

Understanding Chinese Postgraduates' Silence in EFL Flipped Classroom

Yunyao Li

*School of Foreign Languages, Qingdao University, Qingdao, China
2uabigailee@gmail.com*

Abstract: *Flipped classroom has been widely promoted in higher institutions while students were found to be silent in the offline classroom. Given the insufficient understanding of students' silence among postgraduates in the Chinese educational context, this study aims to investigate their perceptions of silence in flipped classrooms and the reasons behind it. A qualitative study was conducted with data obtained from semi-structured interviews among 14 postgraduates who specialize in diverse English domains. The interview data revealed that students' anxiety in speaking English, the teacher-lead learning atmosphere, and the influence of Confucian culture are the primary reasons for students' silence when interacting with teachers and other students in the offline classroom. Implications for future study and suggestions to cope with the silence were provided in order to promote the effective integration of flipped classrooms and the learning environment in China.*

Keywords: *Flipped classroom; English majors; Postgraduates; Silence; China*

1. Introduction

The advent of information and technology has drastically altered the landscape of education. Flipped classroom, as a new and popular instructional model, has become increasingly popular in American educational institutions (Mok, 2014). It has also been consistently acclaimed as one of the most sought-after trends in educational technology (Watters, 2012). As a unique model, it has reversed the role of homework and classroom activities (Chen et al., 2017). The flipped classroom, in contrast to traditional teacher-centered instruction, is centered around students (Gökçe & Murat, 2018) and emphasizes students' autonomous or self-regulated learning and teacher-student interaction. Students watch online videos and learn by themselves before class. Therefore, they will have more time and opportunities to communicate with teachers and students in the offline classroom (Zainuddin & Halili, 2016), and the enthusiasm and effect of students' classroom interaction will also promote the success of flipped classrooms.

Some studies have suggested that flipped classrooms can positively impact educational outcomes. For example, students' learning achievement may be improved (Missildine et al., 2013); this flipped method may result in greater student satisfaction; and a flipped classroom can be more economical than traditional instruction (O'Flaherty & Phillips, 2015). Besides, in an English as a foreign language (EFL) flipped classroom, students can have more opportunities to use the target language in cooperative learning experiences, thus allowing them to develop and enhance the use of language through teachers' immediate and effective feedback (Mehring, 2016). However, challenges also exist. For example, the more required time for redesigning a flipped classroom (Benton & Schlairet, 2014) and lower self-regulated behavior of students (Lee & Sun, 2017) are the difficulties faced by the flipped classroom.

With China stepping into the globalization scene, various instructional models and methods have been gradually introduced. Flipped classroom was introduced to China in 2012 and has been widely practiced for a decade. At present, many scholars recognize the feasibility of it and believe that it can achieve good teaching results. In the Chinese educational context, scholars suggested that the flipped classrooms approach breaks the limitation of time and space and provides students with rich and refined learning resources. In addition, it helps to improve students' more profound understanding of the content knowledge (Yang, 2014). Besides, in ELF flipped classrooms, students can be motivated to learn English, and they can actively and competently use the learned idioms (Chen et al., 2017) and achieve better language output under the guidance of teachers, which plays a vital role in their second language acquisition (SLA).

Despite the benefits that the flipped classroom brings to teaching and learning, some students remain

silent during class discussions and the “question and answer” section in the offline classroom, which leads to ineffective flipped classroom teaching and poor achievement of the teaching objectives. Compared to traditional EFL classrooms, where silence was suggested as a common phenomenon (Hanh, 2020; Harumi, 2011; Shan, 2020), the flipped classroom requires students to have a higher level of autonomy and self-control when they conduct online learning without teachers’ supervision, their lack of engagement (e.g., silence) (Shan, 2020) would hinder students’ language output and learning effectiveness. Many researchers believe that in EFL classrooms, silence presents a significant threat to successful language learning owing to students’ lack of verbal interaction (Nakane, 2002; Tani, 2005; Tsui, 1996).

To understand students’ silence, researchers (White & Smith, 1996) suggested classroom silence indicates the limited or lack of involvement in classroom interaction, students’ talk indicates it. The current research on classroom silence mainly focused on the traditional classroom among undergraduates (e.g., Hanh, 2020), while little research was found in the literature on postgraduate students’ silence in a flipped classroom teaching context, especially in EFL flipped classrooms. Therefore, this study aimed to understand postgraduates’ silence in flipped teaching and learning contexts and explore the reasons behind it. This study contributes to promoting the development of the flipped classroom in China and the integration of this flipped model and English teaching, and the findings also furnish policymakers and administrators with valuable data and suggestions to enhance technological professional training. More specifically, the research questions are:

- 1) Do English major postgraduates keep silent in flipped classrooms?
- 2) Why do they keep silent during interaction?

