



Keywords

Students' Silence,
College English Class,
Factors,
Countermeasures

Received: July 13, 2017

Accepted: July 20, 2017

Published: October 30, 2017

On Silence of College Students in English Classroom

Qin Liu

School of Foreign Language, Yancheng Normal University, Yancheng, China

Email address

hobbyc@163.com

Citation

Qin Liu. On Silence of College Students in English Classroom. *International Journal of Modern Education Research*. Vol. 4, No. 6, 2017, pp. 76-80.

Abstract

The students' active participation in the English classroom and effective communication with teachers are the essential parts of a successful and efficient English class. However, in China, it is very common for the students to keep silent in the English classroom, and they seldom answer the teachers' questions and express themselves in English class. This paper will systematically analyze the current silent phenomenon in English classroom, the reasons for the students' silence, and the corresponding countermeasures of English classroom silence. Both the students and the teachers should work together to build a harmonious class atmosphere, and the harmonious relationship between students and teachers is conducive to the teaching and learning process.

1. Introduction

With the rapid development of China and the frequent international exchanges, oral English has become more and more important in China, however, most college students choose to keep silent in English classroom. They are totally dependent on the teachers to input English into their minds, and they barely practice their oral English in the classroom. It is very common in China that the students are very poor in oral English even though they can get high grades in written exams [1]. Both the students and the teachers should be responsible for the classroom silence. This paper will discuss the English classroom silence from the students' aspect and the teachers' aspect. And offer the corresponding countermeasures to solve the English classroom silence from two parts, the students' part and the teachers' part.

2. Research Background

The investigations on college English classroom silence to figure out the current situation and cause are very significant. In this case, a lot of researches have been conducted on students in English classroom. McCroskey believed that it was plausible to define speech and silence as a continuum of communicative forms from the degree of most to the least. Zhang Lei also defined silence as an active presence bearing communicative functions. From the view of Shane Donald, silence could be classified into three types based on the location of the silence by applying the turn. According to Ollin, teachers could have different views about the functions of silence on the ground that the nature and context of subjects are not the same. These studies indicate that researchers have realized the importance of active participation in English class and form a positive attitude to English learning.

3. Definition of Classroom Silence

Silence is a very common and important phenomenon in human communication, which cannot be simply defined as the simple pause in the process of communication. The definition of silence is wide-ranging because of the multiple representations and different functions of silence in human communication [2-3]. In linguistics, silence means the non-verbal communication, which can be concluded as no sound, no conversation, and no written or oral communication. In a broad sense, silence includes all the non-verbal communication forms; but in a narrow sense, silence belongs to a branch of paralanguage. To conclude, silence is the absence of speech in the process of communication.

As a kind of non-verbal communication, silence has long been neglected by many researchers, and linguistic experts have paid more attention to the verbal communication, which was considered as an effective way of communication. However, with the development of linguistics, experts have come to realize the importance of silence, and the functions of silence have attracted more and more attention from the scholars. In daily communication, silence is also an effective interpersonal communication and exchange [4-6]. The speaker can be silent to express his/her little interest in the topic of the conversation, and one can hide the true emotions and inner thoughts to avoid certain conflicts. Moreover, silence has a close relationship with culture, the social practice and customs have a direct influence on silence, in the introverted culture, people are more likely to keep silent in daily conversation, and the silence of the individual is a direct reflection of the social culture and customs.

The communicative function of the silence has draw more and more attention from the researchers. Nakane held the idea that silence is not only an effective way of communication, but also is abundant and meaningful in communication. Firstly, silence can convey various meanings, silence can show the personality of the speaker, introverted of extroverted. Secondly, it is the reflection of the attitudes like affection, hostility and distance. Thirdly, all kinds of emotions such as happiness, excitement, anger and anxiety can be demonstrated by silence. Saville-Troike described silence as kind of nonverbal human communication but it also should be regarded as verbal in some specific communication. He pointed out that ambiguity existed in silence. "Except in certain contexts, the meaning of any silence is inherently ambiguous and therefore subject to misinterpretation and misvaluation". Different researchers have their own understanding of silence. They all agreed that silence should be regarded as an extremely important and effective way of communication since it has communicative function which means a lot [7].

