



INVESTIGATING STUDENTS' SILENCE DURING SYNCHRONOUS VIRTUAL CLASSROOM: A CASE STUDY

Dela Rahmawati, Yuyus Saputra, Fera Sulastri

*yuyussaputra@unsil.ac.id

Universitas Siliwangi, Indonesia

ABSTRACT

This current study explores the silent behavior of students within a synchronous virtual classroom. It focuses on investigating the factors affecting students' silence in the synchronous virtual classroom from the students' perception. This study used a descriptive case study as the research design. This study used semi-structured interviews as the data collection. A semi-structured interview was asked to five silent students in the synchronous virtual classroom. Then, the data were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The findings indicate various causes of students' silence in the synchronous virtual classrooms: lack of confidence, describing comprehension by silence, lack of knowledge, lack of English proficiency, being a good listener and showing respect, lack of preparation for learning, unsuitable teaching style, and technical issues.

Keywords: students' silence, synchronous virtual classroom, case study

INTRODUCTION

Silence with the type of absence of oral participation during learning tasks is seen as the main problem by many educators (King and Aono (2017)). The reasons of students silent may be varied, such as they may have nothing to say; they may feel insecure and shy; they may feel that their ideas are not valued; they may be disciplined by the teacher, or they may need more time to think and reflect (Zembylas & Vrasidas, 2007). Above all, silence is not distinctive to face-to-face instruction, but silence is also experienced in online communication, one of which is silence occurring when synchronous virtual classroom. Markova, Glazkova, and Zibrova (2017) pointed out that challenges while learning at a distance is lack of interaction. However, classroom interaction plays an important role in improving a student's English proficiency (Zhouyuan, 2016). Otherwise, the fact that many college students did not make a vocal participation during the learning process in a synchronous virtual classroom.

Based on preliminary research that has been done by the researcher in one of universities in Tasikmalaya, it has been found that students tend to be silent in synchronous virtual classroom. Those students did not make any comments or vocal contributions from the beginning to the end of learning process. They did not participate in answering questions when the lecturer asked the class questions, and they did not respond when the lecturer directly asked them to express their opinion. By those conditions, the phenomenon of classroom silence in the synchronous virtual classroom is an interesting object to observe. Classroom silence becomes a common phenomenon

*Corresponding Author

Yuyus Saputra

Email: yuyussaputra@unsil.ac.id

and it has become an obstacle to the interaction between teacher and the students (Zhouyuan, 2016; Hanh, 2020). It also happened during the virtual classroom. Zhouyuan (2016) stated that Asian learners of English as a foreign language have been arguably conveyed as silent and inactive learners.

This study adopts five factors that affecting students' silence that mentioned by Liu (2000): cognitive factors, pedagogical factors, affective factors, socio-cultural factors, and linguistic factors. Cognitive factors include being textbook-dependent, and only asking questions related to texts, lack of background knowledge or schemata and work experience, the interest level in, and knowledge about, the subject matter under discussion. Therefore, teaching style of the individual instructor is an important factor influencing the students' oral class participation mode that come from pedagogical factors. Affective factors come into play when participation is perceived negatively. For instance, some participants considered themselves introverted, having a lack of confidence in speaking, shy in nature and passive in communication, over-relying on native speakers of English, or feeling overwhelmed by native English speakers in class, thus causing inhibition and or intimidation. Furthermore, socio-cultural factors in this study focus on being a good student means taking notes and listening to the teacher carefully without asking questions as a sign of respect for teachers, and a students' belief that questions and problems shall be resolved through self-study and lesson preparation. In addition, linguistic factors focus on the factors that cause silence that comes from participants' linguistic ability and communicative competence. Meanwhile, a possible non-participation assumption in online learning is that related computer problems, computer users are not open enough to share the same vulnerabilities or openness as those who have posted to online forums; despite being able to read everything that was posted, he refused to contribute to the discussion (Zembylas & Vrasidas, 2007).

