SILENT BEHAVIOR IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE CLASSROOM: GOOD LANGUAGE LEARNERS’ PERSPECTIVES

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ABSTRACT

Common assumptions about silence among EFL learners is regarding learner’s linguistic and psychological problems. But, how does if such silence occur to students who have a high ability in English language? This paper aligns the reasons why good language learners (GLLs) perform silent. A case study was conducted with two good language learners as the key participants. As it was qualitative in nature, the interview-driven discussion was presented in a narrative way. The findings in this study confirmed that language proficiency did not play a significant role for the GLLs’ silence. In this study, personal characteristic and classroom environment played a more role to trigger the GLLs to stay silent. Due to its limitation, however, it is suggested to conduct further research which involves a more comprehensive method and larger samples. A special attention should also be placed to the role of individual cultures since it was not discussed in this research.

INTRODUCTION

The discussion of silence in the second language learning has long been elucidated from various perspectives. Most commonly, the silent behavior is linked with the linguistic and psychological deficiencies [1, 2]. From linguistics point of view, for instance, lack of comprehension to the target language is perceived to inhibit the learners’ to participate orally [1]. It is worse when this limitation causes the learners to suffer an excessive anxiety. As the result, the students do not enjoy their learning and it decreases their word production [3] by deciding to perform silent during the entire class.

Current researchers also illuminate the potential engagement of socio-culture in the learner’s silence. The studies highlighted that the learners’ reticence is largely influenced by an external environment such as teachers and peers [4, 5] or previous educational experiences [6]. From those perspectives, of course, it is difficult to judge the meaning of silence from one isolated perspective. Rather, it is composed by a combination of them.

Apart from the theories above, however, it is implied that most researchers draw their attention for students in overall. There is seemingly inadequate information which explores the existence of silence among the good language learners. In fact, there is an anomaly since the good language learners often remain silent despite
possessing high ability in English. In order to bridge this gap, it is imperative to study the meaning of silence among the good language learners in depth. This paper aims to explicate why the good language learners remains silent. Secondly, it will also investigate the good language learners’ view towards silent behavior

**Research Questions**

To clarify the problem above, this research is addressed to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the factors that contribute to the good language learners’ silence?
2. How the good language learners view the presence of silence in English language classroom? Is it positive or negative?

**Understanding Silence**

The term silence has been widely discussed nowadays. However, the researchers seemingly agree that there is no widely accepted convention successfully defining what silence is or what constitutes to silence [1]. The most universal definition about silence is associated with the period of time without any speech or sound. Meanwhile, Tannen [7] describes silence as an omission in a conversation process. From socio-cultural perspective, the researchers assert that silence is beyond the absence of speech [8]. Silence can be very powerful as a means of delivering messages, something that the verbal discourse cannot do. For some reasons, it is very common to hold his/her speech in order to emphasize the meaning of the message. By performing silence, people could convey his/her message deeper even without producing any words from his mouth. Indeed, performing silence will possibly emerge multiple interpretations. Here the existence of context surrounding the silence is very crucial [8, 9]. This is which later determine whether the silence means positive or conversely.

**Silence in Indonesian Cultures**

The term “silence” often results various interpretations depending on the cultures underpin it. In western cultures, for example, silence in a span of time might be irritating. It indicates that someone is not excited to talk to you. On the other hand, in Asian cultures such as Indonesia silence is frequently employed as a form of politeness strategy. This phenomenon is mostly influenced by the collective cultures adhered to the Indonesian people. In collective cultures, the focus is on “showing you belong to and respect your own group” [10, pg. 180]. In this culture, a person is cautious to express his/her opinion if it is different from the opinion of the social community. If he/she should express it, he/she tends to use a very soft language and in an indirect way. They attempt to choose the linguistic features that
do not cause face loss for the interlocutor. In contrast, countries from western part of world, individualistic culture, are relatively free to express their mind.

As mentioned above, Indonesia is included into collective cultures. Hence, silence is valued positively among the Indonesian people. Being silent during the conversation is acceptable moreover when you are in a less power or status. Social status of the interlocutor usually plays a part to determine the language or speech act in the conversation. Javanese women which is low hierarchically is best reflected to this extent [8]. Due to their lower position, the women should considerably consider the language choice they will use including the non-verbal language like silence. However, some other cultures see negatively towards the existence of silence moreover if the silence is not accompanied with further explanation [10]. In Batak culture, for instance, to perform silence is regarded rude.

Silence in Language Learning

As noted earlier, silence is frequently associated with learners’ limitation including in language, psychology, and socio-culture. Students who are silent tend to avoid oral interactions during the language class. They prefer to keep silent and even reluctant to raise hand. Unsurprisingly, such silence is perceived as a threat, in particular, for the teaching strategy who benefits the students verbal engagement such as cooperative learning [9].

