

## **An Analysis of Reasons of Different Class Silence in China and America**

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### **Abstract**

**In daily communication, people usually pay more attention to verbal communication but ignore the nonverbal communication, which is also an important tool of communication. In fact, both of the two ways of communication are rather crucial and cannot be separated from each other. Messages sent by nonverbal communication, however, are often ignored by people. Therefore, correct understanding of nonverbal communication will help people to improve the effectiveness of communication. Silence, as a vital part of nonverbal communication, conveys important signals. Interpretation of silence varies from culture to culture, and from situation to situation. Take class silence as a case, it can be easily found that Chinese students, in class, tend to keep silent and rarely speak out what is in their mind, unless they are required to. However, different from the passive Chinese students, western students perform more actively in class, and they will displace silence by verbal communication for a quiet atmosphere, which is undesired in western class. From the perspective of context of culture, geography and ethics, and ideology, this paper mainly focuses on different class silence between China and America, and to explore the reasons that cause different class silence. Finally, it is hoped that this study may offer a reference to the international cooperation, to avoid communication failure and reinforce efficient exchange and collaboration in teaching area.**

### **Keywords**

**Class silence, Chinese class, American class, reasons.**

### **1. Introduction**

People mainly communicate through two ways, that is verbal and nonverbal ways. The process of communication includes encoding a message, decoding a message, sending a message and sending a feedback. At first glance, silence does not indicate any action, yet communication through silence plays a crucial part in culture. Sometimes, silence can be more instructive than verbal communication in certain circumstances and even outweighs words. In the past few years, plenty of researches have been done on nonverbal communication, such as Paralinguistics, Kinesics, and Proxemics, but researches on “class silence” are still a relatively blank in the academic field, thus, the aim of this paper is to explore different attitudes towards class silence between China and America.

In the first part of this paper, the definition, function and classification of silence will be discussed with the comparison of different phenomena of class silence between China and America, and different characteristics of class silence will be described relatively in the second part. In order to correctly interpret silence, plenty of factors must be fully considered. After comparison, apart from the non-cultural-bound reasons, for instance, shy personality, or indifference in chatting, or extreme mood may cause the failure of communication with verbal words, and all of these reasons may cause students’ silent performance in class. The author has also found that, relatively speaking, Chinese class is silent, and quiet manner can run smoothly

in the teacher-oriented class. In contrast, American class embraces verbal communication, in which teachers and students are communicative in most situations, and even a tiny silence performance is beyond tolerance. After the analysis of factors of context culture, geography and ethics and ideology, some reasonable reasons may emerge to explain different class silence between China and America.

### 1.1. The Illustration of Class Silence

Silence is widely used in various aspects in our daily life, though it is ambiguous. For a long time, there is not a consistent definition of silence. As to class silence, the connotations are much more complex, and in the following part, the author is trying to give the concept of class silence.

### 1.2. The Definition of Class Silence

According to the Oxford Advanced Learner's English Dictionary, the term silence denotes "abstinence from speech or noise" (A. S. Hornby, Ed, 2011:1255). The abundant connotations and ambiguity of silence make it easy to be misunderstood, and make it one of the most elusive of all communicative behavior to describe and measure. Traditionally, in linguistic field, silence has been regarded as a boundary mark, delimiting the beginning and ending of an utterance, or as the absence of speech when you don't know what to say, which occurs at the turn-taking juncture in interaction. Jaworski divides silence definition into three categories "when communication is assumed to be taking place, but the communicator is perceived not to produce any audible verbal signals" (Jaworski Adam 1993: 414) Firstly, silence can be a state in which communication takes place. In other words, "a given communicative event is structured through or frame in silence"; secondly, silence may be formulaic, and sometimes accompanied by other nonverbal behavior, such as bowing, smiling, waving and so on; thirdly, silence is an activity, and a communicative sign like other linguistic forms.

In pedagogy field, silence refers to class silence. Silence is a gap, which occurs when teachers wait for a response from students. Class silence refers to both teacher's silence and students' silence. Teacher's silence often performs as a sign of waiting, anger, hesitating, remembering, etc, while students' silence means thinking, confusing, contemplating, etc. In fact, the performances of class silence are far more than that, on the students' side, it can also be that they are not interested or just wondering around but not focusing on the class. And this paper will focus on class silence on the students' side, studying the phenomena of this nonverbal action and comparing the reasons that cause different class silence between classes in China and America.

