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THE INVISIBLE CURRICULUM OF SILENCE: RETHINKING THE PEDAGOGY OF NON-PARTICIPATION IN EFL CLASSROOMS

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Abstract: This article examines student silence and non-participation in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms as significant pedagogical phenomena. It explores the psychological, social, and linguistic factors underlying silence and proposes inclusive teaching approaches to encourage meaningful student engagement.
Keywords: pedagogy of silence, EFL, student engagement, classroom participation, language anxiety, inclusive education.

Annotatsiya: Mazkur maqolada ingliz tilini chet tili sifatida o‘qitish (EFL) jarayonida o‘quvchilarning darsdagi sukuti va faol ishtirok etmasligi pedagogik hodisa sifatida tahlil qilinadi. Sukutning psixologik, ijtimoiy va lingvistik omillari o‘rganilib, o‘quvchilar faolligini oshirishga qaratilgan inklyuziv pedagogik yondashuvlar taklif etiladi.
Kalit so‘zlar: sukut pedagogikasi, EFL, o‘quvchi faolligi, sinfdagi ishtirok, til o‘rganish xavotiri, inklyuziv ta’lim.

Аннотация: В статье молчание и неучастие учащихся на занятиях по английскому языку как иностранному (EFL) рассматриваются как значимые педагогические явления. Анализируются психологические, социальные и лингвистические факторы молчания, а также предлагаются инклюзивные педагогические подходы для повышения активности учащихся.
Ключевые слова: педагогика молчания, EFL, активность учащихся, участие в занятиях, языковая тревожность, инклюзивное образование.

Introduction

Participation occupies a central position in contemporary English language teaching. Communicative language teaching, task-based instruction, collaborative learning, and interaction-oriented pedagogies generally assume that learners develop communicative competence through meaningful opportunities to use language. Within this perspective, classroom talk becomes both a medium of instruction and an observable indicator of engagement. Students who initiate questions, respond to prompts, negotiate meaning, and contribute to discussions are consequently more likely to be recognized as active participants. Yet the relationship between speaking and learning is not straightforward. A learner may remain silent while mentally constructing a response, comparing grammatical alternatives, interpreting a difficult question, evaluating the social consequences of speaking, or rehearsing an utterance internally. Another learner may remain silent because previous mistakes have attracted ridicule, because classroom interaction is dominated by a small group, or because the teacher evaluates participation primarily through rapid oral responses. These situations may produce the same observable behavior while reflecting fundamentally different learning conditions.

This ambiguity creates a significant pedagogical problem. When silence is interpreted exclusively as a deficit, teachers risk confusing linguistic difficulty with emotional vulnerability,

reflective processing with disengagement, and limited opportunities with unwillingness. The resulting assessment may underestimate learners' knowledge and reinforce inequalities in classroom interaction. Research on second-language communication has long recognized that linguistic competence does not automatically translate into willingness to communicate. MacIntyre et al. (1998) proposed a situational model in which communication depends on a combination of linguistic, psychological, and social variables rather than competence alone. Their framework offers an important starting point for understanding why a learner who knows an answer may nevertheless choose not to express it.

Literature Review

Silence is not a unitary behavioral category. Its interpretation depends on duration, context, interactional expectations, learner intention, and subsequent behavior. A short pause before a complex answer may indicate productive processing, whereas prolonged withdrawal following repeated public correction may signal a deteriorating sense of communicative safety. The absence of speech alone cannot reliably distinguish these possibilities.

Kurzon (2007) demonstrates the importance of developing a typology of silence rather than assuming that all silent behavior serves the same communicative function. In language education, this distinction is particularly important because learners are simultaneously processing unfamiliar linguistic forms and negotiating the social demands of classroom participation.

Bao (2019) similarly emphasizes the place of silence in second-language acquisition. Silence may provide space for mental rehearsal, reflection, and preparation, but its pedagogical value depends on how it relates to subsequent opportunities for language use. A silent period that supports the formulation of a more elaborate response differs from a pattern in which learners repeatedly lose opportunities to speak.

