

Exploring factors influencing student silence in EFL classes: A case study at an Indonesian vocational high school

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ABSTRACT

Research on student silence in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms has become increasingly important in language learning environments worldwide. This study investigates the factors contributing to student silence in EFL classes at a vocational high school in Indonesia. The research focused on students in an 11th-grade class, adopting a qualitative approach to explore the experiences of silent students. The study was conducted in two stages: observation and interviews. In the initial observation phase, the researcher examined classroom conditions during EFL lessons to identify students who frequently remained silent. Following this, an interview phase was conducted with six students who often displayed silent behavior. Pre-prepared questions were used to gather insights into their perspectives on class participation and the challenges they faced in engaging actively. The findings revealed several factors that contribute to student silence in EFL classes, including anxiety, limited language proficiency, low self-confidence, lack of motivation, and introverted personality traits. Additionally, students reported experiencing difficulties related to understanding the material, maintaining focus, and speaking in class. The study also identified common activities among silent students, such as engaging in side conversations, doodling, using mobile phones, listening to the teacher, reading textbooks, and taking notes. In conclusion, this study provides valuable insights into the phenomenon of student silence in EFL classrooms, highlighting several factors that may hinder student participation. These findings could inform strategies for improving the quality of teaching and learning in EFL settings, with a particular focus on supporting silent students.



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1. Introduction

In the realm of education, numerous phenomena warrant careful attention, one of which is the phenomenon of student silence in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classes. While silence in the classroom can be perceived as a normal occurrence, it can also pose challenges to the teaching and learning process. Classroom silence may sometimes be beneficial, fostering reflection and self-assessment; however, it can also indicate underlying issues that hinder engagement.

This raises critical questions regarding the factors contributing to student silence during EFL classes. Based on preliminary observations, two predominant causes appear to be poor interaction and inadequate communication within the classroom, which may serve as fundamental contributors to this phenomenon.

The researcher has chosen to investigate student silence in EFL classes due to the limited exploration of this issue in existing literature. Additionally, there is a desire to uncover the specific factors leading to student silence in this context. Studying student silence in EFL classes is crucial, given that students are generally expected to be active participants in the learning process. Zafarina (2022) identifies several reasons for student silence, highlighting that a lack of self-confidence and inadequate English competence are two significant challenges in this regard.

From the researcher's personal experience, student silence often stems from individual understandings and characteristics, with many students preferring silence during learning activities. In this context, Korol (2022) posits that silence provides students with an opportunity to introspect and engage with their surroundings. This introspection is particularly beneficial when students are empowered to set their own learning goals, select their preferred methods, and create varied outputs throughout the learning process. Fjeld (2022) further suggests that silence can be interpreted as a psychological break from verbal engagement, indicating that students have their own motivations for remaining silent in EFL classes.

Conversely, Huynh and Adams (2022) observe that teachers experience silence differently; it can be seen as an opportunity for reflection, a sign of uncertainty, or a deliberate disengagement. It is essential for EFL teachers to recognize these nuances, as they play a pivotal role in addressing the phenomenon of student silence. Smith and King (2018) argue that educators must cultivate a motivating atmosphere to encourage student participation in the learning process.

The issue of student silence in EFL classes cannot be overlooked. Shachter (2022) emphasizes that when silence arises in educational settings, it should be addressed promptly and effectively. Consequently, this issue warrants further research to identify solutions that can mitigate its negative impacts.

Given these considerations, the researcher is motivated to explore the phenomenon of student silence in EFL classes, particularly because it remains underrepresented in academic discourse. The researcher is also deeply curious about this phenomenon and its implications. Maher (2021) notes that silence can be advantageous for certain students, particularly those who place significant value on silence in relation to their language proficiency. Therefore, any investigation or intervention must be approached with sensitivity. With this understanding, the researcher aims to conduct the study with careful consideration, striving to achieve meaningful results that contribute positively to the field of education.

