

## The Analysis About the Factors of Silence in College English Classroom

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### Abstract

Classroom silence, as a common phenomenon, has been studied by many scholars and researchers abroad and at home. It has become an obstacle of the interaction between the teacher and the students, which not only affect achieving the teaching goals in classroom, but also is not beneficial to the cultivation of students' language ability. In order to break the silence in college English classroom and improve the classroom teaching atmosphere and students' English ability, this paper analyzes the main factors of classroom silence from three aspects such as student factors, teacher factors and cultural factors. Based on these factors which cause the phenomenon of silence, some suggestions are made to overcome classroom silence—building up students' self confidence, improving teaching methods and creating harmonious classroom atmosphere. Only by exploring the factors of silence can classroom silence be broken.

**Key words:** Classroom silence; Factors; College English

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### INTRODUCTION

With the concept of student-centeredness proposed, more and more attention has been paid to teaching approaches

and English classroom interaction. Classroom interaction plays an important role in improving students' English proficiency. During the process of English teaching, teachers and students are engaged in all activities of teaching and learning about the old and new knowledge. But in college English classroom, most teachers are confronted with the phenomenon that students are silent and they also find it difficult to motivate students to participate actively in the academic atmosphere. Even though students are aware of the importance of language communicative ability, most of them do not participate in the classroom activities due to various factors. Therefore, the phenomenon can be found that a few students actively participate in the classroom interaction but most keep silence in English classroom. Most of them are quiet, taking notes and listening. They are unwilling to voluntarily answer questions unless they are asked. These behaviors give rise to a more silent environment which must be more disadvantageous to classroom interaction. This is the phenomenon of classroom silence in college English teaching.

In present ESL/EFL literature, Asian (especially East Asian) learners of English as a foreign language has been arguably reported as silent and passive learners. The most common allegations are that these students are reluctant to participate in classroom discourse; they are unwilling to give response; they do not ask questions; and they are passive and over-dependent on the teachers (Cheng, 2000). It is known that the active participation of students can promote the development of the students' language competence and proficiency. On the contrary, silence can hinder the development of students' overall language competence. Therefore, students' silence in college English teaching is not an individual phenomenon, but a widespread problem. More and more English teachers realize that silence is a negative aspect in college English teaching, so they take as many as possible solutions to reduce this phenomenon. In order to promote classroom

interaction and help students participate in classroom activities, this paper analyzes the underlying reasons and come up with the corresponding suggestions.

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## 1. THE BASIC UNDERSTANDING OF SILENCE

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In order to better understand classroom silence, it is very necessary for us to get some knowledge of the definitions of silence.

### 1.1 Definitions of Silence

Levinson (1983) defines silence as the absence of vocalization. He believes that silence means making no sound in a specific area. Saville-Troike (1985) pointed out that silence is non-verbal and non-fixed act of communication shown by the subject of the communication. Generally silence should be put among nonverbal communication, whereas it is verbal in certain specific communicative event. Silence may be defined as one of the forms a speech act may take, when it has an intentional communicative function and thus silence acts are part of the verbal code. Bosacki (2005) asserted diverse definitions of silence as follows: a sign of rejection; fear of social evaluation; a feeling of invisibility; expressing social disinterest; intense intellectual engagement. Bosacki's definition of silence indicates that silence not only contains abundant social content, but also conveys some specific cultural implications and social psychology with the national characteristics. According to the above-mentioned definitions, silence reflects the noiseless non-verbal communicative behavior that students act in the teaching process in the classroom. On the base of the difference of the effectiveness of classroom silence, silence is divided into positive silence and negative silence. The positive silence means the state that students are thinking after teachers' questioning. And the negative silence means an emotional state that students have no interests, no attention, no participation in the learning contents (Teng, 2009). And this paper mainly discusses the latter.

