

RE-EXAMINING "SILENCE"

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Abstract

As part of a larger study exploring academic discourse socialization of a group of students from diverse academic and cultural backgrounds in an international TESOL graduate program in a Canadian university focusing on how they participate in class, how they perceive different modes of participation of other students in the class, and how this affects their academic discourse socialization process, this study explores 12 EAL students' "silence"/non-oral participation. The study finds that EAL students' "silence" or non-participation was reflection of different factors such as language related issues, concerns about other students, lack of content knowledge, and personality. It was often the case that students' "silence" and/or non-oral participation was a result of combination of those factors. Implications for classroom practices and for meeting EAL students' needs are also discussed.

Keywords: (non) oral participation, silence, EAL, TESOL

Introduction

With the growing enrolment of international students at graduate level in Western universities (OECD, 2017, p. 284–287), it has become critical to consider how international students acquire new social and academic discourses (Morita, 2004). Especially in graduate programs in Western universities which have been receiving an increasing number of students from various parts of the world, it is possible that instructors, local students, and international students may have different academic expectations because of different “cultures of learning” (Jin & Coratazzi, 1996) that each student is used to. This term refers to:

taken-for-granted frameworks of expectations, attitudes, values and beliefs about what constitutes good learning, about how to teach or learn, whether and how to ask questions, what textbooks are for, and how language teaching relates to broader issues of the nature and purpose of education. (Jin & Coratazzi, 1996, p. 1)

Due to differences in cultures of learning, a major area of interest in the field is oral participation and silence of EAL students in the classroom (e.g., Choi, 2015; Tatar, 2005). In many cases, because of these different cultures of learning regarding oral participation expected in EAL students’ home academic cultures and their new academic culture of the Western classroom, EAL students’ participation can be seen and/or understood differently by their peers and instructors. In some literature, researchers often call EAL students’ apparent lack of participation “silence”, which could really be non-oral participation. In order to accommodate increasing number of diverse student body in graduate programs, their participation and the reasons behind why they participate the way they do need to be understood. Therefore, this paper explores EAL students’ silence/non-oral participation in a graduate program in a university in Canada.

Silence/non-oral participation

As student discussion is commonly a major classroom activity in Western countries, especially in graduate courses, silence or lack of active participation of EAL students tends to be a concern for instructors (Tatar, 2005). However, researchers find that silence in class holds different meanings for different students- and that there are different modes of participation besides actively participating in class discussions.

Some students stay silent as a face-saving strategy when they have difficulty expressing themselves clearly with their limited language skills and/ or content knowledge (Choi, 2015; Kettle, 2005; Lee, 2009; Liu, 2002; Morita, 2004; Mukminin & McMahan, 2013; Tatar, 2005). This includes saving their face especially when there are other students from the same country. Studies suggest that students feel more embarrassed of their low performance when in front of other co-nationals (Choi, 2015; Tatar, 2005). Others stay silent as a way of being considerate to other classmates because they might take everyone’s time when they cannot express themselves well, or they are less knowledgeable compared to their classmates in some contexts (Kettle, 2005; Liu, 2002; Morita, 2004; Mukminin & McMahan, 2013; Tatar, 2005). Moreover, they choose to be silent thinking their experiences would not be helpful to their classmates due to

different contexts. Also, some students stay silent to show teachers respect, by not sharing ideas when students have opposing ideas to the teachers' (Tatar, 2005).

There are cases where EAL students stay silent when they feel that other classmates are having meaningless discussions and keep talking because the silent students do not believe it is valuable for the class (Liu, 2002; Tatar, 2005). Some silent students even express their surprise when other students ask basic questions to professors in class (Choi, 2015). It is also interesting to note that while some students believe that they have to try to speak up even if they feel uncomfortable since it is the academic expectation in the western universities (Morita, 2004), others believe that not speaking up does not necessarily mean that students are not engaging in class, and that it is ok to stay silent if they do not feel comfortable (Lee, 2009; Liu, 2002). EAL students cultural background also played a significant role in their participation in their classroom in the Western university such as not orally participating in discussions being humble, or only speaking up only when the information or idea is worth sharing with others (Choi, 2015; Lee, 2009; Liu, 2002; Mukminin & McMahan, 2013).

