Analysis of Classroom Silence in English Class in Chinese Universities

Mingshen Wang

College of Foreign Languages, Nankai University, Tianjin 300071, China
1611617@nankai.edu.cn

ABSTRACT. *The purpose of this paper is to survey and consider the implications of the literature analyzing causes of college students' silence in English class. Since classroom silence has been considered negative, this paper attempts to explain why classroom silence should be avoided, investigate the major causes of classroom silence, and draw out implications for tackling classroom silence. The issues within this discussion fall into three categories: classroom silence caused by students, classroom silence caused by teachers, and classroom silence caused by Chinese culture. This investigation of the local Chinese context resonates with and contributes to the wider discussion of the countermeasures against EFL classroom silence pervading Chinese universities and warrants closer examination. It is difficult to say in advance how far such knowledge could contribute to any policy decisions that may be made in the future, but it is important that the voice of teachers and students makes valuable contributions to the larger wider about the reformation of Chinese EFL learning and English education.*

KEYWORDS: *Classroom silence, Chinese universities, EFL study, Cultural phenomenon*

1. Introduction

Silence has long been a means of communication across cultures, evidence of which can be found through idioms all over the world (Kim, Ates, Grigsby, Kraker, & Micek, 2016). For example, "Silence is golden" is a popular Chinese idiom to indicate circumstances where it is better to say nothing than to speak. However, when silence occurs in EFL (English as a foreign language) class, it would be a totally different matter. Since language is a major tool for communication, developing and improving students' ability in verbal communication is the ultimate goal of teaching languages, which should be achieved (Zhang, 2011). Thus, despite an important means of non-verbal communication, silence is not always welcomed, especially in English class, and usually regarded as a lack of communication competence (Peng, 2016). Over the last few decades Asian EFL learners' silence in English class has been a burning issue that captures the attention of many linguists

and pedagogy researchers and an acute problem that many EFL teachers are attempting to grapple with (Bao, 2015).

2. Causes of Classroom Silence

Case—in the class of Theory and Practice of Cross-Cultural Communication, professor Hao asked his students to interpret one commercial case by using their knowledge with regard to cross-cultural communication. The whole classroom fell silent. All students buried their heads spontaneously and some of them even began swiping their smart phones. After several seconds passed, no student intended to answer the question raised. Having felt the embarrassing atmosphere in class, Professor Hao commanded students a group discussion. This seemed to work, for students soon participated in heated discussion with others sitting nearby. During their discussion lasting roughly five minutes, most of their conversations were conducted in Chinese.

However, when the teacher asked students to express their viewpoints, the once busy classroom became silent again. Finally, it was not until Professor Hao designated one student to speak that the silence in classroom was broken.

In spite of the manifold and complicated factors that contribute to classroom silence, most scholars tend to identify the causes of classroom silence within three major dimensions: the students, the teachers, and Chinese traditional culture.

2.1 From the Perspective of Students

Many linguists and pedagogy researchers argue that students' silence in class is related to their learning motivation. For example, Ellis (1994) argues that second language (L2) learner's learning motivation is an external impetus for L2 learning. According to Gardner, Day and MacIntyre (1992), there are two types of motivations in L2 learning: instrumental motivation, which occurs when students focus on functional goals such as passing examinations, meeting educational requirements and finding jobs, and integrative motivation, which occurs when students are attracted by the target language culture and its ethnic group, and desire for integration into them and identification with them (Wu, 2011). However, the common phenomenon exists in China is that most Chinese college students' English learning is fueled by CET-4 and CET-6 [College English Test Band 4 and 6] (Li, 2014). In addition, many students are not satisfied with the reputation of their universities and their majors (Zhang, 2018). Thus, they, without learning motivations, often feel frustrated in class and are unwilling to speak or answer teachers' questions.