Several previous studies are pertinent to this preliminary investigation. The first study by Saylag (2014) suggests that while the phenomenon of silence in the classroom may pose challenges, it can also provide advantages for student learning. In particular, students require moments of silence to reflect on what they have learned. It is inherent to human nature to pause for thought before taking action or expressing opinions. In the context of language learning, learners can leverage these moments of silence when appropriate methodologies are employed. The second study conducted by Hanh (2020) identifies various factors contributing to silence in the classroom, including linguistic and psychological elements, as well as additional impersonal factors. Linguistically, a lack of vocabulary, poor pronunciation, ungrammatical expressions, and low proficiency levels are significant reasons students may choose to remain silent. Psychologically, barriers such as lack of confidence, shyness, and the fear of losing face or sounding foolish in front of peers and instructors also inhibit oral participation.

Another study by Zafarina (2022) highlights several reasons for silence in EFL classrooms: (1) lack of confidence in answering oral questions, (2) the belief that learning English is difficult, (3) hesitation to speak in front of others, (4) varying levels of language proficiency, and (5) fear of making mistakes and being ridiculed by classmates or judged by the teacher. In this context, the dual issues of lack of self-confidence and inadequate English competence emerge as primary concerns. Meanwhile, Faizin et al. (2022) presents an intriguing perspective: the silence exhibited by Indonesian students does not indicate a deficiency in cognitive development but rather reflects a different mode

of participation in the classroom. Many students reported feeling more comfortable expressing their thoughts in writing than verbally.

Lastly, the research conducted by Purwanti and Yeni (2021) underscores that shyness, categorized as a psychological factor, is a significant contributor to student silence in speaking classes. This factor exacerbates other issues, including lack of confidence, anxiety, low motivation, and fear of making mistakes. This study distinguishes itself by employing a qualitative approach, contrasting with many previous studies that utilized mixed-methods approaches involving questionnaires and interviews. The decision to utilize observation and interviews is grounded in the belief that these methods are more suitable for capturing the complexities of the phenomenon. By employing these techniques, the researcher aims to obtain more valid and nuanced data.

2. Methods

This study employs a qualitative research design to explore the phenomenon of student silence in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classes. Qualitative research is particularly effective for understanding complex social phenomena and capturing participants' perspectives (Hancock et al., 2009; Creswell & Poth, 2018). By focusing on the lived experiences of students, this research aims to provide in-depth insights into the factors influencing student silence.

2.1. Data Collection

Data collection for this study began with classroom observations, followed by interviews with selected students. This two-step approach allows for a comprehensive understanding of the context in which student silence occurs, as well as the perspectives of students who demonstrate silent behavior.

1) Classroom Observations

Observations were conducted in several EFL classrooms at an Indonesian vocational high school. The researcher utilized a structured observation checklist to record instances of student silence, participation levels, and classroom interactions (Fraenkel, Wallen, & Hyun, 2019). This approach facilitated the identification of patterns and contextual factors associated with student silence in real-time settings.

2) Semi-Structured Interviews

Following the observations, semi-structured interviews were conducted with six students who exhibited silent behavior during class. This method allowed for flexibility in exploring the students' experiences and perceptions regarding their silence (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). The interviews included open-ended questions designed to elicit detailed responses about the factors contributing to their silence and any strategies they felt could encourage participation. The interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and subsequently transcribed for analysis.

2.2. Participants

The study involved a purposive sampling technique to select the six students who displayed notable silent behavior during classroom observations. This targeted approach ensured that the interviews provided rich and relevant data about the phenomenon of student silence.

2.3. Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was employed to analyze the data collected from observations and interviews. This method involved identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analysis process included familiarization with the data, coding, theme development, and refining themes, ensuring that the findings were grounded in the participants' experiences.