2. Literature Review

2.1 *The flipped classroom*

With the rapid development of the times, education has gradually shifted from teacher-lead instruction to student-centered learning. The flipped classroom, as a new and widely spread instructional model, has attracted scholarly attention. It is defined as a model that which is traditionally done in class is now home activities, and that which is traditionally done as homework is now conducted in the classroom (Bergmann & Sams, 2012). The customary lectures and subsequent learning exercises may be reversed so teachers can undertake more active group tasks in class (Awidi & Mark, 2019). And the learning materials for students outside school hours could be online videos, digital textbooks (Rahman et al., 2014), or courseware (Mason, Shuman, & Cook, 2013). Unlike teacher-lead instruction, the flipped classroom is a student-centered model. Students can control their own learning pace and be responsible for their learning process (Lai & Hwang, 2016). Moreover, as class time is not used only to impart knowledge, teachers can interact with students through discussion, guidance, and solving problems to encourage students to engage in higher-order thinking (Kim et al., 2014).

The proponents of the flipped classroom indicate that this instructional model provides many advantages. For instance, in the flipped classroom, the active learning and cultivation of students’ learning attitudes may be realized; the class time is freed up for more meaningful activities, such as discussion and solving problems (Lai & Hwang, 2016); students may be more satisfied with the flipped model (Gökçe & Murat, 2018); teachers may be able to cultivate the critical and independent thoughts in their students (O’Flaherty & Phillips, 2015); there may be a positive impact on students’ achievement (Rahman et al., 2014). While other studies pay attention to the challenges and limitations. Students with lower self-regulation may learn little before class time, so they might be unable to engage in class activities (Rahman et al., 2015). Conversely, self-regulated students can improve their self-efficacy, thus further improving their learning achievements (Lai & Hwang, 2016). Another limitation is that teachers need more additional time to redesign the class to be a flipped classroom, and the loud and multitasking learning environment and even IT issues could occasionally be challenges (Schlairet et al., 2014). Studies indicate that the flipped classroom has both advantages and limitations. However, when this model comes to Asian countries (e.g., China), some other challenges are emerging.

Asian students are more passive in expressing their opinions in class because of cultural values, including face-saving, respect for teacher authority, and maintaining harmony (Wang, 2015). Students getting used to traditional instruction need more time to adjust to this new model because of the different learning environments (Lee, 2018). Moreover, foreign language anxiety affects students’ attitudes and emotions (Tran et al., 2013) and leads to reticence and silence (Cunningham, 2014; Mak, 2011). Since

student-centered learning and in-class interaction is the key to the flipped classroom, silence could be a significant challenge in this flipped model in Asian countries. However, to date, a limited number of studies have drawn attention to the challenges of flipped classrooms in Asian countries.

To summarize this section, the literature on the flipped classroom indicates the importance of student-centered learning and the opportunities and limitations of flipping the class. Although many Western scholars have elaborated on the advantages and disadvantages of flipped classrooms, further research is needed on whether this model can better improve the learning for Asian students, including Chinese students. This study focuses on one of the challenges in flipped classroom: silence. It tries to help better and deeper understand this phenomenon and figure out solutions. The present research may help fill the gap and improve the development of this model and the combination of Chinese learning environment and it.

2.2 Classroom silence

In the Oxford dictionary, silence means “a complete lack of noise or sound; a situation when nobody is speaking; a situation in which somebody refuses to talk about something or to answer questions; a situation in which people do not communicate with each other by letter or telephone.” White and Smith (1996) defined *classroom silence* as the absence of talk, which means the limited or lack of participation in classroom interaction. White (1996, p37) has also provided a concrete definition of it: “limited participation or lack of participation during classroom interaction.” Petress (2001) suggested that classroom silence is not just because students refuse or cannot answer questions and communicate in the classroom. He believed that everyone needs to discuss with others, which is crucial for successful education to transpire in the classroom. Regarding the statements above, silence means that students cannot talk or express their ideas in front of their teachers and other students.

Since classroom silence is expected and unavoidable in classroom teaching, scholars at home and abroad have conducted numerous studies on this phenomenon from different perspectives and methods. Some suggested that classroom silence is regarded as a main hindrance to language learning. It is believed that classroom silence is harmful because it will inhibit the learners from reaching the expected learning outcomes and achieving fruitful results (Udhayashankar, 2019). On the contrary, other scholars believe that classroom silence has a positive effect and that silence is “a process of creating meaning” (Eva & Jorunn, 2003) and can make teachers and students calm down and absorb previous events (Ollin, 2008).