To some extents, however, silence can be also valued positively. Tannen [7] argues that it is the context of the silence which determines whether the silence brings negative or positive impression. Yamat et al. [12] claims that the students that they observed “learn silently”. They report that sometimes the students are very cautious toward what they will produce, that leads them to keep silent. Luckily, at the same time, the students utilize their surrounding and do observation as a means of learning a new language. Once they are sure enough, they immediately produce the language orally. It is possibly a trick to avoid mistakes in making utterance when speaking. Therefore, their silence cannot be simply considered as lack of language proficiency in this case.

Form and Participants

This research was conducted through a case study design. A case study is regarded successful to recognizes and presents the individual complexity occurred within a social community [13, 14, 15]. Two good language learners were invited to be the participants named Nelsy and Affan (pseudonyms). They were the second semester students from Constitutional Law Major. They were reported to acquire a high ability in English language proven by the above 500 TOEFL scores. Particularly the second student, he had greatly attracted the researcher’s attention. He did not take part at all in the classroom activities. In the researcher’s pre-observation, he preferred to remain silent and did not actively engage, raise hand,
share opinion, or involve in other verbal participations. Of course, it leads my curiosity whether the student is quiet in nature or it constitutes the process of his learning.

**DATA COLLECTION**

In order to collect proper and deep data, a semi-structured interview was undertaken during April 2019. The researcher used an interview guideline from King’s study [9] with several modifications depending on the students’ response. The interview was carried out within a very casual situation. The students were permitted to speak in Bahasa Indonesia to make sure the opinion was delivered perfectly. An approximately 35 minute interview was recorded from Nelsy and Affan with 15 minutes and 18 minutes length respectively. Having gathered the recording, the researcher started to transcribe it using simple software for transcription namely Express Scribe.

**Data Analysis and Procedure**

As this research is qualitative in nature, it did not rely on statistical computation; rather it was analyzed and discussed in a narrative way. First of all, the data passed through a transcription stage in order to convert the audio data into text. Then, the data was reduced. Unrelated and unnecessary data were thrown away to ensure that only the important data was administered. After that, the data was organized and labeled based on their similarities. This stage was called coding. The researcher made an attempt to reduce and group the data into several small categories. The small categories then are reduced again until the researcher emerges 3 to 5 major themes in the research [16].

**RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS**

This section presents the interview-driven discussion aiming to answer the research questions. To be noted, this research seeks to explore the following research questions:

1. What are the factors that contribute to the good language learners’ silence?
2. How the good language learners view the presence of silence in English language classroom? Is it positive or negative?

**Factors Contributing To Good Language Learners’ (Gll) Silence**

While language proficiency has become a popular attribute to language learners’ reticence, anomaly was shown by two language learners in this research.
Despite possessing a high ability, the students remained to perform silent. The interview conducted in this research noticed that, indeed language proficiency did not play a part to their silence. The personal characteristic was identified significant in this research. Learners’ motivation, habitual and personality was regarded the main reasons of why the GLLs performed silent.

For many language learners, lack of motivation is one factor which greatly prevents them from speaking English. In fact, this case happens to good language learners as well. Only, it was not a result of linguistic problem. There simply seems no good reason for them to speak. Affan said many students “feel unmotivated to speak, including me (him)”. Interestingly, this finding is relevant with a similar study in Iran. They outlined that lack of motivation had become the major reasons for the students to be quiet [6]. Hence, it was clear that the teachers still have a pile of homework to do. The finding alerts that the motivational problem was not only encountered by poor language students, but also by good language learners.

As in Affan case, Nelsy prefers to listen rather than speaking. She “listen(s) to others’ explanation prior to express everything (in mind)”. It indicates that such silence is very typical. In Nelsy’s case, her silent cannot automatically be translated to do nothing. She listened to others in her attempt to gather and analyze the information. During the process, she was thinking and working in her mind. Consequently, she did not produce any sound or speech which was frequently considered as performing silence. Actually, this type of learning had ever been elucidated by Yamat et al. [12]. They claimed that the students “were actually learning or acquiring the language silently” (p. 1342).

Of many potential factors, introversion and extroversion also emerged to affect learners’ frequency to participate in classroom. Both students admitted that they were “... tacitum in nature”. However, they continued that sometimes they were active too (Nelsy), for example in physical movement (Affan).

As classroom is the place for social interaction, the class setting surely plays a crucial role in determining learners’ participation frequency [4]. The teacher and classmate are two entities that the GLLs have interaction most frequently. In fact, these two things were admitted as the crucial reasons before they decide to speak.

The finding revealed that both GLLs had identical perspectives over the teacher’s factor. Nelsy perceived that the teacher plays apart in making her to stay silent. She argued “it is hard to speak during the class because the atmosphere is serious and awkward. So, I mean uuhmm there is a gap. So we cannot uuhmm if we feel secure, then it is easier to speak” (Nelsy). From the interview, it was implied that the teacher holds the entire control in classroom. Often, the teacher was unaware that he/she was too dominant in the class. It was added by the lack of creativity to generate the classroom activity. As the result, the classroom became less enjoyable and the student felt insecure. Also, they were hard to release their creativity.

