CHOOSING SILENCE: EMOTIONAL AND CULTURAL REASONS FOR NON-PARTICIPATION IN EFL CLASSROOMS

Abdullajon Nematov,
Department of English Language and Literature
Fergana State University
Email: abdulloh13an@gmail.com

MAQOLA HAQIDA	ANNOTATION
	This qualitative study investigates the affective and cultural factors impacting university-level EFL learners' silence. Drawing on interviews and follow-up reflective journals from 18 university learners in Central Asia, the findings show that silence was a communicative strategy supported by affective factors and cultural expectations, as well as interactional norms negotiated by both learners and teachers. The themes were silence as an emotion-regulation strategy, silence as a social, cultural and relational practice, silence as planned participation, and silence in terms of characteristic features of the classroom context. These findings challenge conventional pedagogic perspectives on silence in the classroom as a manifestation of cognitive deficiency and student disengagement and contribute to the understanding of silence as a legitimate, culturally situated and emotion-regulated way of participating in the classroom. This suggests the need to create more participatory, communicative EFL classrooms, reconsider measures for assessing talk, and design EFL classrooms that can ease a psychologically safe environment. This qualitative study adds to the growing body of research on affect, identity and silence in university classrooms outside of the Western context.

Introduction. Spoken interaction appears in all approaches to EFL. Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), the dominant approach to language teaching around the world since the 1970s and 1980s sees spoken communication as central, and the learner who is speaking as being at the center of the model language use. Classroom silence is sometimes assumed to be a symptom of passive, lazy and/or linguistically deficit students, but this has been shown not to be empirically valid. The reasons for student silence in the classroom are multidimensional and may relate to emotion, culture and/or calculation.

It is not only a question of the label as such. Teachers may respond to pathologised silence by calling out a reticent student at random, or calling on them more regularly and imperatively. In the worst case scenario, a teacher, in response to silence, may see it as a sign of disaffection. Where participation grades are a common practice, as is typical in university EFL classes, such students are penalized in educational contexts because of how silence is regarded in their culture (as listening and reflecting, rather than as a lack of ability). This indicates that pedagogical discourse concerning silence is influenced by culture and is likely to marginalize some forms of participation.

Recent stances attending to affect, identity, and power in SL/FL acquisition have yet to be extensively supported by qualitative research foregrounding SL/FL learner perspectives and experiences of silence, even in the emerging literature on non-Western university-based EFL contexts. Silence has no universal values or functions, but instead it is shaped through a cultural-historical, institutional, and social context, which is specific for various cultural contexts. To understand silence as response, we first need to understand it in relation to students. This study aims to explore why university EFL students choose silence in classroom interactions, understanding silence as an emotional, cultural, and strategic choice rather than a simple lack of linguistic competence. Specifically, the study addresses the following research questions:

(1) What emotional factors contribute to students' silence in EFL classrooms?

(2) How do cultural norms and expectations shape students' decisions not to speak?

(3) How do students themselves interpret and justify their classroom silence?

(4) In what ways does the classroom interactional context influence non-participation?

Literature review. Drawing on this typology of anxiety, Young identified six sources of language anxiety in the classroom context: personal and interpersonal anxieties, learner beliefs, instructor beliefs and behaviors, instructor-learner interactions, classroom procedures, and language tests. This typology of language anxiety sources has had a major influence in encouraging researchers to adopt a broader perspective which recognizes that the sources of anxiety in relation to speaking are not purely learner-

related. Furthermore, accent-related anxiety is worth mentioning: non-native, and thus stigmatized accents are silenced by students who are ashamed at an audible deviation from their peers [8]. According to the emotion regulation theory of silence, it is not a momentary decision to stop talking. Instead, it is an emotional regulation strategy to protect the self of the individual, as speaking under difficult control conditions could waste the psychological resources needed to suppress the mental effort of speech production [1].

Continuing the research tradition in silence in language learner classrooms, Research on silence began with the phenomenon of silence as the gap left when children do not respond to a teacher's question, or undercommunicative silence [9]. Research in this vein has moved on to silence as communication. However, it mostly conceptualizes participation in terms of what children are producing, neglecting the communicative nature of children's participation.

