

Decoding EFL learners' in-class silence

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Abstract

Among factors belonging to teacher's capacity is classroom managing skill, in which teacher's ability to involve the whole class is important. Students' silence is sometimes linked to a failure in student engagement, therefore research about learners' in-class silence is significant especially for classes having Asian learners regularly "claimed to be quiet". This study investigates reasons behind students' lack of oral participation in an EFL classroom of a Vietnamese university. Participants were 107 undergraduates majoring in English language and data were collected via questionnaire and diaries. Quantitative result highlights the rate of silent reaction towards diverse types of teachers' in-class speech acts - specifically teacher's repetition of students' ideas strikingly got the highest rate of well-above 80%. Additionally, qualitative data reveals further explanation including both subjective causes relating to learners' psychology and proficiency, and objective ones concerning teachers, subject's contents, and classmates. This paper suggests some ways for educators, especially who work with Asian learners, to interpret students' silence and handle it adequately.

Key words: silence, reticence, Asian learners

Introduction

Classroom management has always been of great importance for language classes, and building up skills for this appears to be a must for teachers when developing their teaching capacity. Language classes, particularly EFL ones appreciate handling different types of activities to help students not only develop equally both receptive and productive skills but also become more active in learning and responding to language. Accordingly, in-class silence is seemingly considered a problem obstructing teacher to involve students to those activities.

However, to deal with silence adequately and build up a more “equitable classrooms”, silence should be considered as “a form of participation” and equally studied alongside talk. Insight into students’ silence can possibly assure the recognition of their contribution and involvement even when they say nothing (Schultz, 2012). In the light of this viewpoint, this study is carried out with a view to comprehensively elaborating on reasons behind students’ reticence.

Literature review

Classroom silence and its multiple meanings have been reviewed by certain researchers. According to Schultz (2012), it is a form of engagement that should be considered as a conscious selection of students. Silence can be an indicator of two opposing dimension of attitudes – “resistance or assent”. A student may choose to be silent to generate thoughts over lesson’s contents, but may also turn to silence to disengage themselves from the classrooms’ happenings. In the same vein, Baurain (2011) categorizes silence into two abstract terms – “speaking silence” and “silent silence”. The so-called speaking silence is usually meaningful and contains something going on, while the latter type indicates “absence, withdrawing, or withholding, perhaps as a result of disinterest, boredom, frustration, or force”.

Literature has been filled with studies over the causes of classroom silence, an appreciable number of which are about Asian learners (Cheng, 2000; Liu, 2005a; Liu, 2005b, Ghavamnia & Ketabi, 2013; Tong, 2010; Agazadeh & Abedi, 2014). Cheng (2000), in an account of Asian learners, attributed silence to the *low language proficiency*, which is rather obvious in the situation that students focus more on their receptive skills rather than on productive skills including speaking. Liu (2005a) confirms this by pointing out specific deficiency in pronunciation, vocabulary and oral practice, especially when students are not given adequate opportunities to work on their speaking skill. Besides, *psychological factors* are counted to be where silence derives from, as suggested by Liu (2005a), Tong (2010), and Agazadeh & Abedi (2014). Lack of confidence, lack of motivation, and fear of losing face are figured out to be the origins. Liu (2005a) even discovers it is the students’ *personality* that contributes to their silence since some are born with reticence and tend to avoid talking or being forced to say something. The lesson, furthermore, can be another root when its topics are not interesting or familiar enough or when it is full of drills for some examination and fails to cater students with oral activities (Liu, 2005a). Nevertheless, even if the lesson involves lots of discussion, some students still show their reluctance especially if the main focus is on reading or writing. Finally, some of the records mention teacher-related causes, namely the way teachers pose questions (Liu, 2005b), their constant warning about exam or risks to fail the course which creates pressure, and how their facial expression makes the silent students obsessed by the thought that the talkative ones are more proficient (Ghavamnia & Ketabi, 2013).

