

## **A Study on Silence Phenomenon in College English Classroom**

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**Abstract:** Since 2003, college English teaching reform has been gradually carried out in china. It provides good opportunities for the shift from the teacher-centered classroom to the student-centered one and brings profound influences on English teaching. Many teachers have made some changes in their teaching concepts and updated their teaching methodologies to engage more students into classroom activities as well as enhance their teaching efficiency. However, classroom silence in college English classroom is still a common phenomenon and it often causes communication failure between the teacher and students. Many Chinese students are likely to keep silent in class and reluctant to express their thoughts even when they are expected to answer some questions. Classroom silence is harmful for teaching and learning. This paper probes into the factors that contribute to students' silence in college English teaching and puts forwards several corresponding countermeasures for more effective classroom communication. It aims at improving both the teaching and learning efficiency.

**Key words:** classroom silence; classroom activities; communication; college English teaching; English learning

### **1. Introduction**

Language is the tool for human communications. It usually takes quite a long time to acquire a language and to become fluent, accurate and flexible in using it. A lot of practice is crucial for that long process. As college English teaching reform deepens in our country, it brings significant changes to the teaching practice.

According to College English Curriculum Requirements (2007), the objective of college English teaching is to develop students' comprehensive competence in using English, especially the listening and speaking abilities to help them communicate in English more effectively in their future study, work and social interactions. Many college English teachers have made changes in their teaching concepts and updated their teaching methodologies to achieve better teaching outcomes. College English teaching reform puts more emphasis on the notion of "student-centeredness" instead of the traditional "teacher-centeredness". Therefore, many English teachers provide more chances for students to communicate with each other by designing various activities. These kinds of changes bring students more opportunities to develop their learning abilities.

However, many teachers have to face the inevitable phenomenon of "students' silence" in English class. Teachers find that many students perform very passively in English class and rely on the teachers' explanations heavily. Some students are not willing to express their ideas in class even though the teacher gives them a great deal of encouragement. Students' silence is a common phenomenon which exists in many classrooms. Classroom silence makes the learning atmosphere becomes embarrassing, brings negative influences on teacher-student interactions and can be very harmful for both teaching and learning. This paper will analyze the factors that result in classroom silence and offers some suggestions for better classroom communications.

## **2. The analysis on silence phenomenon in college English classroom**

### **2.1 The definitions for silence**

Silence is defined as "the absence of sound" or "refusal to speak when expected" in many dictionaries. According to Oxford English Dictionary, silence has the following definitions: 1) abstaining from speech or utterance, sometimes with reference to a particular matter; 2) the state or condition when nothing is audible; 3) omission of mention or notice. Saville-Troike (1985) considers silence as the non-verbal and non-fixed act of communication shown by the subject of the communication. Levinson (1985) deems silence as the absence of vocalization. Many researchers also think that silence does not only mean an absence of noise, but constitutes a part of communication. (E.g. Jaworski, 1993, 1997; Tannen & Saville-Troike, 1985). As for classroom silence, White (1996:37) thinks it refers to the limited participation or lack of participation during classroom interaction. In classroom setting, silence is generally considered as a student's negative response to the teacher.

## **2.2 Factors resulting in classroom silence**

In college English class, sometimes, silence is a necessity. For example, when the teacher raises a question or assigns some tasks for group work, students need time to think and prepare for that. Silence which occurs at that time is necessary and important for students. But for most of time in class, silence is unwelcome since it usually occurs when it is not expected at all. It often goes like this: when the teacher requires students to answer some questions, only a few students respond, or no one gives response to what the teachers says at all. The reasons are diverse and analyzed in the following parts.

