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Students' perceptions of silence, wait time, and participation in EFL classrooms

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Abstract

This research explores the way in which students in one particular private university in Egypt experience silence, wait time, and participation while learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL). In contravention of the more negative interpretations of the possible deficits of silence, the research adopts an interpretivist approach to explore how the students themselves make sense of non-verbal participation. Employing semi-structured interviews of undergraduate students, the research conceptualises the experience of silence as a form of cognitive, affective, and social practice in and of itself, and not as the lack of participation. The research results indicate the way in which the students make use of the experience of silence in order to organise their thoughts, language, and emotions, as well as to manage interpersonal relationships in the classroom. Moreover, the research makes it clear how the experience of silence is an act which is shaped by cultural factors and educational experiences in the past, where value is placed on attentiveness, respect, and self-control. In particular, the research explains how students self-identifying as active speakers make use of the experience of silence in order to facilitate and enhance interpersonal relationships between peers and to enhance the classroom harmony. Additionally, the research shows how classroom constraints shape students' decision to speak or to remain silently in the classroom.

Introduction

Participation in the classroom has traditionally been regarded as a pivotal measure of engagement and learning in English as a Foreign Language. Within several educational traditions, especially those developed under the umbrella of Communicative Language Teaching, oral discourse has been viewed as both a channel of the learning process and a manifestation of the learning outcome. Speaker-participants tend to constantly be regarded as motivated, self-assured, and achievement-oriented individuals, whereas non-speech participants are often perceived as detached learners or those lacking competence. This view tends to be problematised by scholars today, as silence tends to be more than just a manifestation of a lack of oral discourse. Over the past twenty years, there has been a growing body of research to re-conceptualise silence in the classroom as an essential element, as opposed to an issue to address. It is apparent from the existing research studies in the areas of language learning, specifically involving second and foreign languages, that silence can embed the notions of reflection, cognitive processing, and management of emotions as the learner is subjected to several tasks at the same time (Jaworski, 1993; Harumi, 2010; Bao, 2023).

Despite the increasing amount of research being carried out on the topic, it appears that much of the existing literature has tended to focus on learners defined as being quiet, shy, and anxious. On the other hand, relatively little attention has thereby been afforded to those learners that participate in class in general yet use silence as well. This is particularly relevant in that it calls into question the hypotheses that have traditionally tended to be made that silence and participation appear to be mutually exclusive in some ways by presenting learners that participate in class regularly yet select to use silence in their affective learning processes instead. Moreover, silence is not experienced uniformly across educational contexts. Cultural norms, institutional practices, and prior educational experiences all shape how silence is perceived and enacted in classrooms. In many non-Western contexts, silence is associated with respect, attentiveness, and social harmony rather than disengagement. Learners may therefore remain silent not because they lack ideas or confidence, but because silence aligns with culturally valued forms of interaction. These meanings can come into tension within English-medium instructional environments that prioritise verbal participation, debate, and immediacy. Further, the experience of silence does not occur in the same way in different educational settings. Several factors, many of which relate to culture and educational background, contribute to perceptions and expressions of silence within classrooms. In addition, within many non-Western cultures, silence tends to connote ideas of respect, attentiveness, and harmony rather than disengagement. Learners might thus choose to be silent not because they have nothing to say or are not confident, but because being silent reflects ideals of participation held within non-verbal cultures. Within these settings, silence becomes the locus of negotiation between past and present forms of academic socialisation. Further, it should be noted that classroom silence is not only culturally defined; beyond

that, it is influenced by various classroom-interaction patterns of instruction and of peers. For example, empirical studies have suggested that the learner might remain silent out of fear of mistakes, protection of the self-presentations of the learner in the classroom environment, and the preservation of group harmony. Then again, the act of silence might be deliberately used in order to listen more carefully to the peers in the classroom or in order to carefully frame the response. In recent years, however, there has been a call for a more context-sensitive and more learning-centred study of silence. In fact, although valuable research has been conducted in the East Asian/Western contrast, there has been a relative absence of studies specifically concerning the experience of silence within the context of the Middle East's private higher education institutions. In short, there have been few studies which have placed a student-centred emphasis in describing how they perceive and use silence within their own learning experiences.