### 1.2 Definitions of Classroom Silence

Teaching is a special kind of communication between students and teachers, so teachers often play an active role in the process of classroom communication, the silence in class is usually thought to be caused by the students. White (1996, p.37) gave a concrete definition of classroom silence. In his view, silence is the absence of talk, but not the absence of thought. In the classroom context, it refers to limited participation or lack of participation during classroom interaction. It does not refer to pause or hesitations that occurs during periods of speech. Teng (2009) holds that college students' classroom silence refers to a kind of psychological state and behavior a student presents in the level of thought,

emotion and action, which is irrelevant and indifferent to the teaching contents. In conclusion, classroom silence refers to this phenomenon: After the teachers have posed their questions, there is no response from students, which is an obvious example of silence. When the teacher gives time for discussion, most of the students are not willing to open their mouths to speak out their ideas. Once the students feel confused about something they learn, they would rather look it up after class than raise their hands to make it clear. All of these are typical facts in college English classes.

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## 2. PREVIOUS STUDIES ABOUT CLASSROOM SILENCE

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Classroom silence has become a very common phenomenon and a barrier in the teaching process, which has aroused attention from researchers and educationalists who mainly investigate the causes of silence in EFL class.

Tsui (1996) found that most of the concerned teachers attributed students' silence to low English proficiency. One of the factors mentioned in his research was students' fear of making mistakes and being laughed at by their teacher or classmates. Consequently, the students were reluctant to answer in front of the whole class. Researchers (Tsui, 1996; Bums & Joyce, 1997) analyze the reasons and factors underlying the second language learners' reticence and make some proposals about the solutions. The cultural factors include the learner's previous learning experience as well as the expectations shaped along with his or her particular experience. Learner's insufficient ability in phonetics, grammar or pragmatics falls into the category of language factors. The psychological and emotional factors include the culture shock, the previous negative social or political experience, and low level of motivation or being shy or anxious. Tsui (1996) proposed five factors which may cause the learner's reticence. The first factor is that the learners are unconfident about their language competence; the second concerns the probability that they are afraid of making mistakes and being laughed at; the third is that teachers are not tolerant of learners' silence; the fourth is that the conversation turns are not evenly arranged and allocated; the fifth is incomprehensible input which causes incomplete and insufficient understanding of the subject matter and hence the advent of incompetent performance. The study from Cortazzi & Jin (1996) suggested Chinese university students' reluctant participation would be related to Confucian values of modesty, and respecting teachers' authority and other Chinese traditional values as "saving face", collectivism. Liu and Littlewood (1997) ascribed Chinese students' non-participation to the teacher-centered mode that students have got accustomed to the operation of the formal schooling. From their study other factors contributing to Chinese students' low interaction levels have been found

as well. The lack of confidence, low proficiency in English and few opportunities to use English for communicative purposes is labeled in it. Jackson (2002) conducted a study on Chinese undergraduates in an English-medium business course in Hong Kong. She claimed that students remaining silent in EFL class are universally concerned about the ability to express their thoughts in English. Their non-proficiency in English has been associated with the decreasing confidence in the ability to participate in the classroom discussion.

Siti, Nik, and Melor (2010) conducted a study aiming to conclude influencing factors that shaped undergraduate students' participation in Malaysian classrooms. They carried out a series of interviews and observations. One of the research results finally discovered was that lecturer traits (for instance, encouraging, understanding, approachable, confirming and supportive) were the most influential factors in encouraging participation among students. Another discovery was that classroom instructor communication variables played an important role in shaping classroom interaction. In other words, positive lecturers' traits encouraged students' participation, while negative traits such as having poor teaching skills or being opposite to students discouraged participation. Likewise, Fawzia (2002) also found that pedagogical factors like course, topic, lecturer and teaching style could affect students' participation.

Chinese scholars also have done some researches on classroom silence. Cheng (2000), based on his experience of teaching college students with different levels of language proficiency and discussion with a lot of colleagues from different countries, argues that interpretations grounded on cultural attributes should not be taken as an easier diagnosis for all problems emerging in ESL/EFL practices. He draws a conclusion that if Asian students are granted to be quieter, the causes are attributed to situation specific rather than the culturally preset, pedagogical factors or the students' foreign language proficiency. Peng (2005) explores the causes of students' silence from the scope of the motivation. She claims that most students' motivation for learning English is instrumental instead of being integrative. In her investigation, she finds that the students spend much time in practicing writing or reading skills instead of speaking and communication competence with the goal of College English Test 4 or 6 (CET 4/6), for the two tests attach much importance to written English but ignore verbal English. Xu (2012), in the experiment study of cooperative learning for breaking the classroom silence, found that cooperative learning approach would finally reduce the students' negative silence phenomena in English class.

