

Research on Silence in English Classroom Interaction for Non-English Majors

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Abstract: *Under the background of the current educational reform in China, silence in English classroom has attracted the attention of scholars. The main form for students to participate in English classroom is to answer the teachers' questions. However, in today's college English classrooms, classroom silence is very common. This paper analyzes the silence of non-English majors in English classrooms from the following three aspects: students' factors, teachers' factors and factors of classroom environment, and puts forward corresponding suggestions. It aims to help educators deal with the current problems in English classroom teaching and seek countermeasures for classroom silence. Based on the results, the paper puts forward new ideas for promoting the tripartite cooperation among schools, teachers and students, and effectively improving the participation of non-English majors in English classroom interaction, so as to achieve high-quality college classroom teaching.*

Keywords: *non-English majors; English classroom silence; classroom environment*

1. Introduction

The more active the involvement of college students in English classroom, the more conducive it is to practice their oral English and deepen their understanding of knowledge. The interaction between students and teachers is also conducive to their divergent thinking and innovative consciousness. When students actively answer questions in class, teachers can directly understand students' absorption of key knowledge and their specific learning situation, which is also conducive to achieving teaching objectives with high quality. However, in today's English classrooms, students seldom take the initiative to express their ideas; most remain silent, resulting in a passive learning environment. Essentially, "silence" within an English classroom represents non-verbal communication behavior between teachers and students during dialogue and interaction. Currently, this phenomenon has become common among non-English majors at colleges and universities worldwide where students are reluctant to communicate with teachers during English classes leading to a decline in teaching quality for these courses. Why does this phenomenon occur? How should university instructors overcome this dilemma and encourage active participation from college students? Addressing these questions is crucial for improving the quality of English classroom instruction for non-English majors.

The motivation of this research arises not only from the consensus within educational circles regarding the importance of cultivating college students' enthusiasm, but also from the reflection on the current situation of silence in the English classrooms.

2. Research Background

2.1 Research Significance

2.1.1 Theoretical Significance

This research deeply analyzes the reasons of silence in classroom interaction for non-English majors from three aspects: students' factors, teachers' factors and factors of classroom environment. It aims to enrich the current empirical research on classroom silence, and change teachers' and students' one-sided understanding of classroom silence. In addition, this research also adopts the form of interviews to look at the phenomenon of classroom silence from the perspective of college students, and implements the theory of interactive teaching and self-determination. This can not only explain why classroom silence occurs, but also connect relevant theories and research, which deepens our understanding of silence in classroom interaction. Moreover, it provides a new perspective and way for

explaining and alleviating the silence of non-English majors.

2.1.2 Practical Significance

Silence occurs in every university subject, but it is particularly noticeable in English classrooms. Generally speaking, college English classroom teaching is a process of language acquisition by teachers and students through interactive communication. The phenomenon of silence is reflected in that teachers communicate with students by asking questions in class, while students remain silent.

Under the background of the current education reform in China, the research on classroom silence for English majors will help teachers understand the current situation and characteristics of college students' classroom silence, so as to improve the teaching level. In addition, targeted research centered on students' silent behavior in the classroom can avoid teachers' general evaluation of students' silent behavior and strengthen the objectivity of teaching evaluation. At the same time, this research helps students have a clear understanding of their own classroom behavior, and adjust their classroom behavior in time, so as to better participate in classroom discussion and realize self-worth. Finally, this research also provides some practical guidance for the teaching management of colleges and universities to alleviate the problem of silence in classroom.

2.2 Related Research

Classroom silence is a common phenomenon in Chinese and foreign educational research. Krishna Bista (2012)^[1], based on her own experience as an international student and her discussion with students from other countries, concludes that the reasons for Nepalese students' silence are: firstly, their lack of understanding of American academic knowledge and culture; secondly, their fear of being looked down upon by local people for cultural mistakes. Hanh Nguyen Thu (2020)^[2] analyzes students, teachers and social culture through follow-up surveys and semi-structured interviews. Laura Taylor A. (2020)^[3] proposes the the impact of neoliberalism and humanized pedagogy on classroom interaction. The analysis argues that neoliberalism creates ideological and material barriers to the practice of silence in the contemporary classroom.