This particular study fills these research gaps by exploring the experience of wait time and participation in EFL classes from the perspective of students in a private university in Egypt. The study conceptualises the phenomenon of 'silence' not as a problem that needs to be overcome but as a semantically significant social practice that is determined by cognitive processes and affective tendencies. The approach of the study highlights the students' experience of 'silence.'

Literature review

Silence as cognitive and metacognitive engagement in EFL classrooms

Second foreign language classrooms have traditionally viewed classrooms devoid of noise as problematic sites for teaching/learning. Accordingly, the preeminent approach to teaching communication-oriented languages was centred on oral production as the essential site of linguistic competence. As such, any talk-less practice was rendered invisible (Ellis, 2008; Long, 1996). Yet, the increasing number of research works have questioned the above approach and argued that talklessness is an important but distinctive area of classroom life rather than the lack of communication (Jaworski, 1993; Harumi, 2010; Bao, 2023). Increasingly, in recent years, researchers are looking at silence more and more as an active cognitive, social, and affective process which can enable learning in more sophisticated ways. Moreover, this conceptualisation fits rather well into a sociocultural and interactionist perspective of learning as a socially mediated activity, both through speech and through silence (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). It means that silence becomes not the absence or opposite of speech but rather a part of it. A considerable amount of research has confirmed that silence helps learners participate more effectively in their internal cognitive tasks, which involve planning, monitoring, and evaluating language production. According to Liu (2002) and Bao & Nguyen (2020), learners often rely on silent speaking as they plan the syntactic structures and monitored their correctness

before speech. The above-mentioned aspects remain highly important when speaking of English as a Foreign Language, in which the language system happens to be more complicated.

King and Harumi (2020) also argue that silence acts as a cognitive buffer that allows the participants to manage the levels of both the cognitive load and the emotional effort required when engaging with each other or with the tasks at hand. This was supported by the literature on the principles of cognitive psychology, which purports to show that silence or reflective pauses are very effective when it comes to learning (Sweller, 2011). The empirical work of Fadilah et al. (2019) and Tatar (2005) illustrates that the learner uses the tool of silence as a strategy in order to assimilate the peers' input and develop a better understanding. The observations dispute the easy interpretation of the phenomenon of silence as a passive act.

Verbal learners and the paradox of silence, cultural and contextual influences on silence

Although there has been extensive focus on students who have been considered reticent, there have been relatively fewer studies carried out that have focused on the phenomena of silence present among verbally active students. Generally, conventional classifications tend to view verbally active students as individuals who become productive as a result of their interaction patterns that involve quick turn-taking (Alcock, 1998). Verbal learners, as discussed by Ahour and Haradasht (2014) and Yashima et al. (2018), can also remain silent if they wish to allow other individuals to participate in a conversation. Fadilah et al. (2019) support the argument that if verbally confident learners remain silent, it is not necessarily an indication of an issue in their communication skills but can simply be a means by which group harmony may be maintained. Furthermore, according to Dewaele and Furnham (2000), there is an interplay between traits and situation when speakers choose to be silent depending on task constraints and classroom and social risks. More vocal people will choose to be silent dependent on class constraints in addition to classroom risks. Silence must be interpreted within a specific context of culture and institution.

In many Asian and Middle Eastern educational settings, silence is often understood in relation to respect, attentiveness, and self-control, in distinction from disengagement (Harumi, 2010; King & Harumi, 2020). Studies done in Myanmar and similar contexts show that collective traditions with a focus on hierarchy and instructor authority shape classroom communication (Dim, 2013; Win, 2015; Wai, 2022). In this environment, learners could choose not to speak so that they would not go against authority. According to Gilhooly (2015), Huynh and Adams (2022), silence in these environments is normally employed as an appropriate means rather than being an indicator of disengagement. In addition, institutional factors like large class sizes, curriculum approaches shaped by the assessment agenda, and teacher-focused approaches to teaching and learning can further contribute to silencing students. Saito et al. (2024) show how educational reforms and transitions in educational

policies can contribute to exacerbating silencing by emphasising coverage and performance over dialogic engagement. In the English-medium higher education environment, the cultural expectations often cross paths with the globally driven teaching practices, in which case the emphasis is given to the weighted discourse engagement. As a result, the silence becomes a site of negotiation between the cultural identity, the requirements, as well as the learning approaches.

