

Why Not Speak Up? A Narrative Inquiry into the Silence of Undergraduate EFL Learners in Speaking Classes

¹Andi Syifa Hanifaturrizkia, ²Aridah Aridah, ³Didik Sucahyo, ⁴Desy Rusmawaty, ⁵Maria Teodora Ping

Email : ¹andsyfakiya@gmail.com, ²aridah@fkip.unmul.ac.id, ³didiks1961@gmail.com, ⁴desyusmawaty@fkip.unmul.ac.id, ⁵mariateodoraping@fkip.unmul.ac.id

^{1, 2, 3, 4, 5} Mulawarman University

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ABSTRACT

Despite the importance of speaking skills in communicative English as a Foreign Language (EFL) pedagogy, many undergraduate EFL learners remain silent in the speaking classroom. Existing research has primarily examined silence among EFL learners in non-Indonesian contexts, resulting in a limited understanding of the sociocultural and linguistic factors affecting Indonesian university students. To address this gap, the present study explores the lived experiences of silent undergraduate EFL learners in speaking classes. Using a narrative inquiry approach, data were collected through a focus group discussion and were analyzed thematically using the three-dimensional space of narrative inquiry. Drawing on Krashen's Second Language Acquisition theories and Saville-Troike's ethnographic framework, the study conceptualizes silence as an outcome of the integration of psychological, linguistic, institutional, and Indonesian cultural conventions that shape classroom participation. Krashen's input and affective filter hypotheses explain the role of affective factors in student silence, while Saville-Troike's ethnographic framework situates these factors within broader cultural and situational contexts. The findings identify interrelated themes, including the silent learning phase, emotional barriers, institutionally determined silence, group-determined silence, and individually determined silence. Ultimately, this study offers a theory-informed and culturally grounded contribution to student silence in speaking classrooms. It highlights the need for culturally responsive EFL practices and provides practical recommendations for teachers to foster more active student participation.

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Introduction

In the field of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning, speaking is considered as an essential component of communicative competence. However, while communicative language teaching approaches encourage active participation in speaking activities, many

EFL learners are still struggling with oral participation and always remain silent. Subsequently, classroom silence in EFL contexts has been explored, with researchers identifying multiple contributing factors. Research have connected silence to psychological barriers like anxiety, low linguistic self-efficacy, and fear of evaluation as the causes ([Huang et al., 2025](#); [Maher & King, 2022](#)). Meanwhile, others have examined sociocultural influences, noting that Asian students are often seen as quiet and passive in English classes because of cultural values and politeness norms in their societies ([Al-Ahmadi & King, 2023](#); [Chaiyasat & Intakaew, 2023](#); [Kim Pham et al., 2023](#); [Kim Pham & Chong, 2024](#)). Additionally, teacher-centered instructional methods have been found to limit students' opportunities to engage in the classroom actively ([Yan & He, 2020](#)). Therefore, regarding the rise of emphasis on communicative language teaching (CLT) in Indonesia, it is crucial to understand why undergraduate EFL learners remain silent in their English speaking class.

Silence is one of the most important social and cognitive processes in language learning that helps internalization and comprehension. While often viewed negatively, another viewpoint from second language acquisition (SLA) theory might address such idea by offering a rational explanation. According to [Krashen \(1982\)](#), silence is a crucial stage in language learning since it allows students to absorb and process words before speaking. The input hypothesis later explains the silent period as when one develops language proficiency through listening and comprehending the language. To put it another way, silence can be seen as a phase for processing meaning and improving linguistic performance rather than only a lack of engagement. Furthermore, the Affective Filter hypothesis explains how emotional factors influence the language acquisition process, causing most adult learners to struggle with fluency despite having sufficient input ([S. D. Krashen, 1982](#)). Based on these SLA beliefs, it can be inferred that good language teachers are those who can give adequate comprehensible input in a low-anxiety setting.

