



## Learning Factors Causing Silence in English Language (L2) Classrooms at the Graduate Level



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**Abstract:** *The English language has been enjoying the status of an official, language of formal documentation and medium of teaching and learning in academic settings. The main object of the study was to find the factors to cause students' silence in English language (L2) classrooms at one of the Government Universities (CS 2nd year). Applying the qualitative real ethnographic research design; with effective classroom observations (using the observation sheet adopted from Jim King) and semi-structured interviews. The study analyzed that there are some notable learning factors, (such as anxiety, fear, lack of confidence, lack of L2 knowledge and L1 interference) that impact the student's participation in the L2 classroom resulting in silence. Such issues directly affect students' speaking proficiency, and confidence to talk and participate in activities in L2 classroom. The study will be helpful for teachers, curriculum designers and policymakers to overcome the factors causing silence.*

**Key Words:** Student's Silence, Confidence, L2 Classroom

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### Background of the Study

#### Status of the English language in Pakistan

English enjoys the status of the official language of academic instruction in Pakistan. A number of education policies have been introduced in Pakistan; each policy has given greater importance to English as the medium of instruction. Ghani (2003:105) describes that English is considered the gateway to success, it paves strong grounds for further studies even in getting higher-order jobs. It is

also the language of instruction in higher education though it is not the mother language of the majority population excluding the upper strata of Pakistani society where English is spoken as status quo. The linguistic and ethnographic background of Pakistan is classified as a multilingual context; where the majority population speaks Urdu as a Lingua Franca, along with other languages like Sindhi, Punjabi, Pushto, Balochi, Hindko etc. In regards to the status of English; it enjoys the status of a second language that is implied in institutions and

has the privilege to be the official language. The prominence of English is improving globally and it looks elevating and spreading and developing in Pakistan at the same rate. The impact of that spread has given birth to the new variety that has been born in; as Pakistan variety that is being researched and codified. (Zaidi, S. B., & Zaki, S. 2017).

Rahman (2008) describes that language learning in Pakistan is a very complex system, the native language the first, Urdu the second and English the third; even the foreign language. Only the speakers of Urdu as a mother tongue learn English as a second language. The lack of proper attention to corpus planning of the English language brought up the corrosive issues of learning and teaching English at all levels. Language learning and teaching remained an uphill task for both teachers and students. In the early decades of Pakistan's history, English was taught in 6<sup>th</sup> grade simply as a subject while Urdu remained the language of instruction (except in the case of Sindh & East Pakistan).

### **Teaching and Learning English in Higher Education**

Shamim, F. (2008) highlighted the trends, issues and challenges in policies related to the practice of English language education in Pakistan. She underlined that from a historical perspective English language education since the creation of Pakistan in 1947, lags behind in setting objectives, implementation of strategies and outcomes and lack in the rationale for the change in policies. On the other hand, the study found that the teaching practice related to English teaching in diverse instructional settings lags behind the major policy change in 1989 for "democratizing" English. The study added that the consequences of implementing English as the medium of instruction in policy decisions posed diverse issues and challenges to implement it on the mass

literacy in English in that diversified population. The study also analyzed that the decisions are made observing the global change forces regarding language policies, however, the local condition regarding language learning and teaching practices in the Pakistani context. Akram, M. (2017) highlighted that there are social, academic and administrative issues that make English language learning teaching difficult in Pakistan. Mahboob, A. (2017) analyzed that English medium instructions at higher education policy do not enable students to get socio-class variation either, however, it is still unclear which English is appropriate at higher education level. The teaching and learning status of English; as a medium of instruction is complex in nature in the Pakistani context due to unclear policies, and lack of global and local changes in context. Because of its complex status, English teachers in Pakistan are facing greater challenges in teaching diversified cultural classes in higher education. Students with different linguistic, cultural and academic backgrounds face diverse challenges related to learning English as a second language (L2) class. Due to this student face issues (i.e. anxiety, fear, lack of confidence) that affect their speaking performance in L2 class, even, though they sometimes remain silent in the class.