Theoretical perspectives on silence, affect, and power relations

Moreover, silence is closely related to the affective aspect of the classroom. The willingness to speak is affected by emotions such as anxiety, confidence, fear of negative evaluation, or the need for acceptance (Choi, 2015; Saito et al., 2024). Silencing is a strategy to avoid loss of face when public speech may have negative evaluations from others, particularly if it leads to loss of face. The teacher-student relationships occupy a crucial role in this respect. Harumi (2010) and Liu (2002) have shown how a dismissive, evaluative teacher response might result in student silence. However, student silence might be legitimised as a teaching factor, as opposed to a problem to be solved. Equally important is the role of peer relationships. Students can choose not to speak in order to maintain harmony, prevent the impression of dominance, or spare peers from embarrassment (Fadilah et al., 2019). The above practice corresponds to Jaworski's (1993) understanding of the social concept of silence, according to which not speaking communicates intention. Theoretical studies on silence offer crucial discourse analysis techniques to understand these dynamic processes. Jaworski (1993) defines silence as a continuum, rather than the opposite of speech, which is the first step to understand silence as a communication act. Jaworski's concept of 'fuzzy categories' makes it clearer that meaning emerges in silence through interpretation. Further, according to Kurzon (1995), unintentional silence (occurring due to nervousness and/or cognitive overload) can be differentiated from intentionally chosen silence, along with silently imposed constraints. Active/agentive processes of signification and constraints can be observed with even greater efficacy in the context of classroom communication.

Taken together, these approaches emphasise the critical need to investigate silence not only in relation to absence but also as a social and cognitive practice with meaningful value. Such approaches are also consistent with qualitative research that emphasises the views of respondents.

Implications for EFL pedagogy and research

From the literature that has been reviewed, it becomes apparent that silence in an EFL classroom is neither beneficial nor non-beneficial; instead, it depends upon various interpretations. In relation to this matter, it becomes essential for educators to go beyond the presumptions that have been

found. When considering situations like the Egyptian private universities, where learners often find themselves in situations where language, culture, and university norms often interact in a complex manner, silence as a phenomenon requires being taken into consideration. This is especially the case when learners often find value in both being involved and not being involved. However, in the area of research, there is a continued need for qualitative research that focuses on the interpretation of silence from the point of view of the learner, the actively verbal students in particular whose experiences have often been obscured from the view of researchers. Through the application of cognitive, cultural, emotional, and institutional approaches to the study of silence, the study addresses the need for research that incorporates a sense of context and a learner-focused approach. The research not only expands prior research but applies it to a new context and therefore plays a part in a debate that involves participation, agency, and equity with regards to EFL education.

Research questions

RQ1: How do EFL students in a private Egyptian university perceive silence during classroom interaction?

RQ2: How do students interpret the role of wait time in supporting or constraining their classroom participation?

Methodology

Research design

The research followed a qualitative interpretive approach to explore how students conceptualise and experience the notions of silence, wait time, and participation in English as a Foreign Language within a private university in Egypt. The approach is rooted within an epistemological foundation of interpretivism, where the meaning constructed from classroom behaviours is considered to have been created via individuals' experiences. Silence, in other words, is not considered a lack of participation and language skills, but is considered to have meaning as an element within classroom communication. A qualitative approach was considered particularly apt given the emphasis placed upon the subjective interpretation of participation and non-participation on the part of the learner. This particular area is one that involves a degree of complexity that may not be easily quantifiable. Based upon a sociocultural/interactionist approach, it can be seen that the research positions the learner's participation as an activity that involves the social mediation of meaning for social purposes. Silence can now be defined from a social perspective that may have particular purposes.

This study was informed by the principles of grounded qualitative research. The data was collected through conducting semi-structured interviews that were facilitated by reflective questions about classroom experiences. This methodological approach allows the participants to voice their thoughts

using their own terminology while ensuring that the research remains well-structured. Importantly, this method is well-suited to the Egyptian education sector, which has English-language instruction combined with the ingrained culture of respect. It is an exploratory design oriented towards an understanding of how students make sense of both silence and participation in their learning environment rather than one set on proving particular hypotheses. Such an inductive research design allowed themes to come out as naturally as possible from interview narratives while at the same time informing them through already existing theoretical concepts in classroom interaction, affect in second language learning theories, as well as theories in participation norms.