The lack of confidence is another common problem that many students have. Abraham and Vann (1987) point out that the more confident learners are, the more successful they will be. Many scholars argue that most Chinese college students are lacking in confidence (Chen, 2017; Wu, 2011; Luo, 2018; Tang, Hu, Zeng, & Jiang, 2018; Yuan, 2017; Zhang, 2011). A major cause of the lack of confidence is

students' worries over the derision from their classmates resulted from their imperfect or incorrect answers to teachers' questions (Chen, 2017; Tang et al., 2018). It is noteworthy that Chinese students' lack of confidence may be derived from Chinese traditional culture that are ingrained in many Chinese students.

Students' silence is also related to their personality traits. Zhu (2012) argues that, in psychology, the trait of extraversion–introversion is a central dimension of human personality theories. In English class, extroverted students who are eloquent and have a keen intellect tend to take active part in class and express themselves whereas introverted students are apt to be passive and less willing to speak in class (Zhu, 2012; Yuan, 2017). However, many students are introverted and reserved (Luo, 2018; Wu, 2011). These students tend to be unwilling to share their ideas with others; instead, they prefer to think about questions and tackle problems on their own (Chen, 2017).

Students' conceptions and treatments of learning and answering questions also have an impact on students' class behavior. For example, some students consider being active and eager to answer questions as the embodiment of immaturity, which is collided with the mature image that a college student should convey (Tang et al., 2018). Some students think that it is those excellent students that should answer teachers' questions because this is their privilege, as well as their obligation (Zhang & Li, 2014). Some students regard those who are active in answering teachers' questions unsociable and think that those students will suffer from alienation (Zhang, 2011). Some student even view answering questions as nothing more than a means of avidly courting publicity (Li, 2014). All these negative attitudes towards answering questions pervade many Chinese universities and keep students from speaking in class.

Another major cause of students' silence in class is students' lack of linguistic competence (Liu, 2013; Zhang & Li, 2014). This is exemplified by two types of cases: some students have difficulty in understanding teachers' questions; others have difficulty in expressing themselves in English (Wang, 2015).

Students' oral skills are intimately related to their linguistic competence (Lin, 2012).

With the importance of these two key written examinations emphasized, students may pay insufficient attention to their oral English skills. CET-SET [College English Test-Spoken English Test] has been expected to be a means of motivating college students to practice their spoken English and ameliorate their oral skills, but the reality is a very different matter (Xi, 2018). A typical example is that many students are worried about their pronunciation and intonation (Li, 2014). Hu (2015) argues that students' lack of oral skills is caused by the traditional English learning methods which hinder students from thinking and expressing themselves in English.

Apart from oral skills, Liu (2013) points out that students' lack of linguistic competence is also exemplified by their lack of ability in listening, which also exerts a detrimental impact upon their oral communications. Students lacking in listening ability have difficulty in understanding the questions that teachers address in English, to say nothing of answering teachers' questions in English (Tang et al., 2018).

Zhu (2012) invokes Krashen's affective filter hypothesis to owe classroom silence to students' affective barriers. According to the affective filter hypothesis, the affective filter is an impediment to learning or acquisition caused by negative emotional ("affective") responses to learner's environment. Certain emotions, such as anxiety, self-doubt, and mere boredom, interfere with the process of acquiring a second language. They function as a filter between the speaker and the listener that reduces the amount of language input the listener is able to Understand. These negative emotions prevent efficient processing of the language input (Krashen, 2003). Zhu points out that, in class, students who have strong motivations, appropriate anxiety and high confidence tend to be active and thus standing more chances of learning the target language whereas those who have low motivations, great anxiety and lack confidence are apt to keep silent. She concludes that once those who have strong motivations, appropriate anxiety and high confidence fail and feel frustrated, they will probably keep silent for a long time and cringe at speaking.