Next, [Saville-Troike's \(1985\)](#) ethnographic framework for understanding silence complements Krashen's SLA theory by considering that its meaning is very context dependent. According to [Saville-Troike \(1985\)](#), silence is divided into institutionally-determined, group-determined, and individual-determined silence. The first type occurs within hierarchical structures. For instance, in an Indonesian classroom context, the teacher initiated most of the talking, while the students only passively listened. Next, group-determined silence occurs when a group collectively maintains silence to convey respect when one individual has more power. To illustrate, students who remain silent while elders speak may reflect cultural values where speaking too soon is seen as impolite, even if they are fluent in another language with different norms ([Saville-Troike, 2008](#)). Then,

individually determined silence is divided into interactive (anticipating responses) and non-interactive (disengagement due to emotions). Additionally, as a part of non-interactive silence, psychological silence reflects personal emotions like shyness, anxiety, or embarrassment. Finally, by recognizing the various forms of silence, educators can better understand and navigate its role in social and academic interactions.

Drawing on [Krashen's \(1982\)](#) theory of second language acquisition and [Saville-Troike \(1985\)](#) ethnographic framework, this study views silence as shaped by both internal affective factors and external sociocultural contexts. Krashen's theory addresses inner learning processes and emotional barriers, while Saville-Troike's framework highlights the influence of cultural and institutional contexts. Combining both perspectives, this study uses them as a framework to analyze and explain EFL undergraduate learners' classroom silence. To illustrate how these theories will manifest in the narratives, several anticipated narrative codes are proposed. Firstly, silent learning phases and emotional barriers could surface, which directly linking to Krashen's SLA theory. Secondly, cultural respect and the role of hierarchy could provide insights related to Saville-Troike's institutionally and group-determined silence. Lastly, the anticipation of response or disengagement in classroom could highlight individually-determined silence in Saville-Troike's framework, where students' silent behavior stems from interactive or non-interactive silence.

Furthermore, most previous studies on classroom silence focus on EFL learners from other cultural contexts, such as Vietnamese EFL university students in online learning ([Kim Pham & Chong, 2024](#)), Saudi Arabian female EFL learners ([Al-Ahmadi & King, 2023](#)), Thai students in EMI settings ([Chaiyasat & Intakaew, 2023](#)), and Chinese students studying in the UK ([Zhu & O'Sullivan, 2022](#)). These studies have collectively revealed that silence can emerge from anxiety, politeness norms, and hierarchical classroom relationships. However, the findings may not be applicable to Indonesian undergraduate learners, who encounter distinct sociocultural, institutional, and linguistic challenges in university speaking classes. One study that focuses on Indonesian students was conducted in a vocational high school setting, which differs significantly from the academic environment of university speaking courses ([Pratolo et al., 2024](#)). Given that undergraduate EFL learners are expected to engage in more advanced communicative and interactive learning strategies, their experiences with classroom silence warrant further investigation.

Previous studies on EFL students' silence have mostly employed phenomenography and case study ([Chaiyasat & Intakaew, 2023](#); [Kim Pham et al., 2023](#); [Kim Pham & Chong, 2024](#); [Thein Win et al., 2024](#); [Zhu & O'Sullivan, 2022](#)). While these designs are valuable for identifying common patterns and typologies of silence, they often fail to capture the

personal, emotional, and temporal nature of students' experiences. Silence is not only a classroom behavior but also a lived experience that involves internal reflection, affective states, and identity negotiation. Therefore, a methodological shift is needed, and narrative inquiry could offer this opportunity as it foregrounds participants' personal stories, emotions, and reflections on silence in a structured chronology ([Caine et al., 2022](#); [Connelly & Clandinin, 1990](#)). Since silence is a deeply personal and context-dependent phenomenon, this method will allow for a richer understanding of students' lived experiences.

Moreover, some prior studies explored silence in general EFL classroom context ([Tang et al., 2020](#); [Yan & He, 2020](#)) or English-Medium Instruction (EMI) university setting ([Chaiyasat & Intakaew, 2023](#)). These settings often mix multiple skills and learning goals, making it difficult to isolate how silence operates specifically in oral communication courses. Yet, silence in speaking classes presents a unique phenomenon, such as some students remain quiet even when fluency and participation are explicitly encouraged. In contrast to reading or writing classes, where silence may indicate concentration or comprehension, silence in speaking classes can directly conflict with its pedagogical objectives. Ultimately, it is crucial to explore undergraduate students' silence in this settings to understand them better and foster speaking class engagement.