Participants

The participants were undergraduate students at a private university in Egypt, where English is the major medium of instruction in the majority of academic programs. This university provides an ideal context to study silence, participation, and classroom interactions in EFL contexts as it offers a diverse student body where many of them come from an Arabic-medium background to study in an English-dominant academic context.

A purposive sampling technique was used to collect data from participants who were able to offer a variety of views regarding classroom participation. This study included fifteen students (n=15) because the sample size is appropriate for a study intended to provide a deep understanding of the topic, rather than making generalisations. The fifteen students were taking foundation level, undergraduate, English language classes, ranging in ability from upper-intermediate to advanced. They were all Arabic speakers learning English, but not all shared the same background of previous educational exposure to English or out-of-school exposure to the English language. This common background made it easier to explore the intersection between their cultural learning approaches and what is expected in an English-language learning environment without being hindered by differences in their previous exposure to learning the English language. Recruitment involved voluntary sign-up in collaboration with announcements that were carried out through relevant courses. All students involved were given an undertaking that involvement or withdrawal from the study would not affect their status. Pseudonyms were used throughout the documentation and reporting processes with the objective of protecting the identities of the students. Identifying details were removed from the transcripts.

The participants consisted of students who identified themselves as highly participative, mid-level participative, and often silent participants of the classroom context. The need for such diversification was to draw attention to the complexities of classroom silence as an event that was highly dependent

on the context, as opposed to the commonly assumed rigid pattern that was typical of silent participants of the classroom.

Materials

The data collection methods used a mix of semi-structured interviews, reflective questions, as well as the documentation of classroom interaction. The questions in the interview sought to gather as much information as possible regarding the students' experiences concerning silence, wait time, as well as class participation.

Interview questions were fashioned into both open-ended questions, which were centred on four key topics: (1) personal experiences of silence in classroom discourse, (2) individual understandings of wait time and pacing, (3) feelings associated with speaking versus remaining silent, and (4) perceptions of changes in levels of participation over time. Some sample questions include, "Can you think of a time when you decided to remain silent during a classroom discussion?" and "What do you normally feel during those times when your instructor pauses for students to answer?". In an effort to encourage a deeper level of reflection, scenario-based probes were incorporated. These probes presented the sorts of common classroom scenarios (for example, rapid questioning, group discussion, public correction) and asked the individuals to put into words how they would think in these situations. They allowed for the expression of an individual's tacit beliefs that may not be accessible simply through questioning. The interviews were carried out mainly in English, with some flexibility to allow the participants to use Arabic if they wanted to express some special emotions or messages that are culturally rooted. This was to facilitate the process of communication and to make sure that the message was not restricted by the language used. The Arabic expressions were later translated into English. These interviews were tape-recorded, and the transcripts included pauses, hesitations, and emphasised aspects, which are important in terms of sense construction. During the stage of data accumulation, it was ensured that field notes were kept so that observations and analyst thoughts could be captured.

Procedure

The data was collected over a period of six weeks, which was within an academic semester, in a private university. After receiving ethical approval from the institution, the participants received an information sheet which described the purpose of the study, the procedures to be followed, as well as the ethical considerations of the study. Written consent was obtained from the participants before they participated in the study. The interviews were either carried out physically in a quiet setting on the campus or online, depending on the preferences of the participants. The interviews lasted at least 45 to 60 minutes to allow the participants to develop rapport with the interviewer as well as to ade-

quately explore the participants' experiences, and the interviews were carried out with the non-judgmental approach to avoid performance pressure. The interview process began with general questions about the learners' experiences of English language learning in a university setting before moving on to more specific themes of silence, participation, and classroom discourse. This process was useful in building familiarity as well as rapport with the participants, which was helpful in gaining access to more delicate issues like embarrassment. The participants were also asked to give specific examples. Throughout the data gathering process, reflexive memoing techniques were utilised in order to note down developing interpretations, assumptions, and biases of the researcher. In consideration of the researcher's personal experience in English Language Teaching, it was imperative for them to be reflexive throughout the data gathering process in order to reduce disparities of power and remain open-minded in their analysis.

Data analysis was conducted utilising a reflexive thematic analysis approach. The initial coding focused on meaning units relevant to the theme of silence, cognition, emotions, and the norms of interactions. The coding was further considered and developed from meaning units toward the conceptual structure listed in Table 1. In the process of analysing the findings, due consideration was given to convergent and divergent opinions so as not to overlook marginalised voices.