The students' silence in the English classroom has been mentioned in several past works, both in face to face learning or in online learning, for instance Zembylas and Vrasidas (2007) examined how students and teachers in two online courses use and interpret silence from an ethnographic perspective. In particular, this study focuses on how learner silence affects itself in asynchronous and synchronous text-based, online communication. Choi (2015) explored the perception and reasons for Korean students' silence and low levels of oral participation in U.S. graduate programs. Zhouyuan (2016) analyzed the factors of silence in college English Classrooms. Hanh (2020) examines the reasons behind student silence in the classroom, or lack of verbal participation, and then suggests some suggested solutions to fulfill in the classroom more effectively. Tang, Wang, and Wong (2020) examined Chinese elementary students' stories about why they do not speak in class.

The study of students' silence in synchronous virtual classroom less exist in some research. The previous research mostly focused on investigating student silence in face-to-face learning and text-based online encounters. Hence, this research aims at investigating the factors affecting EFL college students' remaining silent in the English classroom during the synchronous virtual classrooms. This study is hoped to enlighten the instructors' ability to deal with those silent learners effectively. The key focus and emphasis of this study is on the meanings and forms of online silence in the context of synchronous communication and the factors that caused students' silence during synchronous virtual classroom. Silence can be defined in multiple ways. In this study, silence reflects the soundless non-verbal communicative behavior that students act in the learning process in the classroom.

METHODS

This study used a qualitative method of research using descriptive case study which describe an intervention or phenomenon and real life within its context (Yin, 2002). It was undertaken at the children's literature course in 2021 in the English Department of a university in Tasikmalaya West Java, Indonesia. In addition, this course implemented

synchronous virtual classrooms during the learning process throughout a pandemic. It was chosen because of two considerations: (1) In terms of time, the researcher had a limited amount of time to conduct the research because of study period was coming to an end, while this course had sufficient amount of time to conduct the research. (2) The researcher has obtained permission to conduct observation in this class. In determining participants, the researcher has conducted preliminary study by observing students that were silent in the children literature class that was held via zoom meeting. There were 43 students that followed the class, and from those students, it was found five students who were indicated as the most silent students. Then, those five students who were most silent served as participants for this study and were invited to be interviewed.

The researcher chose semi-structured interviews as the instrument to get the data needed for the research. The interview was conducted through synchronous online chat. Each participant was individually interviewed for about one hour at a different time. The interview was conducted in Indonesian language, participants' first language, to elicit responses without limiting or inhibiting the participants. The data gathered were analyzed using the six steps of thematic analysis procedure by Braun and Clarke (2006). Technically, the data analysis procedures cover a number of stages, namely familiarizing with the data, generating initial codes, searching the themes, reviewing the themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

After the data were analyzed using thematic analysis, eight emergent themes are finally identified that could answer question about factors affecting students' silence in synchronous virtual classroom. The themes found are lack of confidence, describing comprehension by silence, lack of knowledge, lack of English proficiency, being a good listener and showing respect, lack of preparation for learning, unsuitable teaching style, and technical issues.

Lack of Confidence

Lack of confidence was one of the main reasons why participants were unable or reluctant to participate in synchronous virtual classroom. This is the cause of the students' silence that emerges from an affective factor. Based on interview result, students' lack of confidence because they were afraid of making mistakes. They were frequently afraid of making a mistake when asking or responding to a question. Furthermore, students perceived a limitation in their expression space because they were unable to convey their question about the learning material due to a lack of confidence.

Excerpt 1

- P1 : I'm not confident, I don't even stand out when learning in a synchronous classroom. I prefer to listen or pay attention, but if I was asked a question, then I will respond or answer. I always feel unconfident to respond or ask something first, I'm too afraid of being wrong when asking or responding to something.
- P2 : When my questions about learning materials were not conveyed due to lack of confidence, or because learning time had run out, that is where my expression space was narrow.

