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LEARNING THROUGH TALK AND LEARNING THROUGH SILENCE: IN SEARCH OF A STANCE BETWEEN THEORY AND PRACTICE

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Abstract: *A major dilemma facing teachers in English as a second or foreign language countries nowadays is how students can best learn the English language – whether through 'talk' or through 'silence'. Studies have shown that many Asian ESL learners tend to be silent in the classroom, and rely heavily on the teacher (Liu, 2002; Kaur & Lah, 1996). This study is part of ongoing doctoral research on the study of silence in academic discourse among Malaysian undergraduate science and non-science students. The aim of this paper is to provide an extensive review of the literature that has explored patterns of silence in the ESL classroom and the causes and cultural meanings of silence. Some findings on the study of silence among Malaysian science and non-science students in academic discourse will also be presented. It is hoped that the review will forward a stance between theory and practice in relation to learning through talk or learning through silence in the Asian context.*

Keywords: *English Language, Learning, ESL Classroom*

Introduction

English language teachers nowadays face a great challenge as to the best method of teaching second or foreign language. The dilemma has arisen due to the preponderance of theoretical propositions which advocate learner-centred method on the one hand, and the reality of many English language teaching classrooms in Asia which are mostly teacher-centred, on the other. In other words, teachers are in a conundrum of choosing between prescriptive and realistic situations of their classrooms. Some English language teachers become exasperated when trying to implement the former because the students themselves might be bewildered by the teacher's attempt to discard the classroom norm – learning through silence. Many questions, therefore, arise: do the students discard their long standing tradition of silence while learning the second or foreign language, and are the teachers ready to abandon their traditional approach of being dominant in the ELT classroom to a secondary role of an organizer of resources, a guide within the classroom and an independent participant? (Richards & Rogers, 2001, p.167). This paper will attempt to provide answers to the questions above through extensive review of the literature that has explored patterns of silence in the ESL classroom and the causes and cultural meanings of silence in Asian context, and also will present some findings on the study of silence among Malaysian science and non-science students in academic discourse.

Objective of the study

This study is aimed at exploring the causes, cultural meanings and patterns of silence in the ESL classroom in the Asian context by extensive review of the literature, and to present some findings on the study of silence among Malaysian science and non-science students in academic discourse.

Culture as a source silence in Asian ESL classroom

Silence of the Asian learners in ESL classroom has been associated with many factors – culture (e.g. Harumi 1999, Liu 2002, Kitamura 2000, Yu 2003, Haugh & Hinze 2003); deficiency in L2 ability (e.g. Nakane 2003, King 2011); culture of learning (Yates & Trang 2012). Silence can be part of a cultural norm acquired along with the attainment of language during childhood and thereby becoming an aspect of linguistic tool which in turn reflects the conversational style of the individual (Scollon & Scollon 1981, Tannen 1985). According to Scollon & Scollon (1981) cited in Knapp, Enninger & Knapp-Potthoff (1987, p. 279) '[s]ince conversational principles are acquired early in life, (between the ages of one and two), i.e. at a time when children have little to say, they tend to be transferred to conversations transacted in L2'. It has also been suggested that silence of L2 learners has relationship with the desire to preserve ones face and fear of losing it (Harumi 1999, Kitamura 2000, Yu 2003, Haugh & Hinze 2003, Nakane 2006, Shafiee Nahrkhalaji, Khorasani & Ashjerdi 2013). Liu (2002), who studied Chinese students in American classrooms, for example, discovered that Chinese students practiced silence not because of their incompetence in the use of English, but because of an aspect of Chinese culture which discourages loquacity. Also, Sato (1982), who studied different turn-taking styles of Asians and non-Asians, found that

the Chinese, Japanese, and Koreans took significantly fewer turns than non-Asians from Latin America, Europe, and Middle East (Chaudron, 1988, p. 105) probably due to the belief of Asians that a quick response by raising ones hand to answer questions in the classroom was not only embarrassing but was considered as 'showing off' which their culture discourages (Wu 1991, Liu 1989, and Sato 1982).

Also, Phuong (2014), who studied Vietnamese university students in Australian classrooms believes that it is not only culture that influences students' reticence. He highlighted a number of other factors which contribute to the trait including a tendency for hiding one's feelings, preservation of face and fear of losing it, respect for hierarchy, and maintenance of social/interpersonal harmony. He believes that 'Confucianism has permeated Vietnamese culture for centuries and continues to have a strong impact on the social behavior of Asians' (Phuong, 2014, p. 17). From the foregoing it can be understood that social upbringing, with emphasis on respect for authorities plays a key role in Asian students silence behavior in university classroom. Quoting Hunt (2002), Phuong (2014) added that

> Vietnamese people often engage in prescribed behaviors such as avoiding direct eye contact and affective expression, remaining silent and showing attentive listening when speaking to someone older or an authoritative figure, avoiding interrupting, talking back or questioning because ―asking questions or disagreeing with an authoritative speaker is like challenging the senior person's social status which is seen to be rude in Vietnamese culture. (p. 18).

