

Behind Silent Participation: Reticent Students or Ineffective Initiations—Insights from English for Academic Purpose Classrooms

Wang Yuange^{1,a}, Xia Haoran^{2,b,*}

¹School of English Studies, Beijing International Studies University, Beijing, China

²Graduate School, Xi'an International Studies University, Xi'an, China

^awangyuange@163.com, ^bxiahaoran19951102@163.com

*Corresponding author

Abstract: Chinese students have long been considered as ‘reticent participants’, incompatible with the dialogical teaching advocated by Chinese Higher Education. In light of insufficient research on “the second batch of undergraduate students”, this study explores the causes and countermeasures of silent participation (SP) in English for Academic Purpose classes at one Chinese second-batch university. The results demonstrate that these L2 students’ SP are mainly caused by their tutors’ weak, false and zero initiating moves, while on the side of students, they show relatively strong willingness to communicate, being not the conservative talkers as assumed. The results also show the willingness of the two parties’ interplay in a continuing process, for teachers’ identifiable intention directly discourages or encourages students’ active expression. Meanwhile, the students’ initiative to grab the discursive turn can improve the teachers’ motivation. Pedagogical implications are also discussed.

Keywords: silent participation; communicative patterns; initiation moves; willingness to communicate

1. Introduction

In Chinese Higher Education Institutions (CHEIs), such concepts as dialogical teaching, in-class talk, or tutor-student interaction have been endlessly highlighted as priority of the educational reform. In the interaction advocated as an indicator of efficient classroom, acquisition accumulates amid the creative co-construction of knowledge between teachers and students ^[1].

Paradoxically, Chinese college students have long been pigeonholed as reticent or conservative participants. In such situations, all the discussed merits are bound to be empty illusion. This so-called Silent Participation (SP), which though can’t be conflated with “non-participation”, is well-recognized as an obstacle to students’ learning productivity. Since internalization takes the externalization as the precondition, which is argued by Thompson ^[2], learning to speak entails learning to think, then effectively facilitating acquisition. On top of that, a large number of observations witnessed that students exhibiting fewer active responses learn less than those who respond more actively ^[3].

To reduce these unfavourable impacts and to reach dialogical teaching, the reasons of SP have been dug from various aspects: students, tutors, environments, cultures, etc. However, the interaction of its influencing factors is rarely studied. Therefore, this study places SP in the in-class interactive process, essentially an organized and institutional conversation. This further leads to defining the notion and investigating possible causes and countermeasures from diverse perspectives for the purpose of facilitating learning of the L2 learners in English for Academic Purpose (EAP) classrooms at Chinese second-ranking universities. These students are chosen, for they have suffered from lack of focusing on for a long time, due to most previous research prioritizing top colleges.

2. Literature Review

This section summarizes the previous studies on college students’ silent participation and introduces the prevailing communicative patterns at Chinese universities.

2.1 Influencing Factors of College Students' Silent Participation

SP is considered by some scholars as the results of students' active pursuit. On the bright side, not only could the shared silent spaces offer college students personal opportunities to be still and open, it would also serve as interpersonal bridges connecting with their peers. Additionally, the implicit beliefs or theories hidden in students' deep mindsets are found to be influential. A variety of worries originating from students' inner schema-like structures, were exposed in an interview, such as worrying about losing faces and interrupting teachers' lecture ^[4]. Previous research also shows the close connection between SP and students' own willingness to communicate (WTC) ^[5].

Moreover, the low-level WTC of Chinese students, were then claimed to be caused by the Eastern cultures, especially the Confucian cultures ^[6]. Although the cultural differences do exist, these are, however, roasted as over-attribution and over-generalization. With the "adventurous" and "rebellious" Z-generation entering the classrooms, these points of view would fall apart pretty quickly. By stating that, the teachers' possible efforts are also neglected.

However, SP has already been widely proved to be firmly associated with teachers' strategic involvement. At any moment, teachers have the great potential to promote or cut down students' inner WTC. Within the field of communicative patterns, the results of questionnaire investigations revealed the impeding effects of unattractive questions and negative feedback on students' active expression ^[7]. From educational psychology, in Keller's ARCS model (1987), teacher immediacy was put forward as a variable on student motivation. By employing a set of prearranged verbal and non-verbal behaviours (immediacy), educators could dramatically enhance students' willingness to attend classes ^[8]. In these studies, teachers' communication abilities are expounded to play a pivotal role in either decreasing or increasing SP.