2.3 Factors Resulting in Classroom Silence

Research conducted by foreign scholars has revealed various reasons for classroom silence, such as teachers' teaching ideas and methods, students' personalities, and psychological factors (Hanh, 2020). Through the research on classroom silence at home, it is believed that cultural differences are also an essential factor (Martin & Jin, 1996). Influenced by the Confucian culture, Chinese students are more respectful of teachers, adoring the teachers' authority with no preconditions. They must comply with requirements without questions (Bush & Qiang, 2013). They are too modest to challenge the authority, and they do not take the initiative to express their views because they are afraid of being labeled as showing off. They avoid answering questions because they fear making mistakes and losing face (Judy & Crookall, 1995). In addition, Liu and William (1997) believe that Chinese students are more accustomed to the teacher-centered teaching method or the lecture-type teaching method. In previous studies, researchers mainly focused on traditional classrooms, while few scholars studied the phenomenon of silence in flipped classroom, which is a novel and rapidly developing model.

In the study of English classrooms in Asian countries, students keep silent because of personality (Xie, 2006), cultural influences, and anxiety in speaking English (Harumi, 2011). Kubota (1999) found that oriental culture emphasizes collectivism and does not encourage self-expression, creativity, and critical thinking. Tsui (1996) and Yang & Stacey (2003) have pointed out that students' classroom silence is mainly related to anxiety caused by insufficient oral ability. Most of the current studies focus on classroom silence in non-English classrooms, while few have studied the reasons for students' silence in English classrooms, except researchers from East Asian countries (Kim, 2016; Zhou, 2005).

Based on the limitations of previous studies, it is necessary to investigate classroom silence in this study further. Flipped classroom has been developing rapidly under educational informationization, so it is important to study English majors' silence in flipped classrooms and propose corresponding countermeasures.

2.4 Strategies to Release Silence Phenomenon

In the research of Kurt and Moore (2003), they found that appropriate material rewards can significantly improve students' participation in the classroom. To a certain extent, classroom silence can be alleviated.

In order to promote students' participation and interaction in the classroom, Christa and Eisenmann (2009) also conducted related research. Their research results show that in the computer-mediated communication environment, students are more active in participating in discussions than in face-to-face classroom discussions. Therefore, utilizing information technology is also helpful in solving the problem of classroom silence.

Search (Baghcheghi et al., 2012) reported the effectiveness of collaborative learning in breaking classroom silence and found that collaborative learning can not only improve students' classroom involvement but also affect their learning attitude and cooperative consciousness. Cooperation is an effective way to break the classroom silence.

From the perspective of teachers, Scholars gave more specific suggestions. First of all, teachers need to lay down their authority correctly and establish a good relationship with students (Shan, 2020), which can make students dare to express their views and show themselves in class. Second, creating situational questions and activities (Shan, 2020) can stimulate students' willingness to communicate (WTO) in class. Lastly, teachers should optimize teaching ideas and improve how they evaluate students.

In previous studies, the researchers mainly focused on classroom silence in traditional classroom. In terms of methods, they mainly used questionnaire surveys, classroom observation, case analysis, etc. Researchers put forward different suggestions according to the research results, including promoting cooperative learning, adopting situational teaching, using computer-assisted teaching (CAT), etc. In short, previous researchers have provided us with scientific methods and conclusions for further exploration of classroom silence.

The qualitative approach was used in this study to address the question, "What are the reasons that cause English majors to be silent in flipped classrooms?" The findings will contribute to exploring perspectives not covered in previous studies, which will promote the applicability of the flipped classroom in Asian cultures. Furthermore, it could optimize the practice of flipping the classroom by offering solid evidence to policymakers to understand the current situation better and offer advice to improve its developments.

3. Method

Given that the flipped classroom has been widely practiced and can be tested by qualitative research methods, this study chose to use interviews to gain insight into students' attitudes, thoughts, and perceptions about classroom silence in flipped classrooms. Qualitative research can only help us to have a general understanding of the related causes. In contrast, qualitative research, such as interviews, can provide more profound and comprehensible reasons through face-to-face conversation. Compared with quantitative studies, qualitative research allows researchers to gather detailed and in-depth information and figure out the interconnectedness of this information (Tondeur et al., 2013). As proposed by Strauss & Corbin (1998), qualitative research offers fresh insights into well-known research topics, while open-ended questions can help uncover fresh information, thus broadening our understanding of them (Hoepfl, 1997).

3.1 Settings

Different from previous studies focusing on traditional classroom silence, this research mainly involves English majors in flipped classrooms in a university. Compared with the traditional EFL classroom, the EFL flipped classroom emphasizes teacher-student interaction and students' self-study ability. Therefore, the silence phenomenon in the EFL flipped classroom deserves discussing and studying. Although they are all English majors, students' personalities (Hanh, 2020), language proficiency (LP), and teachers' teaching styles also affect whether the classroom is silent. Therefore, students from different majors in English must be involved. The research results will provide ideas for the further improvement of the flipped classroom in China and promote the integration of this flipped model and English teaching.

