

**SILENCE IN CLASSROOM INTERACTION:
A CASE STUDY OF STUDENTS OF ENGLISH AT ELEMENTARY LEVEL
AT HANOI NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF EDUCATION**

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Abstract. The study examines students' silence experience in an English language classroom of elementary level at Hanoi National University of Education (HNUE) and addresses teachers' complaints about the students' passivity during classroom interaction. It aims to seek answers to the questions of whether the students were actually 'taking in' or not from their teacher while they were keeping silent in classroom and to what extent their silence keeping affected their learning outcome. A 'think-aloud' tally sheet and a reading comprehension test were employed as the research instruments. The findings contributed to the discussion of students' 'silent period'. The study suggests that teachers of low levels therefore should not expect too much from their students to speak up in the earlier stage of learning and should instead aid their students' comprehension by providing 'comprehensible input' and linguistic resources for them to take in. Their silence keeping may be attributed to some other factors such as teacher instruction, individual personality, motivation, learning materials rather than the language acquisition process itself.

Keywords: Classroom interaction, silence, silent period, think aloud.

1. Introduction

Working as a teacher of English at Faculty of English, Hanoi National University of Education (HNUE), the researcher finds that her colleagues have complained frequently about the passivity of their non-major students of English in the classroom, especially at the earlier stage of their language acquisition process. The students are reluctant to play a role of active learners as expected, and tend to stick to the passive role which they feel more comfortable with. All they just do at this stage is listening silently. Students' passivity and their unwillingness to speak could explain why they are often described by their teachers as being 'shy' [9]. Students would just listen and take notes rather than speak up. Knowledge therefore tends to flow in one direction only from the teacher to students. However, as for the communicative language classroom specifically, teachers would expect increased interaction among students themselves and between teachers and students. Therefore, the questions of whether the students are actually 'taking in' something from the teacher while they are keeping silent in classroom and to what extent their silence keeping affects their learning outcome has attracted meticulous attention and concern from the teachers. It was with these questions in mind that the researcher decided to conduct a study into silence in English language classroom at HNUE as her teaching context.

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2. Content

2.1. Literature Review

Krashen and Terrell (1983) outlines the stages in second language acquisition based on the ‘natural way’ of acquiring a first language and claimed that Stage 1 is the stage of *comprehension* and is characterized by a *period of silence* or *incubation*. Students are not required to respond orally. Later on they move to Stage 2 *Early Production*. As the students begin to acquire pronunciation, they also begin to build a key list of personal vocabulary. In stage 3 of *Speech Emergence*, the ultimate goal is for students to achieve discourse proficiency, linguistic and sociolinguistic competence [13]. At this point students have developed listening, speaking, reading and writing skills. Further support to this argument is given by Granger (2004) and Haynes (2007). Ellis (2008) claims that most learners, especially young learners begin their acquisition process with a ‘silent period’ during which they are not willing to speak [2]. Some learners, as Ellis (2008) argues, are engaged in ‘private speech’ or talk to themselves in L2 and make no attempt to talk to others [2]. Gibbons (1985), in his examination of the silent period in SLA, concluded that: (1) the initial silent period probably begins as a period of silent incomprehension, (2) if the silent period is prolonged this may be a result of psychological withdrawal rather than language acquisition processes, and (3) consequently initial silence in the language curriculum is not necessarily desirable [5]. On another analysis, Granger (2012) and Bao (2014) share the same view that silence should be viewed as a means of communication on its own rather than as an absence of talk [7][1].

Past studies have offered insights into silence in the second language classroom in some Asian countries, such as China (Jackson and Liu, 2009), Japan (Ellwood and Nakane, 2009; Harumi, 2011), Vietnam (Bao 2014) where silence has traditionally been valued. Silence, however, remains an under-explored issue and more research is needed [1]. Bao’s data from interviews with 10 Vietnamese students show that silence was useful for them to process structures in the target language and there was a positive relationship between silence and quality speech [1].