### 1.3. The Functions of Class Silence

A person is silent in communication, which does not imply that he means nothing. People use silence in communication for various reasons. Zhang Xiyong gave three other functions of silence. Firstly, silence provides an interval in an ongoing communication; Secondly, silence sends some nonverbal cues to help people adjust their behaviors; Thirdly, silence can also help to give a feedback, informing the communicator with a clarity of a message or its significance. (Zhang Xiyong, 2008)

Besides the above functions, Jensen has given five comprehensive interpretations of the functions of silence. Firstly, the linkage function, which means silence can bind or serve relationship. In an international class, silent Asian students may feel support from each other due to their quiet manner, while the western students may feel indifferent because of this cold manner; Secondly, silence has the effect function, as it can affect the surroundings around us, no matter it is good or bad. For instance, Chinese students in an American class may feel uncomfortable when his teacher calls him to answer questions, and if he keeps silent, it will be considered rude and disrespectful to the teacher and class. On the contrary, a Chinese student's silence may be regarded as respect and attentiveness to teachers; Thirdly, silence has the

revelation function, which means it can act as a method to understand, as well as the awareness of oneself, and this function can also help one to hide his or her real thoughts or ideas; Fourthly, silence may also act as the means of judgment, i.e. to express agreement or disagreement. Typically, in China, students express their assent with silence, even though when they have some different thoughts, they may use silence to keep the harmony of class other than retorting back; Finally, silence has the activating function in the process of communication. This is a common phenomenon in Chinese class. Most of the students act quiet superficially but very active in the process of thinking and listening and comparing their own thoughts with others' answers. On the other side, keeping silent for too long a time can be a sign of absence of mind. (Jensen J. Vermon, 1973)

#### **1.4. The Classification of Class Silence**

A word or phrase may provide some information for people to understand, but the meanings of silence depend on the understanding capability of the interpreters. Silence is ambiguous, however, it can also be classified clearly to certain degree. Sobkowiak categorized silence into five types: (1) refraining from speech, (2) absence of sound, (3) withholding knowledge, (4) failing to communicate, and (5) oblivion or obscurity. Nakane summarized silence into four forms: (1) cognitive silence; (2) discursive silence; (3) social silence; (4) effective silence; And the types of class silence also belong to these forms (Adam Sobkowiak, 1997).

The first type of silence means hesitating for cognition in language processing. For example, students may pause for a while when he /she is asked to retell a story which is a cognitive processing for her to get the story back from the memory. The more complex the story is, the longer the pause will be. Nakane points out that pause plays a significant role in communication, and it provides the speakers time to organize their thoughts, as well as allows the listeners the time to digest what the speakers are talking about.

As for the second type, discursive silence, Jaworski describes it as "an important factor in defining the boundaries of utterances" (Jaworski 1993: 12). In class, Teachers and students often use silence to shift their topic.

The third type is social silence, and it refers to the interpersonal communication, which can often be found in daily life. When in class, this function may be disguised in the form of punishment; teacher as well as the students may refuse to talk to the one who is violating the class norm; another aspect of the social silence is that it contains the meaning of relationship. It is the embodiment of power and authority, especially for the teacher, when the teacher is challenged but the teacher is right actually, then a long silence may be the teacher's method to show his or her authority.

The last type is effective silence, which means emotion management. During the teaching and learning process, both teacher and students are carrying a variety of emotions through silence. Feelings like anger, joy, shyness, embarrassment may occur along the situation of students' disobedience to the teacher, students' comprehension of knowledge, teacher's satisfaction with that and students' retardation of the task or questions.

From the classification of silence we can find that, some forms of silence are noticeable while others are relatively insignificant or even ignored by people in communication, due to the complex and ambiguous and various forms of silence, fine study of silence is needed.

## **2. The Contrast of Class Silence between China and America**

It is worldly acknowledged that silence has the communicative function, however, people's attitudes and performances towards silence vary from culture to culture, and the following part of this paper will give a specific explanation of class silence in China with comparison to class silence in America.