When it comes to classroom silence, it means the limited participation during classroom interaction. Teaching and learning in classroom is a form of interpersonal communication, it is a communication between teachers and students. Silence only means the absence of speech, not the

absence of thoughts. Classroom silence is the true reflection of the teachers' teaching and the students' learning. In the classroom context, silence means the limited or lack of cooperation and participation between students and teachers in the teaching and learning activities. The classroom silence was regarded as students' no response or lack of response to teachers' inputs or the contents of teaching. The typical phenomena of classroom silence can be summarized as follows. First, when the teachers ask questions in the classroom, the students will lower their heads, and give no response to the questions [8], what is more, they are even afraid of or shy of answering the questions even though they know the answers. Second, most of students are not willing to open their mouths to express their ideas when the teachers intentionally assign a period of time for the students to discuss with their partners. They are so shy to express their thoughts in the classroom, let alone discuss with the partners. Third, they seldom ask questions in the classroom when they are confused about the teachers' explanations

4. Reasons for Students' Silence in English Class

It is very common in China that students keep silent in English classes, especially for the non-English majors. English is not compulsory for the non-English majors, most of them chose the English course to earn more credits or to pass the cet-4 (college English test band 4 in China) or the cet-6 (college English test band 6), and they show little interest in the English class. As a result, most of the college students remain silent in English classes. The students' personality, English proficiency, and the teachers' teaching method all have direct impacts on the students' silence. The reasons for the students' silence are various, and in this chapter, we will analyze the students' silence from three aspects, factors from students, factors from teachers, and factors from educational environment [9].

4.1. Students' Affective Factors

Students' silence in English classroom can be caused by both internal and external factors, and the internal factors of students have a decisive impact in the classroom. Firstly, low English proficiency is one of the major reasons for students' limited participation in the English classroom, especially for the non-English majors. Most of the non-English majors are poor in English, and they have little interest in English. English is not their major, and most of the students do not attach much importance to learning English, and their low English proficiency can be attributed to their silence in the classroom. Low English proficiency includes insufficient vocabulary, non-standard English pronunciation, and poor grammar. Vocabulary is the foundation of a language, and lack of sufficient vocabulary can prevent the students' understanding of English. Teaching is the mutual communication between students and teachers, and

understanding is the basis of any communication. Without the basic understanding, the students cannot participate in the teaching process, let alone answer the questions in English with accurate English words. They often fall into the awkward positions, two cases are very popular among the students. One case is that some students cannot understand the teaching contents, they often feel sleepy in the English class, for them, English classes are tortures to them if the teacher only speak English in the class, they will fall into a vicious circle because of their poor foundation in English. The second case is also very common, in the second case, the students have some basic understanding of the teaching contents, they can understand the teachers' questions, but they cannot express themselves clearly in English due to their poor vocabulary, and they have a high expectation, they want to answer the question perfectly in English, the only choice for them is to give up answering the question. The non-standard English pronunciation can also hinder the students from participating in classroom activities [10]. Some students have no difficulties in understanding the teachers' question, and they can organize their answers very well in written form, but they have no courage to speak loudly in English classroom especially in front of the teacher because of their poor pronunciation. Some students are also unwilling to take part in the class activities because of their poor English grammar, they are afraid of making grammar mistakes. After all, language is a tool for communication, and the ultimate goal of learning English is for communication, without sufficient vocabulary, good pronunciation, and proper grammar, it is impossible for the students to actively participate in the classroom activities. Teaching is a kind of mutual activity, without the cooperation from the students, the teacher cannot realize his/her teaching goals, and the teaching activity cannot go smoothly. Furthermore, without the proper English proficiency, the students cannot take part in the class activities actively, and they have no choice but to keep silent. The students who have difficulties in vocabulary, pronunciation, and grammar cannot express themselves clearly in English, which finally lead to the occurrence of students' silence in classroom.

Secondly, the old learning styles and habits in high school also have a great influence on students' performance in the English classroom. The objectives of teaching in high school are the mastery of basic English skills, such as vocabulary and grammar. The teachers in the high school put little emphasis on the practice and improvement of oral English. And the students have very few opportunities to improve their oral English. What is more, the exams in the high school are all in written form, oral English is not the focus and requirement of high school English. The students are accustomed to listening to the orders from teachers, they seldom participate in the classroom activities in the high school and they are not willing to express themselves in English in the classroom. In China, students are used to study silently and do exercises to improve their English. The purpose of getting high scores is the only concern for the teachers and students. However, the high score is not the only aim of college English, the improvement of

comprehensive English skill is the focus. Oral English becomes more and more important in college English classroom. It is sad that the students in China cannot put their English knowledge into practice, because they are used to the silent learning styles and habits in high school. They are too shy to open their mouth to express their ideas in English.

4.2. Teachers' Affective Factors

This part discusses the impacts the teachers' impacts on the silence of English classroom. Teaching is a kind of mutual activity which requires the effective cooperation from both the teachers and students, the teaching method, teachers' feedback to students' answers, the teachers' questioning method, and even the relationship between students and teachers all have influences on the classroom silence.

