

Silent voices: Investigating the causes of non-participation in EFL classrooms

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores students' silent behaviour in the EFL classroom. The research investigates the reasons behind students' silence in the classroom, or lack of verbal participation in the classroom. The participants for this study consisted of 8 students who attended EFL classes at Abu Bakar IT High School and data was collected through observation and semi-structured interviews. The findings showed various causes of silence in the classroom: anxiety, introverted or shy personality, lack of language skills, lack of self-confidence, classroom atmosphere, teacher's teaching methods, and difficulty in understanding. Together with the theoretical discussion, the empirical evidence revealed by this study might help teachers to gain a higher awareness and deeper understanding of students' silent behaviour. This study aims to inform other researchers and EFL teachers to find out the reasons behind students' silence during EFL classes and it is hoped that this study can help improve the efficiency of English language teaching and learning in senior secondary schools.

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1. Introduction

Silence plays a significant role in intercultural classrooms, challenging the stereotype of passive students and advocating for its recognition and legitimacy as a pattern of participation (Wang et al, 2020). Silence can be used productively in teaching and learning, and classroom observations should consider teachers' use of 'silent pedagogy' to understand better their teaching methods (Ollin, 2008) in which case it requires the importance of the teacher's role. Teacher immediacy, both verbal and non-verbal, significantly impacts students' active silence and hopelessness in the classroom, affecting teaching objectives and students' achievement (Juma et al, 2022). Indonesian EFL students remain silent in classrooms due to five main reasons: fear of being judged, lack of understanding, insufficient time, and lack of interest in learning. Indonesian EFL students face speaking problems due to lack of practice, lack of vocabulary, and low self-confidence, which can be solved through more practice, studying, and using English learning applications (Fachrunnisa & Nuraeni, 2022). As they were worried, the students were reluctant to share their thoughts with other students, and they were also reluctant to express themselves because they were afraid of certain things.

Understanding the reasons behind the silence among Indonesian EFL students is essential for developing effective teaching strategies that foster active participation and improve language acquisition. Various elements, such as limited vocabulary, fear of making mistakes, lack of confidence, and the classroom environment, may contribute to students' reluctance to engage verbally.

Moreover, cultural aspects and the traditional educational approaches prevalent in Indonesia might further influence students' attitudes towards speaking English in class.

This study aims to investigate the silence among Indonesian EFL students at a senior high school, focusing on identifying the key factors that lead to this behavior. By examining the students' perspectives and experiences, as well as the instructional practices employed by teachers, this research seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of the issue. Ultimately, the findings will inform the development of targeted interventions and teaching methodologies designed to encourage more active and confident participation among EFL students. Through this investigation, we hope to contribute to the broader discourse on EFL education in Indonesia and highlight the importance of addressing student silence in the classroom. Enhancing student engagement not only improves language proficiency but also empowers students to utilize English more effectively in academic and real-world contexts.

2. Method

This research uses a qualitative study to find the reasons why students are silent when they are in an EFL classroom. As done by Maher in her research, to investigate students' silence, it is necessary to know the function and form of silence in the classroom from the perspective of the participants, who are identified as anxious English speakers (Maher, 2021). The first step in conducting this study was to conduct classroom observations to obtain raw data of students who have anxiety and are not calm in the learning process. Imura (2004) says that when students feel that they will not succeed in communicating, they tend to choose not to speak, even though they can do it well. This research was conducted in one of the high schools in Yogyakarta, that is Abu Bakar IT High School.

2.1. Participants

The study observed tenth and eleventh grade students who were in the EFL class and listening to the lesson being explained. The researcher observed tenth and eleventh grade students, selecting 4 students from each class based on the observation. Then from the results of these observations, the researcher determined 4 students from each class to conduct the next stage, namely interviews, each student was given 8 questions related to the factors that caused students to be quiet during EFL lessons.

2.2 Data Collecting Techniques

Interview and observation data collection was conducted in a structured manner with teachers and students as participants using Indonesian as the national language.

a. Observation

As stated by Sugiyono (2013) in qualitative research methods that observation is the basis of all science. Scientists can only work based on data, there are facts about the world of reality obtained through observation.