The distinction between silence and non-participation therefore requires conceptual precision. Silence refers to an observable absence or reduction of verbal production. Non-participation is a broader interpretation of engagement and may involve the absence of meaningful contribution across oral, written, collaborative, and reflective activities. A student who does not answer publicly but writes a thoughtful response, identifies an error, or contributes to peer reasoning may be participating meaningfully through a different channel. At the same time, not every quiet learner is cognitively engaged. A learner may be confused, distracted, excluded, or unwilling to participate. The analytical task is not to assign a positive meaning to silence in advance, but to determine which explanation is supported by evidence.

The willingness-to-communicate framework provides a theoretical explanation for the gap between knowledge and observable speech. MacIntyre et al. (1998) conceptualize second-language willingness to communicate through interacting linguistic, affective, and social variables. Their model challenges the assumption that a learner's communicative behavior can be predicted solely from language proficiency. A learner may possess sufficient vocabulary and grammatical knowledge but avoid speaking when the audience is unfamiliar, the topic is personally sensitive, or the possibility of public correction appears threatening. Conversely, a learner with relatively limited proficiency may communicate readily when the topic is familiar and the interactional environment feels supportive.

This situational variability has direct implications for assessment. If the same learner speaks freely in pair work but remains silent during whole-class questioning, the difference should prompt an investigation of audience, task structure, perceived risk, and teacher response. It should not immediately be interpreted as inconsistent motivation. The willingness-to-communicate perspective also suggests that participation is partly relational. Learners respond not only to the content of a

question but also to the perceived relationship between themselves, their peers, and the teacher. Classroom silence may consequently reflect the social conditions under which language production occurs rather than a stable personal characteristic.

From a sociocultural perspective, language learning develops through participation in socially organized activities. Vygotsky's work on the relationship between language, thought, and development provides a theoretical basis for understanding how interaction can mediate learning. However, participation is not automatically distributed equally among classroom members. Teacher questioning patterns, turn allocation, peer status, linguistic confidence, and classroom conventions influence who obtains opportunities to contribute. When the same fluent learners answer most questions, quieter students may receive fewer opportunities to formulate and test their ideas. Their silence can then be interpreted as evidence of limited ability, even though the interactional structure has restricted the evidence available to the teacher.

This process creates a self-reinforcing pattern. Learners who speak frequently gain practice, receive more feedback, and become more visible to the teacher. Learners who hesitate receive fewer opportunities to demonstrate competence and may become increasingly peripheral to classroom interaction. The problem is not necessarily deliberate exclusion. A teacher may simply direct questions toward students who respond quickly because this maintains lesson momentum. Nevertheless, the cumulative effect can be unequal access to language practice. Classroom silence should therefore be examined at both individual and structural levels. The relevant question is not only why a particular student does not speak, but also how the classroom distributes speaking opportunities, wait time, feedback, and recognition.

The concept of the hidden curriculum traditionally refers to implicit values, expectations, and norms communicated through educational organization and everyday practice rather than through the formal syllabus. Applied to EFL classrooms, the invisible curriculum of silence describes the unwritten rules that shape learners' decisions about speaking. A classroom may formally promote communicative competence while implicitly rewarding grammatical perfection, rapid responses, accent conformity, and public confidence. Under these conditions, students can learn that a short, accurate answer is safer than an exploratory contribution containing errors. They may also infer that the teacher's interpretation of a correct answer matters more than collaborative meaning-making. Silence thus becomes connected to power. Teachers normally control question selection, turn allocation, correction, evaluation, and the transition between activities. Students have varying degrees of influence over when and how they speak. These asymmetries are not inherently illegitimate; teachers have necessary instructional responsibilities. The pedagogical issue arises when classroom organization systematically makes some forms of participation easier and safer than others.

Methodology

This article adopts a critical integrative review and conceptual synthesis approach. It draws on established theoretical work in second-language communication, language anxiety, sociocultural learning, and silence studies, alongside published empirical investigations that explicitly examine classroom silence and participation.

Results and Discussion

Existing studies provide evidence that silence is a recognized and heterogeneous phenomenon in EFL education. Their value lies not in establishing a universal prevalence rate, but in documenting the contexts in which learners and researchers have examined non-participation.