In summary, prior studies have enhanced understanding of classroom silence but leave several gaps unaddressed. Research in this area rarely represents Indonesian university EFL learners, who navigate unique sociocultural expectations and institutional hierarchies that influence their classroom behavior. Furthermore, limited methodological diversity has left the emotional and narrative dimensions of silence underexplored. Finally, no studies have focused specifically on speaking courses, where silence directly challenges the communicative goals of language education. Therefore, this study addresses these gaps by exploring the lived experiences of Indonesian EFL undergraduates' silence in speaking classes through a narrative inquiry approach.

Most importantly, this research will present its novelty in several ways. First, it provides a cultural and contextual contribution by focusing on Indonesian university students. Second, it uses narrative inquiry to allow sharing personal stories, emotions, and reflections on silence from the participants. Because silence involves emotional, cultural, and contextual dimensions that cannot be fully captured through surveys or observation, narrative inquiry allows participants to express how they experience and interpret their silence within their learning histories. Third, it specifically examines silence in speaking classes where verbal participation is crucial. Finally, this study will build on the integration of Krashen's Hypothesis on SLA ([1982](#)) and Saville-Troike's ethnographic framework of

silence ([1985](#)) to explore undergraduate EFL learners' silence in speaking classes as well as explain the underlying factors. Therefore, this study seeks to answer these following research questions:

1. How do EFL learners experience silence in university speaking classes?
2. What are the key factors that contribute to their silence?

By exploring the narratives of silent EFL learners, this study aims to provide insights into the lived experience of students who choose to be silent and the factors that contribute to this phenomenon. The findings may inform pedagogical practices and offer suggestions for creating more inclusive and supportive speaking environments.

Method

This study used a qualitative, narrative inquiry approach to investigate the complexity of EFL undergraduate students' silence in speaking classes. Narrative research is a qualitative method where researchers collect and share the life stories of a small number of individuals, often focusing on school or classroom experiences ([Creswell, 2015](#)). It was guided by the three-dimensional narrative inquiry space, namely temporality, sociality, and place ([Clandinin & Vera, 2019](#)). Specifically, temporality refers to how students' silence changes over time, affected by past learning experiences, actual classroom dynamics, and goals for the future. Sociality refers to the emotions and interpersonal connections that influence one's tendency to speak, including relationships with classmates, instructors, and broader socio-cultural norms. Place refers to the institutional and classroom contexts in which these experiences occur, emphasizing how varied learning environments influence student engagement.

University A (pseudonym) was chosen as the research site based on its representativeness as a public university as well as considerations such as accessibility, feasibility, and familiarity. Adopting purposive sampling, Diandra, Helen, and Theo (pseudonyms) were chosen as participants for several reasons. First, they have experienced prolonged silence in their English-speaking courses during their time as English Department students in the Faculty of Teacher Training and Education. Second, their personality was quite distinct, where Diandra and Theo are outgoing and expressive in their first language (Indonesian), and Helen prefers to be modest in a variety of academic and social contexts. Finally, they have completed all speaking courses level, namely Intensive Speaking, Intermediate Speaking, Upper-Intermediate Speaking, and Speaking for Specific Purposes. Given the importance of individual learning experiences and external influences in influencing students' speaking engagement, Table 1 provides participant demographic

data to lay the groundwork for further investigations.

Table 1. Demographic information of the participants

<i>Name</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Years of Learning English</i>	<i>Major</i>	<i>Educational Level</i>
Diandra	Female	13	English Department	3 rd year university
Theo	Male	7	English Department	3 rd year university
Helen	Female	12	English Department	3 rd year university

The data was collected through a focus group discussion and guided by an interview protocol as the primary research instrument to fully capture each participant's personal and shared experiences with silence in speaking classes. To allow natural responses, the discussion was mediated in Indonesian and lasted approximately one hour. It was conducted offline to build better rapport with participants and enable spontaneous follow-up for a more holistic understanding. Participants gave their consent for the session to be voice-recorded. The discussion was guided by an interview protocol designed by the authors based on the research aims. In line with Krashen's and Saville-Troike's theoretical frameworks, the questions were organized and delivered sequentially, starting from individual affective experiences and extending to broader sociocultural and institutional factors influencing their silence. Example questions are, *"Have you ever hesitated to speak in class because of the teacher's presence or classmates who are more fluent? Can you share an experience?"* The recordings were subsequently transcribed and translated into English for data analysis. Finally, the academic transcripts of the participants were examined to provide contextual information about their study progress.