Silence has more recently been theorized as a resource for communication, and as a resource for interaction. In the first book-length treatment of silence, King found that Japanese EFL learners experienced silence in context-sensitive multi-layered ways. The silence was created as a form of protection, as a form of respect and as a sign of cognitive investment [7]. Other researchers besides Harumi have identified a variety of functions of silence in the classroom. For example, Japanese university students have been shown to use silence to avoid face loss, avoid conflict, and as a period of reflection before making a decision [5]. These studies indicate that silence is a form of participation.

The affective dimension remains one of the most frequently investigated aspects of language classroom silence. An enormous number of studies have described the affective characteristics of language classroom silence since the seminal study of Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety (FLCA) by Horwitz et al.(6). The most widely reported types of language classroom anxiety were speaking anxiety and listening comprehension anxiety, but fear of negative evaluation, communication apprehension, and test anxiety were also factors. The results concerning anxiety as a barrier to oral participation have since been replicated in other language classrooms and populations in academia.

Silence in the classroom is also affected by culture. Tsui's study found that cultural norms such as modesty, deference to authority and protection of group face were some of the factors which influenced the students to be reticent in the English language classroom in Hong Kong university. [11] Her students were not afraid of grammatical errors in speech, and to speak and attract attention for oneself was contrary to the norms of humility and consensus.

Many Asian and Central Asian educational contexts are characterized by the teacher being seen as the epistemic authority and source of knowledge, while student talk is mostly addressed to the teacher. Hence, unsolicited student talk is seen as a presumptuous actually potentially face-

threatening act directed at the teacher. Considering the positive views of silence in classroom, it is then perceived as an indexical sign that the student is listening attentively, respectfully and deferentially. Methods developed as part of CLT used in the Western context can be counterproductive in such contexts unless they are adapted to the cultural contexts. Moving on from this topic, Yashima has researched WTC in relation to international posture and identity investment within EFL contexts. She found that regardless of skill level, the amount of motivation that students had to communicate with members of the target language group was a mediator of their WTC [13].

The silence we see in classrooms may have to do with power relationships and identity construction. Norton, with her poststructuralist grounding, argued that language learners are making certain kinds of investments in identities. In situations where language learners lack sufficient symbolic capital, silence may act as a strategy for preventing further depreciation of identity investment. In heterogeneous EFL classes, informal hierarchies of peer evaluation and comparison may suppress speaking behavior amongst low-expertise learners, or alternatively, the interaction patterns of learners may serve to encourage confident speakers and marginalize other students.

Vygotsky (1978), within the sociocultural tradition, also acts as a counterpoint to the individualizing perspective on silence, framing learning as an intrinsically social process mediated through tools, signs and social interactants. Students may remain silent because they are processing language and preparing to speak through inner speech, or the cognitive activities involved in language comprehension and sense-making. Silence, according to Zembylas & Michaelides (2004), has a pedagogical quality of its own and sets the stage for deeper reflection, self-examination, and real intellectual engagement. And without opportunities for this kind of interior engagement, pedagogical approaches may miss out on its importance and the students who represent it.

Methodology. Consequently, a qualitative, interpretive research design was adopted. This is an appropriate design when inquiring into phenomena from the inside - to capture the meanings and to get to the texture of lived experience rather than to measure variables or test hypotheses [4]. As the focus of the study was students' subjective experiences of and reasoning about silence, it was epistemologically coherent to pursue an interpretivist qualitative approach.

The study is guided by two theoretical frameworks; the first is the affective turn in applied linguistics, which highlights the importance of emotions in SLA and classroom interaction, and can guide the interpretation of students' emotional narratives [1]. Second, Vygotskian sociocultural theory holds that learning is always situated and that participation is mediated by contextual factors, power, and interactional cultural norms: silence is treated there as a practice rather than as a deficit [12].

The research site was a state university in Uzbekistan, where English was a foreign language studied in many undergraduate specialities. The EFL classes were teacher-centered: the students were assigned language exercises, answered teacher questions and sometimes did pair- and group-work in both written and spoken English in the classroom. While grades for oral participation provide formal incentives for students to contribute, anxiety about performance inhibits student participation.