From the statement above, the participants 1 and 4 stated that they were hesitant to ask or respond to something because they were afraid of making a mistake, so the students preferred to remain silent, listen, and pay attention. Furthermore, participant 5 stated that her expression space was limited when her questions about learning material were not conveyed do to a lack of confidence. Instead, when the lecturer directly asked a question, the students would respond or answer the question.

This finding was consistent with Liu (2000) who stated that a lack of confidence in speaking is the main debilitating factor that causes students to be silent due to affective factors. Similarly, Hang & Bell (2015), Zhouyuan (2020), Hanh (2020), and Tang et al. (2020) discovered that lack of confidence is a factor that contributes to students' silence. They discovered that students believe their English is too poor to participate actively in classroom activities. As a result, English students are afraid of being laughed at by their teacher or classmates for making mistakes, so they remain silent in class.

Lack of Knowledge

Apart from cognitive factors, students also indicated that lack of knowledge was contributing factor that prevented them from participating more actively. Lack of knowledge background or schemata had negative impact on some participants' perceptions towards oral classroom participation (Liu, 2000). Further, participants confirmed that they remained silent during the learning process because they did not know the answer to the lecturer's question when it was posed to them. They were hesitant to respond the question, felt clueless about the question, or had the same answer as their friend. As a result, staying silent became their only option in such a situation or when they were unable to express their thoughts, as can be seen in excerpt 2 below:

Excerpt 2

- P3 : Except I don't know the answer, same as the other friends, I'll shut up.
 P4 : I have my own reasons why I sometimes just keep quiet, such as I do not find the answers that lecturers want, feel clueless about the questions asked, etc.
 P5 : I decided to remain silent when I felt hesitant to answer the question.

The findings were consistent with Hanh (2020), students remained silent simply because students did not know the answer or did not understand the question, could not express their ideas, and unfamiliarity with topics or tasks may all contribute to the learners' failure to vocally respond. These findings were also consistent with Hang & Bell (2015), they noted that students stay silent once the student "did not hear the teacher, does not recognise the solution to the teacher's question" (p.765). To conclude, staying silent was an escape they could not express their ideas when they did not know the answer to the teacher's question. When students were unable or unwilling to respond to the teacher's question, students remained deafeningly silent until the call was passed on to the other students.

Describing Comprehension by Silence

Differing from previous findings, silence does not always indicate a lack of knowledge or understanding of students. This study discovered that when participants understood the material, they remained silent.

Excerpt 3

- P3 : I am silent usually because I already understand the material given and explained. As for the question that I have usually been asked by my friend. But if the lecturer asks me specifically, or has questions related to me, then I will answer them.

From the statements above, P3 mentioned that if they understood the material presented and were not confused or had questions, they would remain silent. They attentively listened to the lecturer, and they responded by nodding their head to show that they understood and were paying attention. However, the participants answered the lecturer's questions that were directed specifically at them. This is in line with Tatar (2005), silence does not always indicate a lack of knowledge or interest, and for non-

native students, and it may be a deliberate choice. It means, to prove that the students have had comprehension, the teacher should ask them some questions.

Lack of English Proficiency

Linguistic factors are another factor influencing students' silence. One of the reasons students are silent during synchronous virtual classroom due to linguistic factors is a lack of English proficiency.

Excerpt 4

P1 : The main problem is low English proficiency. This problem creeps into everything. For example, because my English proficiency is lacking, then I have to prepare everything necessary in the learning process. So when my preparation is not maximized, then I hesitate to speak up in a virtual meeting. I have to prepare the words first before I have a conversation.