Next, data analysis was conducted through a deductive thematic-narrative approach, guided by the theoretical frameworks of silence. The process began with familiarization of the focus group discussion transcripts to understand participants' stories. Second, initial codes were generated based on the theoretical constructs. Krashen's codes represented affective and cognitive dimensions, while Saville-Troike's framework informed codes on institutional, group, and individual forms of silence. Third, researchers examined how the data aligned with or expanded these categories, and codes were refined into five themes: (1) silent learning phase, (2) emotional barriers, (3) institutionally determined silence, (4) group-determined silence, and (5) individually determined silence. Fourth, individual narrative accounts were constructed chronologically for each participant by using [Connelly and Clandinin's \(1990\)](#) three-dimensional narrative inquiry space. Finally, to ensure data trustworthiness, researchers collaboratively interpreted and discussed findings using

investigator triangulation to reach consensus. Consistent with [Lincoln and Guba's \(1985\)](#) criteria, the study emphasized credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability throughout the analytic process. Theory triangulation was also done by cross-checking the findings with both frameworks for theoretical consistency and interpretive depth. This systematic process ensured the analysis remained grounded in theory while representing participants' voices.

Ultimately, all ethical procedures were implemented to safeguard participants' rights and well-being throughout the research process. Prior to data collection, informed consent was obtained after participants received comprehensive information regarding the study's aims, procedures, and their rights to voluntary participation. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time without penalty. To ensure confidentiality, pseudonyms were used in place of real names, and all identifying information was excluded from the report. Lastly, the data were securely stored and used solely for academic purposes to uphold participants' privacy and trust.

Findings and Discussion

A. Findings

This study's findings will be presented as a series of narrative stories from each participant that capture distinct and unique perspectives. These stories portray their experience of silence in English-speaking classes and their reasons behind it, which were later considered as the factors affecting their reticence to speak. The following section introduces the narratives of the participants, beginning with Diandra, and then Theo, and finally Helen's stories.

1. Diandra's Narrative on Silence: From Insecurity to Risk-Taking

Diandra enrolled in University A in 2022. In her narrative, she vividly described the initial shock upon entering the university environment, particularly in response to the academic culture and the lecturers' teaching style. During her first semester, she encountered a silent period and emotional barriers largely due to her limited English proficiency.

It was my first time entering college, right? It was really shocking. I got accepted into the English Education program. Right after that, I noticed that the lecturer would just give us the material and then immediately ask us to do a presentation. So, I felt like we didn't really have any chance to speak. Then, Mr. A would sometimes make jokes, right? But I didn't really understand them. And usually, when we had several presentations, I still felt really

nervous. Because I still wasn't used to speaking English in front of ... a lot of people like that. And then, seeing my classmates, they were all fluent in English. So, I felt more like embarrassed, and kind of insecure seeing that their English was ... better.

Moreover, the statement also revealed Diandra's perception that the lecturer did not provide sufficient opportunities for students to actively speak during class. This lack of engagement contributed to her low self-confidence and anxiety. In the interview, she also mentioned that the course content brought by her first semester lecturer was "kind of random". This narrative reflects her lack of interest in the teaching method and eventually led to classroom silence.

Her second semester contrasted sharply with her first as she encountered a strict and authoritative lecturer. Intimidated by the lecturer's dominant presence and teaching style, she remained silent in class. Consequently, her motivation to participate in her intermediate speaking class declined. The excerpt below reveals how the teacher's dominance and lack of attentiveness silenced her by creating fear, discouragement, and loss of agency.

I saw that Mr. B talked a lot too. We were given the opportunity to speak, but it was often interrupted, so it made me reluctant to speak. Also, even if I wanted to speak, I was afraid I wouldn't be listened to. Because from Mr. B's attitude, you could already tell how he reacts when someone talks. He rarely paid attention. So, I felt like if I spoke, I wouldn't be noticed. That made me not feel like talking. Also, if I made a mistake or something, Mr. B would immediately ... correct me right away. I don't like it when he corrects me right away like that.