Chinese scholars investigate the situation of classroom silence from different angles. Lei Hongde (2017)^[4] explains the classroom silence of Chinese undergraduates by constructing a speech barrier model based on the perspective of students. Xu Min (2021)^[5] analyzes the reasons for silence in classroom from the perspective of both teachers and students, and proposes specific and feasible solutions for both teachers and students. Previous scholars have made in-depth analyses on the phenomenon of silence in classroom, but there is no detailed study on non-English majors. Therefore, this research takes this group as the research subject to explore the causes of silence in English classroom.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Questions

This research aims to answer two research questions: (1)What is the current situation of Non-English Majors' English classroom silence? (2)What are the factors affecting Non-English Majors' English classroom silence?

3.2 Research Subjects

The subjects of this study are 128 senior non-English majors from a comprehensive university in Tianjin. There are 82 students majoring in Machinery and 46 students majoring in Japanese.

3.3 Research Instruments

This study adopts questionnaire and interview as the research instruments.

3.3.1 Questionnaire

In the questionnaire, all questions except the basic personal information of students adopt a four-level scale, and there are 27 questions in the questionnaire. Personal background includes major, gender, personality, English score and the duration of silence (See Appendix I 1-5). The following five

questions are about the current situation of English classroom for non-English majors (See Appendix I Qs 1-5).

The investigation content of this questionnaire includes the following three dimensions: First, the survey of students' learning dimension, including fifteen questions (See Appendix I 1-5, Qs 6-15). The second is the survey of teachers' teaching dimension, including four questions (See Appendix I Qs 16-19). The third is the survey of classroom environment dimension, including three questions (See Appendix I Qs 20-22).

In order to improve the reliability and validity of the questionnaire and obtain scientific and credible research results, this research strictly follows the theory and method of scale compilation to design the questionnaire. The reliability coefficient of the questionnaire is shown in Table 1:

Table 1 Reliability Statistics

Reliability Statistics	
Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.854	27

After deleting a few questionnaires that are not answered carefully or answered by more than one option, a total of 125 questionnaires are valid.

SPSS 22.0 was used to analyze the data obtained from the questionnaire survey.

3.3.2 Interviews

Through the analysis and data screening of the questionnaire, two students majoring in Japanese and two students majoring in Machinery are selected from the subjects as the interviewees. The principle of saturation is adopted for sample extraction to ensure that the research objects have differences in gender, personality, English score, silence frequency and other aspects. In order to protect the information of interviewees, J-1, J-2, M-1 and M-2 are respectively named in this research. ("J" represents Japanese majors, and "M" represents Machinery majors.)

In order to supplement the reasons for silence beyond the questionnaire information, the researcher conducted an open interview on the topic of "why do so many non-English majors keep silent in the English classroom interaction?" After that, the researcher read the transcript, conducted text coding, and classified the interview contents into three aspects: students, teachers and classroom environment. On this basis, the following questions were employed:

- (1) If you answer questions in class, is it usually the teacher who asks you questions or you take the initiative to speak?
- (2) What is your English teacher's teaching style and what is the classroom atmosphere like?
- (3) Do you prefer a large class or a small class? And do you dare to speak more when there are a large number of people?

4. Data Analysis and Discussion

4.1 The Current Situation of Non-English Majors' English Classroom Silence

Table 2 Descriptive Analysis of Classroom Status

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean
Q1 Frequency of participation in classroom interaction	125	1	4	2.78
Q2 Frequency of participation in group discussions	125	1	4	3.25
Q3 Frequency of active speech	125	1	4	2.32
Q4 Whether you are sure of the answer or not, you will answer the question	125	1	4	2.21
Q5 Teachers often ask questions	125	1	4	3.31
Valid N (listwise)	125			

In Table 2, descriptive statistical analysis is conducted on the score data of the five questions about the current situation of silence in English classroom in the questionnaire to study the degree of silence. The higher the score, the more active the class is. There are only two situations in which teachers often

ask questions and group discussion participants score more than three points on average (Q2-3.25, Q5-3.31). The other three questions (Q1, Q3, Q4) are respectively scored 2.78, 2.32, 2.21, which are between relative silence and general silence. In general, the subjects' classes are seen in silent state.

4.2 Factors Affecting Non-English Majors' English Classroom Silence

4.2.1 Students' Factors

(1)Based on Questionnaire Survey

A descriptive statistical analysis is conducted on the personal data (See Appendix I 1-5) in the questionnaire to study the relationship between gender, major, personality and the length of silence in English classroom (See Table 3). It can be seen from the table that personality affects students' performance in class: extroverted students are more inclined to speak and are more willing to communicate and cooperate in class, while introverted students don't like to express themselves, so they don't like to speak. At the same time, the results show that college students of different genders and majors show consistent negative silence behavior in English classroom.