Ethical considerations

It should be noted that the integrity of the study covered the entire process of the research cycle. Before the data gathering process, the study obtained approval from the institutional review board regarding the ethical standards applicable to human subject research. The participants were all thoroughly informed regarding the nature of the project, the involvement that they would have, as well as their right to withdraw from the project at any time without penalty. Consent was sought prior to the project commencing. The students' grade status would not be influenced by their decision to participate or not to participate in the project.

With the potentially sensitive nature of the subject matter at hand for the classroom setting and issues of anxiety, self-confidence, and perception of judgment, great care has been given to providing a supportive and respectful interview context. Participants were reminded that there were no right and wrong answers to the questions and that the right to cease the interview at any time they wish. Anonymity was ensured by the use of pseudonyms, while personalised information was suppressed. Voice records and electronic files were safely stored on password-protected media that could only be accessed by the researcher. Data will comply with institutional regulation and will then be safely disposed of.

By reflexivity, the researcher considered it as a practice or obligation. The researcher reflected on their own positionality as a teacher of the English language in a similar setting. The researcher tried to reduce the differences in power that may open the possibility of biased understanding. The researcher was cautious not to distort the voices of the respondents when dealing with silence. With this conceptualisation of silence as practice rather than practice "failure," hopefully this present work can do something positive to engage constructively with the discourse around inclusion and participation and responsive practice in EFL settings in Egyptian higher education.

Table 1

Themes, subthemes, and participant extracts for silence, wait time, and participation

Theme	Subtheme	Illustrative participant extract
Silence as cognitive processing time	Idea formulation	"I stay quiet because I'm organising my ideas before I speak" (P4)
	Language rehearsal	"I think in my head first to avoid grammar mistakes" (P8)
Silence as emotional self-protection	Fear of error	"If I answer quickly and it's wrong, I feel embarrassed" (P10)
	Managing judgement	"Silence protects me from being laughed at" (P1)
Silence shaped by classroom norms	Teacher pacing	"The teacher moves fast, so silence feels like failure" (P13)
	Turn-taking rules	"Only confident students speak because they interrupt easily" (P6)
Silence as culturally informed behaviour	Respectful listening	"In my previous education, silence meant respect, not weakness" (P7)
	Educational background	"We were trained to listen, not to speak unless asked" (P15)
Shifts in participation over time	Growing confidence	"At the beginning I was silent, but later I started sharing more" (P2)
	Adaptive strategies	"Now I use short answers first, then speak more when I feel safe" (P9)

Results

This section sets out the findings from the study, structured around the key themes which emerged during the course of the thematic analysis of the interview findings. The findings from this analysis tend to suggest that students' experiences of silence, wait time, and participation in class are complex, planned, and highly embedded within the cognitive and sociocultural aspects of the learning environment. Rather than conceptualising students' behaviour in terms of the presence or presence-absence of silence, they tended to describe it as complex, context-dependent, and highly situational, and its role as something which varies across specific contexts and specific periods in time. The themes and their sub-themes can be easily found in Table 1, and briefly explained in the next subsections.

Silence as cognitive processing time

Generally, the participants across the dataset regarded silence as a necessary cognitive space that aided thought, the structuring of ideas, and the preparation of language prior to the act of speech. The theme of silence was sometimes associated with cognitive engagement rather than lack of engagement. The sub-themes under this theme are the formation of ideas and the language rehearsal.
The participants explained that maintaining silence helped them organise their ideas, especially when responding to complex questions or engaging in academic discussions. A participant explained, “I’m quiet because I’m organising my ideas before speaking” (P4). This participant acknowledged that maintaining silence helped her prepare her ideas without being Avoidant. For most students, the pause helped her ensure that her ideas made sense and were relevant to the discussion. Incorporated alongside conceptual thinking was the use of silence as a tool for language rehearsal. This was through mental verification of grammar, vocabulary, and structure before articulation, especially during whole-class discussion, which was public and potentially evaluative. This was captured by one student, “I think it through in my head to avoid making grammar errors” (P8). This was described as a technique to minimise risks associated with language while building confidence. Significantly, the silence being referred to in this context was not experienced as passive silence by the participants. On the contrary, they actively constructed the silence as being an enabling aspect of learning itself. This enabled a focus on accuracy, clarity, and confidence.