2.2 Prevailing Communicative Patterns at Chinese Universities

Despite the potential benefits of interaction, the reality is that the 'antithetical' instructional interaction dominated by teachers' discourse still prevails in CHEIs. Not coincidentally, it is then claimed as a widespread issue among very diverse cultures ^[9], in both L1 and L2 settings. In these conventional classrooms, the unbalanced distribution as common structure owns its regular process and is identified as combinations of IRE sequences, namely, the pattern of "teachers' initiation – students' response – teachers' evaluation".

Given the extensive existence of traditional interaction styles that teachers are slow to abandon, especially in Asia countries, IRE/IRF continues to be effectively portraying in-class communication, highly content-based L2 classrooms in particular. Meanwhile, regardless of the endless criticism against IRF/IRE, insisting it as a persistent ailment, it has the great potential to solve teaching issues in conventional teaching settings ^[10], which include the second-batch universities in China. In this case, by depicting the interaction/ transaction surrounding EAP, within the framework of tutor-student exchanges entitled IRE, this study attempts to discuss the presence of SP.

At these classrooms, a high level of pursuits, such as "exploratory talk" or "accountable talk", is unpractical. Whereas, how to find out the causes of SP, and how to stimulate students' response within the exchanges of IRE ^[11], serve as the first and feasible step of dialogical teaching, also being achievable at under-developed universities. These are also the ultimate aims of the present study, to fill the gap between a broad range of research on top universities, and limited studies of unprivileged ones. On this basis, the research questions are illustrated as follows:

- 1) What are the frequent exchanges of the interaction existing in EAP classrooms at the second-batch university?
- 2) What factors have sparked students' SP in these observed dialogues?
- 3) What potential suggestions could be captivated to foster students' response?

3. Methodology

The study was undertaken at a medium-sized university in Chinese mainland, located in an underdeveloped city with a total population of around 21,000. A seventh of the total population is English-major students, who are required to accomplish the same courses and reside in nearly the same class size (35/36 students, in most cases only involving one or two boys).

To better understand the issues of SP and associated communicative patterns in EAP classrooms, the English Stylistics classes are observed. English Stylistics is a compulsory academic English course, supposed to be learned in year 3 by all English-majors. To get a more comprehensive result, among all the 15 junior classes taught by 4 tutors, 3 classrooms were explored for the following reasons. All teachers graduated with a master degree of English Linguistics, including an associate professor with more-than- 10-year experience (T1), a lecturer with 3-year experience (T2) and an assistant teacher with less-than-half-year experience (T3). On the other side, these classes were selected to reserve both the teachers' and students' influences on SP, especially the teachers', through guaranteeing the involvement of students with basic WTC.

The data collection was conducted in the fall teaching semester of 2023. The eighth teaching week, the mid-time of the whole semester, was monitored when the tutor-student interactions had already taken its stable form. To better elaborate on the naturally existing communicative patterns, the 45-minute classes instructed by the 3 tutors were observed, video- and audio-recorded, generating approximately 270 minutes of recording. Minute notes were also taken in classroom observation in order to capture the possibly useful information and aid in the next-step analysis.

Based on these 3 teaching clips, the digital recording was then transcribed by employing Jefferson Transcription System. Although all the three-part exchange structures in terms of IRE were transcribed systematically, this research only focused on the moves causing and addressing SP. In doing so, the observation only captured the frequency and patterning of the initiation moves issued by teachers, and any extended ones that follow closely behind students' SP utilized to pave the way for further responses. Meanwhile, the frequencies of SP were counted and compared, and the ways of teacher's initiations were coded and classified to check if there is a correlation between tutor's initiation and silent participation.

4. Findings

4.1 Coding and Classification of Communicative Sequences

In view of the two-way quality of dialogical teaching, the definition, classification and coding of teachers' initiation and students' responses, not only take into account their own intention and discursive features but also the other party's acceptance. The whole process is assisted by the combination of real-time classroom observation and detailed conversational analysis. Consequently, except for the obviously explicit, identifiable and definite teachers' evaluation moves, all the other ones are coded as teachers' initiating of interaction. Whether the responses are available, identifiable and strong as far as the teachers and the recording devices are concerned, is the standard of determining students' response moves.