Research questions

1. What are Vietnamese EFL students' reactions towards teachers' in-class speech acts?
2. What the reasons behind Vietnamese EFL students' in-class silence as reported by those students?

Methodology

This research chose randomly 107 EFL first-year students majoring in English as the participants. At the moment the data were collected, these students had just enrolled in the university for more than one month. This fact indicated they had transferred from high school learning environment with the main focus on receptive skills to a more integrated language class of the university. Therefore, they were likely to have more reasons to be silent in the class than those who were no longer freshmen.

The two instruments employed to obtain data was questionnaires and journals. According to Gillham (2000), questionnaires help collecting a large amount of data from the participants within a short time and save much effort. Besides, journals are claimed to not only enhance insights into matters inaccessible from the researcher's perspective alone, but also allow the flexibility as entries for the diaries could be completed according to participants' schedule (Mackey & Gass, 2005).

The questionnaires were administered to all the participants, and the framework to build items was based on previous research findings and the speech acts survey designed by Jules (2003). There was also a question asking the participants to claim themselves as a silent student or not. If the answer was "Yes" and they voluntarily left their contacts, they then would be invited to write the diaries with guidance over one-month period. Some of them agreed to post the entries online via Facebook (with privacy mode) or email (sent directly to the researcher), while some others preferred notebooks. In total, 14 participants joined to write the journals. All of the participants' identities were kept unrevealed and anonymous, in which writers' names were coded according to the alphabet.

Results

- 1. What are Vietnamese EFL students' reactions towards teachers' in-class speech acts?**

