

## A Closer Look at Students' Silence: A Case Study

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### Abstract

This article discusses Indonesian State Polytechnic students understanding and reasons towards silence and lack of oral participation in class. It is a qualitative case study conducted with two students from English study program. The authors conducted semi-structured interview and then analyzed the data using a constant comparisons method. Both students realize that they were one of the quietest students in the class. It is revealed that the causes of their silence are lack of speaking skills that related to their study program, shyness in the classroom and lack of background knowledge related with their fields. Their silence in classroom could not be interpreted as their unwillingness to contribute in class, rather than a process they should go through whenever they use English at class orally. Besides indicate the need to find a more suitable teaching approach to help students in class, this finding also suggest that teachers or lecturers need to understand the reason behind students' silence better.

**Keywords:** students' silence, silence in the classroom, vocational university students, vocational university students' silence

### Introduction

From the perspective of its status, English in Indonesia is considered as a foreign language. Meaning that Indonesian people do not use English in their daily life. Indonesian use English in particular job and school setting. While from the perspective of how its purpose, English is used for general purpose and specific purpose. English for general purpose focus on how to use English for general communication, while English for specific purpose is specifically designed to be used for those who are in specific field (Kaharuddin, 2019). For example, those who are in accounting field should learn English for accounting, journalist should learn English for journalism and those who are in tourism field should learn English for tourism.

In the context of higher education in Indonesia, ESP is mostly learned by students in Polytechnic or vocational university. At Vocational university, students are not only learning the theoretical knowledge but also the practical skills. For example, students of Polytechnic majoring in tourism may need to learn practicing their English to lead tourists while travelling. In addition, those who are majoring in journalism need to learn practicing their English to write news properly. Thus, vocational university students need to be actively apply the English knowledge they had as a part of a learning system in a vocational university. However, what really happened in the classroom sometimes is the opposite.

A problem lecturer in vocational university may face when dealing when students active participation in class was that students were kept silent. A number of studies discussed the topic of

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silence. First, Choi (2015) discussed the reason behind Korean students' silence when they are pursuing master's degree in a U.S Graduate school. Second, Cheng (2000) examined the characteristics of Asian, especially East Asian students, related with their silence behaviour in the classroom. Next, Hu & Fell-Eisenkraft (2003) described how Chinese students understand silence in their classroom. While there were extensive studies about students' silence for East Asian countries context, there were also growing number of studies related with students' silence in Indonesia context.

Several research focusing on the topic of students' silence have been done in Indonesia. A qualitative case study by Perkasa et al., (2022) reveal that anxiety related silence in EFL junior high school students context was triggered by low English proficiency, confidence loss and lack of preparation. The other study (Fadilah et al., 2019) unfold that students' silence could be interpreted as positive and negative trait. One of the student deliberately chose to remain silent as their way to participate in the class. Remaining silent was their way to be polite in the class and strategy for "classroom solidarity and maintaining harmony". On the other hand, another student said that their silence in the class was highly influenced by their' lack of proficiency. On another study, Purwati & Setiawan (2022) discussed not only the reason behind students' silence but also the strategy teachers used to increase students participation in class. Although there are several studies about silence in Asian as well as Indonesian context, there have been limited studies involving Indonesian vocational university students. Therefore, it is important to understand Indonesian vocational students' silence in learning English for Specific Purposes.

This article focus on examining Indonesian vocational university students' silence when they learn English for Specific Purposes. It seeks to describe the reason behind students' silence. In the next part, I will try to unpack the definition of silence by using relevant literature, then followed by methods and findings as well as discussion.

Traditionally, silence was interpreted as students' lack of cognitive development (Swain, 1985; Swain & Lapkin, 1995). But, more recent studies on the topic of silence showed that silence was a complex notion. Silence can be interpreted as students' unique communicative style that was influenced by students' native culture; Japanese culture in this case (Harumi, 2011). The same article revealed that two other causes of students' silence were lack of confidence and English teachers' different linguistics perception when teaching English. A literature review study of 10 articles about students' silence in East Asian region conducted by Shao & Gao (2016) also confirmed that students' silence was not a direct signal of students' lack of cognitive development. Instead, the reason of their silence "have to be understood in relation to a variety of cultural, historical and social conditions and processes". In Iran, a study (Ghavamnia & Ketabi, 2015) pointed out that silence in their context could be interpreted as a sign that Iranian students have anxiety issues in the class, they need more time from the teachers to think before expressing their ideas in the class and they preferred to be silent in the class because they still see teachers as authoritative figure and students cannot express their objection to the them.