Research into silence in classroom has employed ‘think-aloud’ protocol as a method of gathering data. This method involves participants’ thinking aloud while they are performing a certain task and they are to write whatever comes into their mind as they are completing the task. Their ‘think-aloud’ may include their feelings and their thoughts about what they are seeing and doing without having to interpret or justify their actions or words [4]. The method was developed based on Ericsson and Simon’s techniques of the protocol analysis [4]. It is the aim of the method to make participants’ thinking processes become explicit during their performance of the task and to give observers understandings about participants’ cognitive processes. ‘Think-aloud’ protocol has been applied in a number of studies into silence and exploration of the process of reading English literary texts [8], [15].

2.2. Methodology

A study was conducted within a class of twenty eight students during a reading skill lesson. They were of elementary level studying their first year at the university. With the aim to address the issue of silence in the context of HNUE English language classrooms, it was the researcher’s intention to answer the two investigative questions:

1. *To what extent are the students actually ‘taking in’ while they are keeping silent in classroom?*

2. *What are the students’ actual responses while they are keeping silent in classroom?*

The researcher used the following two instruments for the study:

1. A tally sheet exploring ‘think-aloud’ [4] technique to elicit the students’ actual response to their teacher’s questions during the time they apparently kept silent in their English class.

2. A post-test given to the silent keeping students after the lesson to check their comprehension of the reading text.

There were 28 learners in the class but five subjects were chosen as representatives of the students who remained to be the most silent during English classes based on the teacher’s observation. It is notable that the five subjects were chosen without prior notice; that is, they did not know about their roles in the research.

Firstly, the researcher explained ‘think-aloud’ procedures [4] and demonstrated the process of verbalizing while thinking by distributing copies of the ‘think-aloud’ example for a reading passage titled *From mountains to modeling* from Unit 7 of *Inside Out Elementary* [14] and the ‘think-aloud’ tally sheet for this reading text. She asked the students to look at the tally sheet for the first part of the reading text (from the beginning to “*and then go to Paris to model the best skirts*”). This was primarily for them to become familiar with the process of verbalizing while thinking.

‘Think-aloud’ example for a reading passage:

Text	Think-aloud response
Before reading	
Title: From mountains to modeling	<i>Mountains and modeling are quite different, but why they are put side by side here?</i>
During reading	
Charllotte Dutton has two jobs. Half of the year she’s a top model in Europe, and the other half she’s a professional snowboarder in Canada	<i>Two different jobs in two places far away from each other, one in Europe and one in Canada, very far!</i>
Here she talks about the problem of having two careers.	<i>She may have a lot of difficulties to manage the two jobs in two far-away places, especially when she is a woman.</i>
“I love modeling and snowboarding,” she says, “But I have to be two different people!”	<i>Imagine a beautiful and fashionable slim model in the mountains with snow, wind and rocks. I can’t believe it!</i>
You need muscles to be a snowboarder, but you have to be slim to be a model.	<i>She has to care much about her diet but how?</i>
When I’m modeling I can’t eat anything fattening. But in the mountain it’s freezing, so you have to eat protein, cakes and chocolate.	<i>Now, I understand how she balances her diet.</i>

While looking at the example think-aloud responses above, the students given the some eliciting questions by the teacher would see the following.

- Comments: *Mountains and modeling are quite different, but why they are put side by side here?*
- Predictions about what will happen next: *She may have a lot of difficulties to manage the two jobs in two continents, especially when she is a woman.*

- Comparisons: *Two different jobs in two far-away places, one in Europe and one in Canada, very far!*
- Picturing the text: *Imagine a beautiful and fashionable slim model in the mountains with snow, wind and rocks. I can't believe it!*
- Problem identification: *She has to care much about her diet and balance it.*
- Problem fixing: *Now, I understand how she balances her diet.*

After that, the researcher paired up the students, had one student in each pair read the next part of the reading and pause to make 'think-aloud responses' to the text, and the listening partner identified and tallied the responses made on the reading partner's tally sheet. Then, the two students of each pair switched their roles and did the tasks with the rest of the reading text, the first reader noting down on his or her partner's tally sheet. When they finished their 'think-alouds', the students discussed their tally sheets for them to become familiar with the sheets and the process.

