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**A MICRO ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY ON SILENCE AMONG IRANIAN UNIVERSITY
EFL LEARNERS**

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ABSTRACT

A common problem in EFL classroom is learners' silence and nonparticipation. The present study aimed to investigate the issue of silence in Iranian university foreign language classrooms. This study was conducted at Islamic Azad University, Isfahan Branch. Four English listening and speaking classes were observed. The Classroom Oral Participation Scheme (COPS) was employed and 56 hours of data was collected to measure the extent of silence and oral participation in Iranian university EFL classrooms. Semi-structured interviews with the participants about silence were employed to consider students opinion and experience on silence in the classroom. The study revealed that there was a general trend towards silence in Iranian university EFL classrooms and learners were silent due different reasons such as learners' personality and class atmosphere. As a result, teachers and learners should be aware that silence impedes the language development. Teachers need to employ some strategies to make learners eager to converse with others in English language classes.

**Keywords: Micro Ethnography, Iranian EFL learners, Silence, Classroom Oral
Participation**

INTRODUCTION

In spite of the importance of the learners' oral participation, students sometimes remain silent and are unwilling to participate adequately in the EFL classrooms. Granger

(2004) described silence as absence of authentic, original and creative production of the second language. Silence in classroom discussion means a situation where no

participant is speaking (Schmitz, 1990). Although silence itself is not a negative phenomenon, the common understanding of silence in the class is negative and for many teachers and students, silence is rarely appreciated.

As All **wright and Bailey (1991)** stated, there are aspects which are observable in the classroom. However, little attention has been paid to the unobservable dimensions of classroom interaction which are as important as the observable aspects. Thus, the underlying factors such as silence in the classroom, influencing foreign language learning are often ignored. Although silence in some educational contexts can be beneficial in learning as it provides opportunity for cognition and reflection, silence in language learning classrooms is highly problematic because learners need to be orally active in the language classroom in order to make progress in foreign language learning.

Watson-Gegeo (1988) supported the use of ethnographic approach in the study of classroom culture. Many researchers believe the superiority of ethnographic approach in their studies to understand what goes on in the classroom by the use of in depth observations and interviews which are followed by

qualitative analysis of the data (e.g., **Hymes, 1996; Rosado, 2013; Van Lier, 1988**).

There are studies on language learners' silence (e.g., **Kato, 2006; Liu, 2005**). However, it is surprising that there are hardly any empirical studies which considered silence of university language learners in Iran. Moreover, ethnographic investigations in this area are considerably lacking. Hence, this study meet the need for more research on classroom silence and is going to investigate silent behavior and the reasons for silence and nonparticipation in university EFL classrooms in Iran, based on observation of actual classroom settings.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Oral Participation in the classroom is an essential part of language learning and students must engage in classroom activities in order to learn the foreign/second language (**Lave & Wenger, 1991**). **Chau (1999)** pointed out silence impedes the learners' progress in language learning, and it prevents the teacher's help as well. If the learners remain silent the teachers do not realize their strength and weaknesses, particularly pronunciation problems.

Liu and Mou (2008) conducted an ethnographic study on silence behaviors among postgraduate Chinese students in the EFL classrooms with their foreign instructors

in China. The data were collected based on ethnographic interviews with EFL students and their foreign teachers, as well as observations. They found that Chinese students' silence behaviors are influenced by their cultural notions of face, power and shame in social relationships.

In an ethnographic approach, **Harumi (2014)** explored Japanese EFL learners' classroom silence in a Japanese EFL context. The study interpreted the roots, functions, and meanings of silence from a socio-cultural perspective, to illustrate classroom silence. It was found that a number of factors such as linguistic, psychological, and socio-cultural factors explain learner silence. While each factor can independently influence classroom silence, they appear to be linked.

Tong (2010) investigated students' oral participation and nonparticipation behavior in some junior secondary classrooms of English in Hong Kong. It was concluded that, the students were more willing to contribute to class discussion and ask teachers questions when they were less visible in class and were shielded by their classmates. The findings also suggested that students were passive at the beginning of the course, but they were active and ready to express their ideas at some other time.

In a qualitative study carried out by **Nakane (2006)**, functions of silence were studied in classroom interactions between Asian and Australian students. The vast use of face-saving silences by Japanese students was observed to be assessed negatively by Australian professors whose response techniques led to the lack of empathy. **Aghazadeh and Abedi (2014)** explored Iranian students' silence in the class. They concluded that silence might be a legitimate form of classroom participation as well as, teachers' negative feedback to questions.