3. Findings and Discussion

In this section, the researcher presents the findings of the study, starting with observations conducted prior to interviews. Observation was the initial step taken in this research to investigate student silence in EFL (English as a Foreign Language) classrooms. The researcher conducted open, direct observations of class XI PM3, identified as one of the less active or quietest classes during English lessons. These observations, lasting approximately one hour, were documented with video recordings and were conducted on February 15, 2023.

The researcher observed all 36 students in class XI PM3. Prior to the observation, a discussion with one of the English teachers helped identify class XI PM3 as the most passive and silent class among the English classes at the school. Based on this recommendation, the researcher selected this class for observation.

The results of the observation indicated that 64% of the students remained silent and passively listened during the lesson, while only 36% actively engaged and spoke during the learning process. This suggests that the majority of students in the class tended to be passive or silent during English learning activities.

Several factors appeared to contribute to this classroom silence. First, the students seemed more inclined to listen than to actively participate, which may reflect a preference for passive learning. Additionally, a lack of English proficiency among many students was observed, as evidenced by their inability to answer questions posed by the teacher. Some students also appeared to pay limited attention to the teacher's explanations, possibly due to a lack of interest in learning English, which in turn points to low motivation to engage in EFL activities.

The researcher also noted other behaviors related to student silence. Some students who remained silent occasionally engaged in unrelated activities, such as chatting with classmates, doodling, or using their cell phones. These behaviors further underscore the students' lack of engagement and motivation in participating actively in the lesson.

3.1. Factors Contributing to Student Silence

This section presents the findings on factors contributing to student silence, difficulties faced by students, and activities engaged in by silent students during EFL classes at an Indonesian Vocational High School, specifically in class XI PM 3. Based on student interviews, the researcher identified five primary factors contributing to student silence: anxiety, lack of English proficiency, lack of confidence, lack of motivation, and introverted personality.

1) Anxiety

Anxiety emerged as a significant factor contributing to student silence, with two respondents highlighting this issue during interviews. Students reported feeling insecure about their language skills and fearful of negative judgments from others. For instance, Respondent B shared,

"I feel unsure of myself, especially when answering questions. I am afraid that I will be wrong" (Respondent B, February 17, 2023, translated by the researcher).

Similarly, Respondent E stated,

"I often feel afraid or anxious if I want to speak, let alone answer questions from the teacher, because I cannot speak English" (Respondent E, February 22, 2023, translated by the researcher).

These statements reveal how fear of negative judgment and self-perceived inadequacy can lead to silence in the classroom. As noted by Curry, Maher, and Peeters (2020), anxiety among language learners often leads to negative thoughts, such as fear of making mistakes or missing opportunities for practice. Gregersen and Horwitz (2002) further emphasize that anxious students may avoid speaking to prevent showing a perceived lack of competence. Additionally, anxiety can stem from emotional instability (Masturah et al., 2021) and heightened self-awareness, which can hinder students' engagement in class (King, 2013; Tang et al., 2020).

2) Lack of English Proficiency

Limited English proficiency was another key factor influencing students' silence. Many students lacked confidence in their grammar and vocabulary, making it difficult to participate actively. Respondent D expressed this by saying,

"I often have difficulties in learning English, so I cannot answer questions and speak in English. Therefore, I choose to remain silent" (Respondent D, February 22, 2023, translated by the researcher).

This response underscores how inadequate vocabulary and grammar skills hinder students from participating, as they feel unable to communicate accurately. Students' limited proficiency can result in silence as they feel unable to construct sentences accurately or interpret lessons fully (Hanh, 2020; Bao, 2020). This aligns with Bahar et al. (2022), who observed that students with limited language abilities may feel embarrassed, making them reluctant to participate. Additionally, Faizin et al. (2022)

argue that the lack of daily English usage exacerbates students' silence, as they struggle to express even known answers in English.

3) *Lack of Confidence*

A lack of confidence was frequently mentioned as a factor causing silence, even among students who understood the material. Respondent C noted,

"I prefer to remain silent even though I actually understand, because I lack confidence when answering questions from the teacher; sometimes I hesitate when answering and speaking in English" (Respondent C, February 17, 2023, translated by the researcher).