The main problem of P1 of this section is that students remain silent due to lack of English proficiency. It is the same as what P2, P3, P4 and P5 stated that their English skill is lacking, and because they did not feel confident, they were hesitant to speak up in a virtual meeting. Further, participant 5 said that because her English proficiency is lacking, she must prepare everything required in the learning process. This finding was consistent with previous studies (Nakane, 2007; Hamouda, 2013; Choi 2015; Hanh 2020; and Shan 2020) attributed students' reticence to low English proficiency. Moreover, Bista (2012) indicated students who are silent do not have enough language proficiency to express their thoughts and opinion clearly. In this regard, language is a barrier for many non-native English speakers. Those with a level of English proficiency face difficulties in class participation, forcing them to remain silent. According to research findings, students are afraid of making mistakes when they have to speaking English.

Being a Good Listener and Showing Respect

Another factor influencing students' silence is the socio-cultural factor related to attitude toward the teacher. Based on the interview result, one of the reasons why students chose to remain silent was students tried to be a good listener and showed respect. Some participants in this study had a responsibility to be a good listener.

Excerpt 5

P1 : I felt I had to be a good listener and always give respect to lecturers.
P3 : I tried to be a good listener. I was thinking about what questions I wanted to ask as well as my friends.

Participants admitted that their silent behavior was employed when they were thinking, and they were silent because they tried to be a good listener and gave respect to the lecturer. This finding was consistent with Liu (2000) that a large number of socio-cultural factors, such as being a good student requires taking notes and thoughtfully listening to the teacher carefully without posing questions as a sign of respect for teacher. Similar result was found by Tatar (2005), which stated silence as a sign of respect for authority and concern for others.

In addition, the interview data indicates that the student's silence did not mean that the students were not excited or they did not pay attention. However, when the lecturer delivered the material, the students took notes and listened to the lecturer carefully. As participant 4 said that when the lecturer delivered material, she recorded it directly in the note. Besides, when the lecturer asked the question, she immediately absorbed the question and came to find or think of the answer to the question. Learners view silence as a source of strength that will help them develop the ability to listen effectively (Bista, 2012).

Lack of Preparation for Learning

Lack of preparation is another cause of students' silence in synchronous virtual classrooms. Lesson preparation is one of the debilitating factors (affect negative perceptions) in the socio-cultural domain (Liu, 2000). The findings of present study revealed that students decided to be silent when their preparation for learning was not maximal.

Excerpt 6

- P2 : ...if my preparation for learning is not maximal, I decide to be silent. However, when I think my preparation is maximal, that's where I feel confident of whatever will be faced during the lecture.
- P4 : There are many factors that cause my confidence to decline. The dominating factor is the preparation of courses which raises the fear of making mistakes.

From those statements, it showed that participants admitted that they hesitated to speak up in virtual meetings when their preparation for learning was inadequate. In contrast, when students had done the most preparation for learning, they were confident that they would be able to handle whatever came their way during the lecture. Students believe that questions and problems shall be resolved through self-study (Liu, 2000). Participants stated that inadequate preparation makes them afraid of making mistakes. This is in line with Hamouda (2013) who found that lack of preparation is the cause of students' reticence to participate in English language class. His study found that 34% of students feel nervous when speaking English without any preparation. In short, students attributed their silence to lack of preparation and expressed that they would feel more confident speaking up in virtual meetings if they were better prepared.

Unsuitable Teaching Style

Another factor that plays a great role in contributing the participants into silence is the teaching style. In the interview result, most of the participants maintained that authority or lecture style (e.g., teacher-centered, frequent lengthy lectures, one-way presentations) has a great influence on their silence.

This study result indicated that there were some lecturers who taught used one-way teaching, where the lecturer only explained the material and was closed by giving assignments without interacting with students during online meetings. as can be seen in excerpt 7 below:

Excerpt 7

- P5 : Teaching style influenced me to stay introverted. Sometimes a one-way teaching style certainly makes me and maybe all students become silent. In one way of teaching style, for example, a lecturer only explains the material and is closed by giving assignments without interacting with students during online meetings, or lecturers may interact with students, but rarely.