In a study, **Ghaffar Samar and Yazdanmehr (2013)** first provided an introduction to the multiple functions of silence in general and then investigated these functions in EFL classes of Iran's private language institutes. The findings were indicative of teachers' lack of awareness of diverse communicative functions of silence in class and that this awareness could be raised through the informal interview phases. It concluded that not all learners' silence should be interpreted negatively as lack of attention or knowledge.

The fact is that not many studies on the world have targeted factors contributing to silence, particularly when it happens in language classes. Moreover, few investigations have been done in Iranian university EFL

classrooms in this area. The present study will answer the following questions:

1. To what extent do oral participation and silence occur during the listening and speaking courses in Iranian university EFL classrooms?
2. What factors make students silent and orally passive in Iranian university EFL classrooms?

METHODOLOGY

Participants

The participants in this study were 104 Iranian undergraduate EFL students, majoring in English Translation. Their age ranged from 18 to 33. They were all freshmen students enrolled in listening and speaking courses. Their instructors had MA degrees. The study was conducted at Islamic Azad University, Isfahan (Khorasgan) Branch, Isfahan, Iran. The data were gathered during the first semester of the 2013-2014 (Iranian academic year).

This study was both quantitative and qualitative in design. To measure the extent of silence in the classrooms, this mix-method investigation was developed using an ethnographic case study. A naturalistic approach to classroom oral participation and silence was followed in this investigation, the classroom was considered as a social and cultural setting, depicted the issue of silence

in Iranian university foreign language classrooms.

Instruments

King's (2011) observation scheme called COPS (Classroom Oral Participation Scheme) was employed. The COPS scheme was utilized to present classroom events with concentration on oral participation during the lesson. The COPS consisted of two sections, which were divided into one-minute segments. The first section reported on the overall participants' oral interaction in the class. The second section of the COPS focused on the three individual students monitoring in each class.

A series of semi-structured questions were used as the interview, this qualitative and descriptive part was used in order to uncover participants' ideas about silence and their experiences in foreign language classrooms. To obtain reliable data, the observation scheme and interview were examined by both researchers in consultation with one another.

Data Collection and analysis Procedures

Four English listening and speaking classes were observed which were taught by four different instructors. Fourteen sessions of each listening and speaking course were observed. During the observations, classroom events from whole-class and individual students monitoring perspective were

recorded minute by minute chronologically. The COPS was low-inference structured scheme. The scheme was practiced to achieve consistency at data entry. Moreover, multiple observations of the classes along with taking non-intrusive seating position were employed to ensure the reliability and validity of the collected data. The lessons were also audio-recorded for further analysis.

The tally marks in each variable column on the COPS tables were added together to calculate the total minutes that a particular behavior or activity had occurred during each observation. Then, the average time each variable occurred during the course of the study was calculated, and the unit of analysis was one lesson. Devoted time for each session was 90 minutes but sometimes the lessons started some minutes late or ended some minutes soon in this way the average lesson time was calculated 75 minutes.

The interviews with the participants were conducted in Persian, to avoid the influence of the foreign language proficiency. The questions were asked from the interviewees, they answered the questions freely. The Interviewees' answers were recorded and transcribed for further analysis. Participants' anonymity was kept at all times, the students and the instructors were informed that interview and observation results are used just

for investigation. Their confidentiality and privacy was observed when the data were analyzed and tabulated.

RESULTS

Results of the Observations

Table 1 shows totals minutes and average percentages of observation time coded for the COPS's first section focusing on oral participation at a whole-class level. The results revealed that the students in the sample dominated classroom talking, and more than one third of all lesson time were taken by student-response which mostly contained answer to teacher questions or giving presentation. However, it showed that there was an undeniable lack of student-initiated talk in the classrooms. It means that the participants rarely produced self-selected turns to talk. One fourth of the class time was consumed by teacher-initiated talk which mainly included giving explanation or asking questions.

Table 1 further reveals that oral participation in the form of a single pair or single group of students talk, took just over 3% of class time. Because only in one out of four classes pair/group work was practiced. As a result, oral participation by pair/group work was not common phenomenon in Iranian university language classrooms. Furthermore, **Table 1** showed that in more than one fourth of class

time in the study, there was no oral participation by any participants. Meantime, the students were engaged in aural activities, writing, or reading silently.