The studies illustrate the diversity of methodological approaches used to investigate silence. Questionnaires can identify reported perceptions across a group, while interviews can clarify how

learners interpret particular experiences. Classroom observations and conversation analysis can reveal how silence emerges during interaction, including the role of teacher questions and turn-taking structures. The sample sizes must be interpreted cautiously. The groups of 117 and 132 students are not interchangeable samples drawn from a common population. Likewise, a study involving 36 students cannot be treated as evidence that the same pattern exists in all EFL settings. These studies support the importance of investigating silence; they do not establish a universal percentage of silent learners or a single causal explanation.

The 2024 Vietnamese study is particularly relevant because it identifies two functions that may appear similar in classroom observation but require different instructional responses: obtaining additional thinking time and avoiding embarrassment. The first may be supported by allowing preparation; the second may require a safer feedback culture and less threatening forms of public participation. The findings summarized by Kör and Semiz (2020) similarly suggest that classroom silence deserves to be understood within students' perceptions of engagement. Their reported gender-related differences should not be generalized into assumptions about the behavior of individual male or female learners. Instead, such findings invite contextual investigation into whether classroom expectations, social norms, confidence, or task design affect participation differently across groups.

The broader implication is that a numerical count of spoken responses cannot independently reveal the educational meaning of silence. The same observable behavior may emerge from different mechanisms, and each mechanism may require a different intervention.

The figure demonstrates the relative scale of the selected learner samples, not the frequency of silence within those samples. It would be methodologically incorrect to conclude that 37% of learners remain silent because Nguyen's study contributes approximately 37% of the combined sample. The numerator and denominator in that interpretation would refer to different variables. A reliable estimate of silence prevalence would require a clearly defined operational measure, such as the percentage of eligible speaking turns not taken by a learner, the duration of silence following a specific question type, or the proportion of students reporting a defined pattern of non-participation. Such measures would need comparable observation periods, sampling procedures, and definitions across classrooms. The available findings nevertheless support a substantive conclusion: classroom silence has been investigated through multiple research traditions, and the phenomenon is sufficiently complex to require more than a single behavioral indicator.

The literature supports a distinction between silence that can facilitate learning, silence that reflects an individual response to classroom conditions, and silence that emerges from interactional barriers. The following typology is an analytical framework proposed in this article, rather than a validated diagnostic instrument.

Table 1
FUNCTIONAL TYPOLOGY OF CLASSROOM SILENCE

Type of silence	Possible underlying mechanism	Observable indicators requiring investigation	Appropriate pedagogical response
Reflective silence	Cognitive processing and response formulation	Note-taking, attentive listening, later coherent responses	Allow wait time and provide planning opportunities

Strategic silence	Deliberate choice or management of interaction	Selective participation, considered withholding of a response	Respect learner agency and offer alternative contribution routes
Affective silence	Anxiety, embarrassment, or fear of evaluation	Hesitation during public performance, avoidance after correction	Provide supportive feedback and low-risk rehearsal
Linguistic silence	Difficulty retrieving vocabulary or constructing language	Long pauses, incomplete utterances, requests for clarification	Supply scaffolding, lexical prompts, and preparation time
Interactionally produced silence	Unequal turn allocation or restrictive questioning	Repeated domination by a few speakers, rapid teacher turn transfer	Redistribute turns and redesign interaction patterns
Disengagement-related silence	Limited attention, low task relevance, or withdrawal	Persistent lack of response across several participation modes	Investigate task relevance, understanding, and learner needs

The categories are not mutually exclusive. A learner may experience linguistic difficulty and anxiety simultaneously, while a classroom with restrictive turn allocation can intensify both. The categories should therefore guide inquiry rather than become labels attached permanently to students. A key distinction concerns the evidence required to interpret each form. Reflective silence should not be inferred merely because a learner looks attentive. A subsequent written response, a think-aloud reflection, or a relevant contribution may provide stronger evidence of processing. Similarly, affective silence should not be diagnosed solely from a lack of speech; learner self-report and contextual observation are necessary to avoid attributing emotions without evidence.