Bista (2012) noted that students distinguish silence as a classroom requirement because of the teacher-centered pedagogies in which the teacher expects them not to speak. Similar results were found by Hanh (2020) and Shan (2020), they believed that the teacher has a great influence on language acquisition. Teaching method is the key factor that causes class silence. In addition, various educational backgrounds, personalities and knowledge frameworks also have significant influence to it. Different teachers represent different teaching methods. In the class, most students were bored with the traditional teaching mode where the teacher had the advantage and dominant authority.

Technical Issues

This study found that technical issues are a reason students remain silent during synchronous virtual classrooms. In the case of synchronous learning processes, technical issues are an unavoidable issue. In this case, a technical issue comprises problems caused by internet connection or because of problems with the computer itself, so that made the students to be silent during the learning process. According to information from the participants, because of a bad internet connection and little problem from PC/laptop, they were unable to understand the lecturer's explanation, they could not answer the lecturer's questions, and they could not hear the lecturer's question clearly.

Excerpt 8

P2 : Sometimes my laptop was lags, so I had to get out first of the new zoom meeting. I rejoined. So, when the lecturer gave questions or the opportunity to ask or answer questions, I became a silent student.

P3 : sometimes a bad internet connection makes me unable to understand my lecturer's explanation, sometimes also errors so I cannot turn on the mic and exit the meeting.

Most of the participants reported that students remained silent because they had problems with their laptops, whether it was because the signal was lost, and the mic suddenly could not be used, or other technical problems that occur on their computers. Similar result was found by Zemblays and Vrasidas (2007), they found that students do not participate in online chat, because the students had computer problems.

From the explanation above, it can be concluded that classroom silence can be rooted from many factors which not only come from students but also from the lecturer, and technical issues. Related to the findings of this research, there are many factors that contribute to student's silence in synchronous virtual classroom, such as lack of confidence, describing comprehension by silence, lack of knowledge, lack of English proficiency, being a good listener and showing respect, lack of preparation for learning, unsuitable teaching style, and technical issues.

CONCLUSION

In a classroom environment, silence is more often maintained by two parties: the students who remain silent and the instructor who does not ask questions to those silent students. There are several factors that cause students' silence namely lack of confidence, describing comprehension by silence, lack of knowledge, lack of English proficiency, being a good listener and showing respect, lack of preparation for learning, unsuitable teaching style, and technical issues. In some cases, students may be hesitant to speak up unless personally invited to speak up by the instructor. Considering that some students prefer to remain silent in various situations, while others prefer to speak up in class, it is reasonable to assume that students have different preferences for actively participating in synchronous virtual classrooms. Teachers should not take the notion of silence literally because it has multiple meanings in the learning process. When students are silent, it cannot be assumed that they are not learning. More emphasis should be placed on the classroom context in which such silence manifests itself, as well as the classroom process by which such silence is produced. Furthermore, there was no significant difference in the factors causing student silence in the synchronous virtual classroom and in the face-to-face classroom based on the results of this study and when it is compared to the previous study. The most fundamental distinction between the two is that synchronous online learning has technical issues arising in student silence, whereas offline learning does not have such technical issues.

Students' experiences provide a great deal of information about students' silence while learning English in synchronous virtual classrooms. They offer insight into what

might be contributing to their silence as well as what lectures can do to reduce that silence. In other words, students can provide valuable information about their silence in learning English in a synchronous virtual classroom by telling the teacher about the handicaps they may face in other than the teacher aware and help them to find the solutions. Therefore, it is important to use their insights to create a more relaxed environment.

Furthermore, this study has limitations. The size and number of the participants are restricted. This study only has five students participating in the semi-structured interview. The result of this study may not be universal. It is crucial to expand the research with a larger number of populations from more colleges in order to obtain more results on a larger scale. Thus, more research method can be used, such as observation and surveys. More efforts should be made in the future research to overcome the aforementioned limitations, and more attention should be paid to achieve practical communication and interaction in language learning in a synchronous virtual classroom.

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