Silence as emotional self-protection

The second primary theme was about the affective aspects of silence. The silence of the research participants was consistently associated by them with anxiety, fear of mistake, and fear of judgment.

Two subthemes that stood out are the fear of mistake and managing others' judgment. Several participants described silence as a way to shield oneself from the risks of emotional presentation in English. Fast speech or unprepared speech was considered to possibly reveal mistakes, leading to embarrassment or loss of confidence. One of the participants explained, "If I answer quickly and it's wrong, I feel embarrassed" (P10). In this case, silence acted as a way to shield oneself emotionally in order to prepare a response, or to stop oneself from responding.

Peer judgment is also another important aspect that contributed to silence. Participants described worries about being mocked, criticised, and negatively judged by their peers. One of the participants stated, "Silence protects me from being laughed at" (P1). This shows that silence not only existed on an individual level but was a way of responding to what is perceived to occur within the classroom. Remarkably, even those participants who described themselves as more or less confident communicators spoke of experiences in which they have been silenced by emotions of pressure. In this context, silencing served as a strategy helpful in managing anxiety and maintaining self-esteem in stressful communication environments.

Silence shaped by classroom norms

The accounts given by the participants also pointed to the significance of the classroom norms and practices surrounding the use of silence in the classroom. Silence was understood to be constructed from the practices such as the pacing conducted by the teacher. Some participants indicated that the pacing conducted by the teacher reduced the students' opportunities for participation such that the consequences of silence could be attributed to participation. This was echoed by one of the participants who stated, "The teacher goes very fast. Silence becomes a sign of failure" (P13). Turn-taking practices influenced the patterns of participation. Participants revealed that more confident students were likely to speak more because they easily interrupted and responded quickly compared to others waiting for an opportunity to speak. A participant supported the idea when they said, "Only confident students speak because they interrupt easily" (P6). This indicates that the silence in class does not reflect the participants' lack of willingness or readiness to speak. These results make it clear that silence must be considered in the context of classroom organisation and instruction. The teacher's behaviour and manner of instruction can offer significant support or constraints on the perception of silence.

Silence as culturally informed behaviour

Another prominent theme was the cultural significance of silence. The participants very often drew upon their educational and cultural backgrounds in attempts to explain why silence was appropriate

or expected in a given classroom setting. There were also some participants who associated silence with listening as a form of respect. A student said, “In my past studies, silence meant respect, not weakness” (P7). This is almost the reverse of the typical Western teaching cultures, where participation is often associated with verbal participation in class discussions. Educational backgrounds were also responsible for the formation of expectations in participation. The participants who were exposed to the conventional education system were found to be trained to listen rather than to speak unless invited to do so. This was testified to by one participant: “We were trained to listen, not to speak unless asked” (P15). In these results, silence is shown to be not just a preference of the individual but a culturally mediated activity. The interpretation of silence by the students was influenced by deep-rooted socialisation in their educational settings, and such socialisation was perpetuated in the English-medium university setting where the goal was to facilitate interaction.

Shifts in participation over time

Finally, the participants were able to point out the dynamic nature of their engagement and disengagement patterns in their speech. Under this category, two subthemes were found – confidence and strategies. Several participants reported that when they began their higher education studies, their strategy was one of relative silence at the beginning and an increased willingness to contribute 话 when confidence and familiarity acquired through exposure developed. A number of the study participants articulated their strategy in the following way when describing the role and impact that language refinement has achieved or facilitated in their lives, “At the beginning I was silent, but later I started sharing more” (P2).

Participants used adaptive participation strategies to help manage the risk involved in participating. For example, a participant reported, "I now respond briefly first and then speak as I feel safe" (P9). In this case, the strategy used helped the participants evaluate the interactional context before taking the risk to take longer turns in the interaction. These results illustrate the dynamic and context-sensitive nature of silence and participation. Students were proactively modifying their classroom behaviour based on their experiences with the classroom context, increasingly interacting while continuing to maintain strategic silent behaviour.