## 2.1. The Characteristics of Class Silence in China

In China, it is almost a common sense among the students that a quiet student is more likely to impress teachers better, besides, the typical Chinese class is teacher-centered, so students in class tend to keep silent and listen attentively, as well as to show the respect to the teachers and their wisdom and knowledge. Few are to interrupt the teacher's lecture unless they are nominated, even though, they won't utter a word before thinking about the question for a while and synthesizing their answers in their mind, just for fear of giving a wrong answer, so one or two seconds of silence may take place before a student starts his/her response. The silence can also be called "gap" during the communication, and it is acceptable in China. A few seconds of pause between question and answer is a common phenomenon in Chinese class, this kind of silence will not cause any uncomfortable feeling either to teacher or to students. Instead, students' silence is encouraged and expected as a sign of respect to their teachers and classmates during the running of class in Chinese culture.

Most Chinese students hold a positive attitude towards silence, regarding it as a symbol of respect, obedience, agreement, understanding, acceptance, and so on. On the other hand, traditionally, Chinese students are not used to the oral participation in class as American students are, and they think that asking questions directly in the middle of the class without permission is a challenge and disrespect to teachers. "Classroom engagement is expected in cognitive (not always observable) and behavioral (observable) aspects." (Krishna Bista, 2012: 81)

When in class, Chinese students usually do not associate oral participation with academic achievements. They believe sometimes they can also benefit from listening to other students' questions and answers as long as they themselves are acting in thinking, that is to say, oral participation is not the only factor for engaging in class, but understanding is the most important part. Even when students themselves get into some academic or some other questions, they may not choose to ask directly in class, but bear the questions in mind or take notes and ask teacher after class. One more reason, due to the large class size in China, on the teachers' side, they would prefer to ask students questions and ask them to discuss after class, so that the teaching process for the entire class can run smoothly and be well-organized. So, silence may contain more information than verbal words in China.

However, we may hear some foreign teachers, who are teaching English, saying that Chinese students seem more tend to write down what they say than to listen and understand. And most students seemly are unconcerned with content, but laboriously and uncritically write down whatever teachers say. They seldom challenge either the teacher or their reading; controversy and debate, when they arise, usually are about grading practice or requirements. This lack of interest and active engagement creates a distressing situation which leads me to write about class silence in China. But not all the phenomena belong to this situation, and we can't say that class silence is a sign of not participating in class.

The author hopes this study may offer a reference to the international cooperation, to avoid communication failure and reinforce efficient exchange and collaboration in teaching area.

## 2.2. The Characteristics of Class Silence in America

Keeping silence, as a sign of respect for the teacher in Chinese culture, has a contrast connotation in American classrooms. The class atmosphere in America is quite different from that in China. Actually, the students and teachers in America are quite communicative. American class is a sort of non-silent class, and silent phenomenon can rarely be found in this talking-style class. Students in America like to raise questions to their teacher bluntly in class and the teacher will give the answer in time whenever there is a question. The American class is more active and sometimes full of laughter. Speaking means earning grade, and teachers will also take various methods to animate the class atmosphere. As we all know very well, small-

group work, out-of-class work and class discussion are very popular teaching methods in America. Eloquence is an important skill that most students want to get, and the teachers also pay some extra attention to help their students to develop that skill, thus, "To open mouth to speak, no matter right or wrong" is widely accepted in American class while silence is undesired. American teachers and students like to discuss with each other, and the teacher-student relationship is more like friend relationship. Just as Saville Trooe puts that silence attracts less attention than speech. Silence plays a negative role in American class, and both teachers and students in America feel uncomfortable if anybody is too quiet and just listening without the oral participation. They think one's silence in class means they are not interested in the content or just shows their disrespect to the teachers. When being asked a question, American students will give some words like "uh, ah..." to replace silence during the process of thinking. Even if they do not know the answer, they will not keep silent but to say "I don't know". Obviously, the class mode in America is different from the class mode in China, where the teachers perform solo and students are listening attentively like audiences.

In a word, silence is just unpopular in American class, and they will do something to kill the "gap" during interaction.