3.2 Participants

Fourteen students were deliberately selected after careful consideration. To begin with, the chosen participants were from MTI (Translation and Interpreting), foreign linguistics and applied linguistics, English literature, and English teaching majors. Secondly, the participants differed depending on several individual elements, including gender, English proficiency, and experience in flipped classrooms. An array of answers would more accurately represent students' perspectives. Table 1 provides details of the participants (pseudonyms are employed to guarantee their confidentiality).

Table 1: Demographic Information of Participating Students.

Participants	Gender	Grade	Major	Flipped Classroom Experience	Activities	Interview Type
C	Female	2 th year of master	Foreign linguistics and applied linguistics	2 courses	Presenation and discussion	Online
D	Female	2 th year of master	English literature	2 courses	Discussion	Face-to-face
E	Female	2 th year of master	English teaching	3 courses	Presenation and discussion	Face-to-face
F	Female	2 th year of master	Foreign linguistics and applied linguistics	1 course	Discussion	Face-to-face
G	Male	1 st year of master	Translation	3 courses	Presentation and discussion	Face-to-face
H	Female	1 st year of master	Interpreting	1 course	Discussion	Face-to-face
K	Female	1 st year of master	English teaching	1 course	Trial lectures and discussion	Face-to-face
L	Female	1 st year of master	Foreign linguistics and applied linguistics	2 courses	Presentation and discussion	Face-to-face
P	Female	1 st year of master	Foreign linguistics and applied linguistics	2 courses	Presentation and discussion	Online
Q	Female	1 st year of master	English teaching	1 course	Trial lectures and discussion	Face-to-face
S	Male	1 st year of master	Interpreting	3 courses	Presentation and discussion	Face-to-face
X	Female	1 st year of master	English teaching	2 courses	Trial lectures and discussion	Face-to-face
Y	Female	1 st year of master	English teaching	1 course	Trial lectures and discussion	Face-to-face
Z	Male	1 st year of master	Interpreting	3 courses	Presentation and discussion	Face-to-face

3.3 Instrument and Data Collection

The semi-structured interviews were carried out one-on-one, adhering to the questions outlined in the Appendix. Except for two students from foreign linguistics and applied linguistics major, all interviews were conducted face-to-face. The participants who were not interviewed in person were interviewed using WeChat (an online app with audio and video capabilities) owing to their willingness. All the interviews, whether in person or on WeChat, were recorded and transcribed for further analysis.

In general, the duration of interviews was about 20 minutes, whereas some face-to-face interviews lasted approximately 30 minutes. The participants provided informed consent for the recording of interviews. The researcher employed online communication applications (e.g., WeChat) to give the participants an overview of the study, such as the aim of the study, the use of the pseudonym, and their right to discontinue participation at any point in the study. All the interviews were conducted within one month. The research purposes and procedures were fully disseminated.

3.4 Data Analysis

Data analysis was based on grounded theory, which offers systematic procedures to help identify categories and the links between them (Urquhart, 2012). Firstly, the coding process follows an inductive approach and involves constructing a theory by analyzing the data. The researcher adhered to the process proposed by Creswell (2009) and Strauss and Corbin (1998), which included open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. It commenced by gathering data using a set of questions. Then, the researcher reviewed the data and classified the recurring concepts (open coding). For instance, if participants continually talked about cultural influences, every time one of them mentioned it or any related aspect, “cultural influences” would be a concept, and “teacher authority” and “conformity” would become categories. The author carefully checked each line of the interview transcripts and used different colors to differentiate between concepts and categories. Throughout the procedure, a set of codes appeared, representing concepts that subsequently be part of the theory.

Qualitative analysis is employed to develop codes derived from meaningful statements in all 14 transcripts. The author went over the data again and checked the code to ensure that the concepts and categories correctly reflected interview responses and also to investigate how they were related (axial coding). For example, conformity was initially considered as students’ personal reasons because the author considered it as the psychological difference of individuals since one who focused on a fundamental foundation of their self-worth, such as a self-attribute, were less likely to conform later to others’ opinions than were control condition participants or those who focused on an external source of self-esteem, such as an achievement (Arndt et al., 2002). However, the author found that the conformity phenomenon mainly occurred in collectivist countries (Bond & Smith, 1996) and East Asian countries (Kim & Markus, 1999), influenced by cultural factors. Therefore, conformity was included in the concept of “cultural influences.”