### **Different Perspectives behind Silence**

Bosacki (2005), defines silence as a sign of rejection, feeling of invisibility, fear of social evaluation, intense intellectual engagement, and expressing social disinterest. This is indicating that silence just not only contains social content, but it conveys social psychology and some specific cultural implications with national characteristics. Degerman, D. (2023) refers to Andrew Solomon (2015: 50) becoming depressed 'is like going deaf, hearing less and less until a terrible silence is all around you until you

cannot make any sound of your own to penetrate the quiet'.

## Classroom Silence

Fredricks et al. (2016) and Wang et al. (2018) described that student participation in the classroom is analyzed from four diverse but integrated aspects: behavioural (engagement in academic activities), emotional (attitude towards teachers, students and academic content), cognitive (self-regulation, determination, and struggle in learning), and social (quality of social interactions in class). However, Teng (2009), defines classroom silence as a kind of psychological state that a student presents in the level of thought, emotion, and action. Putri, M. N. (2023). Divides the silence factors into two major categories: psychological category such as; High self-confidence, High English language proficiency, Students' motivation, and Extroverted personality. However, the study also analyzed the situational category variables divided into: The effect of task types, Interesting topics, Lecturer's positive approach, Positive classroom atmosphere, and Conducive learning environment.

## Theoretical Framework

There are various theories on second language acquisition about how people learn a second language. Second language acquisition relates to several disciplines including, linguistics, sociolinguistics, psychology, cognitive science, neuroscience, and education. Some of those are *behaviourist theory*, *Semantic theory*, *Socio-cultural theory*, *Comprehensive Instructional Model of Language Learning (CIMLL)* and *Complex Dynamic Systems Theory*.

Since the focus of the study is dynamic in nature the CDST is selected for the conceptual framework to follow; throughout the study. Levac and DeMatteo (2009) described that Complex dynamic system theory (CDST) is a theory of the cognitive

development of a child. Dynamic system theory is useful to understand changes and how silence changes from moment to moment. CDST is highly useful to understand silence in the classroom because the CDST approach offers flexibility to researchers. CDST provides a conceptual framework that helps to view the silence of students in the classrooms, at institutional levels, and at social levels. Silence is such a complex and varied phenomenon whose study calls for a flexible and interdisciplinary approach that dynamic system theory allows. The branch of mathematics and deep-rooted in natural and social science (De Bot, Lowie et al. 2007).

## Research Methodology

### Phenomenological Research

Phenomenology helps the qualitative researcher in methodological guidance in order to seek the elucidation and explanation of the lived experiences of the study participants (Horrigan-Kelly, et, al. 2016). Finlay, L. (2009) describes that Phenomenological research has been widely used in therapy and rehabilitation research about the pattern of the phenomenological project in order to understand the lived experiences of the illness or well-being. This study was conducted in a classroom of second-year Computer Science as a second language (ESL) at one of the Government universities in Karachi. The class consisted of 50 male and female students ages between 18 and 20. The speciality of the class was its diversity; as the multi-ethnic and multi-cultural backgrounds of the students, belonging to different areas of the province Sindh. Most of the students were having Urdu as their mother tongue L<sub>1</sub> whereas; others were having Sindhi, Punjabi, and Urdu as their L<sub>1</sub>. Urdu was taken as Lingua Franca among all, and it was used as the language of common interactions among students and teachers excluding the teaching in ESL (L<sub>2</sub>)

## Learning Factors that Lead to Silence among Students in L2 Classroom

Krashen (1982) describes that the most effective way of developing learners' competence in L2 classrooms is to provide sufficient opportunities for learners to participate in a discourse which involves the

meaningful process of exchanging information. However, it can be found that silence in L2 classrooms is a common phenomenon. After doing a literature review, the literature suggests that there may be various aspects that lead to classroom silence but learning factors that are very common in the Pakistani context of L2 class are:

