

A Study on Open University Students' Silence in English Class

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Abstract: *In the present English teaching and learning in Open University, the teacher is still the center in class, whereas students are likely to keep silent when they are supposed to get involved in heated discussion or answer questions actively. Class silence can be said as a widespread phenomenon in English class in China and it is an important factor resulting in such a passive teaching-learning situation; and it will adversely affect students' learning of English. Therefore, it is urgent to deal with the phenomenon of students' silence in Open English class. Aimed to investigating the students' silence in Nan Chong Open University, the present research conducts an empirical study; it explores the reasons leading to silence and then puts up some effective measures to reduce classroom silence in Open University.*

Keywords: *silence; Open English; class; Open University*

The Open University is a new kind of higher education institution that offers open and distance education using modern information technology. Boasting an educational network spanning multiple industries, provinces (cities) and regions, the Open University is established upon the basis of China's Radio and TV University system and dedicated to both degree and non-degree further education. However, in the present English teaching and learning in Open University, the teacher is still the center in class while students learn English very passively. A lot of researches abroad and at home all show that Chinese students are more likely to be silent in the foreign language class. It is clear that students who don't take part in the class actively show silence in Open English teaching, which is not good for their learning of English. Therefore, it is urgent to deal with the phenomenon of students' silence in Open English class.

1. INTRODUCTION TO CLASS SILENCE

As a complex, multidimensional phenomenon, silence has been proved to exist in second or foreign language classrooms and predominantly act as a debilitator (Liu and Littlewoods, 1997). Class silence, particularly among Asian EFL learners, continues to attract discussion which emphasizes its socio-cultural influence on active learner participation in class. Most researches interpreted silence as a face saving, difficulty avoidance strategy, or a silent request for help which is acceptable, tolerable, and indeed productive if teachers are able to engage with students' non-verbal responses. Opinion towards silence vary from scholar to scholar; hence different theories about classification of silence are put forward, among which are the popular silence classifications made by Kwrzon (1995) and Bruneau (1973). Kwrzon (1995) divided silence into intentional and unintentional silence; the former one refers to the silence used as an intentional strategy, whereas the unintentional one is defined as silence caused by extreme anxiety, panic or embarrassment (Kurzon, 1995:42). Bruneau (1973) identified three types of silence in all, namely: interactive silence, psycholinguistic silence and socio-cultural silence.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1. Research Questions and Subjects

Aimed to investigating classroom silence in English as a foreign language in Open University, this present study adopts an empirical approach to seek answers about: (1) Is there silence in Open English class? And what is the degree of silence? (2) What are the reasons resulting in students' class silence? The subjects of this study consist of one hundred and forty students of first-year non-English majors at Nan Chong Open University. All of them take part in such a questionnaire survey for the first time. The students are randomly selected from three classes majoring in elementary education and education administration, and two of the classes are taught by the author herself.

2.2. Instruments

In terms of instruments, this study combines observation with questionnaires so as to ensure the results to be credible, objective and valid. Observations in class are an important way of getting information about teaching and about the whole class situation. Therefore, the author makes observation in her own class as well as in the class taught by the other teacher to find out whether class silence is widespread. There are four weeks for the observations, and the main task is to observe the performance of students in the foreign language class. For example, whether they intend to keep silent if the teacher are speaking or asking questions. The questionnaire used in the present study is borrowed from Wu's (2011) graduate paper with proper revision by the author. There are eight items about the possible reasons for students' behavior in English class from emotional and psychological perspectives, and for each statement there are five choices to choose, from strongly agree to strongly disagree, to show the degree of the agreement. And each degree will be given a score from one to five. The details are seen in Figure 1 and the content of the questionnaires and the form of the questionnaires are described in table 1 and table 2.

Figure1: *Strongly Agree—Agree--Medium--Disagree--Strongly Disagree*

1 ----- 2 --- 3 ----- 4 ----- 5

Table1. *The Content of the Questionnaire*

Part	Items	Survey of the rationale
1	1-14	Students' views on the open English book that they are learning, the teacher's instruction, and the teacher's instruction.
2	15-22	Performance by students in Open English classroom.
3	23-25	Possible reasons of students' silence from emotional and psychological perspective.

Table2. *The Questionnaire Form*

statements	Degree of agreement				
	1	2	3	4	5
1...					
2...					

3. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

3.1. Analysis of Silence Degree in Class

In order to find out the degree of Open University students' silence in English class, the author made observations of the three classes during the four weeks. The data showing the performance of students in English class and the specific results are provided in table 3.

Table3. *The Ratio of Questions Answered by Subjects*

Questions types	Number of type	Number of questions answered by students	Ratio of answered questions
Open-ended questions	42	26	52.47
Closed questions	202	150	74.53%
Total	244	176	

During the observation, the author recorded the questions that the teachers asked in the three classes. All questions can be divided into closed questions and open-ended questions. During the period of observation, the teacher asked 202 closed questions such as "Do you think the statement is true?" and 42 questions like "Could you please summarize the general idea of this paragraph?" Only 52.47% of the open-ended questions were answered, so it reveals that the students prefer closed questions and they would rather keep silent in the class.