Moreover, since categories only provide a description of the data, they must be further combined to construct the theory (O’Connor, 2012). In the final step of the integration and refinement of the theory (selective coding), the researcher pinpointed the “core” category that all other categories need to be related to. Through constant verification and comparisons, the long list of codes was condensed into a reduced quantity. As some codes did not meet the criteria of being thorough and attuned to the data or reflecting the research purposes, they were excluded due to their lack of high relevance to this study. The coding process is illustrated in Figure 1.

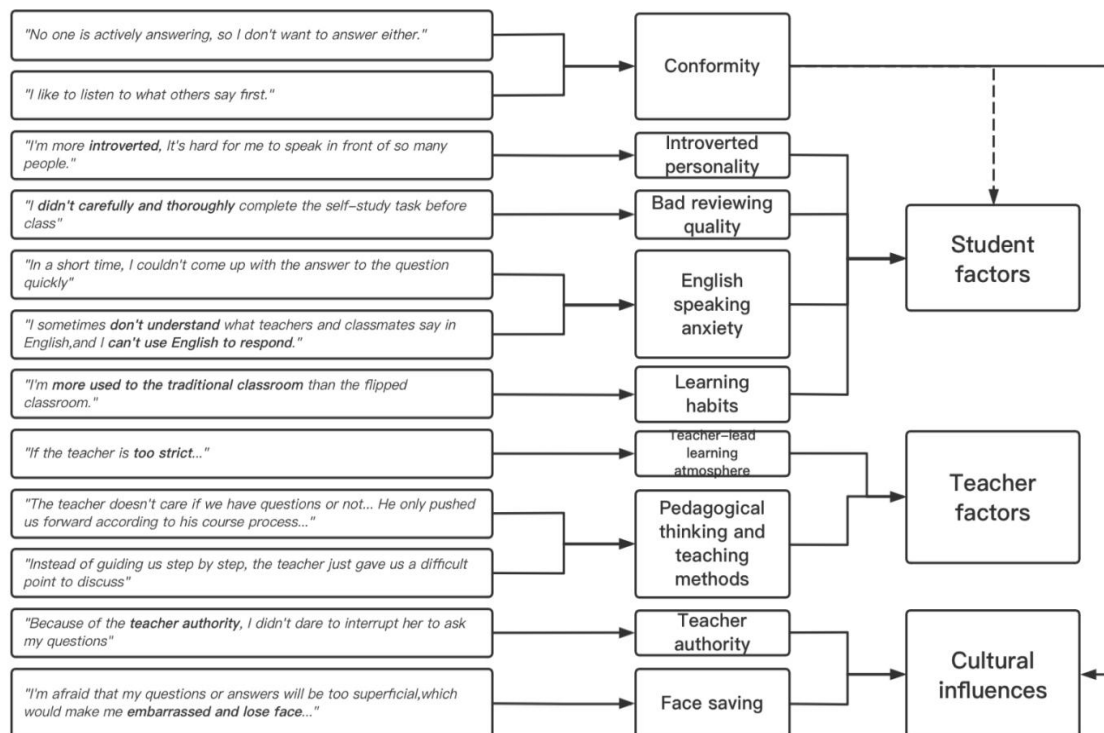


Figure 1: Example of coding process.

Solid lines denote final codes, while dotted lines indicate initial codes.

The author's dual identity as a researcher and an English major who has experienced flipped classrooms resonated during the interviews. Moreover, this also helped the researcher and participants to get closer. Moreover, the author kept refraining from discussing any theories with participants. In addition, the author checked all the recordings and transcripts, leaving no bias in the research materials. Before analyzing the data, all the transcriptions were distributed to the interviewees to guarantee the correctness of the original recordings (Morse et al., 2002).

4. Findings

4.1 Individual Factors of Students Causing Silence

4.1.1 Introverted personality

In their answers, the interviewees revealed that personality is one of the reasons why they keep silent in class. Introverted students feel shy about expressing their thoughts to teachers and classmates, so they are unwilling to participate in classroom interaction actively. On the contrary, extroverted students will be self-motivated to ask questions and discuss with teachers and classmates, trying to become icebreakers. For example,

For so many people in the class, I do not want to say my thoughts, nor will I ask the teacher questions on my initiative, because I feel shy and embarrassed. My personality is very introverted and quiet. I am only willing to discuss with people I know well. At the same time, other students answered questions very actively. (From Student Q)

I have an introverted personality. Usually, I do not like to talk. In the class, I am more reluctant to do that. (From Student C)