Table 3 Descriptive Statistical Analysis of Personal Situation

		The length of silence in English classroom			Total
		<10 min	10-20 min	>20 min	
Gender	Males	13	16	31	60
	Females	17	21	27	65
	Total	30	37	58	125
Major	Mechanical	11	16	29	56
	Japanese	19	21	29	69
	Total	30	37	58	125
Personality	Introverted	11	20	32	63
	Extroverted	19	26	17	62
	Total	30	46	49	125

Psychological activities include learning motivation, anxiety level, conformity psychology and fear of losing face. In English classroom, everyone's psychological activities are different. Learning motivation and subjective consciousness affect students' performance in class. The survey results of psychological activities are shown in Table 4.

Table 4 Questionnaire Results Statistics

Questions	Strongly Approve	Mostly Approve	Not Very Approve	Totally Disapprove	Mean
Q6. It is enough to learn English knowledge taught by the teacher carefully. There's no need to answer questions.	14(11.2%)	30(24%)	65(52%)	16(12.8%)	2.66
Q7. Answering questions too many times and doing group activities in English class will waste everyone's time to learn knowledge.	12(9.6%)	32(25.6%)	58(46.4%)	23(18.4%)	2.74
Q8. Speaking in English class can't improve my English.	12(9.6%)	24(19.2%)	66(52.8%)	23(18.4%)	2.8
Q9. I feel anxious when the teacher asks questions.	20(16%)	51(40.8%)	43(34.4%)	11(8.8%)	2.36
Q10. I am afraid of being laughed at if I say something wrong or imperfect in class.	17(13.6%)	55(44%)	41(32.8%)	12(9.6%)	2.38
Q11. There is no need for my views to be known in class.	17(13.6%)	47(37.6%)	50(40%)	11(8.8%)	2.44
Q12. During class discussions, I just listen and don't have to speak.	16(12.8%)	46(36.8%)	45(36%)	18(14.4%)	2.52
Q13. I will feel relieved when several students answer questions in class.	22(17.6%)	61(48.8%)	37(29.6%)	5(4%)	2.2
Q14. If the rest of the class doesn't speak up, I stay silent.	24(19.2%)	60(48%)	35(28%)	6(4.8%)	2.18
Q15. I prefer indoctrination to asking questions.	21(16.8%)	48(38.4%)	44(35.2%)	12(9.6%)	2.38

As can be seen from the table, 44(35.2%) respondents agree with Q6; 44 (35.2%) respondents approve of Q7; 36(28.2%) respondents consent to Q8. This shows that nearly one-third of non-English majors do not value speaking in class. In the students' psychological activities, 56.8% of the subjects feel anxious when the teacher asks questions (Q9). With regard to Q10, Q11, Q12, 71(56.8%), 72(57.6%) and 64(51.2%) respondents "strongly approve" and "mostly approve", respectively. 83(66.2%) and 84(66.4%) subjects agree with Q13 and Q14. This shows that when most students are silent, individuals dare not speak because of group mentality. Moreover, when they are not sure of the answer, they avoid speaking for fear of losing face.

The results of the questionnaire survey show that the frequency and degree of negative silence behavior of all kinds of students are high. More than half of the students said they would not actively express their opinions.

(2)Based on Interviews

In the interviews, when talking about silence in classroom, several interviewees mentioned the word "habit" :

"I have always been used to listening to the teacher." (J-2)

"It's natural for foreign students to speak up and argue with the teacher if they have any problems in class, but Chinese students don't have this habit." (J-1)

Moreover, lack of knowledge affects the possibility and confidence of students to speak in class. Some interviewees point out that due to "poor learning", they do not know much, do not have enough confidence in themselves, and dare not speak in class. "Sometimes I really want to answer questions, but I really don't know. I'm not sure, so I lower my head." (M-1) According to them, most of the speakers in English class are those with outstanding academic performance in English or who speak English well.

4.2.2 Teachers' Factors

(1)Based on Questionnaire Survey

Table 5 makes descriptive statistical analysis of the score data of the four questions in the teacher dimension. Only the average value of Q17 is relatively high. The mean value of Q16 is 2.51, indicating that students are not close to their teachers. The questions are all scored 2-3 points. On the whole, the English teachers of the subjects are in an average state in class and fail to fully mobilize the enthusiasm of the students.