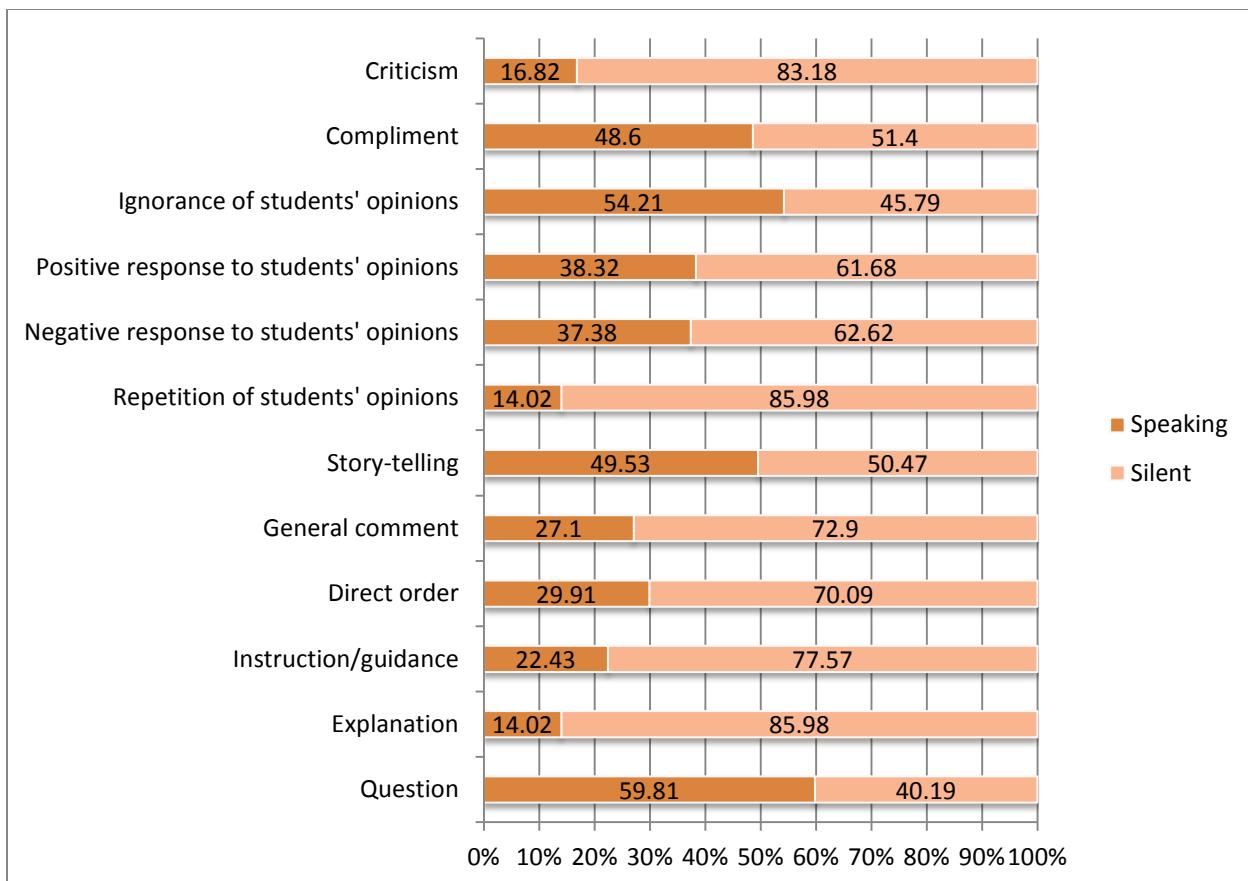


Figure 1. Participants' reactions towards teachers' speech acts addressing the whole class

The chart above clearly demonstrated three groups of students' reactions towards whole-class speech acts. The first group included those receiving silence from well-under 50% of the participants, which were question and ignorance of students' opinions. With a slightly higher proportion of more than 50% to 80%, the second group consisted of compliment, positive and negative response to students' ideas, storytelling, general comment, direct order and instruction. The last group – also known as the high silence-rate one – contained prominent figures of more than 80% of the samples who admitted keeping quiet when hearing criticism, receiving explanation and listening to repetition of students' opinions.