Firstly, it is very common in China that teachers dominate the classroom, and the students just sit straightly and listen to the teacher. When asked about how the students learn the English language in English classroom, most of the students in China will answer 'listen to the teachers', very few students will choose 'group discussion'. In China, grade is the only aim in the English classroom, especially in the middle school. The standard of a good teacher is the high grade of the students. Both the parents and students pay little attention to the improvement of oral English. The form of English exams in China attaches more importance to the skills of written English. In the fixed class hour, the task for the teacher is to input more knowledge into the class to help students get high grade in the exams. The longer the teacher teaches, the more knowledge the students will get in the limited class hour, the shorter the students can speak English. In the long run, the students will gradually lose interest in participating in classroom activities and fall into the habit of listening to the teachers' instructions rather than expressing their ideas in English. Therefore, the teaching method of the teachers in English classroom has a close relationship with the students' silence in the English classroom, and the teachers should be blamed for the silence of the students.

Secondly, the negative feedback from the teachers also results in the classroom silence. The common feedback from the teacher is 'good, very good' when the students give correct answers to the questions. It is so frequently used in the classroom that students do not regard it as complimentary remarks, and they think this kind of simple comment is just the automatic reaction from the teachers. They become so used to this kind of simple feedback, and gradually, they will lose interest and passion in answering the questions and they become more and more accustomed to remain silent. If the teachers do not give positive feedback to the students' answers, the students will feel frustrated and become less interested in responding to the questions, and thus the classroom silence will become worse. And in China, the teachers seldom give comments according to the degree of excellence, the students are so shy to answer the questions, the English classroom is especially silent due to the language disadvantage. What is more, the negative feedback from the teachers also hinders the students' active participation in English classroom.

Thirdly, the inappropriate use of questioning strategies also prevents the students from answering the questions actively in the class. Most of the students reflect that teachers often select the students who put their hands up to answer questions. In fact, this questioning strategy is totally wrong in Chinese classroom, very few students are willing to put up their hands even if they know the correct answer. Moreover, the teacher always likes to choose the few students he/she likes to answer the questions, gives few opportunities to other students. This can also reduce the other students' passion and enthusiasm in participating in the class activities. Other students will complain about the teachers' favoritism and become less interest in the English class and frequently keep silent.

Last but not the least, the teacher-student relationship has a great impact on English teaching in classroom. Good relationship between teachers and students can help to create a lively classroom atmosphere. Under the happy and active atmosphere, the students are willing to answer the teachers' questions and have great interest in learning the English language. On the contrary, the bad teacher-student relationship will make the classroom atmosphere nervous, the students will not take part in the classroom activities actively and English learning will become boring which will make the students' silence worse.

5. Solutions to Students' Silence in English Class

Classroom silence is a big barrier to the effective English class learning and teaching. This part mainly discusses the measures to overcome the students' silence, and improve the class learning and teaching. The measures will be divided into two parts, solutions on the part of students and the solutions on the part of teachers.

5.1. Solutions on the Part of Students

Students are the main part of class activities, both learning and teaching should include the active participation from the students. In order to solve the classroom silence, we must find the solutions on the students' own part. The measures should be considered from two aspects, ways to improve English proficiency and measures to improve the students' self confidence.

Poor English proficiency is the main barrier in activating students' enthusiasm and interest in answering the questions. Due to various factors in China, the students paid little attention in improving their oral English, and students have very few opportunities to practice their oral English. Classroom is the important place for students to express themselves in English. Thus, students should seize every opportunity in class to practice their English. The more they practice, the more fluent their oral English will be. Besides, the students should spend more spare time in reading and listening to improve their English proficiency. There is no shortcut in learning English, vocabulary and grammar is the foundation of English, without the solid foundation, it is

impossible for the students to improve their English proficiency. If students learn English in a proper way in their spare time, it will be easy for the students to actively participate in the classroom activities. High English proficiency is necessary for students to overcome the classroom silence. Without the proper English proficiency, it will be difficult for students even to understand the English class, let alone voluntarily take part in the classroom activities.

Confidence is the proper psychological state for the students to overcome the classroom silence. Students should believe in their own abilities and willing to express themselves in English in the classroom. Confidence is very important for the students to actively participate in the class activities. And only the confident students can voluntarily answer the teachers' questions and never feel anxious or uneasy in the classroom, they will never give up because of frustration or difficulty. With strong self-confidence, students will no longer afraid to answer the questions and actively take part in the class activities. And the self-confidence will also help students to overcome their anxiety in learning English. It is important for the teachers to praise and encourage students in the English classroom. For the students, the teachers' recognition and encouragement can greatly boost their confidence in learning English. Therefore, it is essential for the teacher to appreciate the students in the classroom, when students answer correctly, the teacher should give positive feedback so that students will be greatly motivated and feel respected and certainly will be more active in the classroom. And when the students fail to answer the questions correctly, the teacher should also encourage students to try the next time, and the teacher should not blame the students for their mistakes and be patient to find the shining point of the answers to encourage the students.