Discussion

This study explores the perception of silence, wait time, and participation rates among EFL students enrolled in an Egyptian private university. The findings of the research, which was conducted based on qualitative interview findings, show that silence cannot be conceptualised as the absence of utterances, as it is an intricate process that is strategic and socially mediated. The findings of the research,

much like the most up-to-date research, do not define silence as a process devoid of importance, as it is an embedded aspect of the process of teaching and learning, mediated by cognitive, affective, and institutional factors among others.

Silence as an active cognitive resource

Among the most striking results of the study is that students recognised silence as always being about cognitive processing as opposed to disengagement. Students mentioned organising ideas, rehearsing words, and checking responses for accuracy before making them as some of the things they did in silence. This aligns strongly with research positioning silence as a form of cognitive work that supports deeper processing and linguistic accuracy (Bao & Nguyen, 2020; King & Harumi, 2020; Liu, 2002). Sociocognitively, this result lends further support to an emphasis on learning as extending beyond interaction to cognitive processes, which may not be visible to teachers. Silence here becomes a communicative space as outlined by Jaworski (1993), meaning is derived here from intention as opposed to speech. The present findings support this view by showing that participants actively engaged in meaning-making during silent moments, rather than disengaging from the learning task.
Notably, based on these findings, silence is a regulatory method that facilitates regulation of the cognitive load of learners. This is in accordance with cognitive load theory (Sweller, 2011), which emphasises that learners require appropriate processing time in order to process complex information. In EFL contexts, learners must simultaneously manage content form and social expectations, silence appears to function as a shield that facilitates more effective engagement.

Emotional regulation and the protective function of silence

Aside from the cognitive aspect, the results reveal the emotional facets of silence. The phenomenon of silence was constantly associated with emotional self-protection, specifically with regard to the fear of error, the fear of being negatively judged, or loss of face. This is in consonance with research which found that anxiety and fear of being negatively judged can significantly affect learners' willingness to communicate (Choi, 2015; Dewaele & Furnham, 2000). The value of this study is to show that silence could serve as a coping strategy rather than as an indicator of disengagement. The participants gave reasons for adopting silence as a means to protect self-esteem or to avoid embarrassment while with peers. This supports Kurzon's (1995) notion of intentional silence whereas silence is not imposed by inability but selected as a strategic response to contextual pressures. Significantly, however, the affective dimension of silence was not simply a concern for less confident learners. Indeed, whilst some participants did not see themselves as verbal participants, they also reported withdrawing if they perceived the emotional conditions of the learning environment to be insecure.

Indeed, this finding disrupts simple typologies of learners indexed to 'confident'/'reticent' dispositions and suggests instead a context-dependent understanding of silence, which indexes a response to perceived risk rather than a characteristic of the learner per se.

Classroom norms and interactional ecology

This also reiterates the important effects surrounding classroom discursive norms and interactional structures in respect to student participation. It is particularly noted by participants that teacher pacing affects their speaking turns. When classroom discourse moved quickly or favoured rapid responders, silence was experienced as marginalisation rather than choice.

This is in line with the results showing that the way in which the language of participation is valued in the classroom is socially structured to advantage some modes of participation above others (Harumi, 2010; Saito et al., 2024). In these contexts, some learners who take longer to process the language of instruction might be inadvertently marginalised. The present findings suggest that silence is not only an individual preference but is co-constructed through pedagogical practices. The research highlights further the role of group dynamics in relation to participation levels. The participants showed that more confident speakers dominated the discussion, whereas there were people who struggled to recognise the opportunity to join the discussion. This finding matches that of previous research that has identified that there are often imbalances in the discussion in the classroom that are reflective of power relations (Fadilah et al., 2019; Yashima et al., 2018). Silence in this context may reflect structural constraints rather than lack of engagement.

Cultural meanings of silence and respect

This study represents an important addition to existing research in that it explores cultural perceptions of silence within an Egyptian EFL context. The subjects were able to associate silence with respect, attentiveness, and well-behaved students. This is supported by other research undertaken in Asian and Middle Eastern settings, which sees a silence being perceived as an expression of respect rather than an expression of passivity (Harumi, 2010; Wai, 2022; Win, 2015).

These cultural interpretations of silence challenge Western pedagogical beliefs that link activity to speech. They propose instead that silence may serve a relational purpose, such as deference to a superior or attentiveness to others. This is in line with Jaworski's (1993) observation that silence is given meaning by social conventions rather than by its inherent qualities. Notably, it is in these reflections that participants reveal an apparent tension that exists between these socialised practices

and those in English-medium classrooms that expect communicative talk to occur. This tension creates a space in which students must negotiate challenging norms, sometimes resulting in strategic silence as a form of cultural and interpersonal navigation.