First, inadequate language input and output. Most college students have studied English for more than ten years, nevertheless, this does not necessarily mean they are proficient in English. Some students do not accumulate sufficient vocabulary or master grammatical rules well enough to communicate with others freely and fluently in English. In class, they are apt to be at a loss about what and how to voice their opinions. Even when being asked to say something, they are easily to become anxious and nervous, then their minds will go blank. Tsui (1996) concludes that students' silence are related to anxiety caused by lower learning abilities. In daily communication, they can neither fully understand what others tell to them nor can they make themselves understood. If the situation goes on like this, they will become more and more speechless which will do great damage to English learning.

Second, different personalities. Everyone has his own personalities. Some are extroverted, some are introverted, some are optimistic, some are pessimistic, and some are active while others are passive. Through the author's teaching experience for more than ten years, she finds that the extroverted students are more active in expressing themselves than the introverted ones because they are willing to share their ideas with others. Many introverts are quiet and not keen on interactions with others. In class, usually, they are not good at expressing their ideas and are reluctant to answer questions from the teacher.

Third, learning motivation. Learning motivation plays a very important role in language learning although many students do not realize its importance. Some students study hard for they like English very much and want to achieve great success in learning English, some work hard for passing CET-4 or CET-6, some learn English for taking part in the postgraduate entrance examination or for finding a better job in future and some study English just because it is a compulsory course. For those who learn English just for passing various tests, they may have not realized the importance of English learning for their future development. They just spend

much time memorizing more words and doing exercises or test papers instead of thinking and taking part in activities actively.

Fourth, improper learning habits. In middle schools or even in primary schools, many students have been used to being passive listeners and taking notes silently. In many universities, students learn English in large-scale classes which always have about fifty students or more and teachers have to complete the teaching tasks related to the textbook for each semester, therefore, sometimes it is impossible for the teacher to pay attention to each student and encourage everyone to involve into classroom activities. Some students just sit in the classroom silently, take in what the teacher says and depend on the teacher's explanation too much. They have no idea about how to think independently.

Last but not the least, the importance of face-saving. Face-saving means one should not make oneself or others lose face. The idea of being afraid of losing face is very common in Chinese traditional culture. Some college students are not confident about themselves and they always worry about making mistakes or losing face so they refuse to express their ideas. Some Chinese people think one is likely to make more mistakes if one speaks more unless he/she has made full preparation. Students also worry that they will be laughed at by their classmates if they give the incorrect answers, especially when the questions are quite simple.

All these factors, obviously, will hinder students' learning and lower their learning efficiency. Both the teacher and students need to figure out some effective ways to solve the problems brought by classroom silence.

### **3. The corresponding countermeasures for effective classroom communication**

To decrease the negative influences caused by classroom silence, both the teacher and students need to make some changes in their teaching and learning.

#### **3.1 Helping students foster positive learning attitudes**

Students' positive attitudes towards English learning are crucial for English learning. Passing various examinations may be one of the purposes for learning English, however, it is by no means the only and ultimate purpose. The teacher should be a helpful friend for students and communicate more with their students. Students will listen to the teacher's opinions and learn better if they like and trust their teacher. Then the teacher can help students set up positive learning attitudes towards English learning. Another responsibility for the teacher is to help students find their strengths and exert fully their merits to make constant progress so that they can enjoy the sense of accomplishment from English learning. In addition, teachers should try to remember the

name of each student. If the teacher can call their names correctly, students will feel the teacher is amiable and friendly, and they are more likely to exchange their ideas with the teacher and open their hearts to the teacher.

Besides, teachers need to help students realize the importance of autonomous learning. As college students, they should develop the habit of thinking and learning independently. They should know clearly that learning English can enhance their learning capacity and comprehensive quality. In the long run, English learning is important for one's long-life study and future development in today's society.

### **3.2 Increasing language input and output**

For more input, extensive reading and a lot of listening practice are very necessary. Not only the students, but also the teachers should read more because they act as role models for their students in determining students' learning behaviors and attitudes. Teachers should also be autonomous and life-long learners if they want their students to form good learning habits. English teachers and students should read various books and broaden the horizon. For students' reading, teachers can choose some well-written books with beautiful language as reading materials. In addition, a lot of practice for listening is very important for more input. Students can choose listening materials from the textbooks, English songs, programs, news and films.