Table 5 Descriptive Statistics of Teacher Dimensions

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean
Q16	125	1	4	2.51
Q17	125	1	4	2.82
Q18	125	1	4	2.45
Q19	125	1	4	2.69
Valid N (listwise)	125			

Note: Q16. You have a good relationship with your English teacher.

Q17. Your English teacher often interact with students in class.

Q18. Your English teacher will give students time to think about questions.

Q19. Your English teacher is passionate in class.

(2)Based on Interviews

In the interviews, when asked about the teaching methods of their English teachers, many interviewees used the word "self-indulgent" to describe those teachers who ask and answer themselves, indulging themselves and talking endlessly. One respondent likens such a teacher to a skilled driver, saying that teaching was like "speeding along at 200 yards" (M-2). Students can't keep up with the progress of the teacher's lecture. Another interviewee complained, "Some teachers talk to themselves from the beginning to the end, and don't care whether you understand or not" (M-2). When students encounter self-indulgent teachers, they have little chance to speak up.

The teaching mode of teacher speaking and students listening is still popular in college classrooms. Teachers dominate the right to speak, and whether students speak often depends on whether teachers provide opportunities.

4.2.3 Factors of Classroom Environment

(1)Based on Questionnaire Survey

Table 6 English Classroom Atmosphere Survey Results Statistics

Question	Very Active	Relatively Active	Relatively Dull	Very Dull	Mean
Q20 How is the English classroom atmosphere in your class?	11(8.8%)	50(40%)	57(45.6%)	7(5.6%)	2.48

As can be seen from Table 6, only 11 subjects say that their English class atmosphere is very active. Those who think their English class is relatively active and relatively dull account for 40% and 45.6% respectively. In this regard, we will further analyze the impact of class size and test methods on English classroom atmosphere.

Table 7 Classroom Environment Crosstab

				English classroom Atmosphere				Total
				Very Active	Relatively Active	Relatively Dull	Very Dull	
Q21 What kind of class are you in?	Small classes	Count	“Q	7	27	23	4	61
		% within Classroom Atmosphere”		63.6%	54.0%	40.4%	42.9%	48.8%
	Large classes	Count	“Q	4	23	34	3	64
		% within Classroom Atmosphere”		36.4%	46.0%	59.6%	57.1%	51.2%
Q22 What is the English test method in your class?	Oral questions	Count	“Q	6	35	27	4	72
		% within Classroom Atmosphere”		54.5%	70.0%	47.4%	57.1%	57.6%
	Written questions	Count	“Q	5	15	30	3	53
		% within Classroom Atmosphere”		45.5%	30.0%	52.6%	42.9%	42.4%

It can be seen from Table 7 that small classes are more active than large classes. In small classes, 63.6% of respondents say that the classes are very active, while only 36.4% of respondents say that the large classes are very active. Therefore, the large class size is one of the important reasons for students' silence in classroom. With the expansion of class size, classroom silence is becoming more and more common.

At the same time, by comparing the English classroom atmosphere of oral questions and written questions, the activity of oral questions is also higher than that of written questions. In English class, teachers mostly adopt written questions, oral questions are relatively few, so that students have few opportunities to exercise, which is also one of the reasons for English classroom silence.

(3) Based on Interviews

One subject said, "Chinese students' mute English is cultivated in this way: They just learn English for the exam, not as a language for communication." (J-1) In addition, according to the interviews, when asked about the status of students when they are silent in classroom, most students choose to play mobile phones in classroom, "Especially in large classes, more than 70% of college students use mobile phones in class, and only 30% of students almost never play mobile phones in class" (J-2).

5. Research Findings and Pedagogical Implications

5.1 Research Findings

In terms of students' psychological activities, many of them are afraid to speak either out of the herd mentality or for fear of losing face because of wrong answers. In traditional Chinese culture, modesty is a good quality. Students who raise objections are often considered to be unfriendly to others because they want to stand out from others. This idea makes students keep silent in class, so as to avoid being criticized. Meanwhile, most students prefer indoctrination to asking questions. In primary school and

middle school, teachers' authority is always emphasized, and students can only passively accept knowledge. Although entering university, it is difficult to change the formed habit, and students are still in a state of passive learning and silent in the process of classroom teaching in university. Moreover, the problem students have trouble speaking in class is often because they are not prepared. First, non-English majors don't learn much, so they have nothing to say. Second, their oral ability is not good, they do not know how to say.