The purpose of this observation was to identify the silent or behavioral characteristics of the students that contribute to the EFL classroom's quiet throughout the teaching and learning process. It was also intended to observe how students engaged in learning in EFL classrooms.

b. Semi-structured Interviews

The interview is a data collection technique by conducting a meeting between two people who conduct questions and answers to exchange information. As stated by Sugiyono (2013) in qualitative research methods states that a meeting of two people to exchange information and ideas through questions and responses, resulting in communication and joint construction of meaning about a particular topic.

In this study, researchers chose to use open interviews, interviews conducted in open situations that provide greater flexibility and freedom offered to both parties between researchers and respondents. When drafting interview questions, the aim is to create a structured process that allows the interviewer to assess the candidate's skills, experience and suitability for a role. This process generally involves a few key steps such as understanding what the research is trying to cover and reviewing what phenomena, then determining the purpose of the interview after which the next step is to draft questions that fit the purpose and reference previous researchers who have similar research objectives.

3. Findings and Discussion

Based on observation and interview data conducted by researchers on students in EFL classes. Factors that cause silence in class are lack of interest in English, introverted student personality, lack of student confidence, fear or anxiety, low English proficiency, classroom conditions, teaching methods and difficulty in understanding are the reasons for students to do silence in class. The factors that have been mentioned will be explained in more detail by the researcher below.

3.1. Anxiety

Student anxiety can be a huge barrier to active participation and engagement in the classroom environment, thus greatly affecting student responses and the overall learning experience. In the context of this research, participants openly expressed feelings of fear and a tendency to remain silent, attributing these reactions directly to underlying anxiety. A study by Perkasa (2022) found that anxiety can influence student participation in the classroom. Certain beliefs about their ability to learn English can trigger anxiety and frustration among some students in the classroom. Fauzi et al (2021) also found that students feel anxious when speaking English due to factors like lack of preparation, fear of making mistakes, being laughed at, nervousness, and difficulty pronouncing and choosing words. The statement says students often feel nervous speaking English for various reasons. They include being unprepared, apprehensive, dreading ridicule, afraid they would make mistakes and having trouble pronouncing words correctly. Every one of these elements has the potential to heighten anxiety levels in pupils, which might hinder their ability to communicate effectively and confidently in English.

“I am very anxious if asked to come to the front of the class and speak in English to answer questions given by the teacher because I don't speak English.” (Respondent S#E, January 30, 2024, translated by the researcher)

The student experiences significant anxiety when required to speak English in front of their peers. This suggests that public speaking, especially in a foreign language, is a major source of stress. The anxiety is also linked to the task of answering questions, which requires the student to think on their feet and articulate responses in English, adding to the stress.

3.2. Introvert personality / Shyness

Introverted personalities and shyness are the causes of silence in EFL classes. Students with introverted personalities are also associated with a lack of self-confidence. A study by Handayani and Purbani (2018) found that language anxiety was the main affective problem in speaking English which was experienced by participants categorized as introvert students. Their language anxiety was caused by two other problems, namely communication apprehension and fear of negative social evaluation. This statement was also supported by the statement of Ahsan et al (2020) who said that shyness and lack of confidence negatively impact EFL students' speaking skills, and proper teaching circumstances can help improve these issues. The statement implies that shyness and a lack of confidence may be lessened when educators foster a positive and productive learning environment. Students may become more eager to take part in speaking exercises as a result, which will eventually improve their speaking abilities.

“I choose to be quiet when the teacher is explaining because I am embarrassed if I have to interact with many people and I actually pay attention to the teacher explaining.” (Respondent S#E, January 31, 2024, translated by the researcher)

The student actively decides to stay silent during the teacher's explanation. This is a conscious choice influenced by their personal feelings and classroom dynamics. The student's silence stems from embarrassment or social anxiety about interacting with others in a group setting. This indicates a lack of comfort in social interactions within the classroom, likely due to fear of judgment or making mistakes in front of peers. Despite choosing to remain quiet, the student is engaged and focused on the teacher's instruction. This suggests that the student's quietness is not due to disinterest or lack of understanding, but rather social discomfort.