Based on the criteria, four kinds of teachers' initiation moves and 3 students' responses were identified and coded. Meanwhile, the force and governance of the "Teachers Initiation – Students Response" sequences are again manifested and proved in the selected classrooms. According to the statistics, the very rare presence of students' initiation moves (only twice in T1's class) can be ignored.

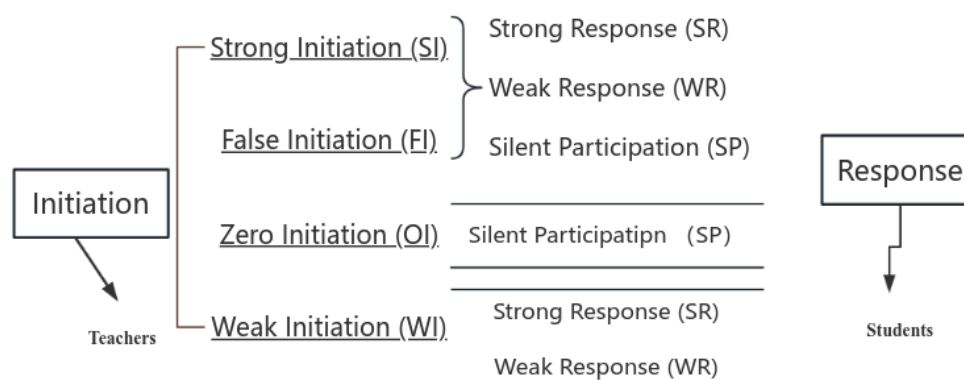


Figure 1: Types of "Teachers Initiation – Students Response" Sequences

The four types of teacher's initiation moves are: Strong Initiation (SI), Weak Initiation (WI), False Initiation and Zero Initiation (OI). As long as the tutors strongly present her willingness to communicate (WTC), for example, by specific initiating methods like questions or by retaining long wait time, their initiation is grouped as "strong initiation". In terms of False Initiation, teachers initiate with evident

approaches like issuing an order or raising a question, yet with no expectation of students' response, which could be reflected in their very short wait time or almost no wait time. Weak Initiation refers to the exchange: tutors have no intention of initiating, but students give active response; Zero Initiation is the phenomenon that teachers behave like talking to themselves, when they should be triggering students' response. To distinguish from WI, it is certainly replied by students' SP.

Correspondingly, the students' response falls into three types: Strong Response (SR), Weak Response (WR) and Silent Participation (SP). Any loud enough, clear and identifiable, or right answers belong to SRs. WRs refer to those unrecognizable noises, laughter, or sporadic voices. On the whole, all the Teachers Initiation—Students Response sequences are described in Figure 1.

4.2 Initiation-Silent Participation: Possible Causes of SP

As depicted in Figure 2, most SPs are directly triggered by teachers' Fake Initiations and Zero Initiations. This is prevalent and common in all these three classrooms, in particular in that of T2.

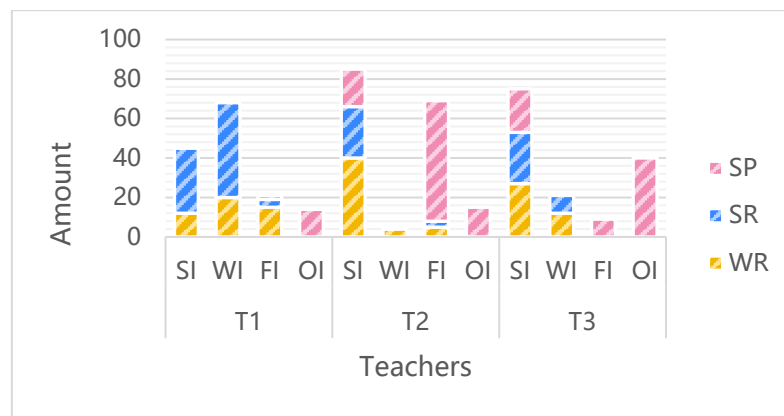


Figure 2: The Amount of Teachers' Initiation Moves and Students' Responses

Reflected in these FIs, when sensing that the teacher has no willingness to communicate (WTC), students in return don't bother themselves to think and answer. Example 1 includes the I-SP sequence made by T2 and her students, in which T2 raises a question and immediately replies to that question. This shows how students' participation is hampered by teachers' short wait time. In this case, students have no room for talk in the total teacher-centered sequence, no more so than in Example 2.