After knowing that silence was a complex notion, it is impossible to simply conclude that students who were silent at the class were lazy. It maybe was just the way the participate in the class. So, in this study we will discuss the reasons behind students' silence.

## Methods

This study was conducted at Polytechnic or Vocational University in Indonesia, focusing on students from English study program. The participants of this study were two students (one male and one female). Several criteria were employed in selecting participants. First, we chose two students that we consider have minimal oral participation in class. After that, we check with other lecturers if those two students have the same manner in their class. I wanted to make sure that those two students also have minimal oral participation in other classes other than mine. Second, as those two students were happened to be in one our speaking class, we also looked at their final score on that course. Based on the observation, it was shown that the score they got on that course was not as high as other students. Third, I use pseudonym Sony for the male student, and Rima for the female student. Both Sony and Rima was English study program students at their third semester. In addition, Javanese language was their first language and English was considered as foreign language for them as they only learned it when they were in school.

The authors provide a set of semi structured interview for each participant. The questions being asked to each of them were the same. Next, the data were collected in the form of audio recording. After

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that the audio was transcribed. The type of questions in this interview were open-ended questions. In general, the questions focus on exploring their silent behavior in the classroom, what drives them to do such behavior and how their experience was in dealing with their limited active participation in class. To minimize coercion, we began the interview with questions about simple things; such as their hobby, where they live, their daily life or how their campus life so far. After they seemed to be comfortable with the conversation we gradually began discussing the research questions.

The main purpose of this interview was to get participants' responses upon the research questions as clearly and as detailed as possible. Therefore, we decided to conduct the interviews in Indonesian language to ease the participants in delivering their answers, ideas or responses. If necessary, now and then we also used Javanese language to give them a casual and more informal impression. It was hoped that that would help them to be more open in answering the questions. The interview for each student lasted for approximately 1 hour. The interview was conducted outside the campus. Instead, we let them choose the place of their own choice.

The data analysis method we incorporated in this study was constant comparative method proposed by Glaser (1965). In constant comparative method, the raw data were analyzed and coded to eventually generate a theory (Corbin & Strauss, 2014). After we got all the data in the form of transcribed audiotape recording, we then looked for key words or key phrases that appeared from the interview. At first, the key words we found were too many. So, we tried to filter it out by looking for key words or key phrase that has the same concept. Afterwards, we arranged the "core category" (Kolb, 2012) by meticulously connecting it to other categories, evaluating the similarities and relationships between them, and finally finishing categories that still need development and improvement.

## Result and Discussion

Both participants in this study fell under the category of being verbally reticent pupils. This assertion was confirmed by the pupils' admission that they were among the class's quietest participants. Notably, the main theme that emerged from the data were lack of English speaking skills pertinent to their studies, shyness in the classroom and lack of content knowledge. Despite the fact that all of these criteria were partly linked and related, the lack of English language proficiency in relation to their main fields of study was the most common. Other prevalent causes mentioned by the participants included a lack of English language skills and classroom shyness.

The first cause behind students' silence was lack of English speaking skills pertinent to their studies. Because they were not using English in their daily life, they had some difficulties speaking it in the classroom. When lecturers asked them questions, sometimes they could guess what they meant and knew the answers. However, they could not express it in English. Sony believed that his lack of practice of using English orally was the most decisive factor inhibiting him from verbal contribution in the classroom. When he was asked what he did to overcome the problem, he said that he tried to watch movies without subtitle, hoping to learn some new vocabulary items to help him speak more fluently.