3.3. Lack of confidence

Students who lack confidence showed reactions such as hesitation and fear with tasks or orders from the teacher to respond to questions by coming forward. Petres (2001) pointed out

some reasons of students' silence in classroom. Two of them are closely related to the students themselves. The first one is low self-confidence. Students think their English is too poor to take active part in classroom activities; the second one is language anxiety. Students are afraid of being laughed at because their English is poor and they cannot express what they want in the target language accurately and effectively.

EFL students face difficulties in speaking English due to low self-confidence, using their mother tongue, large classes, and lack of time, despite using authentic material (Robinson et al, 2020). Because they do not practice speaking English outside of the classroom, pupils encounter difficulties when they speak the language. They lack enthusiasm to speak English and speak in their home tongue during English courses.

"I am not confident in my pronunciation when speaking English, because I have a very strong Javanese accent" (Respondent S#C, January 30, 2024, translated by the researcher)

The student feels insecure about their ability to pronounce English words correctly. This lack of confidence likely affects their willingness to speak and participate in English conversations or classroom activities. Student attributes their pronunciation difficulties to their strong Javanese accent. This suggests that the accent might make their English pronunciation sound different from native speakers, which could be a source of self-consciousness and insecurity.

3.4. Low English Proficiency

EFL students' low proficiency in English is one of the reasons for the silence during EFL classes. This is a weakness. According to Pranasti (2013), the reason behind students' silence during EFL classes is not only because of their nature as students who prefer to sit and listen to the teacher explain but also because students prefer to be silent to avoid mistakes if they take part and participate in activities during EFL classes.

"I feel that my English skills are not very good, but I'm okay with making mistakes and being told where they are." (Respondent S#E, January 31, 2024, translated by the researcher)

"With my lack of English skills such as lack of knowledge about vocabulary and how to construct sentences in English, I prefer to stay silent during EFL classes." (Respondent S#G, January 31, 2024, translated by the researcher)

Based on the results of the researcher's interview with the respondents said that the reason they were reluctant to be active was because of their lack of proficiency in English, which made students choose to be silent and reluctant to participate in activities when EFL classes took place.

3.5. Lack of interest

The researcher found that the lack of interest in EFL classes that occurs in high school students is one of the factors that some students choose to stay silent. Some students said that the lack of interest in English lessons is because for some students English is difficult, not really needed and do not have the enthusiasm to learn it. students face many unknowns that may be ambiguous and challenging for students. As a result, low self-esteem on the part of the learner can lead to anxiety, and lack of interest leading to low class participation. Likewise, Harumi (2011) stated that students who have no interest in EFL classes because they do not have the confidence to learn it and feel if they do not have the opportunity when they are in the classroom, so EFL students need more motivation in increasing their interest in learning English.

"I'm not interested in EFL classes because I don't feel confident to master English and also because the teacher who teaches the class always uses English during the lesson." (Respondent S#C, January 30, 2024, translated by the researcher)

Students lack interest in their ability to learn and master English. This can stem from past experiences, perceptions of language difficulties, or lack of basic skills and the exclusive use of English by teachers may be overwhelming for students, especially if they are at beginner or intermediate levels. Building interest may require support, encouragement, and perhaps a different teaching approach that suits the student's learning style.

3.6. Classroom conditions

A comfortable classroom atmosphere is essential for effective learning, especially in the EFL classroom. In an EFL classroom at Abu Bakar High School silence allows students to concentrate on absorbing language lessons without distractions. Students who lack interaction and prefer to remain silent quickly become bored and feel a bad atmosphere in the classroom. Zarfsaz and Takkac (2014) stated that the capacity and size of the classroom also affect how comfortable students are in learning. Classrooms that have a capacity with many students make some students who have anxiety and shyness reluctant to participate in learning. This is also related to students who said that it is difficult to concentrate if the classroom atmosphere is noisy by their classmates. Thus, with the silent mode when the class is in progress, it is expected for students to be able to foster an atmosphere that can improve their English learning atmosphere.