According to the researches abroad and at home, it can be found that these researches analyzed the effect of possible reasons that caused the classroom silence. And it

is important for teachers to realize their combined effects on the teaching and learning process. In the following, the author will discuss the factors that result in the classroom silence.

### 3. FACTORS RESULTING TO CLASSROOM SILENCE

Researchers (Krashen, 1982; Swain, 1985) have proposed that in the second language classroom the most effective way to develop the learners' competence is to provide the learners with sufficient opportunities to participate in discourse which involves meaningful exchange of information. But it can be found that classroom silence is a common phenomenon in second language teaching process. From the previous studies abroad and at home, it can be concluded that the following three aspects may lead to classroom silence: learner factors, teacher factors and cultural factors.

#### 3.1 Student Factors

Learner's factors in classroom silence mainly includes the following aspects:

First, lack of confidence. Tsui (1996) proposed five factors of silence. Of the five factors, the first one is that the learners are unconfident about their language competence. So students are afraid of being laughed at by their teachers or classmates for making mistakes and then they keep silent in class. Petress (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. Jackson (2002) conducted a study on Chinese undergraduates in an English-medium business course in Hong Kong. She claimed that students remaining silent in EFL class are universally concerned about the ability to express their thoughts in English. Their non-proficiency in English has been associated with the decreasing confidence in the ability to participate in the classroom discussion. Ding's survey (2008) shows that many non-English majors think they can not express themselves because they are not good at English. The main reason is students' lack of confidence.

So the lack of confidence, low proficiency in English and few opportunities to use English for communicative purposes is labeled in classroom silence.

Second, students' personality, gender and motivation. Liu's study (2000) shows that gender and personality have great influence on participation modes because female students and introverted students have stronger

tendency to keep silent in class. Xie (2006) stated that students' personality and gender are the main reason for silencing phenomenon. Students' personality has something to do with Chinese cultural background. China has a long history of civilization which advocates the doctrine of Confucius. Students who keep silent in class are considered to be prudent and modest. Peng (2005) claims that most students' motivation to learn English is not integrative but instrumental. Under the pressure of passing CET4/6 to obtain diplomas, students would spend more time in reading or writing skills instead of speaking ability. The emphasis on reading and writing ability and the neglect of the oral competence has greatly affected students performance in class.

### 3.2 Teacher Factors

Besides student factors, teacher factors play a very important role in classroom silence. There are many teacher factors that influence the classroom silence. The traditional teaching method is the main factor of students' silence. In the obsolete teaching model, the teachers occupy most of the time giving lectures. What the students can do be listen to the teachers quietly; they dare not interrupt teachers or challenge teachers' authority. They are accustomed to the teacher-centered model, and they will not ask questions even when they have difficulties in comprehending some key points. Also, teacher's lecture styles have great influence on students' silence, e.g. teachers' excessive expectation will inhibit students' participation for fear of losing face in front of teachers, teachers' intolerance of students' silence by not giving enough wait-time for students, students' unwillingness to participate in classroom interaction because of unequal opportunities offered to them (Xie, 2006). Teachers' questioning skills are also responsible for students' silence in the classroom. Wang and Zhang (2008) have summarized several reasons for the college students' silence in English class from the three perspectives. According to Wang and Zhang (2008), students, teacher and classroom climate are the major contributing factors, and they are related to the teacher's questioning strategies, even some improving measures on teachers' questioning strategies.

### 3.3 Cultural Factors

Classroom silence can also be affected by cultural factors. Asian culture generally prefers collectivism to individual self-expression, critical thinking and creativity; but the western culture prefers the individualism and displays the opposite characteristics. Chinese students are believed to be more reserved on the ground that they are expected to listen to teachers' lesson quietly. Chinese students seem to be passive receivers of knowledge and cannot realize the importance of output in the process of second language learning (Cheng, 2000). Petress (2001) pointed out some reasons for students' silence in the classroom. One of the

reasons is the cultural impact. Students in China regard their teachers as "authority" and they are submissive to their teachers' instruction, they are used to listening to what their teachers said instead of expressing their own ideas or thoughts. Chinese students may be influenced by traditional Chinese culture and avoid possible chances of losing face in the classroom. Besides, exam-oriented education provides students with few chances of oral communication in English classroom.