Table 1

Learning Factors that Lead to Silence Among Students in L2 Classroom

Psychological Factors	Situational Factors
Lack of confidence	Subject/ Topic taught
Language proficiency	The behaviour of the teacher,
Gender fear	classroom atmosphere,
Student's personality	

## The Participants

The selection of the participants for the current study has been conducted by following the purposive and convenience sampling technique. Purposive sampling is one of the most controlling instruments to gather *selective information-rich cases* for in-depth study (Patton 1990). The total population of the current study was comprised of 45 students out of that 15 were girls and 30 were boys. The participants of the current study were 10 graduate students of the computer science 2<sup>nd</sup>-year group attending the ESL (L2) classes regularly at the Government University of Karachi. The selection of sampling was purely purposive and conveyance sampling.

Additionally, convenience sampling was used as a tool as the participants were from the accessible unit. Convenience sampling is mostly used in situations when the population is very small and easily available or known (Newby 2014).

## Biographic Statistics of the Participants

Participants of the current study; (have been presented all with their names changed) included Sadia, Uzma, Wahiba, Rehana,

Sobia, (coded 1-5) Sohail, Sajid, Sarfrad, Karim, Rashid and Shoukat (coded 6-10). Three participants were having Sindhi as L1 three of them were Punjabi-speaking at four of them were Urdu as L1. All the participants used Urdu as Lingua Franca rather; all of them were proficient in speaking Urdu, as they lived and got education here in Karachi, since their childhood.

## Data Collection Method

As the current study is diversified and complex, therefore, two research tools were used; that were classroom observations and semi-structured interviews. The study has been focused on two basic principles; first, the study must have a logical match between questions and the research method being used and they must be bonded to each other. Second the method that should be selected and used must have an excellent quality of trustworthiness of study (Farrokhi, F., & Mahmoudi-Hamidabad, A. 2012).

Only observation was not enough to go into insight into the psychological dimensions of the participants' silence in the L2 classroom. The observation was triangulated with semi-structured interviews

to complement both observations and questionnaires (Miles and Huberman 1994). Both tools were designed to facilitate the process of research so as to meet the requirements of the data collection from the L2 classroom.

In this study non-participant classroom observations made; is easy and direct there were no obtrusive elements in the study of participants' actual behaviour and any specific change that occurred in their behaviour in relation to changing situations with the passage of time and context. The observation also served as the objective of the study was triangulating, confirming, and contextualizing the data collected by the other methods, (Merriam, 2003).

The behaviour of the participants in the L2 classroom was observed in six categories, such as comment, verbal response, non-verbal response, volunteer participation, yes/No response, and silence. The study is comprised of six categories of integrated responses in the observation of this study such as Comment: (the participants' reply to the question to the whole class. Or gave his views/opinion), Verbal response: (the participant spoke in response to question/clarification question), Non-verbal response: (the participant nodded in positive or negative to the clarification question), Volunteer participation: (the participant joined in pair/group/multiple class activity), Yes/ No response: (The participant accepted/rejected the question) and Silence: (the participant remained silent/didn't talk.)

The current study utilized the timescale to examine the fluctuations of the participant's silent period during the L2 class within the given time of the L2 class. The L2 class went on without intervals (as it was allocated 120 minutes). The responses of the participants were examined in observation; the time was distributed comprised on 30 minutes intervals using time scales during the whole 120 minutes class. The main purpose of using time scales in this study was

to examine the changes in the silence of the students on four different time scales such as moment-to-moment variation, variation at class level and variation during the whole period of 10 classes.

The semi-structured interviews were conducted based on observations and knowing the complexity of the nature of factors that can clearly be observed through the behaviour of the participants in the L2 class only. The interview guide has been divided into two main themes: psychological factors and situational factors in the main domain while the questions were designed in an open-ended format.

