynamic classrooms, where students feel comfortable expressing themselves and collaborating with peers, promote better language acquisition and retention. Conversely, a chaotic or overly rigid classroom atmosphere can inhibit student engagement and hinder progress.

A similar opinion was expressed by Wang and Zhang (2022) that the classroom environment in an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) setting plays an important role in shaping students' learning experiences and outcomes. Various factors, including classroom culture, teacher engagement, student motivation, and teaching methods, significantly influence the effectiveness of EFL education.

e. Lack of teacher approach

In EFL classrooms, a significant factor contributing to student silence is the teacher's lack of approachability. In this study, the researcher revealed that when teachers do not actively engage with students or create a supportive and approachable atmosphere, students often feel intimidated and hesitant to participate. According to Juma and Habibulla (2022), teacher closeness, both verbal and non-verbal, has an important influence on students' active silence and discouragement in the EFL classroom. Fear of making mistakes and receiving negative feedback can increase anxiety and reluctance to speak up in class. As a result, students may choose to remain silent rather than risk being shamed or criticized, which hinders their language learning progress and overall class engagement. Similarly, Hongboontri and Boonyaparakob (2021) stated that less friendly interactions between teachers and students, and a more pressured classroom environment, contribute to student silence in EFL classrooms.

To overcome this, teachers need to adopt a more inclusive and interactive teaching approach, creating a classroom environment where students feel comfortable and supported in their learning journey. Hanh (2020) suggested that teachers' methodology, lesson contents, and class cooperation contribute to students' silence in EFL classrooms.

f. Homogeneity

In the EFL classroom, homogeneity among students' language proficiency levels often contributes to student silence. In this case study research shows that when students feel that their peers have better language skills, they may feel overshadowed and lack the confidence to actively participate in class discussions. The same statement from Watanabe and Swain (2008) that perceptions of peer proficiency influence the nature of peer assistance and affect students' confidence and participation in class discussions. This sense of inadequacy can lead to self-consciousness and reluctance to speak up because students are afraid of making mistakes or being considered less competent by their peers. Justice et al., (2011) state that peer effects are strongest for children with low language ability in classrooms with similarly low skill levels, and reference status has greater consequences.

In addition, in classrooms where students' proficiency levels vary widely, lower proficiency students may struggle to keep up with the pace of instruction or feel intimidated by the proficiency of their peers. Cassidy and Eachus (2000) state that perceived proficiency is positively correlated with academic performance, and strategic learning approaches are associated with higher academic achievement. This gap can create communication barriers and inhibit students' willingness to engage in speaking activities.

g. Learn English Via the Internet

In this study, one significant contributor to students' silence in the EFL classroom is the abundance of alternative methods for learning English, particularly through the Internet. With so many resources available online, students may rely heavily on self-directed learning outside of

class. The same statement was also made by Xiao (2011) that students' silence in EFL classes may be due to alternative methods of learning English through the Internet. According to Zafarina (2022), Sinternet learning offers flexibility and convenience, it can cause a disconnect between classroom teaching and individualized learning. The availability of online resources and digital tools for learning English may increase student silence in the traditional EFL classroom, as students may prefer this method over in-class participation. Students who primarily learn English through online platforms may feel less interested in actively participating in classroom activities, as they may find the traditional classroom setting less interesting or relevant to their learning needs. Harumi (2011) suggests that silence in the classroom can be a source of conflict between students and teachers, and may be influenced by cultural and contextual factors.

h. Flexible Learning Environment

In EFL classrooms, the establishment of a flexible learning environment is essential to overcome student silence. This research shows that a flexible learning environment allows for adaptability and responsiveness to students' individual needs and preferences. By combining various teaching strategies, such as group discussions, hands-on activities, teachers can create a dynamic learning environment that caters to diverse learning styles and interests. According to Pham and Wan (2023), silence in EFL classrooms is influenced by various dimensions including sociocultural, affective, psycho-linguistic, interactive, and individual factors. Understanding these dimensions can help educators create a more conducive learning atmosphere.

This flexibility encourages students to feel more comfortable expressing themselves and actively participating in class, thus reducing the occurrence of silence. Kariippanon et al. (2018) state that flexible learning spaces facilitate student-centered pedagogy, self-regulation, collaboration, and student autonomy and engagement, making them more enjoyable, comfortable, and inclusive. In addition, flexible learning environments foster a sense of autonomy and ownership of the learning process among students.

4. Conclusions

This study identified several key factors that contribute to student silence in EFL classrooms. Vocabulary limitations, sleepiness, incorrect pronunciation, classroom environment, lack of teacher approach, and homogeneity of student proficiency all have a significant impact on students' willingness and ability to actively participate in class. Inadequate vocabulary knowledge inhibits communication, causing students to remain silent. Sleepiness due to lack of rest further discourages students. Fear of mispronunciation prevents students from speaking, while an uninteresting classroom environment cannot motivate them. Lack of teacher approach and support increased students' anxiety and reluctance to speak, and varying levels of proficiency among students led to feelings of inadequacy, prompting some students to remain silent. The study also highlighted effective strategies that students used to achieve learning success despite their silence in class. Students benefit from using the internet to learn English through interactive and engaging methods such as games and songs. In addition, a flexible learning environment that encourages peer interaction can help students overcome their reluctance to talk to teachers and clarify their understanding. These findings underline the importance of creating a supportive, dynamic and interactive classroom environment and implementing a caring teacher approach to encourage student engagement and language acquisition in an EFL environment.

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