This statement highlights how a lack of confidence can prevent students from sharing their understanding, despite having the knowledge. This lack of confidence often stems from low self-esteem and is exacerbated by limited language skills and minimal support (Dörnyei, 2005; Bahar et al., 2022; Lakshmi et al., 2022). According to Purwanti and Yeni (2021), students lacking confidence may feel embarrassed, fearing ridicule from their peers if they make mistakes. This lack of self-assurance may also result from limited motivation; as Juniati et al. (2018) argue, motivation can enhance students' confidence, fostering active participation in EFL classes.

4) *Lack of Motivation*

Low motivation was another factor linked to student silence. Unmotivated students often preferred silence or engaged in unrelated activities. Respondent A admitted,

"I don't like English lessons because I think this lesson is difficult, and from the beginning, I was not interested; therefore, I prefer to be silent" (Respondent A, February 17, 2023, translated by the researcher).

This statement suggests that disinterest in learning English results in minimal classroom engagement. Students lacking motivation are often disinterested in learning, feeling that English lessons hold little personal relevance (Smith et al., 2018). Zhang (2019) argues that motivation is critical for language learning, as it drives students to engage more actively. Zafarina (2022) also notes that positive reinforcement, such as encouraging feedback, can help reduce silence by boosting motivation.

5) *Introverted Personality*

Introverted personality traits also contributed to silence. Introverted students may feel more comfortable listening rather than speaking. Respondent F reflected this by saying,

"I am often silent because I do have this kind of personality. Therefore, I prefer to be quiet and just listen" (Respondent F, February 22, 2023, translated by the researcher).

This response shows how introverted students may avoid speaking due to a preference for introspection over active participation. According to Wen (2017), introverted learners may struggle to adapt to social interactions in the EFL classroom, making it challenging for them to participate. Amalia and Husna (2020) add that introverts often experience anxiety and shyness, making them reluctant to speak in front of others. This tendency to avoid speaking can result from internalized fears and a preference for introspective engagement over external communication (Elfiza, 2017).

3.2. Difficulties Experienced by Students in EFL Classes

In addition to factors contributing to silence, students reported several difficulties they faced in EFL classes: difficulty in understanding lessons, focusing, and speaking.

1) *Difficulty in Understanding the Lessons*

Many students cited difficulty in understanding lessons due to limited vocabulary and grammar skills. Respondent D mentioned,

"I often find it difficult to understand or learn English, as I still know little vocabulary" (Respondent D, February 22, 2023, translated by the researcher).

Similarly, Respondent E noted,

"I usually find it difficult to understand the material, especially difficult material. It is also difficult to understand the sentence structure" (Respondent E, February 22, 2023, translated by the researcher).

These responses highlight how gaps in language knowledge contribute to students' silence, as they may feel unable to engage meaningfully. According to Min (2016), students who lack vocabulary and grammar skills often feel unable to communicate fluently. This difficulty can reinforce a preference for silence, as students may feel unprepared to engage actively.

2) *Difficulty in Focusing in EFL Classes*

Students also experienced challenges in maintaining focus during EFL classes. For example, Respondent A stated,

"I find it difficult to focus in this lesson, because my friends often tease or talk to me" (Respondent A, February 17, 2023, translated by the researcher).

Respondent B added,

"I often feel sleepy and tired during English lessons, so I cannot focus on these lessons" (Respondent B, February 17, 2023, translated by the researcher).

These responses indicate how both external and internal factors disrupt students' concentration, leading to disengagement. Fatmawati and Haura (2020) highlight that distractions from peers and personal fatigue are common barriers to focus in the classroom. These distractions can further decrease student engagement, leading to increased silence.