Even if the silence in class makes EAL students look like they are not participating, there are other ways to show that they are engaging in class. Some students show their response to other students' comments through body language, and others participate actively in group projects or online discussions. Furthermore, some students talk individually to professors after class, or email them about the class (Choi, 2015; Lee, 2009; Morita, 2004; Tatar 2005). These clearly show that EAL students do not simply stay silent due to lack of desire to learn or limited English skills. Rather, in some cases, they are just participating non-orally, and silence in classrooms is a complex aspect that needs to be carefully examined.

In addition, the studies mentioned above examine individual students' experiences (Kettle, 2005; Tatar, 2005), or a group of students from the same nationality (Choi, 2015; Lee, 2009; Liu, 2002; Morita, 2004; Mukminin & McMahan, 2013). Considering that classroom interaction depends on the composition of the class such as students' previous educational experiences and backgrounds (Dippold, 2015), it is worthwhile to examine students' perspectives and experiences about their participation in multicultural classrooms from points of views of students from different academic and cultural backgrounds.

Research context

This study was part of a larger study that explored the academic discourse socialization experiences of 14 graduate students in an international TESOL program at a Canadian university. The program was primarily designed for international students, and although in the first cohort all students were from mainland China, the cohorts since then have had students from different parts of the world including but not limited to Iran, Brazil, Korea, Russia, and Canada. As the program is international, it offers a variety of ways to help students transition to the new cultural and academic context of a Canadian graduate program. This support includes the initial five-week orientation to help students prepare for the upcoming graduate program as well as on-going cultural and academic advising and support.

Participants and their recruitment

The participants were recruited through an e-mail explaining the focus of my study, sent out by a program assistant of the TESOL program. I also approached some participants using snowball sampling (Patton, 2002). Upon submission of the consent form attached to the e-mail, participants were contacted through e-mail and were invited to the interview.

The central question of this larger study was: what do students consider as legitimate modes of participation in a TESOL graduate program designed primarily for international students in a Canadian university? The focus was on the students' (non) oral participation and how they negotiate legitimacy of participation. In order to understand EAL students' silence/non-oral participation, this study focuses only on 12 EAL students who participated in the larger study. Below is summary of the participants. I am not disclosing the country of origin of participants outside of China to maintain anonymity, given the few numbers of students and graduates from particular countries. Similarly, in order to maintain anonymity, I asked my participants to pick a pseudonym and used their pseudonyms in the study.

Table 1

Pseudonyms	Status	Area of Origin
Helen	Student in 1 st term	China
Jack	Student in final term	China
Emily	Student in final term	North Africa
Michelle	Student in final term	China
Amanda	Student in final term	South America
Gina	Graduate	Eastern Asia
Jenny	Student in 1 st term	Eastern Asia
Katherine	Graduate	Eastern Europe
Amy	Student in final term	China
Dianna	Student in 1 st term	Southern Asia
Tina	Graduate	China
Sharon	Graduate	Eastern Asia

Table 1. Pseudonyms.

Research Design

To explore the research question and develop a detailed understanding of students' participation in the TESOL program, a qualitative research approach was chosen. Specifically, in order to explore participants' lived experiences in the program, and develop more detailed knowledge about them (Wengraf, 2001), I conducted semi-structured qualitative interviews. I first conducted focus group interviews and then individual interviews with the study participants to discuss further their accounts from the focus group interview. The duration of the focus group interviews were in length of approximately one hour. The individual interviews were conducted about a month after the focus group face-to-face interview depending on the participants' availabilities. The individual interviews varied from approximately 30 minutes to an hour.

Findings

This study found that participants participated in class non-orally or stayed silent for different reasons, mainly for four major reasons. Therefore, below, I will discuss the four major reasons: language related issues, concerns about other students, lack of content knowledge, and personality.

Language related issues

Some participants' accounts suggested that language was a factor that affected their participation. For instance, Amanda, a participant from South America said that she was not shy and she wanted to contribute her ideas and experiences in group discussions, but she could not, due to her lack of academic English skills. She said she had no problem talking to her friends about her daily life, but when it came to talking about academic reading, she could not produce what she wanted to say. This suggests that although she may appear silent when she could not contribute in discussions, she was eager to orally participate.