Vietnamese silence in the classroom is, therefore, as sign of respect for authority which, in the classroom, is the teacher. The tendency extends even at their places of work as Liem (1980) cited in Phuong (2014) states – 'Vietnamese employees do not voice opinions to their bosses, but rather listen to orders' (p. 18).

Silence and deficiency in L2 ability

Various studies (e.g. Nakane 2003, King 2011, Nguyen 2012) perceived that deficiency in L2 ability results in silence of second language learners in the classroom. Nakane (2003), for example, who studied Japanese students in Australia, believes that silence as a politeness strategy is used in communication by people who have limited capacity in verbal communication. This view is supported by King (2011) who believes that 'for many Japanese students their lack of talk has nothing to do with choosing to be silent but is primarily a consequence of significant deficiencies in their L2 abilities particularly when interacting with native speakers of English' (p. 10).

All the above researches were, however, conducted in English speaking countries where the subjects of the study were apprehensive of their proficiency in English language in the mainstream ELT Classroom. In his individual account of his silent behavior in an American classroom, Bista (2012), a Nepalese, stated that he decided to remain silent particularly during the first semester because he became nervous, his face flushed very red, and he was afraid that if he spoke in the classroom, his accent might not be understood by his classmates. Bista's testimony may account for the reason why foreign students remain silent in the mainstream ELT classroom – i.e. psychological defeat – even before they started talking. The fear of his accent points at another

psychological factor which has to do with self-confidence or anxiety. Therefore, fear of derision may cause a non-native speaker to be silent in a mainstream English speaking environment.

In countries where English is a second of foreign language, few studies have been conducted on students' use of silence. Among the few available ones was a study of 250 undergraduate students in Malaysia by Karim & Shah (2008), who discovered that classroom participation anxiety was common among Malaysians than non-Malaysians. They found 'that students appear to be orally apprehensive only in the university classroom not when they are outside of it' (Karim and Shah, 2008, p. 3). Their finding seemed to suggest that classroom participation anxiety occurred not only in the mainstream English language speaking environment but in English as a second language classroom as well. The implication of their finding to the study of silence is that the perceived lack of competence in speaking the second language and anxiety may result in the learner silence.

Silence and culture of learning

Among the reasons for silence of English as a second language learners is 'the culture of learning' Yates & Trang (2012). Yates & Trang believe that 'there are different expectations regarding the goals of education, teaching and learning styles, including assumptions about patterns of interaction deemed appropriate in the classroom, that is, issues such as who has the right to speak, when and what should they be saying' (p. 24). As most of the studies on silence were conducted in English speaking countries, this important factor has been overlooked. It has to be noted, therefore, that Western style of teaching and learning differs significantly from that of other non-native English speaking countries. In English speaking countries, where communicative language teaching methodology was prima-facie, the role of the teacher is more of a facilitator (Richards & Rogers, 2001), while in non-native English speaking countries students perceive the teacher not only as instructor but an authority. Therefore, the silence of Asian students in Australia, New Zealand or America, for example, can be of great concern to the teacher just as loquacious ones can be considered troublesome in Japan, China or Malaysia. In this case, 'one may need to be cautious when concluding which mode of learning, talk or silence, is superior' (Bao, 2014, p. 2). Despite the preponderance of communicative language teaching methods in the West, the method might not work well in situations 'where talk is employed sparingly and silent attentiveness is valued, [thus] making silence and reticence a big deal might confuse members of that culture as much' (Bao, 2014, p. 1).

Following is atypical American English language teaching classroom interaction:

> Teacher: *(Loudly)* Excuse me.
> Sandi: Excuse me.
> Teacher: Brenda, you were not called upon to speak.
> Brenda: *(Loudly)* And neither was anybody else. Don't come at me like that.
> Teacher: Excuse me. [Brenda
> Brenda: Excuse you, [nigga *(other students make cat calls)* [I hate it when she come at me like that, and everybody was talking.
> Teacher: [Glenisha, Glenisha. Sandi
> Brenda: [It makes me mad, for real.
> Teacher: Excuse me, Brenda. Sandi. You were not called on to speak.

Sandi: Was I called on? *(student laughter)*
Brenda: *(to another student and pointing towards the teacher)* [She didn't have no problem with some people just [xx]

(Godley, 2012, p. 450)

Above extract was from a study of English language learning classroom in America by Godley (2012) who reported the "patterns and expectations for appropriate classroom discourse" (p. 449) which was found to be common "in African American communities and among African American students during group conversation" (p. 449). It is not certain whether similar classroom interaction can occur in Malaysia, Japan or Jordan where the teacher is considered not only as a provider of knowledge but as authority with power to determine the pattern of classroom interaction.

The silent Asians: Teachers' and students' perceptions

Many a time, teachers were exasperated by Asian students' reticent behavior particularly in a Western multicultural classroom or where the teacher attempted to change the routinized classroom behavior of learning through silence. Harumi (1999), for example, who studied Japanese students learning English at a London University has this to say on returning to Japan with full expectation of changing the learning situation of his Japanese classroom:

> "Returning to Japan, in the first lesson at a Junior college. I was full of hope and expectation, my ambition was broken by an invisible wall between students and myself. The direct import from the U. K., the Western way of teaching struck my students who sat back and had been wondered what I was expecting. As a teacher, I felt frustrated like an outsider. As a learner, I realized how difficult it is for students to change their learning style or strategies automatically as expected". (pp. 9-10)

Above quotation points at the difficulty of changing students' learning behaviour immediately and automatically in the Asian context where attentive listening is valued more than oral participation.