As typical of the OIs, in Example 2, there is no any explicit signs of starting a conversation in the teacher's turn, that's to say, no putting-forward of question, no shared meaning making, no stress of certain words, no drawing-out of sounds and even no ups and downs in intonation. After introduction to definition, a variety of examples are listed and presented on the PPT. With the foundation of knowledge and the clues on the white board, students should have been endowed the chance to interact with the teachers, for they should have been presumed as capable of responding. On the contrary, there is deprivation of students' active expression.

Example 1

T2: "For example, roses and love, is there any rela::tion?"

S2: SP

T2: "=>Yes, there is<, because couples send roses"

Example 2

T3: "Next one (0.5) vehicle (0.5) vehicles (.) the engines or dynamos of vehicles"

S3: SP

T3: "Or(.)machines(.) replace its parts"

S3: SP

After SP, lack of extended initiating attempts is also figured out as deterring element. The supposed-to-have attempt to save the "double-way interaction" is proposed, and then named by this study as Extended Initiation (EI). It symbolizes the tutors' further initiation after receiving unsatisfactory response.

As anticipated by the tutors, the corresponding response should be strong, loud and correct. If the SI is followed by SP or WR, the extended initiations are considered as ‘useful tools’ to make up for them, as depicted in Figure 3. For instance, in Example 3, the T2 takes several discursive turns to re-initiate by repeatedly transforming the sub-types of initiation moves – repetition, louder sound, rising tone etc. – until she at last acquires students’ response.

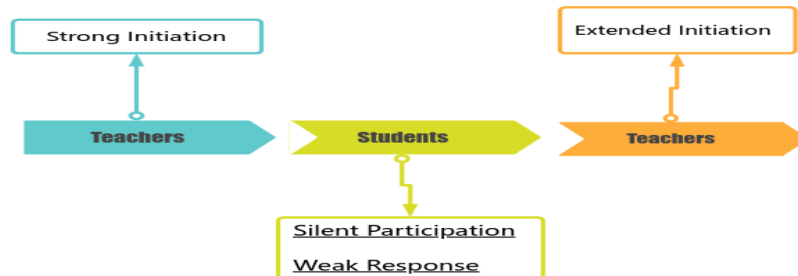


Figure 3: Sequences of Silent Participation-Extended Initiation

Example 3

T2: “OK(.) we could(.) come up with some examples(.) from the cradle ↓ to grave↑::”

S: SP

T2: (3) from the creator to grade

S: SP

T2: CRADLE

S: “grave”

However, the EI is far from sufficient. What is frequently seen is the phenomenon that tutors prefer to skip and ignore the SPs and speak on students’ behalf, just as illustrated in Example 4.

Example 4

T1: “So what two things are juxtaposed in this figure of speech?”

S1: SP

T2: “Two contradictory expressions(.)to stand out.”

This is even more frequently occurring in the discourses of T2 and T3, demonstrating a big gap between ‘WR+SP’ and EIs. According to Figure 4, only one third of unfavorable responses in T2’s classroom is then followed with extended initiating effort, while only 16 percentage is observed in that of T3.

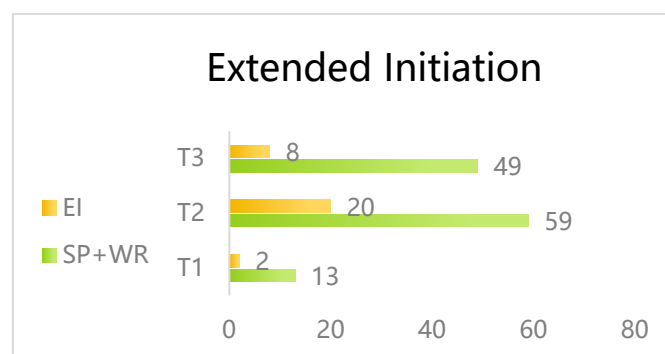


Figure 4: Details of Extended Initiation Moves Utilized by the 3 Tutors

4.3 Weak Initiation-Response: Evidence of Students’ Willingness

The Weak Initiation-Response sequences are founded in all these 3 tutor-student interactions. This even dominates the T1’s classroom, accounting for approximately half of all her initiation moves. Even if there is no intention of interaction on the teachers’ side, the students still manage to participate. The