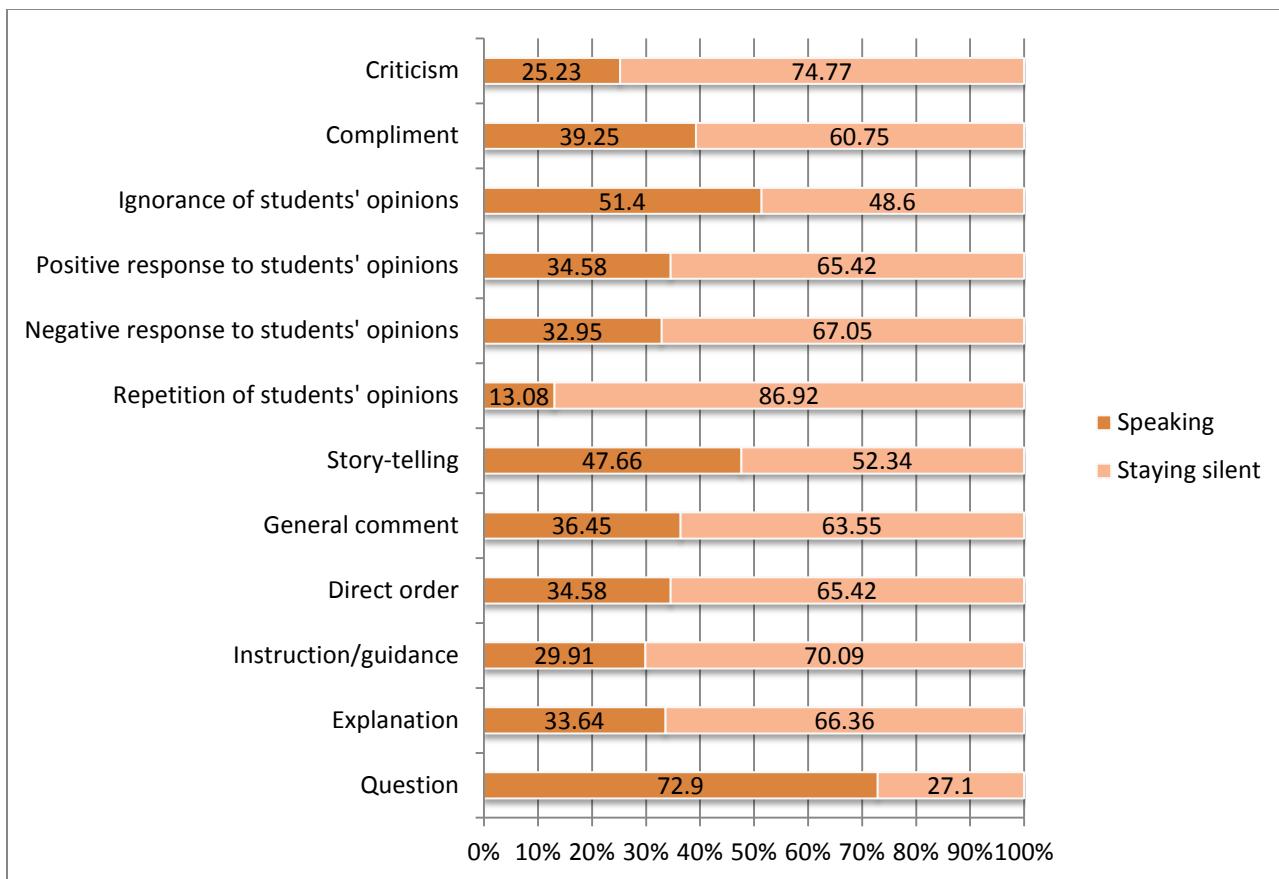


Figure 2. Participants' reactions towards teachers' speech acts addressing each individual

As seen from the chart, teachers' question made up the lowest proportion of silent students, in which more than 70% chose to respond when being asked in person. Following this number, around 50% kept quiet towards teacher's telling story and their ignorance of students' opinions. The other speech acts (criticism, compliment, positive or negative response to students' opinions, general comment, direct order, instruction, and explanation) accounted for a more remarkable percentage of around 60% to 75%. Strikingly, the rate of participants having no oral reaction when teachers repeated students' opinions was 86.92%.

SPEECH ACTS	TO THE WHOLE CLASS	TO EACH INDIVIDUAL
Question	40.19	27.1
Explanation	85.98	66.36
Instruction/guidance	77.57	70.09
Direct order	70.09	65.42
General comment	72.9	63.55
Story-telling	50.47	52.34
Repetition of students' opinions	85.98	86.92
Negative response to students' opinions	62.62	67.05

Positive response to students' opinions	61.68	65.42
Ignorance of students' opinions	45.79	48.6
Compliment	51.4	60.75
Criticism	83.18	74.77

Table 1. Comparison of students' reactions towards teachers' speech acts between when being addressed in person and when being addressed altogether

Comparing the results delivered in the two charts above, the difference in students' reaction between when being addressed in person and when being addressed altogether could be witnessed. Overall, the rate of silence seemed to be high at more than 60% (except for compliments for each individual) regardless of teachers' ways to address when they gave explanation, instruction, direct order, general comment, repetition of students' ideas, negative/positive comment on students' ideas and criticism. Question for the whole class, story-telling, ignoring students' opinions and whole-class compliment accounted for a more modest rate of 40% to around 50%. The only speech act having the low silence level of 27% was question for individuals.

On the whole, quantitative data indicated that the percentage of students stayed silent towards teachers' in-class speech acts appeared to be high whether teachers addressed in person or in group. The lowest figure was the rate of participants choosing to keep quiet when the teachers asked them individually.