In terms of teachers' factors, the main reason is that many teachers are accustomed to the traditional teacher-led lecturing class and do not give college students enough time and opportunity to show themselves, resulting in the loss of interest in teaching itself and the phenomenon of classroom silence. The results show that teachers' questioning alone can not effectively stimulate students' activity, and teachers themselves need to adjust their questioning methods and pay more attention to classroom questioning. Teachers speak on the stage, students listen to teachers, a pattern and inertia is formed. However, students are in a passive position, unwilling or unable to speak. As time goes by, habits become natural and learned silence is formed, making it difficult for students to speak up.

At present, China's school education adopts the form of class teaching system, its advantage lies in the concentration of teaching can effectively improve the teaching efficiency, save a lot of teaching time, manpower and material resources. However, its disadvantage lies in that when there are too many students in each class, it is difficult for teachers to observe each student and prepare lessons according to each student's learning situation. In addition, each student's learning experience, knowledge reserve and other aspects are different, which requires teachers to develop teaching objectives and design classroom problems with different levels of difficulty.

5.2 Pedagogical Implications

5.2.1 Building a Student-centered Teaching Model

Teachers should define the principal role of students and build a student-centered college classroom teaching model. Teachers always firmly occupy the dominant position in class and are the main initiators of teacher-student interaction. This requires teachers not only to truly change their educational cognition, update their educational concepts, and realize the principal status of students in the classroom, but also to clarify their own role as teachers, consciously examine teaching behavior, and actively improve their teaching ability. We should change the "imparting" and "cramming" teaching modes in college English classroom and build a student-centered heuristic teaching mode. We should pay attention to increasing students' "sense of gain" in classroom teaching, and improve English teaching efficiency. In classroom teaching, teachers should not only effectively ask questions and guide students to be good at answering, but also encourage students to be good at asking questions and inspire students' curiosity.

5.2.2 Implementing Flexible and Diversified Teaching Methods

Traditional and outdated teaching methods will make students lose interest in classroom teaching and in teachers' questions, so they become silent. Teachers should actively improve the way of asking questions in classroom teaching, clarify the requirements of asking questions, and examine the rationality and scientific nature of the questions. At the same time, teachers should strengthen their own professional quality, consciously optimize education and teaching behavior, and pay full attention to students' initiative, so as to promote students' active participation in classroom teaching activities through equal interaction and communication with students. When students can not make a timely response to the teacher's questions, teachers should change the questions into simpler ones in time, and then guide students to return to the original questions, so as to avoid silence in classroom.

Teachers can create a relaxing and open classroom environment, set up group discussions and encourage students who do not like to participate in the discussion, which will greatly reduce students' anxiety about classroom interaction and give them a buffering period to adapt to it.

5.2.3 Updating Educational Ideas and Changing Teaching Methods

Among the influencing factors of silence behavior in English classroom, students' inappropriate self-cognition, psychological state and special psychological reaction in the group are often ignored. These factors are important reasons for students' negative silence behavior in classroom. College students generally have excessive self-concern and strong tendency of self-image management. Therefore, teachers should pay attention to students' psychological status in time, help them adjust their bad cognition, and relieve their pressure in social communication.

For example, teachers should actively improve the way of asking questions in classroom teaching, clarify the requirements of asking questions, and examine the rationality and scientific nature of the questions. In addition, teachers should carefully examine and rationally analyze the silent behavior of students in the classroom, pay attention to the behavior of silent students, and distinguish and judge the nature of silence through the changes of their eye contacts and body movements. When students have negative silence behavior, they should be reminded in time and be guided to actively participate in the classroom.

6. Conclusion

The classroom silence of college students has become a common phenomenon in many colleges and universities, which has caused great harm to the classroom teaching effect. The diversity of the classroom silence of college students also determines that teachers and students must cooperate to improve the phenomenon to some extent. This research adopts questionnaire survey method to measure non-English majors' classroom silence. After obtaining the data of the specific situation of classroom silence, statistical analysis was used to investigate the influencing factors of classroom silence. The research shows that students' psychological factors, teachers' personal factors and factors of classroom environment affect the phenomenon of classroom silence. Moreover, the following interviews provide support for further analyzing the causes of silence in English classroom.

On the basis of the research results, the corresponding countermeasures and suggestions are put forward to reduce the phenomenon of classroom silence in an attempt to help teachers and universities to correctly face and deal with the problem of students' classroom silence.

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