frequently-used methods include repeating the words or phrases a moment ago uttered by the tutors or the ones written on the PowerPoint, automatically translating teacher's language (code-switching), or forcing the turn-taking by vocalizing what the teacher is about to say. Additionally, students are found to predict the teachers' initiating and sometimes reply to some at-that-time nonexistent questions in advance.

4.4 Initiation Moves: Effective Sub-types

It reveals that a large proportion (at least exceeding 70%) of tutors' intentional initiation moves (SI) manage to harvest students' answers. To some degree, these different approaches under the category of SI are not distinctive enough to differentiate themselves largely from the other when it comes to the effectiveness of eliciting students' response.

Table 1: The Sub-Types of Tutors' SI

Sub-types	T1	T2	T3
Display Questions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ <u>Disjunctive questions</u> ✓ General questions ✓ Special questions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Alternative questions ✓ <u>Disjunctive questions</u> ✓ <u>General questions</u> ✓ Special questions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ <u>Alternative questions</u> ✓ <u>Disjunctive questions</u> ✓ General questions ✓ Special questions
Order	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Asking for follow-up reading ✓ Pushing forward the exchanges/tasks 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Asking for examples ✓ Asking students to explain ✓ Pushing forward the exchanges/tasks 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Pushing forward the exchanges/tasks ✓ Asking students to translate
Others		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Referential questions ✓ Long wait time 	

(Note: The underlined are the frequently-used ones.)

Table 1 gives a breakdown of the soliciting approaches used by these tutors, namely the sub-types of strong initiations. The two most common ones are orders and questions. It shows that tutors almost exclusively use display questions instead of referential questions. The display questions are those whose correct answers are known to the teachers, with the only function of interrogating the students' knowledge. It should be noted that disjunctive questions are the shared preference, whose nature is purely social questions, asking questions for the sake of "asking". Specifically speaking, by putting forward these questions, the sole purpose of tutors is "seeking interaction", to obtain students' attention and turn-taking.

Table 2 concludes other sub-types of all initiation moves except for SI, which are discovered to have already received students' Strong Response. It demonstrates the unintentional but effective initiating approaches in the tutor-student interaction. Notably, the ups and downs in sounds and the repeating of certain words make a difference. T1 has been the most obvious beneficiary, for she makes the most use of rising pitches, stresses, deliberately slow tempo, and constant repeating. This contributes to the least frequency of SP happening in her classrooms, producing a closer dialogical class, whether consciously or unconsciously.

Table 2: The Relatively Effective Initiating Approaches Employed by the 3 Tutors

Sub-types	T1	T2	T3
Repetition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ English words ✓ Chinese words ✓ English sentences ✓ Chinese sentences 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Chinese words ✓ English words ✓ English sentences 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Chinese words ✓ English words
Sounds	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Slowing voices down ✓ Prolonged sounds ✓ Rising pitch ✓ Putting stresses on certain words 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Rising pitch 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Rising Pitch ✓ Slightly prolonged sounds
Code-switching	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Switching from English to Chinese ✓ Switching from Chinese to English 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Switching from English to Chinese 	

5. Discussion

Conforming the connotation of dialogical teaching, the encoding and identifying of teachers' initiating attempts find four kinds of initiation moves. Almost all coded strong initiating approaches (whether commanding or questioning) could be labeled as effective, while almost all false initiations and zero initiations are blamed as obstructions of students' verbal responses. In the stimulating students' ripostes effects, different questioning techniques or directive commanders as sub-types of strong initiation only differ slightly, unlike the findings in other classroom studies. This suggests that as long as the tutor herself/himself is intentional, she/he can build a two-way exchange smoothly, leave aside the quality of the responses/answers.