However, in her third semester, she was taught by a more relaxed lecturer who employed a less formal teaching style. Although this created a more comfortable classroom environment, her silence during discussions persisted because she needed additional time to prepare responses before speaking. This implied that she faced a high cognitive load in real-time communication.

Actually, when a question comes suddenly, I get confused about how to put the words together. Back then, during the semester with Miss C, my vocabulary wasn't that much yet. So sometimes when I wanted to answer, I actually could, but not suddenly. But if I already knew the question beforehand, maybe I could prepare by using Google Translate first. I can't just answer suddenly like that. Maybe I could, but the answer wouldn't be long,

probably just short answers.

Additionally, during the same semester, Diandra encountered significant challenges while preparing a Socratic seminar as her final exam. She struggled to gather data for her assigned topic, which increased her anxiety about speaking in front of the lecturer. Her perception of an authority imbalance in the classroom and the lecturer's close observation made her feel her answers were wrong before she spoke. She admitted, "whatever I had memorized just disappeared," which diminished her willingness to participate. Furthermore, her lack of interest in the topic reduced her motivation and negatively affected both her performance and confidence.

Finally, in her last speaking course, she encountered the same lecturer as in her second semester. Because of this familiarity, her reasons for silence mirrored her earlier experience. Specifically, the interactive silence persisted, as she would wait quietly for classmates' responses, particularly when topics changed rapidly. Furthermore, she expressed fears of making mistakes, being judged by peers or lecturers, and feeling embarrassed. In addition, the Indonesian cultural norm of not interrupting an elder's speech influenced her silence; out of respect for the lecturer, this expectation made her hesitant to speak up during class discussions. Ultimately, a combination of personal apprehensions and deeply rooted cultural values shaped her silence in the classroom.

Because Mr. B also talks a lot in class, like he tells a lot of stories, right? And it just doesn't feel right to suddenly interrupt him while he's speaking. I mean, when someone is talking, especially an older person, you're not supposed to interrupt, right? I also had that in mind. And like, when a lecturer is talking, sometimes we're really afraid to interrupt. That's why sometimes we don't dare to speak, because he'll definitely just keep going. It would feel weird to suddenly answer the question in the middle of what he's saying, right? And it's also not allowed to do that.

At the end, Diandra reflected on her experiences and challenges in speaking courses. She acknowledged the perceived significant improvement in her skills and expressed gratitude for those phases. Later, during her final terms, she was the first to have a face-to-face speaking test. This provided her with a more personalized environment that allowed her to demonstrate her true capabilities. As a result, the lecturer encouraged her to be braver and take risks, which became the motivational turning point for her future improvement in speaking. Empowered by this support, Diandra proactively enrolled in English courses

beyond the university to help her grow as a confident speaker.

2. Theo's Narrative on Silence: From Language Shock to Self-Perceived Growth

Similar to Diandra, Theo enrolled at University A in 2022. He experienced significant adjustment difficulties during his first semester, which he primarily associated to his vocational high school background in Science and Technology. Theo confessed that his basic English skills were lacking. As a result, the shift in education discipline caused him to feel unprepared and contributed to his sense of shock.

I was also shocked. Because my background is from a vocational high school (SMK). So it was like, shocking. Really shocking. For example, I came from a science and technology major in vocational high school, and then suddenly switched to English (major). My basic English was lacking to begin with.

Theo's main reason for remaining silent in his first semester was due to disengagement from lessons, which he attributed to the lecturer and uninteresting topics. He specifically admitted that basic activities, such as spelling exercises and reciting the alphabet, did not stimulate his interest or encourage participation. Consequently, these learning activities failed to foster meaningful engagement.

Because sometimes the topics are just about spelling, like, what's the point? And then there's always the ABCD thing, right? He always mentions that in every meeting. In my opinion, I'm really not interested. It's just not interesting at all, those kinds of topics.

In his second semester, he reported feeling even more shocked due to the strict lecturer's approach and the classroom atmosphere. Theo's silence in class was mainly caused by the time he needed to process discussions, especially since the lecturer often changed topics quickly, as Diandra also noted. The lecturer's strictness and rapid topic changes created emotional and cognitive challenges that contributed to his silence.