The sample consisted of students from first and second year EFL classes, 12 females and 6 males, without a selection on gender, who declared that they used voluntary speaking in class very rarely or never. The students represented different levels of English skill from elementary to upper-intermediate students and belonged to different regions of Uzbekistan and to different first language backgrounds. The researchers included students at a range of expertise levels deliberately to show that silence is not because of low expertise but is linked to a wider socio-emotional issue.

Data were collected through two primary methods. Semi-structured individual interviews, each lasting between 40 and 60 minutes, were conducted in both English and Uzbek according to participant preference, with Uzbek-language responses subsequently translated by the researcher and verified by a bilingual colleague. Interviews explored students' emotional experiences of speaking English in class, their interpretations of specific moments of silence, their perceptions of classroom norms and expectations, and their reflections on the relationship between silence and learning. An interview guide was developed based on the research questions and refined through two pilot interviews conducted prior to main data collection. Data analysis followed the principles of thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke, proceeding through six phases: familiarisation with the data, generation of initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final analysis [2]. Coding was conducted inductively in the first instance — allowing themes to emerge from the data — before being interpreted in light of the study's theoretical frameworks. Trustworthiness was enhanced through member-checking, with five participants reviewing and commenting on draft thematic summaries, and through peer debriefing with a colleague experienced in qualitative EFL research. All participant quotes are presented under pseudonyms throughout.

Ethical approval was obtained from the university research ethics committee prior to data collection. All participants provided written informed consent and were advised of their right to withdraw at any stage without consequence. Given the sensitivity of discussing anxiety, vulnerability, and academic performance, the researcher framed interviews as exploratory conversations rather than evaluations. Anonymity was assured through the use of pseudonyms, and all data were stored securely in password-protected files accessible only to the research team.

Result. Analysis of the interview and journal data generated four overarching themes, each capturing a distinct but interrelated dimension of students' experiences of classroom silence. These themes are presented below, illustrated with representative participant quotations.

Table 1
Types of Silence and Underlying Motivations

Type of Silence	Primary Motivation	Illustrative Example
Emotional self-protection	Fear of public error, anxiety	"I keep quiet. It is safer." (Nodira)
Cultural/moral restraint	Respect for teacher, modesty	"It is not polite to speak too much." (Malika)
Strategic engagement	Mental rehearsal, selectivity	"I think about the questions in my head." (Sherzod)
Contextual withdrawal	Peer dominance, teacher correction, pace	"The teacher looks at them. I stop trying." (Komil)

However, the most common response was regarding the experience of speaking anxiety and the employment of silence as a means of avoiding making a fool of themselves, being humiliated, or losing face. Virtually all students indicated fear of public error, that is, making a grammatical mistake, pronouncing a word wrong, or failing to find the exact words even if they know it well, when faced with having to say it in public.

A second-year student named Nodira explains that "When the teacher asks a question, my heart is beating very fast. I know sometimes the answer, but I think, what if I say it wrong? What if everybody laughs? So I keep quiet. It is safer." That is precisely the logic of calculated silence: the subjective cost of failure in public is too high, just as the subjective benefit of contributing is too low. Indeed, Nodira said she sometimes knew the answer - she was not silent because she did not know, but because the risks of sharing her knowledge were too high.

Many students spoke of accent stigma: feeling bad about how their English sounded to themselves and to others, especially more skilled students. First-year Bobur described his speech this way in his reflective journal: "I hate when I speak and my accent comes out. I sound like a village person. I prefer to listen and not embarrass myself." To internalize the stigma of one's own accent is to suffer a shameful barrier to participation: silence is a dignified response. This finding is aligned with those of Liu and Jackson, who found that accent-related anxiety is typical among Chinese EFL learners, and extends these findings to the Uzbek EFL context [8].

A second theme was how students constructed silence in relation to cultural values. Students discussed the cultural values related to silence, including respect, humility, and politeness (deference) to the authority of teachers. In discussing their silence, many drew on cultural scripts they had learned about when, how, and to whom to speak and listen in academic contexts.