All in all, classroom silence is mainly affected by the above-mentioned factors. Then, how to break the silence in the classroom is what the teachers and researchers should consider.

## 4. SUGGESTIONS TO BREAK CLASSROOM SILENCE

By analyzing the main factors which lead to classroom silence, it is quite necessary for teachers to know how to break the silence in English classroom. The following is some suggestions.

First, building up students' self-confidence. Self confidence is a most significant factor in language learning. In general, successful language learners appear to have higher self-esteem than those who are unsuccessful (Richard-Amato, 2003). Lack of confidence can hinder students from learning English well. To build up students' self-confidence, teachers should help students have a better understanding and an appropriate evaluation of themselves, and make them believe that they can study English well by working hard. In addition, students should have a correct attitude toward studying English. English studying is concerned with four skills—listening, speaking, reading and writing. The purpose of studying English is not only for attending tests such as CET 4/6. The four skills are equally important in learning English. Only when students feel confident to speak in the English classroom, will they participate in the activities and tasks teachers design for them. So it is very important for the teacher to build up students' confidence.

Second, improving the teaching methods. Teaching methods have a great influence on students' performance in the classroom. At first, it is very important for college English teachers to have a correct judgment of students' proficiency, only when they have a correct judgment of their students, can they ask appropriate questions. Besides, teachers' questioning strategies can influence the students' learning in the classroom activities. So the teachers' questions should neither be too easy nor too difficult. If the questions are too easy, the students will be reluctant to answer because they think it is meaningless; if the question is too difficult and beyond the students' ability, the students will feel too frustrated and do not want to answer the questions. Also, teachers should try to encourage the students to take risks to answer questions



in class without giving them negative comments. Positive feedback can be much more effective than negative feedback in changing students' behaviors (Nunan, 1991, p.195). If the teacher gives a positive feedback, the students will be more encouraged to take part in the classroom interaction. On the contrary, when the teacher provides negative feedback, the students are likely to feel embarrassed and their enthusiasm of answering questions will be reduced more or less. Finally, interaction between the teacher and students is very important in the classroom. With the interaction, the classroom atmosphere can be very active and students are willing to participate in the activities designed for them. What the teacher should do be encourage student-initiated questions, organize them to cooperate to get answers, and always prepare to provide help to them. Such activities can be used in class as discussion, group work or pair-work. This interaction is beneficial for cultivating student' communication abilities. Only by taking various useful teaching methods, can the students take part in class activities actively so that the classroom silence can be avoided.

Third, creating harmonious classroom atmosphere. The classroom atmosphere is fundamental requirement of the classroom interaction. It plays a very important role in achieving effective teaching. To create a non-possessive and harmonious environment in class, what is needed for teachers is to become more of a facilitator who creates the environment for students to be engaged in, and the teacher should not be an authoritarian knowledge-giver. Teachers, to be facilitators, must first be real and genuine, discarding. Marks of superiority and omniscience (Brown, 2000). In order to enhance students' involvement in classroom activities and preventing classroom silence, the teacher should try to promote teacher-student empathy and peer empathy, and reduce teachers' authority so as to establish a harmonious relationship with the students. In the harmonious atmosphere, the students feel less nervous and anxious about participating in class activities.

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## CONCLUSION

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In college English classroom, silence is a common phenomenon which troubles teachers. Classroom silence can be affected by many factors. But the main factors can be concluded as he following: student factors, teacher factors and cultural factors. For students' part, such factors can be the main elements for them to keep silence in class: lack of confidence, low proficiency in English, personality, gender and motivation, etc. For teachers' part, teachers' teaching methods and questioning strategies can influence students' involvement in classroom activities. Meanwhile, cultural factors are also responsible for classroom silence. In order to break the classroom silence in college English classroom, the following suggestion

is made: Building up students' confidence, improving teaching methods and creating harmonious classroom atmosphere. Besides these suggestions in this paper, there are many other ways to break the classroom silence. What the teacher should do is take various measures to break the classroom silence and improve classroom atmosphere, eventually involve more students in classroom activities and improve students' English ability.

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