2. What the reasons behind Vietnamese EFL students' in-class silence as reported by those students?

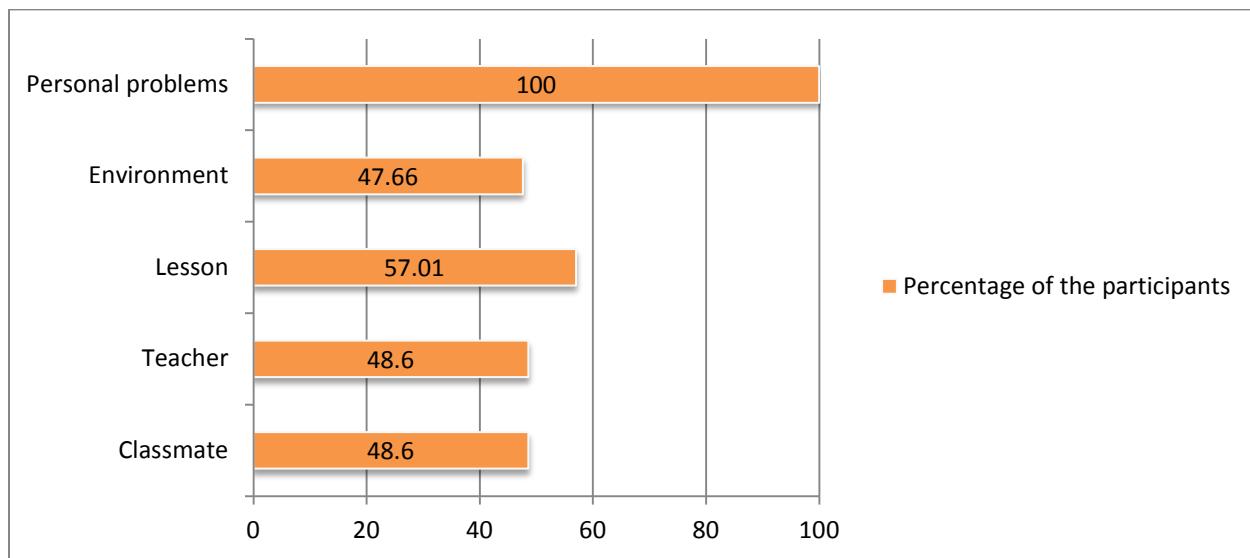


Figure 3. Reasons behind students' in-class reticence

Apparently, the proportion of participants selecting personal problems as the reason for reticence made up the absolute figures of 100%. Meanwhile, the other factors like environment, the lesson, teacher and classmate gained comparatively equal rates of around 50% to 55%.

Based on the results of the previous research, more items under personal problems were provided in the questionnaires and each of those items got different percentage depending on the participants' selection, which was illustrated in the chart below.