From a more gently voice, Affan supplemented that the teachers actually had given equal opportunities for the students. What seemed inadequate was “...
sometimes the students received fewer stimulants from the teachers ... “. He continued by suggesting that he “can be quicker (to give response)” if only the teacher offered adequate stimulants. From this view, the attention of teachers’ tolerance toward the length of silence needed to be given. Often, the teachers expect their students to respond their questions quickly and fluently. In fact, this might be irritating for the students.

Another factor that made the students silent was from peers’ role. From the good language learners’ point of view, they often remained silent even though they could contribute more for classroom discussion. They preferred to let other students’ led the classroom discussion. They wish that other students can also participate without worrying too much to their language (Nelsy). In addition, they avoided looking too dominant among the others. Such show-off actions basically could intimidate the others and raise jealousy (Affan). Luckily, even if the jealousy persisted, he was sure it would not affect his learning. “... I used to dealing with that kind of students. I do not uuhmm think about it too much.” (Affan).

Moreover, Affan claimed that his silence was not eliminating his participation. Basically, he declined to involve very often because he preferred to help their classmates. Affan stated “I always try to... for example, if they want to ask a question, they ask me for help, sometimes for translation” (Affan). Again, from this finding that GLLs silence was more than the absence of sound. Affan used his silence to help his mates which was relatively poor. He perhaps considered that he was good enough; therefore, there was no need to involve in a classroom discussion. What became his goal was to embrace his peers to reach his level.

Interestingly, Nelsy also pertained that “yes” her peer ignorance played a role to her silence, but in a negative way. “... They did not listen to me. I was a bit disappointed. Since then, every time they do not listen to me, I decide to... (Keep silent)” (Nelsy). This shows the importance of peers’ relationship. Often the good language learners were reluctant to speak because their classmates did not support them. They feel keenly intimidated of such intolerance like the pressure to ask briefly, the feeling of being watched, or classmates’ respect [4]. This sentiment was also supported by Nelsy stating that:

“Sometimes, when we were in the class, for example the teacher was vicious, my classmates wanted the class ended immediately. They did not want to stay longer with the teacher. Hence, if I wanted to pose more questions, they felt upset. (They) Wanted to end the class soon. So, better I cancelled it” (Nelsy).

Is Silence Good or Bad?

The early discussion has pertained the potential factors triggering the silent behavior. One of remarkable factors mentioned was the GLLs’ personality which was quiet in nature. But, it did not automatically send a message that they were antipathy with talkative students. Both students agreed that silence was positive in one side, despite also negative in the other side. They said the effect of silence was
really dependant with the moments when they speak. Even, Nelsy suggested to combine silence and talkative to create a balance. It means, the students need to know where and when they must silent. Unsurprisingly, both students encouraged other students to be more active in a group discussion.

“It would be better if (my classmates) are very active. So I can listen to them who attend the classroom” (Nelsy).

“I mean, there is a proverb silence is golden, but it does not mean to stay silent all the time. We have to speak for important things, for example something in urgency. Although for a small thing like asking question in lesson. I mean the opportunity to ask question is only one hour but we miss it because considering it is silence. Of course, this is wrong” (Affan).

CONCLUSIONS

The discussion likely confirmed that the GLLs’ silence were considerably influenced by collective cultures. As mentioned earlier, people who were from such cultures tended to be very cautious over the community’s feeling. Their attempts to give more opportunities to other students were best reflected to this culture. They were aware to prioritize their community prior to themselves.

Most importantly, the GLLs’ silence did not prelude them to learn English. Perhaps, this is the matter that distinguishes the GLLs’ silence from the other students. While performing silence, the GLLs remain to learn and acquire the language. In Nelsy’s case, for example, her silence let her to explore her listening and critical thinking ability. She silently listened to the information from other students before expressing his own. As the result, her answer became more conclusive. Affan, on the other hand, indirectly acquired the language. Indeed, he does not apparently contribute to the classroom discussion, such as posing questions, giving comment, or raising hand. However, he has actually confirmed his linguistic knowledge through his assistant and collaboration with the other students.

Up to present, there is very few research that exclusively elaborates the phenomenon of silence among the good language learners. Thus, their silent behavior was frequently misinterpreted. This research may contribute to offer novel insights for the teachers or classroom instructors. The teachers should be aware that every learners are different. What might the teachers do is to find an appropriate strategy in order to ensure the students experience the language learning.

Eventually, the researcher are keen to aware that this study is very limited in terms of its scope and generalibility. Hence, further research which involves larger good language learners as participants should be undertaken. The use of intensive observation is highly suggested in order to describe how the silence occurs among the learners. By doing observation, the research can describe the existence of silence in more detail. A special attention should also be placed to the role of individual cultures since it was not discussed in this research.
REFERENCES