A psychological research done by Wu, Zhang, Li and Guo (2011) owes classroom silence to students' diffusion of responsibility. Diffusion of responsibility is a sociopsychological phenomenon whereby a person is less likely to take responsibility for action or inaction when others are present (Kassin & Markus, 2013). Wu et al. argue that students' five types of ideas can cause diffusion of responsibility. First, most students tend to push their luck and entertain the idea that they would not be chosen to answer the questions. Second, when most of the members in a group exhibit some behavior in common, albeit criminal, they are not to blame because it is impossible to blame every member of the group. Thus, students would rather keep silent, in that they are not to blame anyway. Third, students wish to be in conformity with others, which is also mentioned by Zhuang (2013) and Li (2014). When one student see that others keep silent, this student would probably keep silent in order to keep in conformity with others. Fourth, some students think that when they try their best to find the answers to teachers' questions while others keep silent and do not have to worry, they will feel that they are carrying an unfair share of the workload and thus keeping silent as others to regain the fairness, which is known as social loafing, the tendency for individuals to expend less effort when working collectively than when working individually (Karau & Williams, 1993). Fifth, the bystander effect occurs when multiple individuals are watching a situation unfold but do not intervene (or delay or hesitate to intervene) because they know that someone else could intervene, and they feel less responsibility to do so (Darley & Latané, 1968). When a few students answer teachers' questions in class, other students will generate loft expectations for them, relying on those who can answer teachers' questions. All of these five factors can cause students' diffusion of responsibility, which is one of the reasons that many students keep silent in class.

2.2 From the Perspective of Teachers

Many researches point out that one prime cause of classroom silence is the traditional conceptions of pedagogy that are ingrained in many Chinese teachers

(Zhang, 2011; Yuan, 2017; Luo, 2018; Zhang, 2018; Tang et al., 2018). On the one hand, many Chinese teachers tend to speak alone through the whole course of the class regardless of killing the possibility for students to speak; on the other hand, in the context of examination-oriented education, the importance of examinations and scores is particularly highlighted, which means that whether or not students speak in class makes very modest contributions to their examination scores, thus rendering students keep silent in class.

Another perennial and unresolved problem lies in the unhealthy relationship between teachers and students. Yuan (2017) argues that students may give teachers a wide berth in virtue of teachers' superior status which may plunge the whole class into a sleepy backwater. Due to the strained and oppressive atmosphere of class, students would probably cringe at answering teachers' questions (Chen, 2017). Zhang (2011) argues that teachers' superior status, which is typified by the lack of communications between teachers and students, can dishearten students from speaking in class.

Teachers' preparation for the lessons also matters. Students would entertain the idea that teachers devote scant attention to the lessons if teachers do not do adequate preparation for the lessons (Yuan, 2017). Zhang (2011) argues that teachers' inadequate preparation for the lessons can result in cursory treatments of the textbooks and applying the teaching materials in a rather dull way, for which students' interest is hard to stimulate.

Students' class behavior is also conditioned by teachers' questioning strategies. Chen (2017) argues that most questions that Chinese teachers address are close-ended, to which there is usually only one correct answer. Since students may be unable to assure themselves of the correct answer, they would rather keep silent than respond to teachers for fear of making mistakes and being ashamed. In addition, students are often not allowed ample time to prepare for their answers. Ye and Peng (2013) argue that the questions that most teachers put to students are either too difficult or too easy for students to answer. Also, some questions are tiresome, which students are not interested in and are unwilling to think about. More importantly, teachers do not phrase their questions with clear and careful diction, thus causing difficulty for students in understanding the questions.

Students are also sensitive about comments and feedbacks from teachers (Wang, 2015; Luo, 2018). Li and Wang (2018) argue that teachers' positive feedbacks, which can stimulate students' desire for knowledge and encourage students to speak actively, are the catalyst for lightening the atmosphere of the class. Liu (2012) argues that teachers' excessive negative feedbacks and undue corrections to every error in students' answers can upset and even frighten students. For fear of making mistakes and negative feedbacks from teachers, students would rather keep silent than feel frustrated or disappoint teachers.

2.3 From the Perspective of Culture

Apart from limits of students and teachers, Chinese traditional culture also contributes to the silence in classroom from the following four aspects: high-context culture, value-collaterality orientation, influence from Confucianism and maintenance of reputation.