“My class has students who are less able to be orderly when the EFL class is taking place or noisy. While I don't like noisy atmosphere when I am learning, so the reason I am silent is because I am lazy to respond to lessons with a noisy atmosphere.”
(Respondent S#F, January 31, 2024, translated by the researcher)

In the learning process, the atmosphere of the classroom is very influential on the behaviour and mood of EFL students. Based on the observations made by the researcher, respondents were observed during the EFL class. Some of them looked sleepy, did other things outside of learning and ignored their teacher's explanation. Some students admitted that the reason why they were silent during EFL class was because of the uncomfortable atmosphere of the class.

3.7. Difficulty to understanding

The difficulty of understanding the lesson is one of the factors that cause the reason behind students' silence during EFL classes. The researcher found that students' silence was because some students were confused and did not understand what was being explained by their teacher, which is a weakness. The confusion felt by students arises because it is not far from the feeling of fear and anxiety to ask questions if they do not understand the material presented. This makes some students reluctant to be active and choose to be silent, so the teacher does not notice students who do not give signs that they have not understood. This is similar to Uslu (2014) statement that students do not have the opportunity to ask questions because their teachers (instructors) always choose the same students to answer or be asked about their understanding. This should be the role of the teacher to make students become more motivated and have the enthusiasm to ask what they do not understand with the material presented.

“Because my English skills are very poor I find it difficult to understand when I am learning, because my teacher uses English more often.” (Respondent S#B, January 30, 2024, translated by the researcher)

During the lesson process, the goal of every teacher is good student understanding, especially in EFL classes. But there are some things that become obstacles in achieving the desire for attention and students with good understanding, one of which is the occurrence of difficulties in understanding so that some students choose to be silent.

The findings suggest that addressing these factors requires a multifaceted approach involving both pedagogical strategies and classroom management techniques. Teachers need to create a supportive, engaging, and structured environment that encourages participation and reduces anxiety. By understanding and addressing the root causes of silence, educators can enhance the effectiveness of English teaching and learning, ultimately improving students' proficiency and confidence in using the language.

4. Conclusion

This research has investigated the phenomenon of silence in EFL classrooms and generated important insights with the help of data collected from observations and interviews. The study highlights several critical factors contributing to silence among Indonesian EFL students in a senior high school setting. The observations and interviews with Grade 10 and 11 students at Abu Bakar IT High School reveal a complex interplay of personal, psychological, and environmental factors that

lead to students' reluctance to participate verbally in class. The results of this study found that the silence in the language classroom was caused by students preferring to listen quietly rather than actively participate directly when the EFL class was in progress, but this was still effective because there were still some students who were active so that there was visible interaction between the teacher and students during class time. Other factors that cause students in the phenomenon of silence that occurs in EFL classes are anxiety, introverted or shy personalities, lack of confidence, low English proficiency, lack of interest, classroom atmosphere, teaching methods, and difficulty in understanding. The factors that cause the phenomenon of silence in EFL (English as a Foreign Language) classes are diverse. Firstly, anxiety often makes students feel uncomfortable to speak, as they fear making mistakes or being judged negatively by classmates or teachers. Secondly, introverted or shy personalities can make students reluctant to speak, as they tend to withdraw from social interactions, especially in unfamiliar or uncomfortable environments. Furthermore, lack of self-confidence is also a major factor; students may feel that their abilities are not good enough, thus choosing to keep quiet rather than take risks. Low English proficiency also makes students hesitant to speak, as they may find it difficult to string sentences together or not understand the right vocabulary.

In addition, a lack of interest in the subject or the English language itself can lead to students not actively speaking. An unfavourable classroom atmosphere, such as being too formal or tense, can discourage students from speaking. Inappropriate teaching methods also play a role; methods that are less interactive or too focused on theory can reduce students' opportunities to speak. Finally, difficulties in understanding the material make students hesitate to participate, as they are not sure if they understand the topic well. This can be seen from the facts that occur in EFL classes, one of which is when the teacher asks students to answer questions, students will feel anxious because the student is not paying attention and feels a lack of ability in English which makes students afraid to answer and choose to be silent. In addition, there are several phenomena of silence committed by students during EFL classes, there are some students do not pay attention to the teacher when the material is being explained, this happens because of students' lack of interest and feel difficulties in understanding so they are reluctant to pay attention and choose to ignore the ongoing EFL class. The silence that students do in EFL classes has a meaning that cannot be seen directly, because some students do silence for other different reasons.

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