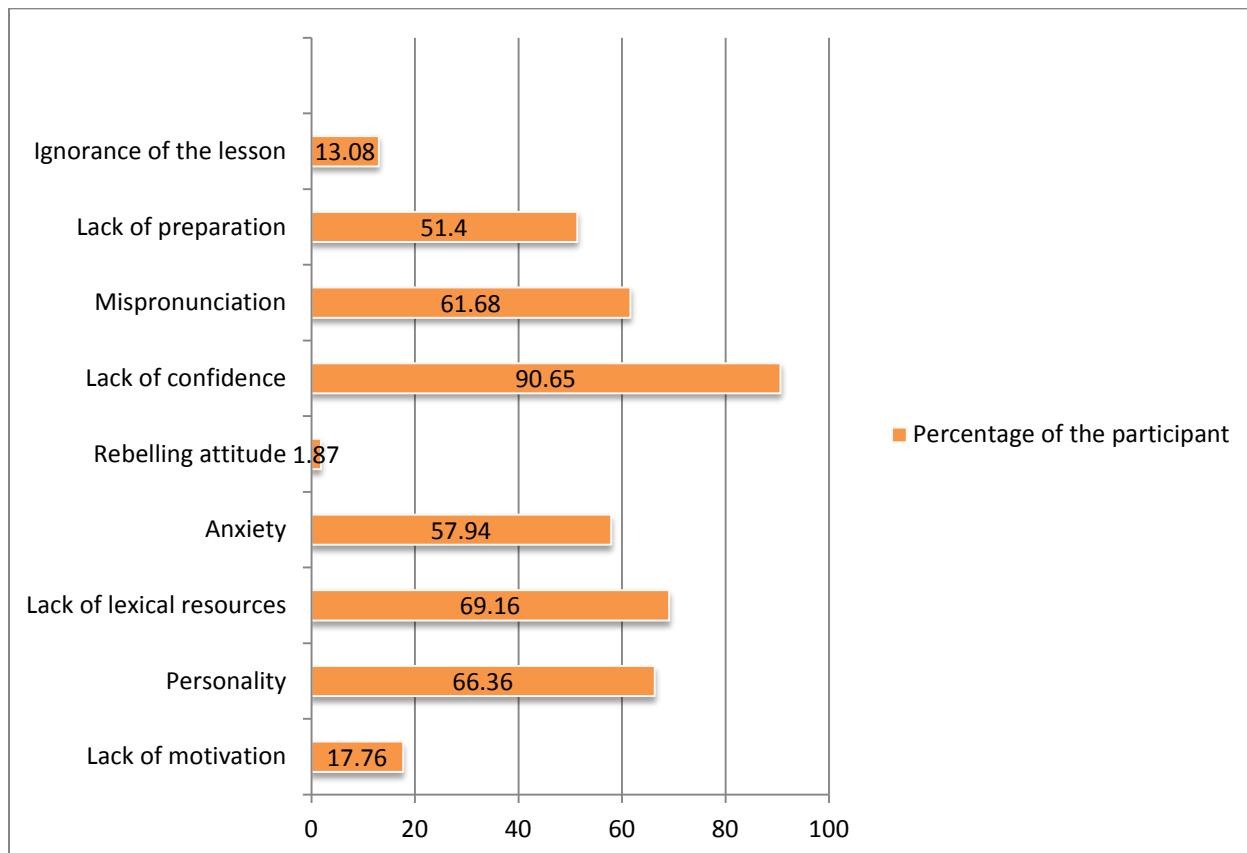


Figure 4. Personal problems-related reasons behind students' in-class reticence

There was a great variation in the percentage of choosers for each personal problem. While the highest rate of 90.65% belonged to lacking confidence, there still existed low value of only 1.87% reporting rebelling attitude as the reason for in-class silence. Lacking motivation and ignoring the lesson made up respectively 13.08% and 17.76 %, while the other problems' rates ranged from 51% to 69%.

Apart from the figures above, a deeper insight into reasons for students' in-class silence could be gathered from students' sharing or personal stories in their diaries. Among these, it was surprising that none of the students mentioned that learning environment made them silent, contrary to the rate obtained from the questionnaires. The other factors, however, received quite thorough explanation as followed.

Classmate

While nearly half of the participants rated this factor as a root of in-class reticence, a modest amount of sharing was obtained. According to student B, students' oral participation might be obstructed by their teammates' low proficiency. Even when the language proficiency was satisfactory, shared student F, student might also become silent if working with reserved

counterparts: "They didn't speak so I couldn't talk like a strange creature in a silent group". For another case, in-class silence would appear when class members had negative attitudes towards each other, as reported by student A, G and C. Student F described the look on her classmates' faces whenever she spoke: "Sometimes I looked into their eyes, and I thought no one paid attention to my speaking." Student G even revealed her irritation with frequent group conflict that made her reduce her oral reaction.

Teacher

Although having the same proportion with classmate factor, this factor received more elaboration from the participants. Student A said she felt rather more hesitant to raise the voice due to teacher's strict supervision: "While I was discussing with my friends, teacher X came to our place and listen to my speaking so attentively. I felt so hesitant to continue!" She also mentioned teacher's high requirements as another root for her silence. Specifically, she felt the teacher was so strict in rating the pronunciation that she sometimes did not dare to raise her voice. At another angle, student F pointed out teacher's lack of attention made them less want to speak: "I just talked when the teacher came to my corner, the first reason was I had nothing to say and I thought that the teacher seemed to ignore me. He didn't ask me anything except for something he asked all the class to answer."