4.1.2 Bad reviewing quality

From the interview data, students' learning consciousness is a crucial reason that causes their silence in the flipped classroom. Flipped classroom emphasizes the flexibility and autonomy of learning and is student-centered. In language teaching, many teachers scaffold students towards independence using strategies to help them become autonomous (Masouleh & Jooneghai, 2012). However, our interviewees said that their self-study efficiency and quality were not high, mainly because they were not interested in the course content and also because of their laziness and habits of traditional learning. For example,

When studying online, I sometimes unconsciously neglect some learning contents because of my own interest orientation, so my self-study is not comprehensive enough. (From Student G)

Only through preview and self-study online before the class can I know where I have questions. However, I may be lazy, so I will not learn some knowledge points carefully. I just wait for a few minutes before class to quickly browse the content. (From Student Q)

In my opinion, although the teacher would ask us to preview and learn by ourselves, he wouldn't check whether we did and would teach as usual during the class, so I am not so serious about self-study. (From Student K)

4.1.3 English speaking anxiety

As all the courses are taught in English, students must have high LP. They need to organize their answers within a specific time and present them to teachers and other classmates in English. Some of them can not actively participate in classroom interaction owing to their less confidence in their vocabulary and spoken English, which leads to anxiety in speaking English. Moreover, they often care too much about the accuracy but not the fluency. For example,

Because I am an interdisciplinary student who studied business before. For the first time, I was exposed to this teaching model (flipped classroom) and had my first course that is taught in English, so I might not understand the teacher's questions, or I might not think of an answer for a while. After all, the conversion between the two languages is not something that I can master in a day. Communication in English will limit my classroom interaction. If I were to speak in Chinese, I would probably play better, and I would not be afraid to express my views. (From Student Y)

English ability is also a reason that makes me unable to answer questions and discuss. For example, when a teacher asks me a question, I may organize many kinds of answers in my mother tongue, but I lack English vocabulary, so I may not be able to organize a complete sentence in English to answer the teacher's questions. In this case, I will not answer his questions. (From Student L)

Although I may not be completely able to understand what the teacher said, this kind of all-English communication environment makes me not adapt to it. It makes me afraid of what to do if I can't answer well in all English, which will greatly affect my participation in the classroom. (From Student Z)

4.1.4 Learning habits

Besides, students still need to adapt to the flipped classroom. As students are the center of this model, they need to engage in self-study and be proactive in classroom interactions fully. However, Chinese students from Confucian heritage culture (CHC) are typically passive, and they are used to keeping silent and accepting the knowledge imparted by teachers (Tran, 2013). Therefore, their failure to adapt to this model, as well as the habit of traditional learning, make them less actively involved in classroom interactions. For example,

I want to wait for the teacher to teach in class because I prefer the traditional classroom form. (From Student Q)

I think we used to only listen to teachers in class, but now, with the development of education, this new model (flipped classroom) forces us to become more active in classroom interaction, but I'm still not used to it. (From Student X)

Also, some students like to study by themselves more. They like to search Online for more information and learning techniques, and group work such as discussion will not make them more involved in learning and improve efficiency. They believe that studying alone works better. The following quotes elaborate this perspective:

I like to study by myself, and independent learning is more suitable for me. If I have a problem, I prefer to look up information Online myself. Even if there are problems that cannot be solved, I usually do not ask the teacher in class. I will ask my familiar friends after class. (From Student E)

An interesting finding was that the interviewees did not reject the flipped classroom. On the contrary, they agreed with the positive effect of it on their learning and are willing to try to adapt.

I think the form of flipped classroom is good, which enables me to better understand the learning content of this lesson and think deeply. (From Student G)

I think flipped classroom allows us to learn by ourselves and discuss with classmates and teachers. I can learn more knowledge and have more ideas. Although preparing for the flipped classroom will take me more time, it's good to learn more knowledge. (From Student L)

4.2 Teacher Factors Leading to Silence in Flipped Classroom

4.2.1 Teacher-lead learning atmosphere

Our participants all believed that the teacher-lead learning atmosphere can affect their participation in classroom interaction, and they agreed that this is a fundamental reason. Prior researchers have reported that aloofness and insensitivity to student needs are negative teacher qualities. (John, 1986). Moreover, our data aligns with these conclusions. The severe attitude of teachers when asking questions and discussing with students and their aloofness towards students create a teacher-lead learning atmosphere in the classroom, which will be the reasons for affecting students' enthusiasm for interaction. A more cordial and humorous teacher who encourages students and tolerates their mistakes may further promote students' WTO. The following quotes elaborate this perspective:

When I have questions, if the teacher has a mild attitude, I will take the initiative to ask him. But if the teacher is too serious, I may be unwilling or afraid to interact with him in class because of his attitude. (From Student Q)

The teacher's attitude will greatly affect my enthusiasm for asking questions. Because if the teacher is aloof or serious, I will worry about whether the questions I ask are too simple,

and whether the teacher will blame me for not having prepared well. (From Student G)