The results obtained from individual student monitoring are presented in **Table 2**. The mean of student-initiated talk among the 84 students who were individually monitored minute by minute throughout observation periods was considerably low (see **Table 2**). While devoting less than a percent of their time initiating talk, and about 2% of their time talk-response, the students eventually spent the majority of the class time listening to the student talk. Furthermore, over 6% of students' time was consumed by being off-task and disengaged from the learning process. In addition, individually monitored learners were observed to engage over 80% of lesson time to the task of listening to the teacher, to the other students or audio equipment.

Based on **Table 1**, in more than one fourth of lesson time there was no oral participation by any participant, **Table 2** showed that most of this silence was used by the students listening to audio-video equipments and about 5% was spent by the students either writing or silently reading. It is not surprising that little time was spent for practicing writing and reading skills

because the focus of the courses was on improving listening and speaking skills.

Results of the Interviews

Fifteen students were participated in the interview voluntarily. The results of the interview are presented in this part.

Ten out of 15 respondents stated if they had a question, they would not ask the instructor in class. They mentioned that they would ask their classmates or if it was a very urgent question they would ask the instructor after the class. Nine participants pointed out that they spoke English to participate in class only when they named by the instructor. Even if their answers were correct they doubt to answer. Others stated they would not volunteer to speak unless they were quite sure about the answer.

Eight interviewees mentioned that they did not feel confident, therefore, they kept silent in the class. They thought those who speak in class were really perfect. They felt anxiety to speak in front of their classmates and the instructor. Four students said they were shy, sometimes they knew the answers but they preferred to remain silent.

Five students mentioned that they were silent because they did not understand the subject or question. For example, when the instructor asked the students questions about the classmate's lecture they were silent because

they did not know the answer they did not understand the lecture or they did not listen to the lecture since it was not interesting for them. In addition, the respondents stated that sometimes they were tired or the topic was boring and as a result they preferred to be silent to end discussion.

Based on the interviews, it was not just low English proficiency and fluency which made

learners remain silent in classrooms. Some students stated that they refused to participate in oral activities that they found easy or repeating. They thought level of students was low, they wished they had worked on higher level book; they would participate more, if their classmates were more active. They felt if they always speak in class while the others were silent they were annoy the others.

Table 1: Whole Class Oral Participation Results

Categories	Total minutes	Mean per class %
Teacher (initiated)	1028	24.48
Teacher (response) Talk	18	.42
Student (initiated)	15	.36
Student (response) Talk	1612	38.38
Students in pair/group (single)	53	1.26
Students in pair/group (multiple)	85	2.03
Choral Talk	54	1.29
Off-task melee	187	4.45
Silence	1148	27.33
Total	4200	100.0

Table 2: Individual Student Modality Results

Categories	Total minutes	Mean per class %
Talk response	242	1.92
Talk initiate	4	.03
Talk pair/group	269	2.13
Talk choral	152	1.21
Reading aloud	23	.19
Reading silent	244	1.94
Writing	419	3.32
Listening to teacher	3078	24.43
Listening to student(s)	4635	36.78
Listening to audio	2774	22.02
Off-task melee	760	6.03
Total	12600	100.0

CONCLUSION

The current project found convincing evidence that silence is common phenomenon in university EFL classes in Iran. Individual students were observed to be silent during the

class. They rarely produced self selected turn to talk and seldom did they speak voluntarily during the lessons. The students employed silence in order not to become the center of attention in the classroom.

Moreover, this study showed that different factors such as classroom atmosphere, participants' trait, learners' personality and proficiency can influence students silence in the university EFL classrooms in Iran. The results of the present study confirm the findings of the study conducted by **King (2011)** concerning oral participation patterns within Japanese university second language classrooms and dramatic lack of talk produced among the learners. The findings are also in line with the study conducted by **(Harumi, 2014)** who found that some interrelated linguistic, psychological and socio-cultural factors influence language learners' silence.

Clearly in order to improve students' participation in the target language, both EFL learners and teachers need to take some measures. Students should be active learners in the classrooms and make use of the chances to practice speaking English to others and try not to be too silent in class. It is also useful for them to improve their English proficiency, and be supportive of peers during oral English lessons.

It is important for instructors and teachers to create friendly environment in class, in order to make students willing to speak English, and they should provide interesting topics for classroom discussions. In addition, English

teachers should try to give the EFL learners more chances to be orally active in class. However, because silence vary from context to context, more research is required with different groups of EFL learners in various situations to better understand the issue and promote the learning of oral English. The findings of this study help teachers develop the appropriate curriculum by considering the importance of oral interaction in language learning.

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