The cycle is important because it shows how an apparently individual behavior can be reinforced by classroom organization. A student who speaks less receives fewer opportunities to demonstrate oral competence. If the teacher interprets this lack of evidence as a lack of knowledge, the student may be offered fewer challenging opportunities or may be repeatedly asked only simple display questions. Such practices can further reduce meaningful participation. However, the cycle is not inevitable. A teacher can interrupt it by providing preparation time, using structured pair work, allowing written responses before oral discussion, and ensuring that students have equitable access to turns. These changes increase the range of evidence available for evaluating learning and may help learners develop greater confidence. The model also generates a testable hypothesis: classrooms that reduce unnecessary communicative risk and distribute opportunities more equitably should show changes in the relationship between initial silence and subsequent participation. Testing this hypothesis requires repeated observations and learner-level data rather than one-time impressions.

Classroom questions do more than elicit information. They establish expectations about the acceptable speed, length, and accuracy of a response. Display questions, for which the teacher already knows the expected answer, may be useful for checking vocabulary or grammar. However, when they dominate classroom interaction, they can encourage students to focus on producing the anticipated answer rather than developing and negotiating meaning. Abedinpour's research,

published in TESOL Quarterly in 2026, examines obstructive silence through structured observation, conversation analysis, and stimulated-recall interviews. Its reported findings identify turn-taking patterns, initiation–response–feedback sequences, and display questions as important indicators in the analysis of obstructive silence. This work highlights the need to examine the interactional organization of silence rather than attributing it exclusively to learner characteristics.

In a conventional initiation–response–feedback sequence, the teacher initiates a question, the learner responds, and the teacher evaluates or elaborates on the response. This structure is not inherently problematic. It becomes restrictive when the teacher controls nearly every turn, treats incomplete responses as failures, or moves rapidly to the next speaker without allowing learners to formulate ideas. An alternative interactional pattern can preserve instructional clarity while increasing learner agency. The teacher can pose an open question, provide individual thinking time, invite brief written preparation, ask students to compare interpretations in pairs, and then facilitate a whole-class discussion. This sequence creates multiple entry points into the same task.

It also produces richer evidence of learning. A learner who cannot respond immediately in a public exchange may contribute after discussing the question with a peer. The difference between these performances can reveal the influence of interactional conditions and help the teacher make more informed instructional decisions.

Participation grades can unintentionally reward visibility rather than learning. If assessment primarily counts spoken contributions, students who speak frequently may receive higher evaluations regardless of the relevance or quality of their contributions. Meanwhile, students who listen carefully, prepare thoughtful responses, or contribute substantially in small groups may receive limited recognition. An equitable assessment system should distinguish participation frequency from participation quality and should not treat all forms of silence as equivalent. At the same time, EFL instruction must preserve meaningful opportunities for oral language production. Recognizing silent reflection cannot replace the need to develop speaking competence.

Table 2

PROPOSED MULTIDIMENSIONAL PARTICIPATION RUBRIC

Dimension	Evidence to consider	Suggested assessment focus
Oral contribution	Relevance, intelligibility, elaboration, interactional responsiveness	Quality and development of spoken language
Collaborative engagement	Listening, turn-sharing, peer support, negotiation of meaning	Contribution to shared learning
Reflective preparation	Written planning, notes, response revision, task analysis	Evidence of preparation and reasoning
Communicative development	Willingness to attempt responses, use of feedback, revision after difficulty	Growth over time rather than confidence alone
Strategic participation	Appropriate questions, clarification requests, considered timing of contributions	Purposeful involvement in classroom interaction

The rubric is a proposed pedagogical instrument and requires piloting before use for high-stakes grading. Its dimensions should not be assigned arbitrary numerical weights without evidence that the resulting scores are reliable and valid. For example, a teacher might compare a student's initial oral performance with later pair-work contributions and written preparation. If the student

demonstrates strong understanding in writing but remains hesitant during whole-class discussion, the appropriate response is not to disregard speaking development. Rather, the teacher should design graduated speaking opportunities and assess improvement over time.

The purpose is to broaden the evidence used to understand participation while retaining the communicative objectives of EFL education. An effective intervention begins with diagnosis rather than compulsory speech. When silence appears, the teacher can consider whether the task is linguistically accessible, whether learners understand the question, whether sufficient planning time has been provided, and whether the classroom environment makes errors socially costly.