I was more shocked. Because of Mr. B. And then, the reason I'm afraid to speak sometimes is because I knew how he was. For me, it was like I was just scared of Mr. B sometimes. And then sometimes, when he discusses a topic, it doesn't quite make sense to me. That's why I need some time to process it. Sometimes it's too fast for me.

Afterwards, in his third semester, Theo continued to encounter difficulties related to

processing time, much like Diandra, primarily due to his limited English proficiency and restricted vocabulary. Later, when preparing for the Socratic Seminar, he mentioned experiencing insecurity and anxiety from a perceived power imbalance with more proficient classmates. It made him fear judgment, which in turn inhibited his willingness to speak and participate actively during group discussions. These patterns of self-doubt and social comparison suggested an underlying sense of inferiority.

Yeah, the Socratic Seminar, right? It was done in groups. During the discussion, I mostly just stayed quiet. But I still spoke a little, even though not as much as the other friends. Maybe, if I had to say, it's because there are others who are more skilled, that's probably why my answers were like that.

Moreover, Theo also experienced collective silence in the fourth semester. When everyone chose not to respond in the speaking class, he expressed his dilemma, such as "Should I answer? Should I not answer?" considering that his confidence level was also low at that particular moment. Additionally, his silence was influenced by cultural norms that prioritize respect and social harmony, including refraining from interrupting elders and maintaining respectful communication.

Because our culture is Indonesian, right? When talking to elders, we definitely speak with politeness and all that. But like what was said earlier, interrupting is also part of manners, right? Ideally, it's better to let the person finish speaking first. Although sometimes, when we speak, Mr. D interrupts us right away. Well, that's fine, I guess.

Finally, upon reflecting on his progress after completing four speaking courses, Theo acknowledged substantial improvement. He recalled a sense of growth when comparing his current abilities to those at the beginning of his studies. Despite experiencing considerable academic pressure during the first four semesters, he conveyed relief and ease regarding the next semester, as all speaking classes had been completed.

3. Helen's Narrative on Silence: From Fear to Confidence

In the same timeline, Helen enrolled at University A in 2022 and became classmates with Diandra and Theo. She echoed her peers' experiences of university culture shock, particularly regarding the differences in lecturers' teaching styles. Helen faced emotional barriers in her speaking classes, especially negative emotions such as the fear of being judged or making mistakes when speaking. Ultimately, the lack of guidance and limited

teacher-student interaction appeared to discourage her participation.

Just like the others, I was shocked. Then more like ... I get nervous when speaking in front. And with Mr. A, we're rarely taught, right? So ... it feels kind of weird when I want to speak. I was afraid of making mistakes, things like that.

Next, in her second semester, Helen reported experiences as largely similar to her first semester. She continued to struggle with low motivation and confidence in speaking, fear of making mistakes, and an authoritative teaching style that discouraged her from participating in class discussions. Her silence in class was primarily influenced by the way feedback was delivered. She described the lecturer's feedback as "too straightforward," which made her hesitant to speak up. In addition, she also found the topics to be uninteresting and disengaging. The unpredictable changes in subject matter left her confused about what to focus on, which further reduced her motivation to participate.

Because the topics kept changing, it was confusing to know what we were supposed to be learning that day. For example, if last week we talked about health and then we expected to continue next week. But it turned out the next week we discussed something else. So, it kind of made me lose motivation to speak. Because it ended up being a different topic. So, what we had prepared before wasn't brought up that day.

Additionally, Helen cited reasons for her silence in the third semester similar to those of her peers, including difficulties with processing time, perceived power imbalances, and the lecturer's teaching style. From this, it can be understood that the classroom environment prioritized linguistic accuracy over communicative situation. As a result, a high-stakes atmosphere developed in which errors were penalized rather than treated as learning opportunities.

Same as that. Because the question comes suddenly, so I know what I want to answer but I don't know how to say it. Sometimes I forget the vocabulary. Then Miss C is very strict with corrections, right. Also, umm ... like the pronunciation and all that. So, I choose not to answer.

In her fourth semester, Helen, like Diandra and Theo, was taught by the same lecturer as in her second semester. She expressed similar concerns about uninteresting and

frequently changing topics, which diminished her motivation, as well as the authoritative teaching style that discouraged speaking. Her statement implied that the lecturer's inconsistency and perceived bias in evaluation prompted her to withdraw from active participation as a form of self-preservation.