Consistently, silent classrooms are mostly caused by teachers' lack of exchange-eliciting intention or awareness which there should have. Zero initiations equal to what Sinclair and Coulthard (1975) called 'informative', which are named so in this study for they restrict or even prevent students' verbal participation. Similarly, in the FIs, which are also regarded as notable missteps and errors of tutors' initiations, teachers themselves close the door of students' verbal output by leaving very short wait time or no wait time, and other discursive and non-discursive hints expressing no WTC. After capturing these negative signals, even when students have owned WTC, they tend to be voiceless for negative expectations naturally induce silent students.

Whereas a large portion of weak initiations surprisingly unfold students' subjective initiative. The fact is that students continuously seek for opportunities to participate in the instructional talks dominated by the educators. Inability to reply with correct answers, and lack of precise understanding of teachers' intentions don't stop their responses. No longer as "hesitant talkers" with lack of confidence, language anxiety and low self-esteem, their performance is inconsistent with some previous research on Chinese students^[12]. Short answers, coined answers after no questions or just repeating the teachers' words clearly demonstrate their efforts to wedge into the talks. These, in some cases, succeed to facilitate tutors' communicative willingness. For these L2 learners, regardless of what is the original purpose, tutors' conscious or unconscious stresses, intonation changes, repetition of certain words, especially English words and instant code-switching invisibly work to encourage students to take part in in-class talks. Students are prone to teachers' initiating using certain English expressions, which contradicts the view that interaction using weaker second languages created problems in content acquisition.

6. Conclusions

Based on the aforementioned discussion, this study highlights that these relatively advanced L2 students who could be more active and engaging are yet trapped in the classrooms dominated by teachers. That being said, however, I would argue that tutors should be portrayed as solution taker instead of problem maker. Teachers have the ability to embark on dialogical teaching: firstly, more opportunities should be given to these students consciously; secondly, the initiating discourse could be more intentional and more apparent in its appearance for students' ease to catch the clues; Thirdly, extended rows of initiations are necessities after receiving SP; Lastly, in L2 classrooms, appropriate vocal variety and code-switching should be utilized.

References

- [1] Hardman, F. (2008). *The guided co-construction of knowledge*. In: M. Martin-Jones, A. de Mejia, & N. Hornberger (Eds.), *Encyclopedia of language and education*, 253–264. New York: Springer.
- [2] Thompson, P. (2008). *Learning through extended talk*. *Language and Education*, 22: 241–256.
- [3] Heward, W.L., Gardner, R., Cavanaugh, R. A., Courson, F. H., Grossi, T. A., & Barbetta, P. M. (1996). *Everyone participates in this class: Using response cards to increase active student response*. *Teaching Exceptional Children*, 28(2): 4– 10.
- [4] Zhu, Z.B., Chen, L.L. & Jin, Z.G. (2017). *Analysis of factors influencing student classroom silence from the perspective of implicit theories*. *University Education Science*, (06): 50-56+122.
- [5] MacIntyre, P., Dörnyei Z, Clément R, et al. (1998). *Conceptualizing willingness to communicate in a L2: A situational model of L2 confidence and affiliation*. *The Modern Language Journal*, 82(4):545–562.
- [6] Chan, S. (1999). *The Chinese learner-a question of style*. *Education and Training*, 41(6/7): 294-304.
- [7] Zhang, R.J. (2012). *An investigation of the relationship between students' silence and teachers' questioning: EFL classrooms in Xinjiang University*. *Journal of Xinjiang University (Philosophy and Social Sciences)*, 40(06): 142- 145.

- [8] Sheybani, M. (2019). *The relationship between EFL Learners' willingness to communicate (WTC) and their teacher immediacy attributes: a structural equation modelling*. *Cogent Psychology*, 6: 1- 14.
- [9] Hardman, F. (2016). *Tutor–student interaction in seminar teaching: Implications for professional development*. *Active Learning in Higher Education*, 17(1): 63–76.
- [10] Huang, S. (2018). *New progresses of researches on IRF classroom discourse pattern: based on literature review of 70 study cases*. *Journal of Schooling Studies*, 15(02): 93- 101.
- [11] Xiao, S.H. (2017). *Revoicing the minds: A search of research on interaction in the classroom*. Shanghai: East China Normal University Press, 50-60.
- [12] Liu, X.Q. (2005). *On Silent Classrooms*. Qufu: Qufu Normal University.