4.2.2 Pedagogical thinking and teaching methods

In addition, according to the participants, teachers' teaching styles also directly or indirectly affect their willingness to participate in classroom interaction. Although flipped classroom has developed for more than ten years in China, it does not mean that Chinese teachers have adapted to this relatively new instructional model. The teachers organize the classroom in the form of a flipped classroom. However, in the actual implementation, they still ignore the importance of classroom interaction when designing teaching and unconsciously lead the classroom. The quotes below illustrate each of these:

The teacher doesn't care whether we really have problems in online and offline classes. Sometimes she asks us if we have any questions. But, if we don't talk, she doesn't persist in finding our confusion and just continues to teach the content according to her schedule. Therefore, we feel that it doesn't matter if we don't ask questions, so we won't do that in class. (From Student L)

The teacher only made comments and explanations based on our self-study, instead of expanding and deepening our study, so we felt that we had been standing still, which made us very depressed. Moreover, his enthusiasm for classroom interaction is very low, resulting in a negative impact on our willingness to interact. (From Student S)

We thought that the teacher would lead us to do a lot of discussion and practice, but he only showed us some ppts in class, which led us to still be vague about the content of this lesson, and our enthusiasm for interaction also decreased. (From Student G)

In class discussion, the teacher often only gives us a difficult knowledge point to discuss in groups, instead of asking some guiding questions step by step, which makes it difficult for us to do well. (From Student H)

4.3 Cultural factors influencing students' participation in classroom interaction

4.3.1 Teacher authority

Influenced by Confucian culture, East Asian countries, especially China, emphasize the authority of teachers, so students are more respectful of teachers. The students think it is impolite to interrupt the teacher, so they often dare not ask questions in class because of the teacher's authority. The reason for teacher authority has been proven to cause students' silence in the traditional classroom (Zhouyuan, 2016). This phenomenon has also emerged in the flipped classroom. For example,

Because of the fear of teachers' authority, I would rather communicate and discuss with my classmates after class than ask questions to teachers in class. (From Student K)

4.3.2 Face-saving

Many students worry that their questions are straightforward or that they lose face when speaking in front of others when unsure about the answers. Influenced by culture, Chinese students are afraid of making mistakes and losing face (Judy & Crookall, 1995), which causes them to be silent in class. The following quotes illustrate this:

In class, I don't want to be embarrassed by mistakes. I will worry that my questions will make the teacher think I am not well prepared and leave a bad impression on the teacher, or that my answers will make me lose face with my classmates. (From Student Y)

Other students may have understood a certain knowledge point, but only if I did not understand and asked questions, the teacher would think that I did not listen carefully or my understanding ability was insufficient, which would leave a bad impression on the teacher. (From Student L)

4.3.3 Conformity

Conformity is also an essential reason respondents believe leads to their silence in the classroom. Students change their thoughts and behaviors to match the responses of others because individuals usually try to gain the social approval of others and build beneficial relationships with them. Through this procedure, they can improve their self-esteem (Arndt et al., 2002). As a result, some students are reluctant to present themselves too much in class or even avoid participating in classroom interactions. For example,

I see that no one else is talking, then I won't take the initiative to ask or answer. (From Student K)

I don't want to show myself in front of others. I prefer to ask questions that I don't understand after class, because no one else asks questions, only I say, which will make others think that I love to show off. (From Student L)

No one else answered. I don't want to be the first one to answer, because it will make people think that I like to show off my knowledge. (From Student Q)

In summary, students have a positive attitude toward flipped classrooms. However, their self-study consciousness, personality traits, LP, and inadaptability hinder their classroom interaction. Furthermore, the teacher's personality, teaching ideas and methods are why students remain silent in the classroom. In addition, the influence of traditional Chinese culture also directly or indirectly leads students to avoid interaction.

5. Discussion

This study investigated the reasons for English postgraduates' silence in the flipped classroom. Generally, their silence in this flipped model is caused by many reasons. The interview data generated three themes: student factors, teacher factors, and cultural influences.

In line with previous research (Hanh, 2020) on traditional classrooms, this study suggested the impact of students' personality characteristics on classroom interaction. Students with introverted personality find it difficult to participate in classroom interaction actively. Unlike the traditional classroom, the flipped classroom is a student-centered, personalized classroom, which requires students to study independently and actively participate in the classroom. This study suggested that students' self-study consciousness affects their self-study quality and their interaction enthusiasm in the classroom. Besides, anxiety in speaking English is also an obstacle to students' classroom interaction (Harumi, 2011), further confirmed by this study. Due to the differences in English proficiency, the lack of vocabulary and confidence in oral English ability will cause students' anxiety in the foreign language classroom, leading to classroom silence. In addition, with the rapid development of education, new instructional models emerge endlessly. However, Chinese students are more accustomed to the traditional teacher-centered classroom and rely on teachers to impart knowledge. However, the lecturing teaching mode has apparent deficiencies in promoting students' development of critical thinking and improving their communication ability (Nilson, 2016). Students have been in a passive position for a long time (Tran, 2013), so they are used to keeping silent and unwilling to interact in the new model of the flipped classroom actively.