On the following day, the study was conducted so that the students' think-aloud process could be as natural as possible. They were asked to read another passage titled *It's always summer on the inside* from Unit 8 of the same book with the lesson focus on the reading skill. While reading the students were asked to think aloud individually and write down their entire 'think-alouds' in the 'think-alouds' response sheet. Then the students were observed as they were reading the text. The study aims at exploring the meaning of students' silence in class interaction; the students were therefore not reminded of the task while they were reading. They were only reminded to write down whatever appeared in their mind in English or Vietnamese or both. This enables the students to freely write what they were thinking about the reading text without any language barriers. While students were thinking aloud, the teacher remained silent to avoid disrupting their thought patterns [4].

When the students finished their think-aloud process and wrote down their entire think-alouds, some questions were raised to check their comprehension. While some students were called to answer the questions orally, the others including the five subjects were asked to write down their answers. The five subjects' written 'think-aloud' response sheets were then collected and their 'think-aloud' responses were scripted. For the students who wholly or partly responded in Vietnamese, they scripts were translated into English. The students' post-test were marked clerically and their scores were calculated and presented in the form of numerals. Short answers to the post-test questions were counted provided that they were correct.

2.3. Finding and discussion

It can be seen from the five tally sheets collected that all the five silent students were not doing the same things when the others were taking part in class activities actively. Their 'think-aloud' response varied considerably from comments (e.g, *I can't believe it, this is extraordinary for a man, he looks like a real pirate*), predictions about what will happen next (e.g, *he will discover another new material*), comparisons (e.g, *this new material should be more comfortable than a normal swimming suit*), picturing the text (e.g, *the wetsuit must be very comfortable to wear*) to problem identification (e.g, *he needs to earn enough money to open and run the shop*). However, no 'think-aloud' response was found on problem fixing.

The 'think-aloud' response of each learner will be investigated as follows:

Student A

This student had seven responses during the reading of about 150 words. This number shows that he was fairly attentive in the lesson, although he appeared not to have any oral response to the teacher's eliciting questions in this class hour. Most of his thoughts were

comments on the events happening in the story about Jack O'Neill. Of the seven responses, there were up to five comments.

Student B

This student responded the least among the four participants who wrote down their responses. She wrote only five times during the reading. Both student A and B's responses were their comments on what they had read but while A wrote comments on a variety of things in the story, B only thought about the main character. It can be easily seen that even though they apparently kept silent, there was a marked difference in their ability to produce written responses.

Student C

It could be said that this was the most hard-working reader. He made quite a number of responses during the reading. More importantly, all the responses belonged to a wide range of things. He not only made comments on the story but also was able to picture the text in his mind. For example, he tried to imagine the shop with a lot of surfboards and wetsuits and the boss who looked like a pirate with only one eye. This student was able to keep his concentration over the whole reading as we can see him comment from the title to the end of the reading passage.

Student D

This proved to be the most critical reader. She raised some questions while reading such as: *Why did he stop working for the company? Children work for the company?* Also, she produced quite a number of comments such as: *it is not to the law; it is not useful; he is a creative man; the life of Jack O'Neill is interesting.* Furthermore, she predicted some events which may happen next in the story from what he has read: *maybe he loves summer; the weather is not suitable with his hobby.*

Student E

This student seemed to be the laziest and most passive one in the reading lesson. He wrote nothing on the 'think-aloud' response sheet. The teacher found it really difficult to know whether he was working on the reading text or not.

Following is the summary of the results of those five students in the reading comprehension test.

	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5	Q6	Q7	Correct answers
Student A	✓	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	✗	05/07
Student B	✓	✗	✓	✗	✗	✓	✓	04/07
Student C	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓	✗	05/07
Student D	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓	✗	05/07
Student E	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	06/07

The results are really surprising when there is no marked gap in the number of correct answers among the five respondents. However, the most surprising fact is that the most passive student is the one with the highest result. This proves a fact that silent or passive attitude in the class does not necessarily mean the students were not working. This is possibly because they do not want to share their thoughts with the teacher and their peers.

An immediate inference is that their silent appearance in the classroom did not necessarily reflect their inability to make responses and comments on the reading text. Their performance in the reading comprehension check shows that they understood the text quite properly.