Sometimes I get the idea of the questions. I know, or at least I think I know how to respond it but only in Indonesia. I need more time to translate the words and sentences in my head into English. I think it is because I still learn English passively, not actively. (Sony)

I did not say that I could understand everything, but at least I know some words. So, I can guess the meaning of the questions. I also use Google Translate or asked my friends how to say it in English. I think I need practice more. (Rima)

The challenges would be twice harder when the activity in the class was in the form of discussion. Because they have to respond to their discussion immediately. They felt that speaking English in discussion was hard because they almost did not have time to write down what they were planning to say.

If the discussion is in the written format, I could still try or ask my friends. But when it is verbal, everything was so fast. Usually I still process the answer in my mind but the lecturer does not have the patience in waiting for me to finally answer. I felt that I get anxiety because of that (Sony)

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Imagine you are learning a foreign language that you do not use in daily life. That only has already make you anxious. Now, the burden would be harder because you have to use that foreign language to contribute to the discussion. And you have to do it fast. (Rima).

The second reason was shyness in the classroom. Both students explained that they were hesitant to talk in the class is because they were partly influenced by their habit of being silent in the class while teachers explaining materials. Their teachers since elementary school up to senior high school instructed them to keep silent while the teachers explaining in front of the class. As described by Sony, students thought that teachers would consider them as a good student if they do not interrupt in the middle of the class. Now in the vocational university lecturers expected them to be actively and orally participated in the class. These different situations make both of the participant of this study confused and barely able to keep up with the new situation. Both of the students admitted that they unconsciously believe that they were not allowed to their lecturers while the lecturers explaining materials. Rima added that their lecturers in university always encouraged them to speak. They could answer, ask or respond anything the lecturers explain. Still, both Sony and Rima were always having no courage to talk about something out loud.

The last reason was lack of content knowledge. Even though Sony and Rima had already started learn English since elementary school, did not mean that they have already master English. In polytechnic, the level of English materials was more complex and advanced compared to English materials they previously learned.

Now, besides learned grammar, listening, writing, reading we also have to learn courses like communication skills and translation. They are way harder to understand. (Sony)

When you learn courses like translation, customer service and hospitality, you will learn some new terms or technical words that you are not familiar with. So we, the students, have to work harder to catch up with the lesson. (Rima)

After revealing the reason behind students' silence, the following section would be the discussion. The findings of this study was in accordance with previous study (Lee, 2009). The study described that Asian students tend to be reluctant in the classroom for a variety of interrelated reasons, and it is unclear which factors are more significant than others. As a result, it is challenging to pinpoint one specific explanation. Both participants in this study fell under the category of being verbally reticent pupils.

English proficiency was the obstacle experienced by the participants in this study that made them unable to give oral contribution to the classroom. They also emphasized that they had anxiety when speaking, especially if it is related with content knowledge. This finding was relevant with previous study explaining that anxiety of English learners could be different based on the environment they are in (Lightbown & Spada, 2021). They have already learned English since elementary school but the content of academic English in vocational university is more advanced, thus they need more practice and time to catch up and be better.

Another interesting point is that, Indonesian students' silence in this study was not sign of lack of cognitive development. But, the way they participated in the class was different. They would feel more comfortable to write down their respond rather than talk it out loud. This reaffirmed what Cheng (2000) explained that it was wrong to infer that Asians students were passive and did not want to contribute to the class. In another words, (Kumaravadivelu, 2003) explained that stereotype attached to Asian students as passive and inactive in the class as "more imagination of Western Academia than in the actual classrooms of Asian societies".

## Conclusion

As this is a small scale case study, it is impossible to make generalization over the result of this study. However, it is hoped that this study could shed a light about the reason behind

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students' silence in the context of Indonesian students learning ESP in vocational university. Another barrier for this research was that all of the factors that made students silence in the class were overlapped and had connected each other. Therefore, the result of this study could be benefit for those who are interested in the same topic as the basis or general idea of how the reality of the actual classroom related with students' silence was.

For Lecturers, this study could benefit them in a way that they can take a step back and find out the reason why their students kept silent in the class. After knowing the reason, hopefully they can make some strategies to attract students to be participated in the class. For students, as they are a polytechnic student, practicing their skills and knowledge in class is inevitable. Thus, they should consciously make an effort to overcome their oral participation anxiety in discussions and to adjust to their new educational context. If they have problems, they could communicate it with their lecturer so that the lecturer could find other solutions to their problems.

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