2.3.1 High-context culture

The American anthropologist Edward T. Hall categorizes cultures as being either high or low context, depending on the degree to which meaning comes from the settings or from the words being exchanged. In high-context cultures, people are very homogeneous with regard to experiences, information networks, and the like while people appear to be less homogeneous in low-context cultures. According to Hall's standard of classification of culture, Chinese culture, in which meaning is not necessarily contained in words and information is provided through gestures, the use of space and even silence. That is to say, Chinese culture tends to be more aware of their surroundings and their environment and does not rely on verbal communication as their main information channel. Therefore, Chinese students are less willing to interact with teachers in class because they believe that silence often sends a better message than words as a proverb states, "Empty cans clatter the loudest."

On the contrary, in some low-context cultures, such as German, Swiss and American cultures, due to the lack of common experiences, students expect to express their opinions in a very active, articulate and detailed way by providing much relevant information and data. The differences between high-context cultures and low-context cultures help to explain why Chinese students are considered to be less active in in-class activities than their counterparts from America as well as other European countries.

2.3.2 Value-collaterality Orientation

Collaterality focuses on an individual's most immediate group memberships. The goals of the group take precedence over those of the individual. If we look back in history, we can clearly find that Chinese collectivism culture derived from ancient times, when primitive clan was the main social form. At that time, all types of social activities were centered on kinship. With the transition from primitive society to feudal society, Chinese people have gradually built up a small-peasant economy, which still largely depended on family. Owing to the backward productivity, people had to work together by forming a kind of family-based unit. After going through a relatively long period of feudalism, the essence of collectivism has been passed down generation after generation and now been deeply rooted among Chinese people, which have left profound influence on peoples' mindsets as well as behaviors. Liao (2016) argues that as the foundation of Chinese traditional culture, Confucianism emphasizes that no one can exist alone without others; instead, everyone's existence is dependent to the group. To Chinese students from a culture

that emphasizes the collective good and the maintenance of face, behaviors, for example, expressing their own viewpoints in class, are deemed to be too competitive, as they may disrupt the group's harmony and separate people from one another. Thus, Chinese traditional education system highlights the importance of fostering the spirit of collectivism, and, given this convention, students would probably brand those who are active in class as being obsequious to teachers or exhibitionism and isolate them (Zhao, 2018). However, American and European students, whose cultural framework celebrates individual achievement and responsibility, will take this phenomenon quite naturally.

2.3.3 Influence from Confucianism

Since Confucius initiated Confucianism, though it has gone through changes of past dynasties, it has been the mainstream of Chinese ideology, politics and culture all through the ages. The ideology and culture of Confucianism have the effects of maintaining kingship, regulating confliction, and stabilizing society. Therefore, it has been esteemed as a classic of governing a country and a magical weapon of administration by the feudal rulers of all dynasties and become the dominating thought and spiritual backbone of feudal society in China. Even today, it still has tremendous potential influence on all the aspects such as politics and economy in China. The basic values of Confucian thoughts of "rite, justice, honesty, shame, humanity, love, loyalty and filial piety" are the basic rules of consciousness for the daily conduct of most of Chinese people all the time. The courteous, friendly, gentle, honest, tolerant, earnest and industrious temperament of Chinese nation has also gradually developed under the education of Confucianism. Confucian culture highlights the importance of respecting the teacher (Wu, 2011; Tang et al., 2018). From Confucian's theories, students should respect their teachers under any circumstances. The relationship between teachers and students is even compared to that between fathers and sons. However, Chinese students' respect to teachers could also impede their in-class activeness. Chinese classroom is characterized by a high degree of formality. In class, the teacher possesses a great power and dominates the class. Thus, students are apt to keep silent. For this reason, students do not dare to suspect their teachers and blindly trust in authority (Zhang, 2018). Although some student-centered teaching methods have widely been put into practice in English class, traditional teacher-centered teaching pattern remains predominant due to the profound influence of Chinese traditional culture (Zhang, 2011). Dominated by traditional culture which does not allow students to share their opinions or discuss

With teachers, students have an inferior status as someone who is taught and can only listen to teachers (Zhang & Li, 2014).