One second-year student, Malika, offered this description: "In our culture, it is not polite to speak too much in front of the teacher. The teacher is the knowledgeable one. If I speak, maybe I am saying 'look at me, I know more.' This is not how we were raised." Malika's formulation is important as for her speaking out is not only risky but also transgressive in a sense because it violates the relational norms of the appropriate relationship between a student and a teacher. Tsui's observation on how the cultural values of modesty and deference to authority structure the participation

behavior of EFL students in Asian educational settings summarizes this well [11].

This was particularly true for children raised in rural communities, who described the school culture as one which valued silence. Mehriban described: "At school, we never spoke unless we were asked. It is the teacher's job to talk, ours to listen. So here, when the teacher says 'discuss with your partner', it feels very strange." The clash between the cultural model of learning with which these students arrived at university and the communicative demands of the EFL class generated rather different levels of discomfort and confusion than mere reluctance to participate.

A third theme which emerged strongly from the journal data was the identification of silence as an active process. Several students described the process of actively listening in the classroom, of planning what they were going to say, information processing the comments of their peers and waiting for an appropriate moment to contribute, all of which, while not visible to the teacher, were purposeful behaviors.

A first grader who does not speak voluntarily, Sherzod, writes in his journal, "I am always listening. I think about the questions in my head. In other words: 'Sometimes I make full sentences in my mind. I don't say them, but I have them.'" Sherzod challenges the assumption that students who do not speak are no longer thinking. In the case of Sherzod, he is clearly thinking in full sentences, engaged in the cognitive work of language production that is invisible to and uncounted by the participation economy of the classroom.

A strategy related to calculated silence or selective participation is to refrain from speaking when interactants do not feel confident or sure enough to participate without risking making mistakes. For example, in Zulfiya's comment, "I only speak when I am almost sure. I don't want to waste the class time with wrong answers", perfectionist orientation towards target language use is demonstrated again: calculated silence is a quality control mechanism. This would have its disadvantages (less practice to develop skills, a lack of feedback), but in terms of the student's point of view this is a rational choice, and it shows high level of metacognition.

Theme four was a collection of students' descriptions of the factors that contributed to their silence, all falling under the more specific sub-factors of teacher response patterns, peer-dominance and the pace of interaction.

As to teacher behavior, the students said that they felt anxious and self-conscious when the teacher unexpectedly asked a question, corrected a mistake in front of the class, or made a face to indicate displeasure when a student made a mistake. As Dilorom said: "When the teacher corrects you in front of everyone, you feel ashamed. After that, you don't want to speak again." The correction of errors in public can have a negative effect on students' willingness to speak, since they realize it can lead to loss of face and other negative sanctions.

Peer dynamics were also critical: in some classrooms, a few verbally dominant peers monopolized classroom talk, restricting participation in the curriculum for less assertive peers. Komil described that "There are three or four students who always answer. The teacher looks at them. I stop trying." Fluent students made this worse, as participants felt even less capable in comparison; they seemed to have no choice but to be silent as the only thing that made sense.

Finally, the slow pace was a continuing issue. Students who required extra time to process information indicated they were being left behind by the time question-and-answer exchanges reached them. Also, by the time students feel ready to speak, the moment has passed for contributing to the discussion. Classroom activities that allow development of wait time and gradually develop greater complexity, and that are not based on speed and competition, may allow more pupils to join in and encourage their cognitive processing.

Discussion. This study suggests that silence should be reconceptualized in EFL teaching and learning. The students did not consider silence as mere boredom, disinterest, and lack of language. Instead, silence provided them with social, cultural and affective opportunities and constraints which they appropriated. The silence that results, however, is a considered, rational, and often productive form of participation that is not, however, recognized or rewarded by existing assessment frameworks.

In line with King's view of silence as contextually situated rather than pathologized, and Norton's view of non-participation as a rational choice for students with limited interactional capital [7], this study builds on these ideas to argue that the emotional and cultural aspects common in Japanese and East Asian EFL contexts are relevant, if not more so, in the Central Asian context. This is achieved by situating the experiences of students attending a non-Western university.