Earlier with Mr. B, because the topics kept changing ... yeah, it just made me feel unmotivated. And then, the grades tend to prioritize those who speak often with Mr. B, so I thought, might as well just not speak at all, and just accept whatever grade I get.

Finally, similar to her peers, Helen perceived improvement and a better emotional state after completing her speaking classes. She revealed feeling more confident and comfortable, particularly because she no longer faced the strict speaking classes and correction of her previous speaking courses. She explained that while she still participates in academic presentations in her current semester, she did so with greater self-confidence.

B. Discussion

The narratives of Diandra, Theo, and Helen demonstrate that students' silence in the speaking class is a complex phenomenon shaped by various factors. Specifically, the main argument here is that silence should not be seen merely as disengagement. Instead, it can also reflect emotional states, cultural norms, and classroom dynamics in Indonesia. Building on this point, these findings highlight silence as both a potential barrier and a deliberate strategy in language learning. Furthermore, analyzing students' experiences across silent learning phases, emotional barriers, and institutionally-, group-, and individually-determined silence shows that silence arises from the interplay of internal affective filters, Indonesian cultural conventions, and teacher-centered practices that influence classroom participation.

Initially, all of the participants are experiencing university culture shock, difficulties in adapting to new pedagogical practices, and limited English proficiency. These findings are consistent with [Zhu and O'Sullivan's \(2022\)](#) study, which reported heightened anxiety faced by Chinese international students upon entering a new cultural environment due to the loss of familiar social cues. As [Oberg \(1960\)](#) suggested, the removal of cultural signs and language familiarity often leads to uncertainty and withdrawal. In the data, the participants discuss their initial college experience, where the setting was completely new and shocking, such as the unfamiliar teaching approaches. These conditions eliminated all of the familiarity they had gained from their previous high school learning environment. This unexpected result became one of the causes that contributed to their silence. Therefore,

instructors must anticipate this factor to better understand students' silence, especially in their freshman year.

Additionally, the data align with [Krashen's \(1982\)](#) SLA theories, highlighting processing time in the silent period and the affective filter that inhibits willingness to speak. For instance, Diandra's inability to understand the lecturer's jokes illustrates Krashen's silent period. In the following semester, Diandra and Theo both needed extra time to answer questions. A shared emotion among participants that was best described by Helen involved persistent anxiety, fear of making mistakes, low self-confidence, diminished motivation, and apprehension about correction. These findings parallel [Zafarina's \(2022\)](#) research, which attributes Indonesian students' reluctance to speak to fears of error, peer mockery, and teacher criticism, and exemplify Krashen's affective filter. Similarly, [Ozdemir and Papi's \(2022\)](#) study found that L2 learners' self-confidence and speaking anxiety are shaped by belief systems, motivation, challenging instruction, learning environments, and proficiency level. Other prior research also shows that learners often remain silent to process information ([Godínez Martínez, 2022](#); [Wang et al., 2022](#)). Overall, students' silence is found to stem from the silent period, emotional barriers, and teacher-centered instructional approaches.

Building on these psychological and linguistic factors, the data also reveal that institutional elements play a significant role. The factors affecting their silence were in line with [Saville-Troike's \(1985\)](#) framework. The institutionally determined silence, as the third major theme found, showed in the narrative mainly in the form of authoritarian teaching. The participants recalled that one of their lecturers is very strict and rapidly changes topics, which lowers their motivation to speak. This is supported by previous research by [Yan and He \(2020\)](#), who found that students remain silent due to teacher-related factors such as theoretical content, unfamiliar topics, high academic standards, and strict personalities. Additionally, Theo mentioned experiencing power imbalances with more proficient peers, while Diandra noted a lack of speaking opportunities due to teacher-centered instruction. Thus, institutional variables, including teacher-related factors and power imbalances, strongly predict student silence.