2.3.4 Maintenance of reputation

A person's reputation and dignity play a very important role in Chinese society. Most Chinese people make a conscious effort to maintain and protect their own reputation and others' reputation, which is one of the social conventions of China.

Students are so influenced by this convention that they tend to adopt a rather conservative attitude towards teachers' questions and give no response for fear of losing reputation (Zhao, 2018). If students make mistakes when answering teachers' questions, their classmates would probably laugh at them thus tarnishing their reputation (Liao, 2016).

3. Possible Measures to Deal with In-Class Silence

3.1 For Students

3.1.1 To establish a positive learning attitude

Before entering university, students' aims of learning are very clear, that is, to enter a good university. However, most of them may become confused when they start their campus life. They receive very little homework and get rid of the controls from teachers and parents. As time goes by, most of students gradually lose their goals or take examination as their temporary motivation. However, students should come to realize that the purpose of learning is not target at exam. Instead, they should make full use of various classes in university to improve their overall abilities, which will definitely make them more competent when they enter society one day. A strong motivation could lead to students' active interaction in class. For example, English major students should be aware of the fact that examination is neither the end nor the purpose of their English learning. As English major students, they are supposed to become qualified English speakers who have a good command of linguistics, literature and cultural communication after their graduation in the future. Therefore, they should seize every opportunity to speak in class and view it as a good way to have a direct interaction with their teachers so as to polish their English and deepen their understandings in professional field.

3.1.2 To build self-confidence and stay self-motivated

The main reason that accounts for in-class silence is that most students lack enough confidence. They feel either unconfident about their language competence or correctness of their viewpoints. Therefore, the key to solve silence in class lies in how students could overcome their bashfulness and build up sufficient self-confidence. Apart from encouragement from teachers, students have to stay self-motivated. When they give right answer to teacher's question, they are suggested to give themselves some positive implication. Even though they answer question incorrectly, they do not need to feel frustrated because a self-motivated person will always comfort himself by taking each failure as a precious experience and seeing his own merits.

3.2 For Teachers

3.2.1 To encourage students to express their ideas bravely and freely

Teachers should give much more encouragements to students, which would make students express their ideas bravely. When giving questions in class, teachers should give the students enough time to think about and discuss with their classmates, by creating a harmonious atmosphere to arouse the students' imagination and desire. The teacher should have enough patience to listen to the opinions of the students.

3.2.2 To create a relaxed learning environment and stimulate students' interests

It is important to create a friendly, relaxed and effective learning environment atmosphere for students to express their ideas bravely and freely. The student-centered class should have many activities, which can encourage students to solve their own problems on their own or in pairs or groups. If there is a trusting, positive and supportive connection between students and teacher, then there is a much more chance of effective interaction. In short, the good relationship between the students and the teacher can create a free environment for motivated learning. Teacher has to pay much attention on how to respond to students, especially when giving feedback and correction.

Teachers should combine the English teaching content with the western countries'. Politic, culture, local conditions and customs, which can cultivate the students' cross-cultural consciousness, and meet the curiosity of students in English learning and psychological desire. At the same time, it can create an active classroom atmosphere, and stimulate the students' interests in learning English. Having the interest, the students are willing to participate in classroom interaction; the class silence can be broken.

3.2.3 To adopt a task-based language teaching

It is a good way for teacher to adopt a task-based language teaching. It can promote classroom interaction in English teaching. Task-based teaching can change the teacher-centered class into student-centered class and improve the effect of classroom interaction through group work and other activities. Besides, it can make students stay focused on the complete act of communication. If well organized, these activities can increase the amount of the students' participation and reduce the students' anxiety and then created a relaxed and supportive environment for students to learn.

4. Conclusion and Implications

This investigation of the local Chinese context resonates with and contributes to the wider discussion of the countermeasures against EFL classroom silence

pervading Chinese, universities and warrants closer examination. It is difficult to say in advance how far such knowledge could contribute to any policy decisions that may be made in the future, but it is important that the voice of teachers and students makes valuable contributions to the larger wider about the reformation of Chinese EFL learning and English education.

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