3.2. Reasons of Students' Classroom Silence

3.2.1. Attitudes toward Language Learning

According to the data collected, it is known that as many as 75.38% of the investigated students agreed that oral language is a very important part in English learning; 68.57% of the students thought communicative competence is very important, and 55.26% of the students liked the sound of English.

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Most students held the view that spoken English is necessary and of great importance. 51.83% of the students held the viewpoint that they participate in classroom activities actively and 28.66% of the students ask the teacher immediately when they have a question, and only 23.34% show the eagerness to answer questions. In the classroom, there are some students participating in activities actively, but few students answer the questions voluntarily, which just suggests students' low eagerness.

3.2.2. Low English Proficiency

The data from questionnaires presented in Table 4 show the influence of this factor upon the performance of Open University students in English classes. As we can see, 52.86% of the students regarded low English proficiency as the problem that bothering them and prevented them from expressing their opinions. So this factor was a barrier for many students in aspect of playing a part in the interaction in English classroom activities.

Table4. Statement 27: Low Proficiency of English Prevents Me from Expressing Ideas

5-point	Frequency(n=140)	Valid percent (%)
Valid		
1.strongly agree	25	17.86%
2.agree	49	35%
3.uncertain	35	25%
4.disagree	19	13.6%
5.strongly disagree	12	0.54%
Total	140	100.0

3.2.3. Affective Factors

Learning anxiety and lack of confidence are affective factors that prevent students from airing their opinions freely. As high as 42.14% of the students thought they were afraid of making mistakes, so they would rather just keep silent than participate in the interaction even though it is most likely to improve their English competence.

Table5. Statement 20: Being Afraid of Making Mistakes

5-point	Frequency(n=140)	Valid percent (%)
Valid		
1.strongly agree	15	10.71%
2.agree	44	31.43%
3.uncertain	34	24.28%
4.disagree	34	24.28%
5.strongly disagree	13	9.30%
Total	140	100.0

3.2.4. Cultural Influence

Though many people think that they have their unique ideas and dare to show their intelligence in public, cultural factor shows its impact on Open University students. 18.95% of the students agreed that they were afraid of making mistakes and losing face, and 20.19% were afraid of being too pushy and misunderstood by their classmates; nearly one third of the students had no idea about this. It is obvious that the cultural factor is deep-rooted in the mind of students and it influences the students psychologically. The result of the questionnaires which reveals Open University students' opinions is shown in the following table.

Table6. Cultural Influence on Classroom Silence

Statements	Strongly agree---- strongly disagree (%)				
	4.11	14.84	31.96	37.16	11.72
33. Being afraid of making mistakes and losing face.					
34. Being afraid of being too pushy.	5.15	14.84	24.52	40.39	14.90

3.2.5. Traditional Teaching Method

In the questionnaires, the following three statements try to examine the influence of traditional teaching method: As was revealed in the table, 37.20% of the students agreed that the teacher spent a lot of time organizing activities for the students to practice oral English, the other students did not sure or disagreed; 72.20% of the students thought the materials they used contained lots of activities and as many as 74.38% agreed the materials contained a lot of drill exercises such as grammar patterns. These data suggest that though the teacher gave the students some time to speak, her class always organized according to teaching materials which contain a lot of drill exercises, so the teaching method was restricted, and grammar translation method was used frequently.

Table7. Influence of Traditional Teaching Method on Classroom Silence

Statements	Strongly agree---- strongly disagree (%)				
	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Other
4. Lost of time spent to practice oral language.	5.17	32.03	31.96	29.74	0
5. Materials contain lost of interactive activities.	17.17	55.03	17.07	9.52	0
6. Materials contain lot of drill exercises such as grammar patterns.	20.07	54.31	12.72	11.77	1.03

3.2.6. Classroom Environment

Classroom environment affects students' performance directly. In the table blow, almost all the students held the point that relaxing environment is necessary for speaking English. Active classroom climate can motivate the students to perform better. The relationship between the teacher and students is listed as one reason that makes students remain silent. So creating a relaxing environment and forming good teacher-student relationship can be an impetus to elicit students' talking.

Table8. Influence of Classroom Environment on Silence

Statements	Strongly agree---- strongly disagree (%)				
	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Other
9. Relaxing environment is important for practicing oral English.	54.21	37.18	4.31	3.29	1.01
28. On bad terms with the teacher, I would rather keep silent.	0	9.52	21.33	45.79	23.35

4. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATION

From the above discussion, we can see students' silence in classroom, which can be seen as a failure of the interaction between the students and the teacher, occurs more often in the Open University English class and it is caused by various reasons, namely, students' low English proficiency, passive learning attitude, some affective factors, cultural factor, the teacher's traditional teaching methods as well as the classroom environment. Therefore, in order to improve teaching efficiency and change the present state of classroom silence, much effort should be spent. For the part of students, they should firstly build up their self-confidence and take a more positive attitude in their study; moreover, learning to cooperate with the teacher and other classmates is also an important way of reducing silence in class. For the part of teachers, they should update their teaching styles and task-based instruction which is learner-centered turns out to be a good alternative; on the other hand, it is necessary for teachers to create a relaxing environment and build harmonious atmosphere in which students can get rid of their shyness and participate actively in the class discussion.

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