Details about teacher-student interaction were also included in participants' diaries. For student I, it was the teacher's "flooding" use of English that made him annoyed and the lecture more difficult to understand. He could not help feeling that the teacher was trying to show off his English fluency instead of focusing on lesson's quality. Student I said for sure that the whole class's minds seemed to be in turbulence attempting to understand the teacher, they therefore did not respond even if the question was translated into Vietnamese. Besides, student M claimed that the teacher gave "anyone-can-tell" questions, which made them too general and not interesting that almost all the class members stayed silent when being asked. Student G mentioned another example when she had intended to answer but then did not for fear that "*The teacher may ask me "Why"?*" Additionally, how teachers delivered their questions or lectures was also taken into account. Student G, I and L had the same viewpoints that when teachers kept one-way lecturing, students would have no inspiration to share their ideas in the lesson. Student L and N also took the similar example that their teacher just insisted on giving questions and calling students to answer and by no way a student-teacher interaction could be created as the students seemed to be passive all the time.

Lesson

Lesson to some extent affected the level of students' oral engagement in classroom activities. Student C admitted that she did not talk much because the theory to learn was too easy, so there was "nothing to ask the teacher or discuss with friends". Comparable in their comments on lesson's contents, student H and N and B found the uninteresting knowledge prompted them to stay quiet throughout the period. For student M, the meaningless activity in the lesson at times could be counted as the factor for her silence.

Drills were mentioned by a considerable number of students. Student I and N both hold negative perspectives that a lesson full of drills did not create the chance for them to raise their voice. Also elaborating on this, student A, B, C and L accidentally agreed that drills like checking homework and test practice naturally required no oral reaction. These four students shared in

their diaries they still stay focused but they hardly say anything because they just paid attention to the answers or the ways to deal with some types of task.

Personal problems

Obviously, this factor was ranked first among all the reasons and admitted by all the participants as the principal grounds for students' silence in class. Accordingly, the qualitative data also consisted plenty of details about each writer' own matters partly explaining their reticence.

Personality. Student C admitted having a tendency to keep talking to the minimum because she was not a talkative person, and it would be hard for her to change that character. Student G wrote that she rarely shared anything with others in her nature. Student H and L were of the same opinions that they used to be hesitant in class and this had been set up as a habit from their high school.

Low language proficiency. This factor was mentioned student A, B, and M who thought that the deficiency in lexical resources created difficulty for them to raise their voice in English classes. For student A, she had enough ideas to respond but she struggled to express those in English; student B even faced a fear when she "suddenly had no words in mind to continue her speaking". In terms of pronunciation, student H, M and N had the same problem that they frequently made mistakes, and student N was stuck with her local language effect in which sound /l/ and /n/ were frequently mistaken. Some others expressed their fear of mispronunciation and this also made them hesitant to speak in class, shared student B and D.

Also, student I, B and D said that sometimes they thought they could not give any oral response because their language proficiency generally were not good enough to understand teachers' instructions.

Psychological factors Students F, H, I, M and N all said that they lacked the confidence needed to raise their voice since they were afraid of speaking "something wrong" in front of the whole class and being laughed at. Student K claimed her in-class speaking hesitance rooted from the fear that the others might detect her mistakes. She even expressed: "I feel more comfortable when the whole class speak together, that's when no one can track my errors." Some students like A and M talked about being overwhelmed by other superior counterparts. Student M showed schools of thoughts about this in her writing:

"When my group did a presentation, I did not say much. The other friend was very good at speaking, so letting her present would contribute to the whole group performance. In my nature I am not inferior, but when I see myself lagging behind friends, all of my confidence flew away. [...] I keep thinking that if I speak too much, people will not be interested and will not want to listen to me, which is much more miserable. It seems a vicious circle: I am bad at speaking and you do not want to listen, you do not want to listen so I do not want to speak anymore... My inferiority keeps burgeoning."