Referring back to Ellis' (2008) claim that most learners begin their acquisition process with a "silent period" and Krashen and Terrell's (1983) belief that Stage 1 in second language acquisition is the stage of *comprehension* and is characterized by a *period of silence* or *incubation*, the students' silence keeping in our research in their classroom may be attributed to the fact that they have just moved on from their beginner level to elementary level at which their ability to make reproduction of the language remains limited. However, it could be clearly seen that they managed to make written responses and comments to the teacher's question successfully. At this stage they were still engaging in private speech sometimes called 'self-talk' [2]. If there exists the 'silent period', then this period should exist only at the beginning stage of the second language acquisition process [13]. However, the findings from the current study show that this 'silent period' still persisted among these students when they had already moved on to elementary level and to some extent they were able to produce and make some certain simple or more complex responses successfully. It might be the case that these students were not willing to speak up. They may not feel comfortable and ready to share their answers with their teacher and classmates. This interpretation was in line with Gibbons (1985) claim of learners' 'psychological withdrawal' [5]. In fact, Gibbon believes that the silence keeping may be a result of psychological withdrawal rather than language acquisition processes [5]. The assumption in this case is that the students in the study may lack motivation to make oral responses about what they otherwise could produce successfully in written form when they assumingly had fewer constraints and were free from teacher's control. The findings of the current study give further support to Bao's argument (Bao 2014) that productive use of silence could be useful to language learners rather than being viewed as a forced, passive behavior [1]. The post-test and the 'think-aloud' response sheets which are employed by the study as both qualitative and quantitative measures therefore can assist teachers to make decisions about whether their students' silence keeping relates to their learning outcome or not, and then to consider other causes of silence for further treatment.

3. Conclusion and implications

The study results show that the students' silent appearance does not necessarily mean they do not take in 'something new' from the lesson and they cannot be responsive to the teacher's questions. This encouraging fact to the teacher was fully proven by the students' proper performance in the reading comprehension test. Added to this, it can be safely assumed that the silent period is naturally a part of second language acquisition processes in the earlier stage of learning when students are not yet willing to speak out the language as they feel not yet prepared to. An immediate and obvious implication for language teachers is that teachers therefore should not expect too much from their students at the earlier stage of the language learning to speak up and instead they should aid their students by providing comprehensible input, equip them with linguistic resources for them to take in, process, and then in the later stages to be able to reproduce the language themselves. On the other hand, the results obtained by 'think-aloud' technique revealed the students' ability to successfully give their responses, however simple or more complex these responses were. Although they appeared to keep silent, their silence may be attributed to other factors rather than 'language acquisition processes'. Other factors such as teacher instruction, individual personality [9], motivation, learning materials, culture-specific views on silence, the structure of lessons to facilitate talking or not, and gender issues should also be taken into account instead.

Due to limited time and resources, the study would have been of more significance if there had been interviews with the students in the classroom to offer them opportunities to express themselves and if the sample drawn from the population were broader so that more

generalizations could be made. However, the study offers deeper insights into the issue of silence in language classroom and implications for language teachers. Teachers need to adapt their teaching materials to fit their students' interests, and to take into consideration their students' learning styles and their individual differences. Class activities should be designed so that they are both useful and fun in the way that they provide new linguistic resources and meaningful practice to students, and at the same time, interesting and engaging to motivate students.

APPENDIX A: THINK-ALLOUD TALLY SHEET

Text	Think-aloud response
Before reading	
Title: <i>It's always summer on the inside</i>	
During reading	
Post reading	

APPENDIX B: READING COMPREHENSION TEST

1. What is the meaning of the title '*It's always summer on the inside*'?
 - a. Jack O'Naill never goes outside
 - b. Wetsuits keep you warm in cold water.
 - c. California has a warm climate.

Without looking back at the passage, write down:

2. where Jack O'Naill went to the sea
3. why he started to make wetsuits.
4. where he discovered a material for wetsuits.
5. when he opened his first Surf Shop.
6. why he took his children to boat shows.
7. why he looks like a pirate.

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