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Author: U. Thulasivanthana

Swami Vipulananda Institute of Aesthetic Studies, Eastern University, Sri Lanka

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# DECODING LEARNERS' SILENCE IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE CLASS

U. Thulasivanthana

*Swami Vipulananda Institute of Aesthetic Studies (SVIAS), Eastern University*

*vanthana22@gmail.com*

## **ABSTRACT**

Classroom silence is a common phenomenon in English language class. It is one of the major hindrances in language learning process. Silence instigated by learners is challenging, troubling and unsettling. It is harmful as it inhibits the learners from reaching the intended learning outcomes and achieving fruitful results. This paper aims to examine English language learners' classroom silence and the reasons for remaining silent in second language learning context. Through examining these issues this study seeks to present some effective strategies to reduce silence in English class. Thus, this study seeks to improve teaching and learning efficacy. The second year English language learners in SVIAS are reluctant to speak in English and depend greatly on teacher's explanation. Most learners prefer to sit at the back of the class to avoid being called to answer but outside the class they talk spontaneously. When the lecturer asks questions the learners often tend to respond with silence. Unless called upon individually to answer, they sit passively in the class. This problem generates frustration and fiasco in English language teaching and learning. Learners' inactivity in the class prompted the researcher to find out the causes for their silence.

Key words: Silence, English, Classroom, Learning

## **INTRODUCTION**

Silence is a debilitating phenomenon which has been proven to exist in second language classroom. This paper unfolds the notion of silence in English class and the reasons behind it. Motivating English language learners to speak in English class seems to be challenging. Silence in English class is a huge problem for many lecturers as it is a common aspect when learners are asked a question by their lecturers. Jaworski (1993) delineates silence as antagonistic and menacing when a learner does not reply to the lecturer when being expected to do so. Jones (1997) regards that in a typical class the learners should communicate.

The students remain silent due to a variety of reasons such as to exhibit reverence and gentleness, to avoid saying something negative, to build rapport with others. Numerous narratives regard silence as an impediment to be overcome; on the other side of this barrier is a richer, more vibrant promised land of vibrant classroom interactions (Reda, 2009). Literature related to second language acquisition reveals that communicating in the target language fosters second language learning and deficiency in second language results in silence. Silence indicates idleness, communication breakdown, ignorance, unwillingness to participate and passivity. Silence has not been adequately explored in the mainstream literature on second language acquisition in Sri Lanka. This research tries to unearth the factors that contribute to learners' silence and outlines some

useful guidelines to reduce silence in English class.

## METHODOLOGY

A total of sixty learners on a second year Fine Arts degree programme participated in this study. All the participants had received approximately ten years of prior English instruction. The learners were asked to think about the reasons for remaining silent in English class in focus group interviews. This provided an insight about the learners' experiences and beliefs for not speaking English in class.

## RESULTS

The learners remain silent due to issues such as low proficiency level in English, lack of confidence, nervousness, timidity and fear, difficulties with vocabulary, negative environment and negative mood.

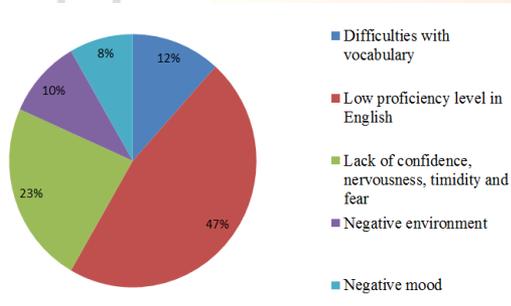


Figure 3.1: Reasons for learners' silence in English class

## DISCUSSION

### 4.1 Low proficiency level in English

Low proficiency level in English prevents the students from expressing their opinions. Most learners have studied English as a second language for more than ten years but they have not acquired sufficient mastery to communicate

fluently. They cannot completely comprehend nor can vocalize their opinions.

### 4.2 Lack of confidence, nervousness, timidity and fear

Lack of English leads to lack of confidence, nervousness, timidity and fear. They do not like to speak in English in front of the class and they think that it is good to remain silent rather than making mistakes. The learners do not have confidence with their proficiency in English, pronunciation, grammatical accuracy and their thoughts. The fear of negative response from other learners and low self-esteem are one of the reasons that make them not want to speak. The learners reflected that their English is not as good as their lecturer. They also worry they will be ridiculed by their peers if they give wrong answers. They feel shy about making mistakes in speaking English. Most Sri Lankan students are comfortable with teacher-centered classroom. They have been trained to learn through listening to their teachers and taking notes silently since primary and secondary education. These problems have decreased their motivation to speak English.