### Classroom Observation

The classroom observations were comprised of 10 classroom observations from week 2 up to 5. The pattern of the seating arrangement was divided into two sections on one right side of the classroom there were seats arranged for girls while on the left side, the seating arrangements were made for boys. The selected pattern was all arranged prior to observations with the facilitation of the researcher to sit near the participants. All ten participants were selected to sit on the middle benches therefore the researcher decided to remain closer to them for examining their participation, behavior, and silence in the English L2 classroom. The observation session was conducted in person as a participant observer and no recordings were made due to official restrictions. Whole the record of observations was kept handwritten, and formal in the form of using new observation sheets in every observation with noted observational responses. Two observations are made every week. The class teaching was about communication skills in English, it mainly focused on speaking and different communication tasks like discussions, pair work activities, presentations and critical reviews and comments.

## **Semi-structured Interview**

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Since in semi-structured interviews, the interviewees could possibly express their personal opinions regarding the questions asked to them, it encourages them to provide even more useful information, especially their personal views about sensitive and private issues in qualitative research. They can provide reasons for their answers easily and clearly as they couldn't give during observation Edwards, R., & Holland, J. (2013). The current study applied the semi-structured interviews after observing the classes, though, the process of observation went smoothly and it was considered that the nature of silence was an extremely complex and dynamic phenomenon. The nature of factors affecting the process of silence was difficult to be measured in observation; only identifying the silent students in the class. Therefore, the semi-structured interviews were conducted to know the exact nature of the variables.

## **Ethical Considerations**

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No unfair means were used in collecting the data. During observation, other students and the teachers also gave their consent to show no objection to the observation being done. Observations were made in a way that didn't disturb the teaching process in the class. The schedule for the Semi-structured interviews was framed with the consent of the participants during break time to avoid any academic loss to them. At the end of the data collection, the participants were given inboundary refreshments due to some restrictions from management to take them out of the university campus premises.

## **Data Analysis**

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In the current study, the data was analyzed and interpreted from the prestige point of the question and Complex Dynamic System Theory (CDST). The method of data analysis in this study is orderly process analysis as

within-case and cross-case. Within case deals with the examination and interpretation of individual cases using facts from the data (Miles and Huberman 1994), while the cross-case analysis focuses on comparative analysis of the participants (Duff 2012). Miles and Huberman (1994) describe the cross-case analysis where the researcher analyses the process and the results received and understands the nature of the process by specific contextual variables.

## **Thematic Analysis**

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Jack Caulfield (2022) describes thematic analysis as a procedure for analyzing qualitative data. It is normally used for a collection of texts i.e. interviews, transcripts etc. The researcher deeply analyzes the data to ascertain general or common themes-topics, concepts and patterns of meaning that appear repeatedly. There are several approaches applied to thematic analysis such as coding, generating themes, defining themes etc.

## **Findings of the Research**

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On the basis of the data analysis, the results were drawn, and according to the responses, the themes were developed. The respondents agreed on these factors that caused them to, either avoid participation in the class or to remain completely silent. The themes are divided into two major categories: Psychological factors and situational factors.

## **Psychological Factors**

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This category of factors is related to those challenges that students highlighted to affect their speaking performance in L2 classrooms.

## **Lack of Confidence**

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Lack of confidence is the result of internal fear leading students to avoid taking part in class activities. Tsui (1996), analyzed that there are five factors of silence in the class. The students are unconfident in their

language competence, they are afraid of being laughed at by their teachers and peers. They are afraid of doing mistakes in class. Fear of anxiety caused students' silence in class. Additionally, low proficiency and lack of opportunities are labelled in L2 classroom silence.

As one of the participants of the study underlined:

*As belong to the Sindhi community; my English pronunciation is weak, so I usually remain silent as I feel that students will laugh at me and they will later on taunt me for my harsh pronunciation. (Participant 2)*

While another participant highlighted

*My grammar is so weak, so I usually avoid speaking English either in class or outside the class with my friends and family. I feel shy because I think people will criticize me for that and it will discourage me to develop my language. (Participant 7)*

### Language Proficiency

Lack of proficiency in L2 was reported as another significant challenge for the participants to take part in L2 class. The participants agreed that language proficiency plays a vital role in enabling students to speak or remain silent. Tsui (1996) states that most of the students in L2 classes in government colleges in Pakistan lack knowledge of the target language even though they learn the English language in primary education during their early schooling.