3) *Difficulty in Speaking in EFL Classes*

A lack of confidence and fear of making mistakes contributed to students' difficulty in speaking. Respondent C described this by saying,

"I find it difficult to speak in English, especially when answering questions. It feels like a lack of confidence, even though I actually know the answer" (Respondent C, February 17, 2023, translated by the researcher).

This response shows how anxiety and lack of confidence can prevent students from expressing themselves, despite understanding the material. Juniati et al. (2018) argue that frequent practice, increased vocabulary, and motivational support can help overcome students' hesitation in speaking. Addressing these issues can encourage students to move past silence and engage actively in class discussions.

3.3. Activities of Silent Students during EFL Classes

The study also explored the activities silent students engaged in during class. Some students occupied themselves with unrelated activities while others attempted to follow the lesson.

Respondents reported a variety of activities, including using cell phones, doodling, or chatting. For example, Respondent A mentioned,

"I often draw or make scribbles in my book, and sometimes also operate my cell phone" (Respondent A, February 17, 2023, translated by the researcher).

However, a few students reported more constructive activities, such as taking notes or paying attention. Respondent C shared,

"I usually just stay quiet and focus on listening, but sometimes I also do other things such as drawing on my book or taking notes on the lesson material" (Respondent C, February 17, 2023, translated by the researcher).

These responses reveal a mixture of disengagement and occasional attentiveness. Classroom interaction is essential for effective learning, as it promotes the exchange of ideas between teachers and students (Bahar et al., 2022). Students who engage in unrelated activities are likely to miss out on these interactions, limiting their learning opportunities. However, positive classroom interactions can encourage students to become more active participants.

In examining the factors contributing to student silence in EFL classes, this study identified anxiety, lack of English proficiency, lack of confidence, lack of motivation, and introverted personality as significant influences. These factors collectively create a classroom environment where students often feel hesitant or incapable of active participation. Many students experience language-related challenges that limit their ability to speak up, while psychological and personality-related barriers further reinforce their preference for silence.

Moreover, the difficulties students face in understanding the material, maintaining focus, and expressing themselves contribute to their disengagement in class. Students often compensate for these challenges by resorting to various activities during lessons—some distracting, such as using cell phones or chatting with peers, and others constructive, like listening attentively or taking notes. These behaviors reflect the diverse ways students cope with the challenges of learning in a foreign language environment, suggesting a need for tailored support that addresses both academic and emotional barriers.

4. Conclusion

This study concludes that student silence in EFL classes at an Indonesian Vocational School is primarily influenced by five factors: anxiety, lack of English proficiency, lack of confidence, lack of motivation, and an introverted personality. Additionally, students face several difficulties that contribute to their silence, including challenges in understanding lesson content, maintaining focus, and speaking in English. Furthermore, silent students engage in a range of activities during EFL classes, some of which distract from the learning process, such as chatting with peers, using cell phones, doodling in notebooks, or falling asleep. However, some students also engage in constructive behaviors, including listening attentively to the teacher, reading materials, and taking notes on important information.

The findings of this study have several implications for educators and school administrators. Firstly, teachers should be aware of the psychological and linguistic barriers that contribute to student silence, such as anxiety and lack of confidence, and consider incorporating supportive teaching strategies, such as positive reinforcement and creating a safe, encouraging classroom environment. Addressing language proficiency gaps through targeted interventions, such as vocabulary-building exercises or additional grammar support, may also help reduce students' hesitation in participating. Furthermore, fostering student motivation and engagement through relevant and interesting lesson content, as well as interactive and collaborative learning activities, may encourage more active participation. For students with introverted personalities, alternative forms of participation, such as small-group discussions or written reflections, could be encouraged to accommodate their preferences and help them gradually build confidence in larger group settings. School administrators may also consider professional development opportunities focused on managing student engagement and addressing emotional needs in the language-learning context. Such efforts could foster a more inclusive and participative learning environment, ultimately improving students' language skills and confidence in EFL classes.

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