Workload. For some students, workload from other subjects made them feel exhausted and disengaged with the lesson. Student C, E, F, and K all experienced this situation when there was plenty of homework to complete, or when they had to study up to six periods in the morning, or when there were tests in the lesson.

Other factors. Student A and B believed the reason they could not attend the lesson actively because they did not have background understanding about the topic. For student H and I, lack of

oral participation resulted from their lack of preparation for the lesson. Unexpectedly, student C expressed she intended not to speak because she “wanted to give the chance to some other friends”.

Discussion of the results

The study’s findings to some extent harmonized with the literature review. In general, the participants stay silent towards teachers’ common speech acts whether the teacher addressed an individual or speak with the whole class. Besides, causes relating to teacher, students’ personality, their psychology and their language proficiency are in the same vein with what are figured out by Cheng (2000), Liu (2005a, 2005b), Ghavamnia & Ketabi (2013), Tong (2010), and Agazadeh & Abedi (2014).

Some of the findings deserves more discussion and seemed to be contributive to the literature review. Firstly, students’ silence may sometimes stem from student’s intention to help their counterparts. Given this result, their silence should also be considered as a contribution to the lesson. Moreover, the participants were under considerable effect from their friends and may adjust their level of oral reaction if their friends were silent. Students’ silence should also be taken for granted for the lessons whose focus is on listening, reading or writing drills as students expect to have more chance for self study and reduce oral participation. Under this idea, silence denotes students’ intense engagement in the lesson. Finally, the teacher’s requirements and supervision over students’ talk are in need of consideration as it was stated as a reason behind the reticence.

The findings suggest teachers to view silence as a normal part of language classes, due to the personality of students and sometimes the silence is natural when activities involve mainly drill tasks. Instead of being stressed by the “deafening silence” of the learners, teacher should consider some of the following solutions. Firstly, *grouping students heterogeneously* could be a good way to help them overcome their lack of confidence as they can feel more relaxed to raise their voice in a group with counterparts of different levels and personality. This assures that they would not be profoundly overwhelmed by better learners but not be affected by silent ones, providing that the teachers maintain supervision over groups. Secondly, teachers should be mindful of their *ways of delivering the speech*, specifically slow speed, simple words and specific questions should be good options, especially for classes of low level. Receiving the lowest percentage of silent reaction, giving question to each individual should be made use of to reduce the level of reticence. Sometimes, difficult or theoretical contents can be partly explained in mother tongue to make sure the students follow the lesson but are not flooded with academic words or complicated lectures. Also, for low-level ones, teachers should be more tolerant with some of their pronunciation or grammar mistakes. Last but not least, teachers should keep in mind that in-class silence is not always an indicator of disengagement, even in case it is, there could be some hard-to-control factors leading to that reticence like students’ personality, their own workload, and student-student conflicts. Therefore, *a calm and accepting attitude* as well as a satisfaction when having tried their best should be essential for the teachers to keep their mental health and motivation for teaching career.

Conclusion

The paper has gathered relevant details about students' reaction towards teachers' speech acts, in which silence was the principal way of responding. Various reasons behind this response can be traced back to classmate, teacher, lesson and students' personal matters concerning personality, psychology, and language proficiency.

Though carried out over a small scale, the study still provides a significant reference for teachers dealing with Vietnamese learners in particular and Asian ones in general. This study, however, still have some rooms for improvement in the future. If possible, further studies should be conducted over a bigger scale and involve different types of participants including teachers, parents or education managers. Besides, the framework for building data collection instruments should include socio-cultural factors to explain students' reticence more comprehensively. Finally, it could be better if there is some investigation to find out more effective solutions to deal with silent classroom.

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