Silence is perceived as a sign of non-learning or lack of attention especially in the mainstream English language teaching classroom. On their part, Asian students consider their silence as a strategy for pondering over what the teacher said; or as a form of mental preparation. Losey (1997, as cited in Nakane 2003, p. 41) believes that interruptions by mainstream students contribute to silence of the minority. This may include fear of derision or a remark that may signal loss of face. Students from minority groups, therefore, might be hampered by two great barriers: linguistic and ethnic. As a result, both their teachers and their school mates interpret their silence negatively as lack of attention to learning or simply plain incompetence.

In her study, Nakane (2003) reported that the Japanese students in Australia 'hold stereotypical images of themselves as being 'silent' and of Australian students as being 'talkative' (p. 56). Therefore, the Japanese students 'regarded these differences as a problematic and negative aspect of their learning experience' (p. 56). Similarly, in his study of Chinese students studying in Australia, the reticence of the Chinese students was construed as 'a sign of passiveness; something negative'; while the Chinese believe that their silence was 'a sign of respect for their teachers and classmates' (Liu 2002 as cited in Phuong, 2014, pp. 14-15). As already highlighted, any study of

silence in ESL classroom must consider the sociocultural background of the learners, the learning environment and orientation to learning before concluding whether silence in that situation is problematic or not.

Silence in academic discourse among Malaysian undergraduate students: Some initial findings

This treatise is part of an ongoing Doctoral research on the use of silence by Malaysians undergraduate students in academic discourse. Among the methods for data collection used in this study was focus group interview. Participants were asked, among others, how often they talk during classroom lectures, group work and workshops/seminars. Some of the responses indicated that participants of this study felt that it was not only 'inappropriate classroom behavior' to stop the lecturer to ask a question, but as part of a problem to learning 'because actually the lecturer is busy teaching us and then, I think what if we raise our hand it will delay the [], you know. So, is part of a problem lah' (Chinese-Malaysian respondent). Another respondent added that

> 'Rather than raise your hand and asking because they're too shy and think at what other people think because in Malay when someone stand out it's like awkward' (Malay speaker of English)

Adding to the above, another Malay speaker of English said 'Maybe as a personal, yeah. They usually ask personally after the class'. This finding tends to support a study by Braddock et al. (1995, cited in Nakane, 2003, p. 90), that 69% of overseas students, including Asians, at Macquarie University in Australia, prefer asking questions after lectures than during lectures. The findings of this research indicated similar tendency among Malaysians, who perceive asking question during lesson as 'awkward' or 'problematic'. Again, this (mis-) perception on asking questions during lectures tend to support what Yates and Trang (2012) proposed on differing beliefs about the cultures of learning between native English language learning classroom and second language learning classroom. The participants of this study tend to perceived the classroom as a place where interrupting the 'authority' (the lecturer) is considered inappropriate.

Similarly, during group work, workshops/seminars, the participants of this study prefer silence to talk, as some of the extracts tend to indicate:

> […] in my case I'm not that kind of person like she's. I would rather be silent in classes, during group work, and I just, I'm that kind of person who just follow the floor, yeah (Malay speaker of English)

Other participants said:

> Most of the time I tend to keep quiet because I feel like I don't have enough knowledge in what they're talking. So, when I raise any question I always have this fear that they'll ask any question I don't know how to answer (Indian Malaysian)

And:

I'm also not that outstanding person. I just talk when needed, and talk when asked (Malay speaker of English).

From the extracts above, it can be deduced that Malaysians prefer learning through silence to learning through talk. Probably due to learning orientation of Malaysians who 'expect their teachers to "spoon feed" them at all levels [...] Perhaps this can be attributed to a cultural trait that has become the norm in the history of our educational system' (Kaur & Lah, 1996, p. 177). More investigation, however, is needed in various Asian schools to find out which method – learning through talk or learning through silence – is more appropriate to the needs of the students and the educational system.

Conclusion

In this paper, an attempt has been made to review literature that has explored patterns of silence in the ESL classroom and the causes and cultural meanings of silence, and also presented some findings of an ongoing Doctoral research on the use of silence in academic discourse by Malaysian science and non-science students. The result of the literature review indicated disparity between Western countries where much work on Asian silence has been conducted, and ESL countries on their perception about silence and silent students. While teachers in Western countries consider silence of Asian students as problematic, the Asians perceive their use of silence as respect and a strategy for learning the second language. The findings of the current study on Malaysians, indicated that students prefer silence to talk in the classroom, group work and seminars/workshops. The implication of the initial finding of this research is that, in the near future, Asian students, particularly Malaysians, prefer learning through silence to learning through talk. However, more investigation is needed in order to explore which method of learning the second language – talk or silence – is more appropriate for Asian students and the educational system.

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