### **2.3. The Contrast of Class Silence between China and America**

Different teaching methods can result in different connotations of class silence between China and America. Firstly, the general impression of Chinese class is a teacher-oriented class, and the teacher may perform most of the speech with students listening attentively and taking notes hastily. All the students may expect that they can engross themselves to the teacher and sit upright receiving the "duck-stuffing teaching style" quietly. This typical Chinese teaching style stresses the order of class and prompts the students to listen more and think more but speak less. The general American class is student-oriented, teachers may adopt speech class and seminar as the two main forms of teaching methods and attach more importance to students' knowledge-receiving than the class order, so different voices are welcomed in American class. Most students in class can and are always ready to speak out their mind, and the atmosphere is rather active and American students usually are skilled in expressing themselves in this kind of education.

Secondly, due to the different population size, Chinese class size is big while American class size is small. Therefore, to keep the order of class, Chinese teacher will require the students to keep the discipline, and not whispering is a must obey rule in China, so anyone who wants to speak will first raise up his/her hand to get the permission of the teacher. So, a silent class style is formed over time. On the other hand, considering the proportion, there are more schools and less students in America, and the American class style is relatively free. Different opinions or ideas are welcomed in class because the number of students is often less than 30, so everyone may get a chance to speak. Speaking in class means getting scores while silence will get nothing other than teacher's worrying.

Thirdly, Chinese teachers and students focus much more on in-class study and more or less ignore after-class collaboration. Students are required to accomplish their task independently and do not chat or discuss questions in class, so students themselves tend to form a habit of conservation which is that they rarely share their findings or questions with others. On the other hand, besides the in-class study, American teachers also encourage students to give a lot of energy and time to after-class practice. The power and effect of teams and groups are highly emphasized, so students have this studying habit like sharing their ideas with others and heeding on communication. Therefore, American class is a non-silent class and hot discussions are very common in American class.

### 3. Factors Leading to Different Class Silence between China and America

There are certain reasons that cause class silence, both cultural-bound and non-cultural-bound. Different cultures certainly will hold different interpretations of silence in communication; however, it is very true that there is something in common in the understanding of class silence that is not bound up with culture. For instance, some students are shy, and sometimes they are just too shy to speak, or in some other circumstances, students are indifferent to the topic, so they are unwilling to participate in the class communication. One more example, when students are in their extreme mood, such as they are extremely happy, sad, depressed, desperate or surprised, and they often lose in their minds and are unable to form a complete and reasonable sentence, thus, they choose to be silent in action and they need time to adjust their emotion to clear their minds before they can come back to the normal communication. Therefore, silence in class, acting as a pause in communication between teacher and classmate, becomes a necessary part in the process of thinking. Those causes of class silence mentioned above are non-cultural-bound, and this interpretation of class silence can be applied to most countries in the world. One thing, however, needs to be remembered by heart, only when the silence is not associated with culture, can those above interpretations be employed universally. Apart from the non-cultural-bound reasons that cause class silence, some factors associated with culture cannot be ignored.

#### 3.1. Context Culture

Edward T. Hall's classification of culture may offer a deep insight of silence. He divides culture into two types: high-context culture and low-context culture. In general, high-context culture communication refers to the interaction that indirectly uses verbal language, while the low-context-culture communication is just the opposite; i.e. the interaction of information is conveyed by verbal language. Chinese culture is a high-context culture. Chinese people highly praised the tacit agreement since the ancient time, and they believe what cannot be taught, can only be tasted. People are very used to trying to figure out the meanings beyond words during communication. There are a lot of famous sayings about silence in China since the ancient time, which show that Chinese culture belongs to the high-context culture. For example: "A wise person does not dare to be talkative while a person likes talking knows nothing" (Arthur Waley, 1998: 56) "A gentleman would rather be quick in action than talk a lot" (Waley Arthur & Yang Bojun, 1999: 4). Being cultivated in this high-context cultural background, Chinese students believe that what is not said is important so they tend to understand what they learn in class silently and listen carefully and keep taking notes. They form a habit to understand and try to excavate the meaning behind teacher's words other than questioning their teacher face to face even when they come across with some puzzles during the class. Therefore, the communication between students and teachers in China highly depends on the class context in which the silent utterance occurs. In contrast, American students live in the low-context cultures, therefore, they emphasize verbal communication more than nonverbal communication, and most of their interactions are invested in the explicit code. Active interaction is welcomed while silence cannot be endured in class. Students are encouraged to raise their question and speak it out right in class, and the teacher will help to solve every problem in class immediately but not after class, while Chinese students tend to ask questions after class.