This takes us back to the affective dimensions of silence, where Arnold in particular argued that acquisition is affective and that unrecognized negative affect can frustrate participation and acquisition [1]. In contrast to this, students in the study were not refusing to speak. Rather, they were negotiating the conflicting emotions of having something to say, yet feeling afraid of revealing a hidden self, of conforming to cultural expectations, and comparing themselves to more fluent peers in the moment. Understanding this emotional work rather than attributing it to laziness or deficiency improves the equitable and productive development of EFL pedagogy.

The findings of the study suggest a number of pedagogical implications for EFL classroom. Teachers should bear in mind the affective dimension behind oral involvement in class activities, as silence may be a form of affective regulation. Silence can also be addressed in a psychologically safe classroom environment where errors are normed, not corrected publicly, a wait time is used, and feedback is equally given to all students [6].

Second, EFL classrooms need more plural models of participation. Assessment models that equate participation with simply how much students speak do not take into account cultural and affective orientations towards forms of participation that are more reflective and selective. Some listening tasks, peer reflection, journal writing, and think-pair-share for collaborative or turn-taking answers taken as legitimate participation, could provide a more equitable approach to grading considering the different processing styles and modes of participation.

Third, EFL teachers in multicultural contexts could make culture a topic of the interaction, not in order to impose one model on others but to have learners reflect and articulate their own participation norms. Such a cultural meta-conversation can ease language learning and act as an effective vehicle for cultural learning. It can also do so while fostering the intersubjectivity that is necessary for inclusive classroom communities.

The study makes several contributions to theory. It extends the affective turn in applied linguistics [1] by providing rich, grounded evidence of the emotional labour involved in oral participation, demonstrating that silence is itself an affective practice — a product of active emotional regulation, not its absence. It enriches sociocultural accounts of classroom interaction by showing how silence functions as a site of internal meaning-making and private speech, challenging the conflation of learning with visible verbal output [12]. It develops the ideas of Zembylas and Michaelides (2004) by providing empirical evidence that silence can be pedagogically purposeful rather than merely disruptive. And it contributes non-Western, university-level qualitative evidence to debates about the cultural dimensions of language classroom silence, demonstrating the relevance and complexity of these dynamics in the Central Asian educational setting.

Conclusion. This qualitative study has demonstrated that silence in EFL classrooms is emotionally, culturally, and strategically motivated. Drawing on data from eighteen undergraduate university students in Uzbekistan, the study identified four thematic patterns: silence as emotional self-protection driven by speaking anxiety, accent shame, and fear of public error; silence as culturally sanctioned behaviour aligned with norms of respect, modesty, and deference to authority; silence as strategic participation involving active listening, mental rehearsal, and deliberate selectivity; and silence as a response to classroom contextual factors including teacher response patterns, peer dominance, and interactional pace. Taken together, these findings position silence not as a deficit to be remedied but as a meaningful communicative practice that merits pedagogical recognition and structural accommodation.

Several limitations of the study should be acknowledged. First, the sample was drawn from a single institution in Uzbekistan, limiting the direct transferability of findings to other EFL university contexts, though the theoretical insights are likely to have broader applicability. Second, the study relied primarily on self-report data through interviews and journals; while this is appropriate for the goal of accessing student perspectives, it does not capture the full complexity of classroom interaction as it unfolds in real time. Systematic classroom observation data would provide a complementary, behaviour-level account of the interplay between student self-perception and actual interactional behaviour. Third, the predominantly female sample composition may limit the generalisability of findings across gender groups, as gendered participation norms may mediate the dynamics described here.

Several options present themselves for future work. Following students in the same classroom over one year or several different semesters could shed light on how silence and speaking change as the classroom context changes, as language abilities change, and as social networks change. Future research into some of these factors, such as how teachers interpret silence or how teachers interpret the interaction compared to students, may further expand this line of thinking, particularly in the area of teacher professional development. Exploring more pedagogical approaches, such as wait time approaches and error normalization approaches, as well as frameworks for assessing participation, is another avenue that could be taken in expanding understanding of the phenomenon and expanding research on the topic into classroom practice.

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