5.2. Solutions on the Part of Teachers

Teaching is the mutual communication between the teacher and students. In the traditional English class, the teachers play the dominant part in the teaching process, while the students play the minor part in the whole teaching process. The teachers spend a large part of the class time in explaining the basic English grammar and vocabulary to the students, and the main task of the students is to listen to the teacher and memorize the teachers' teaching contents. The teachers give very little time to the students to express their ideas in English, and the students seldom involved in the group discussion to exchange their ideas with other classmates which lead to the common silent English class in China. To solve the silent problem in English classroom, the teachers should change their roles in the class, the traditional teacher-centered classroom should be changed into student-centered classroom. Teachers should not dominate the whole class, and teachers should not be the rulers of class activities. Teachers should appropriately change their teaching mode and let students be the main participator of the teaching process. The proper role for the teachers in the classroom should be the organizers and supervisors. The teachers should reduce the time in explaining and give more opportunities to the students to exchange their ideas, and encourage the students to actively participate in the

classroom activities, reduce the anxiety of students in answering the questions and improve the students' enthusiasm in taking part in the classroom communication. Only in this way can the silent problem of English classroom be solved.

In addition, the teachers' feedback to students can have a great emotional impact on students. the proper and positive feedback can greatly motivate the students to participate in the class activities, and have a positive impact on the students' emotions, and vice versa. The positive emotions of the teachers can be conducive to the students learning while the negative emotions of the teachers can greatly prevent the students from participating in the class activities and reduce the students' enthusiasm and interest in learning English. The students care a lot about the teachers' recognition of their hard work, they will be greatly motivated by the teachers' encouragement. The students will feel satisfied and confident if they can get the respect and recognition from the teachers and other classmates, and they will naturally be willing to take part in the classroom activities if they can get encouragements constantly. The teachers should pay great attention to the emotions of the students, and give students various degrees of recognition under different situations. Teachers' respect and recognition for the students will greatly encourage the students to actively answer the questions and be voluntarily involved in the classroom activities.

6. Conclusions

College students' silence in English classroom is a very common phenomenon in China. Most of the students in China show no interest in answering the questions and participate in classroom activities. The reasons for the silence are the students' affective factors (low English proficiency, old learning habits) and the teachers' affective factors (traditional teaching method, inappropriate feedback, bad teacher-student relationship). And the solutions to the silence phenomenon should be analyzed from both the students and the teachers. The students should improve their English proficiency and be confident in English class, and the teachers should change their teaching method and give proper positive feedback to the students.

References

- [1] ANA CHRISTINA DaSILVA IDDINGS, EUN-YOUNG JANG. The Mediatonal Role of Classroom Practices During the Silent Period: A New Mmigrant Student Learning the English Language in a Mainstream Classroom [J]. 2011, 42 (4): 567-590.
- [2] Panofsky C P, Bogad L. Hearing Students' Silence: Issues of Identity, Performance, and Recognition in College Classrooms [M]// Transforming Classroom Culture. Palgrave Macmillan US, 2011.
- [3] Corkin D M, Horn C, Pattison D. The effects of an active learning intervention in biology on college students' classroom motivational climate perceptions, motivation, and achievement [J]. Educational Psychology, 2017: 1-19.
- [4] Sibel Tatar. Why Keep Silent? The Classroom Participation Experiences of Non-native-English-speaking Students [J]. Language & Intercultural Communication, 2005, 5 (3-4): 284-293.
- [5] Yates L, Nguyen T Q T. Beyond a Discourse of Deficit: The Meaning of Silence in the International Classroom. [J]. International Education Journal Comparative Perspectives, 2012, 11: 22-34.
- [6] Covarrubias P O. Masked Silence Sequences: Hearing Discrimination in the College Classroom [J]. Communication Culture & Critique, 2008, 1 (3): 227-252.
- [7] Hao Yang. A Research on the Effective Questioning Strategies in Class. Science Journal of Education. Vol. 5, No. 4, 2017, pp. 158-163.
- [8] Kim S, Ates B, Grigsby Y, et al. Ways to Promote the Classroom Participation of International Students by Understanding the Silence of Japanese University Students. [J]. Journal of International Students, 2016, 6.
- [9] Neaveditoro D, Rubinstein A, Neuman A C. Speech Recognition in Nonnative versus Native English-Speaking College Students in a Virtual Classroom. [J]. Journal of the American Academy of Audiology, 2017.
- [10] Emert T. Puncturing the Silence: Teaching The Laramie Project, in the Secondary English Classroom [M]// Teaching, Affirming, and Recognizing Trans and Gender Creative Youth. Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2016.