Concerns about other students

Another factor that influenced the way students participate in class was concerns about other students. Some students' accounts suggested that they sometimes did not orally participate in class discussions because they did not want their classmates to perceive them negatively such as "dominant" students. Some participants from China talked about their cultural background, and according to them, in their classrooms in China, students are normally quiet in class and if someone speaks up in class, they may be seen weirdly because it is not a common classroom practice. Also, some students were worried about getting into conflicts with other students by speaking up. Jack said:

I get into troubles because of speaking instead of remaining silent I guess. You lose friends because of you talk too much inappropriately instead of remaining silent (Jack, individual interview, December 7, 2017).

This shows that he stayed silent because he considered discussion as a potential risk of arguing with his classroom, which may potentially lead to losing his friends.

Lack of content knowledge

Lack of content knowledge was another factor that affected participants' participation in class. Some students' accounts suggested that even though they were willing to participate in discussions by contributing their experiences and ideas, they sometimes could not due to lack of content knowledge. For instance, Emily said:

...most of our classmates were local teachers and they were experienced so they had more than I did to talk about. I tried to speak as much as I can, but sometimes I just stayed silent. (Emily, group interview, November 22, 2017)

Similar experience was shared by another participant:

...they [her classmates] were all teaching, like in public schools. And so their experience was richer in that way because they were able to speak what they were doing and how what we learn in the elective, how they could see in the school... so I think they were all seem confident and talking all the time and I was the one silent or also trying to participate but I wasn't working so I could relate to my previous experience in [a country in South America], I did my best, but I felt it wasn't enough, so it was very challenging. (Amanda, individual interview, December 18, 2017)

These excerpts suggest that despite the fact that they were trying to participate through "talking", like their other classmates, they were sometimes "silent" due to their lack of experience in the specific context.

Personality

Lastly, participants' personality seemed to be a factor which affected their participation in class. Some students talked about their personality, and some students talked about their upbringings. For example, Amy said:

I think because I'm not a very expressive person but do love listening to other's opinions and it takes me time to organize or structure my answers so sometimes it seems like I was not participating in the discussions, but just want to structure the answer in my brain and then I talk about it. But sometimes after I finish structuring, people just reach to another one or something like that. (Amy, group interview, December 18, 2017)

This shows that Amy being "not a very expressive person" may make her appear "silent" in class, as she is not orally participating, however, she is thinking about the topic, meaning that she is engaged in class discussions.

Discussion

As demonstrated in findings, EAL students' "silence" or non-participation was reflection of different factors that surrounded them. Those factors included language related issues, concerns about other students, lack of content knowledge, and personality. However, it was often the case that students' "silence" and/or non-oral participation was a result of combination of those factors. Face-saving (E.g., Choi, 2015) and lack of content knowledge (E.g., Liu, 2002; Tatar, 2005), which were reported in previous literature as some of the main reasons hindering EAL students' oral participation were also the factors affecting EAL students' oral participation in my study. In contrast, while perceived lack of proficiency in English was another factor hindering their participation in the literature (E.g., Mukminin & McMahon, 2013), this study found that even if a student who was comfortable and competent in speaking English in daily settings was willing to contribute to class discussions, she was unable to do so due to her actual lack of academic English skills. Moreover, although academic culture was also reported as another critical factor for their participation in previous studies (E.g., Lee, 2009), findings from

this study suggest that even students from the same academic culture participate differently depending on their personality. Regardless of how their participation might look in the classroom, in many cases, EAL students were engaged in discussions, but were unable to participate in discussions orally, or chose not to orally participate.

Conclusion

This study provides some implications for internationalizing graduate programs. Considering the significant increase of diverse student body in graduate programs in Western universities, instructors need to be open to different modes of participation including non-oral participation. That way, students who come from different academic backgrounds will be able to contribute their experiences. Also, as lack of academic English skills can hinder some EAL students' participation even if they possess high proficiency of English skills and are willing to contribute to class discussions, more support with their academic English skills would be needed. This will allow students with academically, culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds to share and learn from each other's invaluable experiences.

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