

# On Chinese College Students' Silence in Class: Causes and Solutions

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## Abstract

Despite the effort to improve undergraduate education in China, "silence" in class, as a besetting sin, remains a puzzling problem for both teachers and students, who often ignore each other in class. This can be the result of teachers' negative attitude and inadequate competence in teaching. Furthermore, students' lack of enthusiasm, self-confidence and self-control can also explain their silent presence in class. Finally, college students' silence can also be ascribed to the unreasonable school curriculum and the inadequate in-job training on the part of the administrators. This article is intended to provide practical solutions to the silence-related problems in college classrooms from the perspectives of teachers, students and schools in order to promote interactivity in class.

## Keywords

Classroom; Silence; Colleges and universities .

## 1. Introduction

As the forefront of undergraduate education, classroom teaching is naturally at the core of all jobs at a university. However, "collective silence" is quite common in the classrooms of Chinese colleges and universities, whereas lively teacher-student interaction is rare. Quite a few researchers showed concerns over the negative impact of silence on the quality of learning [1]. How to restore and eternalize liveliness in college classrooms seems an everlasting preoccupation for teachers and scholars.

## 2. The Problem of "Silence "

"Silence" occurs during the interval after the teacher asks a question and expects the students to answer in the classroom [2]. Generally, it is a voiceless and semantically indefinite nonverbal speech act demonstrated in the interaction between teachers and students [3]. In the college classroom, the collective silence of students is often considered detrimental to both the development of students' thinking and the improvement of students' ability to express, which in turn undermines the quality of learning [4].

The silent students are mostly unwilling to respond voluntarily to the questions raised by teachers unless called on. Some of them have an answer in mind but somehow wait until the question is answered by the teacher or somebody else. Some lower their head because they have no idea or have an idea but are afraid of being laughed at in case their answer is ridiculously wrong. Others remain silent as they show more interest in their own stuff than in the content of the course.

## 3. The Causes of "Silence"

"Silence" in college classrooms is closely related to teacher-student relationship, teacher's teaching method and students' personality.

### 3.1. Teacher-student relationship

There is almost always an imbalance in power between the teacher and the students, which impairs the normal communication between the two parties in class. This discrepancy is manifested in the loss of equality, development, and proactivity. Equality serves as the premise for effective communication which allows all participants equal opportunities to express thoughts, feelings and wishes. But unfortunately, the deep-rooted belief in the teacher's absolute authority in China deprives students of the equal right to speak. Their relationship remains one between subject and object. This division continues silencing students in class where they are placed at the lower end of the skewed scale. A balanced relationship promotes the development of both parties. When one party develops, the balance requires the other party to develop accordingly. So teachers' development fosters students' development, and thus has to precede students' development. But if the teacher fails to update his knowledge, broaden his horizon, or improve his teaching methods, he can hardly help his students develop their potentialities. Then disappointment arises and silence follows. Students are thus rendered passive in class. It is acknowledged that proactivity is the main factor in effective communication in classroom activities. Passive students usually speak little in group work with partners, and prefer taking notes to communicating with teachers.

### 3.2. Teacher's teaching method

As the organizer of classroom activities, the teacher is a decisive factor in the classroom climate. His teaching method considerably affects students' state they choose to be in while listening. A class dominated by the teacher's monologue is hard for students, active or passive, to feel part of it, especially when the content of the course is profound or esoteric for undergraduates. In this case, where students are either bored by the teacher or discouraged by the content, silence is the only option. Furthermore, due to the large class size, the opportunity to speak often goes to the most active students. The less active ones are then neglected or forgotten, and left in silence by the teacher. It is the teacher's inappropriate teaching method that fails to transform the difficult content into accessible information for students; that drains students' enthusiasm for the course; that fossilizes the silent group in class.

### 3.3. Students' personality

Students' gender, learning style, learning habits, language characteristics, knowledge level, self-concept and other unique features are important factors in classroom participation. Usually, the students who are extroverted and lively, with a positive sense of self, are good at speaking up in class, and actively involved in classroom activities. On the contrary, those cognitively incompetent and intellectually unprepared students basically silent in class. They are unwilling to interact with teachers in class, reluctant to express their ideas and feelings in class. In the process of classroom teaching, they need to spend more time and energy to digest and absorb the content taught by the teacher. These students are less likely to actively express their opinions, preferring to ruminate on their own.

## 4. Measures to Diminish Silence in Class

Silence has become quite common in college classrooms. To transform silence into active participation, it is advisable to build an equal teacher-student partnership, adjust teaching strategies and give more attention to silent students.

### 4.1. Equal teacher-student partnership

The formidable teacher authority is the obstacle to effective communication between teachers and students. Only the absence of such imbalance can help equal teacher-student partnership to emerge. First of all, teachers should drop the label as an authority and narrow the gap with

students. They should increase communication with students, and strive to become students' trustworthy friends. Students would no longer be scared away from class participation due to the imbalance of power between them. Second, it is important to enhance the role of teachers as guides in class. The communication between students and teachers in classroom teaching is to better promote the development of students, which requires continuous improvement of the guiding role of teachers. For this purpose, teachers are required to cultivate the art as guides, grasp the teaching skills comprehensively, and promote effective classroom interaction. Meanwhile, teachers also need to expand their horizon, and inform themselves of the updated knowledge. Third, when the above requirements are fulfilled, the teacher can build a cooperative classroom which allows for various forms of interaction between the teacher and students and cooperation among students. This could help students summon up courage and confidence in classroom participation and diminish silence.

#### **4.2. Appropriate teaching strategies**

The teacher, as an organizer and guide of students' learning, is in a position to change silence into active participation in a college classroom. Compared with the classes in primary and secondary schools, university courses are undoubtedly more difficult to understand. But not every university course makes students silent, and not every teacher makes students remain silent in the university classroom. In real teaching, there are students who are unwilling to participate in classroom interaction due to the lack of interest, introvert personality and other reasons. However, it must be admitted that the inappropriate teaching methods are the main factor that causes many students to choose silence in classroom teaching. In order to improve students' participation, the teacher should learn the characteristics of each student and their expectations of the course, and design reasonable and interesting classroom activities according to these characteristics and needs, and pay close attention to the level of enthusiasm of students [5]. It is also important to lighten up the classroom atmosphere by using interesting and humorous examples from real life, playing videos and showing cartoons. Furthermore, students can be encouraged to simulate a situation to which the knowledge and skills they have just learned can be applied.

#### **4.3. More attention to passive students**

Finally, every student should have equal opportunities to participate in classroom activities which are usually dominated by active students. The teacher should allocate more questions to introverted students, rather than leave them in silence. The teacher can help students enhance their self-confidence in course learning by giving them chances to answer questions. When they become used to expressing their views in class, their self-esteem grows gradually, and in the end, silence diminishes. Moreover, the teacher should inform the silent students of the harm of silence in class, such as low self-esteem, negative self-image, and poor sense of achievement. If more attention is given to silent students, they can overcome personality deficiencies to participate in classroom activities and strive to improve themselves in spare time, even if they are not good at or interested in the subject, they can also master relevant knowledge and skills, which will help them better prepared for career development in the future.

### **5. Conclusion**

Silence, though naturally existent in classrooms, is damaging to the quality of education and the overall development of students. Therefore, it is crucial to properly approach the causes of silence. Teachers' dominance in teaching, improper teaching methods and students' passive personality are the possible reasons for reticence. It can be considerably alleviated by building an equal teacher-student partnership, employing appropriate teaching strategies and allocating more attention to passive students.

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