As a participant in classroom interaction, teachers are an essential factor influencing students' classroom interaction. Based on research, John (1986) found that teachers with the employment of humor, the ability to communicate, and valid testing techniques are more effective in class. Moreover, teachers' respect for students is directly proportional to students' participation. Therefore, teachers' personality characteristics play an important role in students' classroom interaction. Consistent with her findings, teachers' attitudes and level of respect for students in the classroom also influence students' motivation to interact. Besides, in the research on traditional classrooms, scholars suggested that the lecture-type teaching method is still prevalent. The teacher-student relationship is not a two-way one in which discussions occur, but like a one-way one in which knowledge is imparted. Students are often regarded as passive and more compliant and obedient, absorbing knowledge rather than understanding it. (Tran, 2013). Our research further proves this. Although teachers volitionally or non-volitionally implement flipping the classroom, their teaching concepts and methods are still based on traditional teaching forms, which makes students less active in participating in classroom interaction. Students expect more guided questions and equal discussion.

The students in this study exhibited different perceptions (e.g., conformity and face-saving) due to the influence of Eastern cultures, including Chinese culture. They remain silent when no one is speaking and are afraid to make mistakes in class (Judy & Crookall, 1995). While in flipped teaching and communicative approach, there is an emphasis placed on student initiative and interaction rather than simply on teacher-centered direction (Anderson, 1993). Through discussion and interaction, students' understanding will be facilitated. Therefore, silence caused by conformity and face-saving not only hinders flipped learning but also foreign language teaching. In addition, the Chinese Confucian culture emphasizes respect for teachers and their authority. The participants in this study also mentioned their respect for teachers and even their fear of teacher authority as reasons that prevented them from asking

questions.

6. Limitations

Since all the participants are English majors from a Chinese university, the small scope limits this study. Therefore, the findings need to be more inclusive, and informants in this study may have omitted certain contextual factors. Consequently, further inquiries are needed to grasp more profound perceptions of English majors on the flipped classroom and the reasons affecting their classroom interactions by involving more participants from different grades and universities. In addition, it could be beneficial to interview teachers, as they are an integral part of classroom interaction and one of the reasons for students' silence.

7. Conclusion

This study contributes to a more profound understanding of the current state of development of flipped classrooms in China and the existing problems by identifying and interpreting the reasons for the silence of English majors in this model.

As the flipped classroom is a new instructional model introduced into China from the United States, its effect in practice in China will be affected by Chinese culture and concepts. This research explored the existing classroom silence phenomenon in flipped classrooms, which is different from traditional classrooms, by profoundly understanding students' views on flipped classrooms and the reasons that hinder their participation in classroom interactions. Therefore, combining flipped classrooms and the current pedagogy in China is the key to helping this new model to integrate into the Chinese instructional environment more quickly. At the same time, the application of flipping the class needs to be appropriately adapted to the actual situation of the students.

In practice, this study proposed that there is an urgent need to cultivate students' self-study consciousness so as to improve the quality of their self-study before class and enhance their initiative in classroom interaction. Through combining the findings of previous studies and the present study, a good classroom atmosphere is important. Although respecting and honoring teachers is essential in Chinese education, to keep up with the times and embrace new modes of education, teachers should let go of their authority appropriately. By encouraging students and tolerating their mistakes, teachers build confidence for students to ease their anxiety in speaking English and enhance their motivation to participate in classroom interaction. In addition, the interviews highlighted the importance for Chinese teachers to encourage students to participate in the classroom. Teachers can make students engage in collaborative learning and actively participate in classroom interactions with the help and support of their peers rather than sticking to the lecture style of teaching. The integration of the new educational model with China's old educational traditions is not complex issue. Changes should be made in order to achieve a better combination.

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Appendix

Interview Protocol

- 1) Basic information: What is your major? Your grade? Your flipped classroom experiences? Tell us about your experience in the flipped classroom. How has it been?
- 2) Do you often ask or answer questions and actively participate in discussions?
- 3) What are the worries or concerns preventing your intention to participate in classrooms? Do you have any specific examples you would like to share?
- 4) Do you have any suggestions on teachers' implementation of flipped classrooms?