The proposed framework has particular relevance for educational environments where learners study English alongside other languages and where formal assessment may emphasize accuracy, memorization, or rapid reproduction of expected answers. In multilingual classrooms, learners may need to coordinate knowledge across languages before expressing an idea in English. This process should not automatically be interpreted as inadequate preparation. Brief planning in a familiar language, bilingual lexical notes, or structured translation-to-reformulation activities may help learners develop the conceptual content required for subsequent English communication.

Nevertheless, the purpose of such support is to facilitate language development rather than eliminate English-language practice. Teachers can gradually move from bilingual preparation toward increasingly independent English production as learners gain confidence and linguistic resources.

In examination-oriented contexts, the pressure to avoid mistakes may be reinforced when classroom activities resemble high-stakes oral testing. Teachers should distinguish practice environments, where experimentation and revision are essential, from assessment situations that require standardized performance. A classroom that treats every answer as an examination may unintentionally discourage the exploratory language use necessary for communicative development. The framework may also be useful in Uzbek higher education, where EFL learners can have different levels of prior exposure, confidence, and opportunities to use English outside the classroom. These contextual considerations should be investigated empirically rather than assumed to characterize all Uzbek learners or institutions. A locally grounded study could examine whether students participate differently during teacher-led questioning, small-group discussion, written preparation, and digital interaction. Such research would provide evidence about which classroom arrangements expand participation without making unsupported cultural generalizations.

The present article synthesizes existing theoretical and empirical work rather than reporting a new experiment. Its proposed typology, feedback model, and assessment rubric should therefore be treated as conceptual contributions requiring validation. The studies reviewed differ in sample size, educational context, research design, and the definitions used to describe silence. Their findings cannot be pooled into a reliable overall prevalence estimate, and the reported associations do not independently establish causation. Some available study summaries also provide insufficient detail to calculate effect sizes, confidence intervals, or standardized comparisons.

Future research should use clearly operationalized measures of silence and participation. Classroom observation could record the frequency and duration of pauses, the distribution of speaking turns, teacher wait time, response type, and the opportunities offered to individual learners. These observations should be complemented by interviews or reflective tasks that clarify learners' interpretations of particular silent episodes. Longitudinal designs would be especially valuable because a single observation cannot distinguish a temporary reflective pause from a persistent participation barrier. Repeated measurements could establish whether learners respond differently as classroom routines, task structures, and feedback practices change.

Experimental or quasi-experimental studies could compare different preparation sequences, such as immediate whole-class questioning versus individual thinking followed by pair discussion. Outcomes should include not only the number of spoken responses but also response quality, willingness to communicate, anxiety-related self-reports, and the distribution of participation across learners. Researchers should also examine possible differences associated with proficiency, gender, educational level, disability, and prior learning experience without assuming that group membership determines behavior. Ethical safeguards are necessary when investigating anxiety or recording classroom interaction, particularly where participation data may influence grades.

Conclusion

Classroom silence is neither an automatic sign of failure nor an inherently productive learning strategy. It is an ambiguous phenomenon whose meaning depends on cognitive processing, emotional experience, linguistic resources, learner agency, and the organization of classroom interaction. The concept of the invisible curriculum of silence reveals how everyday teaching practices communicate expectations about acceptable participation. Rapid questioning, unequal turn allocation, public correction, and narrow participation grading may create conditions in which learners learn to protect themselves from communicative risk. These practices can obscure learners' knowledge and restrict access to opportunities for language development.

The empirical studies discussed in this article support a more differentiated understanding of silence. Research involving undergraduate EFL students, Vietnamese engineering students, Chinese learners, and other educational groups demonstrates that silence has been investigated as a cognitive, emotional, strategic, and interactional phenomenon. However, differences between these studies prevent the calculation of a universal silence rate or the assertion of a single explanation for non-participation. The proposed pedagogical framework recommends interpreting silence through multiple forms of evidence, expanding access to speaking opportunities, providing structured preparation, and evaluating participation through both the quality of oral interaction and broader evidence of engagement. These measures do not diminish the importance of speaking. Instead, they create more informed pathways toward it.

Ultimately, the central responsibility of the EFL teacher is not to eliminate every silent moment but to determine what that moment makes visible about learning. Silence becomes educationally useful when it is understood, investigated, and responded to with appropriate pedagogical judgment. The classroom that values communication must therefore learn to listen not only to what students say, but also to the conditions that enable or prevent them from speaking.

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