Silence as a relational and ethical practice

Another important finding emerging from the results is that students employed the use of silence not only to regulate their own behaviour but also to enable other students to be heard. The participants reported that they intentionally withheld speech in order to give an opportunity to another student to speak. This is in accordance with research suggesting that silence can function as a prosocial act rather than an individual limitation (Fadilah et al., 2019; Yashima et al., 2018).
This is a manifestation of the ethical element of silence, whereby the students value collective learning over self-expression. This goes against the grain of normal pedagogies that equate participation with performance. In fact, silence is presented here as a form of cooperation. The above discovery is even more important for verbally active children. Contrary to expectations, these children showed awareness of the dynamics of a group and were willing to adjust their own activity for the benefit of others. This supports calls for more nuanced understandings of learner identities that move beyond static categories such as “talkative” or “quiet.”

Implications for theory and pedagogy

The research contributes to the theoretical discourse on silence by confirming the conceptual definitions put forth by Jaworski (1993), regarding silence as a form of communicative act, and the intentionality framework proposed by Kurzon (1995). On the other hand, the research shows that silence is intentional and meaningful, thereby challenging deficit models that still exist in pedagogic discourse. Academically, the results provide evidence that educators need to reconsider conceptualisation and measurement of participation. Offering opportunities for reflective silence, the ability to allow sufficient Wait-Time, and valuing Nonverbal Participation may enhance creation of more inclusive learning environments. In addition to this, the educator can value opportunities to address the concept of silence to reduce speech performance anxiety. Moreover, the findings highlight the importance of teachers being conscious of the dynamics of classroom conversation. Issues concerning regulation of pace and turn-taking can perhaps counter the unintended sidelining of students with different information processing styles.

Positioning the study within the broader literature

Through the lens of students in a private Egyptian university, the current study could contribute to the existing body of knowledge regarding silence by placing the phenomenon in a relatively under-studied environment. While there are existing studies conducted within East Asian and Western settings regarding silence, there are relatively few studies regarding similar settings in the Middle East. The research also contributes to knowledge on verbal learners because the study shows that students who identify themselves as verbally active engage in complex activities related to silence.

Limitations

There exist some limitations to the study that the reader should be aware of in the course of interpreting the research results. Firstly, the current study was conducted at a private university in Egypt. This is a consideration that might affect the generality of the current study to other settings, mostly public universities or educational settings with different linguistic and pedagogical traditions. Second, the number of participants surveyed was deliberately limited and based on voluntary survey responses. Although this is adequate for a qualitatively based research approach like this one, it might nonetheless present a biased sampling of students who tend to be more reflective or at ease with the discussion of the experience. Thirdly, the research has actually mainly used self-report data that has been collected through conducting interviews that could be susceptible to participants' perceptions, memory, and tendency to present themselves in a positive light. Despite that, reflexive practices have been used in this study to reduce bias in research. Lastly, given that the study collected data at only one point in time, it fails to present any changes that may occur regarding students' perceptions of silence and participation over an extended period of time or across different classes. This could be addressed by conducting research that takes into consideration longitudinal designs that include institutions.

Conclusion

This paper explores the experience of silence, wait time, and participation among EFL students at a private Egyptian university. These findings contradict the belief that silence is a deficit practice and demonstrate that it is often a deliberate and significant practice. The silence was utilised by the students to organise ideas, to control their emotions, and to control social interactions, suggesting that learning can often occur between the seams of verbal communication. Silence appeared as an interactive and culturally contextualised phenomenon where the use of silence as a means of showing respect and maintaining harmony was articulated by the participants, particularly in the context of the classroom shaped by the past learning culture and expectations. However, the use of silence was also shaped by the teacher's actions and practice. In particular, the research showed that verbally

active group members eagerly exploited silence, thus refuting binary oppositions between 'active' and 'passive' learners simplistically. It also appeared that learners' involvement was fluid and contextual rather than stable or personality-linked. This particular point emphasises the importance of reconsidering involvement in language lessons.

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Conflict of interest

The researcher confirms that there is no conflict of interest associated with this study.

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