Moving from institutional to sociocultural dimensions, the group determined that silence was experienced by all the participants, especially in regard to silence as a social norm, turn-taking culture, and social harmony maintenance. All participants agreed that Indonesian culture did not permit young people to interrupt the elderly's speaking, considering it a norm even in the classroom setting. In contrast, Theo believed it was acceptable if the elderly or the lecturer interrupted them. It resonates with [Saville-Troike's](#)

(1985) argument that silence interpretation relies heavily on the specific situational, cultural, and interpersonal context in which it occurs. In the Indonesian context, students' politeness and their tendency to remain silent can be understood as a reflection of Indonesia's deep-rooted patrimonial and hierarchical culture. As [Wiryomartono \(2020\)](#) explains, Indonesian politeness is not merely a matter of linguistic behavior but a social mechanism shaped by obedience, hierarchy, and face-saving practices within a patrimonial system that values harmony and respect for authority. This behavior aligns with the Indonesian concepts of *tata krama* and *sopan santun*, where humility and deference are signs of good character. Thus, students' silence in speaking class can also be seen as a culturally ingrained act of respect and self-restraint that mirrors broader Indonesian social values.

Finally, the individually-determined silence was mainly shown through the experience of non-interactive silence. All participants reported choosing not to participate and disengaging entirely particularly due to the uninteresting topics. Previous research similarly identifies uninteresting topics as a significant teacher-related factor contributing to silence ([Sarwari, 2024](#); [Wulandari et al., 2021](#); [Yan & He, 2020](#)). Participants' accounts suggest that generational gaps between lecturers and students may create a disparity, as lecturers often rely on traditional teaching styles and select discussion topics based on their own experiences. This approach can be perceived as irrelevant by students from younger generations, such as Generation Z. Thus, these findings underscore the importance of selecting engaging speaking topics to promote class participation.

Taken together, the narratives illustrate how learners' silence results from the intersection of internal affective filters, as described by [Krashen \(1982\)](#), and the external sociocultural structures emphasized by [Saville-Troike \(1985\)](#). In other words, emotional barriers such as anxiety and fear of correction are not isolated psychological phenomena but are reinforced by cultural expectations of deference, power distance, and teacher authority. Eventually, this theoretical integration highlights that learners' silence cannot be understood solely from linguistic or affective perspectives but must be interpreted within the broader ecology of classroom interaction and Indonesian cultural norms.

Ultimately, this study demonstrates that students' silence in EFL speaking classes is not merely disengagement or psychological constraint, but a strategy developed by learners due to the deep-rooted Indonesian cultural values. By integrating Krashen's affective filter and Saville-Troike's ethnographic perspective, this research provides a more holistic understanding of why Indonesian learners choose silence. Pedagogically, these insights call for a shift toward more empathetic and culturally responsive teaching practices.

Pedagogical strategies such as peer collaboration, small-group discussions, and dialogic questioning can help reduce learners' affective filters and offer lower-stakes opportunities for oral participation. Finally, increased teacher awareness of classroom power relations, particularly in contexts where authority and respect are emphasized, can facilitate a balance between structure and empathy, thereby encouraging students to speak without fear of negative evaluation.

Conclusion

This study offers critical insights into the experiences of EFL undergraduate students and the factors influencing their silence in English-speaking courses. The findings indicate that student silence is not simply a sign of disengagement or low proficiency but a context-dependent communicative behavior shaped by affective, cultural, and institutional influences. By integrating Krashen's SLA theory with Saville-Troike's ethnographic framework of silence, the research demonstrates that silence results from the interaction between internal affective filters, such as anxiety, motivation, and self-confidence, and external sociocultural pressures, including hierarchical classroom norms and Indonesian values of politeness and respect. This theoretical synthesis reframes silence as a dynamic adaptation strategy shaped by emotional and cultural dimensions, rather than as a learning deficit.

Theoretically, this research bridges affective and ethnographic perspectives on classroom silence, demonstrating that emotional, cultural, and institutional factors interact within a unified ecology of language learning. Practically, the findings highlight the need to create emotionally safe and culturally responsive learning environments. English instructors are encouraged to interpret silence not solely as resistance but as a form of participation that occurs at various affective and sociocultural levels. Nonetheless, the study's limited generalizability and reliance on students' self-reported narratives indicate the need for further investigation. Future research should examine teachers' perspectives and explore how specific instructional interventions may influence silence and engagement across diverse EFL contexts.

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