#### 3.2. Geography and Ethics

Geographically, China has been closed for a long time owing to the semi-feudal continental geographical environment, which offers a fertile soil for collectivism, along with the feature that China's ethnic groups live together over vast areas, while some live in individual concentrated communities in small areas. This layout of residence forms a complex inter-personal relationship, so Chinese people are very careful when they are communicating with others, just

as an ancient proverb describes: "The walls have ears." With the same ethic and same living background, Chinese people can understand each others' tacit meaning without much effort. This is why Chinese students value the harmony of class and choose to be silent for fear of breaking this rapport. Besides, in the history of Qin dynasty, in order to consolidate his power, the tyranny emperor, Qin Shi Huang, implemented a policy to burn books and bury the literati in pits. People were restrained the freedom of speech. Silence, therefore, as a nonverbal communication tool, is greatly adopted by people since they dare not to speak publicly.

Across the Pacific Ocean, America, a "melting pot", on the other hand, is an immigration country. People from every corner of the world can be found in America. In geographical, America is a territory with a sparse population, and it is a land abundant with opportunities. This is a reason why Americans are talkative and optimistic, and they prefer to talk to each other while do not like silence in communication. Another crucial factor is that, America is a relatively young country, with less than 200 years, stepping into capitalist society as soon as this country has been founded. People share the concept of equality, freedom and right to pursue personal happiness. People communicate with each other explicitly, so the use of verbal language is very vital. In daily interaction, people make great use of language, such as humor, even when people do not have many topics to talk about, they will actively find something to chat with each other. Thus, small talks are very common in western country, as well as in America. Inheriting the talkative culture, the American students in class form a communicative trait and are prone to refusing any kind of silent mode.

### 3.3. Ideology

Chinese culture, as a typical mainland agriculture, worships collectivism and emphasizes the harmony of society as an organic whole. Chinese culture highly values kindness and tolerance, and focuses on people's moral cultivation but not individualism, reflected in speech, being implicit, being cautious, or even silence. The collectivism society forces its people to value the importance of social harmony, to attach importance to personal moral accomplishments. Politically, collectivism stresses group values and rejects personal interests, therefore, personal interests should be after collective interests, which forms the national character of humility, conformity, restraint, connotation, and this is a constant value in the system of Chinese culture, which gives a positive basis to silence. On the contrary, the Americans advocates individualism, forming the national character of extroversion, confidence, uprightness, therefore, in America, personal interests are before the nation's profits. This kind of value also represents their communicating style of non-silent communication. In order to defend their own interests, develop themselves, or express their different ideas, Americans rarely think about the status of the interlocutor but just say what they want to say directly. Being dominated by the individualism value, Americans hold that silence will not help them to show their individuality, thus it may be an obstacle to represent their talents and hinder them to realize their personal value. Being brave to talk other than keeping silent is their choice in interaction.

## 4. Conclusion

The nature of class silence is very complex both in China and in other countries. Americans, however, value speech in class for they take speech as a part of students' grade, assuming those who are silent are not engaged in class. The Chinese students, on the other hand, feel it is a challenge to speak publicly, and most students will feel internally uncomfortable if they are required to speak in class. Though unlike the active American students, Chinese students are a group of silent students, and their silent performance cannot be read as non-participation, nor should teachers take students' silence literally. Anyhow, silence in Chinese class can also be a sign of thinking activity, and no one should take for granted that silence in class is a sign of not learning. Correct understanding of Chinese class silence should be combined with the

traditional Chinese cultural background, ethics, and the principle of politeness. The author believes much effort of understanding the Chinese culture and historical factors should be made if one wants to activate Chinese class. This paper analyzes the different class silence from several factors; however, deep analyses are still needed for a more comprehensive understanding of this phenomenon, and a more widely research and considerable data are also necessary to make up the limitations in this paper.

As silence has multiple meanings in different class rooms, further research of class silence is strongly encouraged.

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