### 4.3 Difficulties with vocabulary

Vocabulary plays a central role in interaction. Many studies underline that effective communication in English class is facilitated by adequate and appropriate vocabulary acquisition rather than the learning of grammar rules. Lack of competence in vocabulary makes the learners unresponsive in English class. Most learners admitted they lacked vocabulary. Though they want to say something they do not have words to express their thoughts in English.

### 4.4 Negative environment

In SVIAS English classes are conducted for the students from the Department of

Music, Department of Dance and Drama & Theatre Arts and Visual & Technological Arts but English language learning zone has only one classroom. This classroom has fans and lights but half of them are out of order. Mostly the classroom looks untidy and students perform additional duty by arranging the classroom. English Language Learning Zone has only one whiteboard and a flipchart board. There are no desks or writing pad chairs in the classroom. Each department has three groups. If one class takes place in that classroom other two groups have to find some places to study. The learners spend a considerable time in search of a right place to study. In many cases they have to sit under the shade trees irrespective of the weather conditions. The noise from the other learners who practice songs, dance and drama distract English language learners. Sometimes two classes are conducted simultaneously at the same place.

#### **4.5 Negative mood**

Unfavorable environment for learning English results in fatigue and frustration among the learners. In addition, when classes are conducted in places like auditorium and shady trees they do not concentrate. In SVIAS English is not used as a medium of instruction. The learners study English as one of the additional languages exclusively in the second year. Most learners do not put much effort to learn English. They have a carefree attitude toward learning English. When compare to their core subjects, English is far less priority by the learners. They do not attend English class regularly. They think just about passing English exams is enough.

### **CONCLUSION**

Silence in class is considered as negative aspect by many researchers.

Therefore, effective measures such as teaching useful phrases for fillers, explaining and repeating, giving encouragement, patient and adjusting teaching style and providing adequate infrastructure and facilities can be applied to reduce the adverse effects of silence in the classroom.

#### **5.1 Teaching useful phrases for fillers, explaining and repeating**

Teaching fillers has been neglected in English language teaching in Sri Lanka. Fillers are discourse markers speakers use when they think or hesitate when they talk. They are used when the speaker is unsure about forthcoming utterances. It signals there will be a delay in utterance. Therefore, teaching fillers provide awareness about how to hesitate in English language during their speech. Another main problem in teaching is frustrations caused by misunderstandings in the classroom. The teacher should use explain and repeat strategy to clarify any areas of uncertainty because learners who do not have English as their first language may find it hard to assimilate instructions.

#### **5.2 Giving encouragement**

As students are not interested in learning English they are tired of listening to the lecturers. English class should provide encouraging and reassuring atmosphere. The lecturers should motivate the learner to foster positive learning attitudes and learn independently. Underachieving and reticent learners need to be encouraged and applauded when they make advancement in their learning. The teacher needs to guide the learners to realize that language learning is a trial and error process. If the students are not frightened about giving wrong answers, they will feel more assertive and confident in speaking out their ideas.

### **5.3 Be patient and adjusting teaching style**

The lecturers should not always expect correct answers from learners because this will block them from expressing their ideas. Insufficient time to think about the answers also leave the learners unresponsive. Learners come to SVIAS with a variety of cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Some teaching styles are far more effective than others. Therefore, the lecturers should use those methods, approaches, strategies and techniques for teaching diverse and unique learners. Teaching style should be clear-cut, straightforward, relaxed, interesting, and consistent and controlled teaching style.

### **5.4 Providing adequate infrastructure and facilities**

Classroom environment is one of the major factors affecting student learning. Learners respond better when they find the learning environment as positive and supportive. Buildings, classrooms, language learning laboratories, equipment, appropriate furniture and technology are central components of second language learning environment in higher educational institutions. High-quality infrastructure promotes better teaching and learning methods and reduces boredom. However, irrespective of poor infrastructure and facilities the students perform meritoriously in national level music, dance, drama and visual arts competitions but for gaining sustainability in education the institute should focus on creating an environment that not only guarantees knowledge but also offer special care to the mental and physical wellbeing of the language learners because higher educational institutions with insufficient infrastructure can have low level of attainment than institutions that have better infrastructure and facilities.

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