For more output, more activities should be carried out such as discussions, group learning and debates. Now, nearly every student has a mobile phone and they use QQ and WeChat very frequently. Hence, teachers and students can make best use of these modern technologies to serve for English learning. For example, the teacher can set up QQ or WeChat groups and assign learning tasks for them to fulfill after class, especially for the listening, speaking and written tasks. After students have submitted their work, teachers can evaluate and give students timely feedback about their performance.

### **3.3 Learning in small groups**

Learning in small groups or cooperative learning is a good choice for large-scale class teaching. Before carrying out activities for group learning, the teacher should introduce some instructions and basic requirements to students. In group learning, each member has a clear division for the tasks to be completed. In small groups, the learning atmosphere is more relaxing and students can learn from each other. Especially for the introverted ones, they will not feel lonely or helpless. They listen to each other, provide timely help to other members and present their learning achievements to the whole class. To finish the group tasks, each member has to make efforts and most of the students will work hard for better achievements. They know exactly that they work hard

for themselves as well as for the honor of their group. Group learning not only engages students in classroom activities, breaks the classroom silence but also stimulates students' learning interests and enthusiasm.

In the process of group learning, the teacher needs to pay special attention to the introverted students' performances and make sure that every student should take part in the activities. Students should know that everyone is responsible for the group performance. Sometimes, the teacher can even take part in the activities, being a member in the groups. Both the teacher and students should bear in minds that the process of involvement is more important than the results of the activities in group learning.

### **3.4 Helping students build up confidence**

For the introverted or academically poor students, teachers need to give them more encouragement and praise when they make progress in their study. Besides, creating a more pleasant learning atmosphere will be helpful for all students. When designing classroom activities, teachers need to design some moderate questions, that is, not too difficult nor too simple. The way of posing a question is also important. Teachers need to guide students to think and encourage students to speak their ideas out loud. Students should fully understand that making mistakes is inevitable and sometimes, even necessary for language learning. They cannot make progress in English learning if they always worry about the accuracy of language. As the saying goes: "A fall into the pit, a gain in your wit." What students should do is not to fear for mistakes, but to learn from their mistakes or failures. Also, it is necessary for teachers to show patience and care for students to help them relieve their fear and anxiety. If students are not afraid of making mistakes and willing to speak out their ideas, they will be more optimistic and confident in learning English.

### **3.5 Changes of the teacher and students' roles**

In fact, china has a long tradition of "showing great respect to the teacher and the teacher's teaching", which is deeply ingrained among Chinese teachers and students. Students are taught that idea when they were very young. Therefore, in the traditional English classroom, the teacher is often the dominator of the whole class. It is the teacher who designs the class, controls and supervises all the students.

Now as college English teaching reform has been carried out for about ten years, more and more teachers have realized that students are the center of the classroom. Teachers as well as the students need to renew their teaching and learning concepts. Teachers need to give students more time and freedom for their participation in the class. The roles of the teacher shift from the dominator and controller into the organizer, instructor, monitor,

helper and evaluator. As for students, they are the participators, listeners, helpers in group learning and center of the classroom activities. Only by changing their teaching ideas, can English teachers arouse students' learning enthusiasm.

#### 4. Conclusions

Every coin has two sides. Silence, sometimes, has its valuable part in language learning, after all, students need time to think and to reflect on what they have learnt. Nevertheless, for most of time, silence in college English classroom is an unwelcome phenomenon. In light of the importance and necessity of students' engagement in classroom activities, teachers and students need to work together to break the silence so that students can learn effectively and to enhance their language competence gradually. Thus, both the teaching and learning efficiency can be improved. Teachers need to change their teaching concepts and renew their teaching methodologies to stimulate students' learning interests, and in the end, the objective of college English teaching to develop students' comprehensive competence in using English can be realized.

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