One of the participants added:

*I studied at the government school in a far-reaching village in the northern part of Sindh. We learnt English as a subject where speaking skill was not given much importance. And we just learn the book and prepared for the exam, no such focus was given to language proficiency. (Participant 4)*

### Gender Fear

The culture prevailing in Pakistani higher education institutes witnessed gender

differences causing psychological being of being victimized by the opposite gender. Gender difference in students in the Pakistani context is a major indicator that causes students to avoid peer, group and public participation. Wicks-Nelson and Israel (2006) examined that usually female students show a more anxious attitude in L2 classes due to many factors such as proficiency, security and inferiority/superiority complex.

One of the participants added:

*I belong to a rural area where co-education is not very common. I never studied with girls nor have I experienced teaching from any female teacher from an early age I studied in boys' schools and then in college. This is the first time that I am in coeducation at one side it looks good but it will take time for me to adjust. (Participant 10)*

### Student's Personality

Some people are introverts they can't express themselves in front of others. Some of the participants also acknowledged that they did not participate in L2 class because they feel shy.

One of the participants added:

*I am so shy since my birth, even I cannot openly discuss my personal issues with my friends and family member because think they will not understand my feelings rather they will feel different about me. (Participant 3)*

### Situational Challenges

#### Subject/ Topic Taught

The subject/Topic that is taught in the class is required to be impressive and it should be in the interest of the students. If the subject/topic varies from the interest of students they get bored and remain non-active and irresponsive to the teacher. One of the respondents shared:

*I am not interested in learning English because I don't find it interesting rather it looks so boring to me the way the teacher*

conducts it. The topics don't attract me as they belong to very common fields of day-to-day dealings (Participant 5)

### The behavior of the Teacher

The teacher in the class is the key indicator for motivating the students to take part in the activities. The behaviour of the teacher should be so cooperative and facilitative. If the teacher is showing a rude and authoritative tone the students avoid taking part in activities in the L2 classroom. (Yasseen [2010](#)) analyzed that there is a positive and significant relationship between teachers' attitudes and students' academic performance. One of the participants highlighted:

*In the beginning, I tried to take part in activities, but the teacher criticized me over my mistakes, pronunciation and the way I spoke. The teacher also discouraged me by saying either I should correct my mistakes or I should keep silent (Participant 1).*

### Classroom Atmosphere

The classroom atmosphere is considered a significant motivational indicator for learning and teaching. If it is not conducting the learning and teaching environment is highly affected. By providing a conducive learning environment and effective learning strategies in the L2 learning process, the intrinsic motivation of young learners could be stimulated from the beginning (Wu [2003](#)). As one of the participants added:

*Our classroom is always remain noisy; because most of the time we have pair work*

*group discussions and speaking activities, we can't understand each other and the classroom is so congested that we can't openly work. The classroom environment is even not conducive for most of the weak students because of less participation of weak ones. (Participant 5)*

### Recommendations and suggestions

On the basis of the findings of the study, it has been recommended that due to a lack of L2 knowledge, confidence and motivation, students remained silent. Therefore, the main focus should be given to enhancing the basic knowledge of grammar, syntax, morphology and vocabulary of the students when they join L2 courses. If the basic knowledge of students is good they will take part in activities in L2 class, their confidence has been boosted they will overcome the anxiety or fear of speaking. Next, the teacher should encourage students to speak English in class even if their pronunciation is not good and the structure is broken. The teacher should also discourage the practice of laughing at the students when they speak harshly or wrong in the beginning. This way students can get confidence and reduce anxiety. The teacher should also create a conducive and friendly environment especially if s/he is of the opposite gender to the participant in L2 class. As some students come from same-gender schools they have some introvert sorts of feeling when they face teachers or peers of their opposite gender so there should be care for gender biases.



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