

Factors Contributing to the use of Conversational Silence in Academic Discourse among Malaysian Undergraduate students

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ABSTRACT

Asians are said to use silence in academic situation more than other learners from Europe and America. With the increased need for students' oral participation in the language learning classroom and other academic situations, the Asian silent behavior has been considered a problem. The aim of this study is to investigate factors that contribute to the use of conversational silence by Malaysian science and non-science undergraduate students in academic discourse. Seventeen undergraduate students from a local university in Malaysia participated in a focus group interview which required them to respond to questions related to the beliefs of their culture on the use of silence, the extent to which the participants practice silence in academic discourse, and factors that contribute to the use of conversational silence. There were two groups each from the Departments of English and Computer and Communication System who informed the research. The study was underpinned by Brown and Levinson Politeness Theory, which is tied to the concept of 'face' as something that is highly valuable, and must be guarded in interaction. The findings suggest that some factors such as socio-cultural upbringing, personality and intimidation by the environment play a role in the use of silence by the informants of this study.

Keywords: Use of conversational silence; Academic discourse; Politeness; Malaysian undergraduate students; Focus Group Interview

INTRODUCTION

Conversational silence – an act of saying nothing where talk is expected, has been a common practice in everyday conversation. As interlocutors talk with one another, not all information is transmitted verbally, the non-verbal way is also used. Where silence is used instead of talk, a conversation partner tries to decipher the meaning based on the culture, context and situation of its use. In some situations, for example, silence is used where one of the conversational partners tries to be polite. Politeness in interaction has been said to be prevalent in many Asian cultures (Phuong 2014, Nakane 2003, Ali 2000, Harumi 1999). As conversation principles are acquired early in life, Scollon and Scollon (1981 cited in Knapp, Enninger and Knapp-Potthoff 1987, p. 279), believe that the use of silence in conversation as a politeness strategy tends to come along with the attainment of the first language. Homes

(1995 cited in Yu 2003, p. 1680) describes politeness as ‘a behaviour which actively expresses positive concern for others, as well as non-imposing distancing behaviour’. In the Vietnamese culture, for example, the tendency for hiding one’s feelings, preservation of face, respect for hierarchy, and maintenance of social/interpersonal harmony are paramount social behaviours (Phuong 2014). Quoting Hunt (2002), Phuong (2014) stated that:

Vietnamese people often engage in prescribed behaviours such as avoiding direct eye contact and affective expression, remaining silent and showing attentive listening when speaking to someone older or an authoritative figure, avoiding interrupting, talking back or questioning because —asking questions or disagreeing with an authoritative speaker is like challenging the senior person’s social status which is seen to be rude in Vietnamese culture. (p. 18)

The above mentioned tendencies have a link with the acquired social norm of being polite and avoidance of any unwanted behaviour that may signal lack of respect. In the Vietnamese culture, therefore, avoidance of direct eye contact, interruption, and disagreeing with people in positions of authority are considered impolite tendencies, and can lead to loss of face. Conversely, for one to have honour and dignity, thereby maintaining one’s face in social relationships, one has to be polite by exhibiting behaviours considered desirable.

Similar socio-cultural behaviour has been reported of the Malays, whose conversational style is characterised by short messages, and quiet and short accent (Jassem 1994, p. 62). In addition, there is a lot of indirectness in Malay speech (Omar, 1992, p. 175). These characteristics are associated with their childhood upbringing where Malay children learn the do’s and don’t’s of language use (Omar, 1992, p. 175). Malay children, for example, were taught to speak to elders only when they need to, and that while speaking, they should not look directly into the eyes of the speaker, otherwise they (the children) will be considered *kurang ajar* (rude) (Omar, 1992). Ali (2000) added that:

‘Preserving another’s face is part of good manners and proper civilities. Those who want to save the face of another would demonstrate it, for instance, by delaying a negative reply or by not communicating negative feedback and embarrassing him’. (p. 15)

In the Malay culture, therefore, the face is safe guarded during conversation by means of refraining from talking or delaying a negative reply. In other words, silence seems to function as a means of expressing politeness and preserving one’s face.

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

This article investigates factors that contribute to the use of conversational silence in academic discourse by some Malaysian science and non-science undergraduate students. Specifically, the study focuses on the beliefs of the participants on the use of silence, how they practise silence in academic discourse, as well as factors that contribute to the use of conversational silence in academic discourse.

ACADEMIC DISCOURSE

Academic discourse has been viewed as a unified register in applied linguistic literature, especially in language teaching and learning, where courses for English for Academic Purposes (EAP) have become established as a standard response to fulfilling the English communication needs of tertiary-level students in the academy (Bhatia, 2013, p. 25). As such, Academic discourse refers to the ways of thinking and using language which exist in the

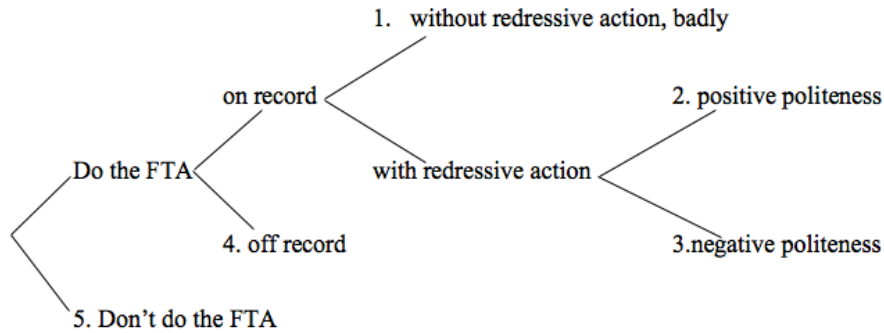
academy, which is the heart of academic enterprise as it is a way individuals collaborate and compete with others, to create knowledge, to educate neophytes, to reveal learning as well as define academic allegiances (Hyland, 2011, p. 1). Various past studies on the use of silence (Yates and Nguyen 2012, King 2011, Nakane 2003/2006) discovered that L2 learners were silent in L1 environment as a result of their perceived lack of proficiency in the use of English language. King (2011), for example, believes that ‘for many Japanese students their lack of talk has nothing to do with choosing to be silent but is primarily a consequence of significant deficiencies in their L2 abilities particularly when interacting with native speakers of English’ (p. 10). Many of the past studies on the use of silence in academic situations were, however, conducted in English speaking countries.

Only few studies are available on the use of silence in English as a second or foreign language situation. Karim and Shah (2008) who investigated classroom participation anxiety among Malaysian undergraduate students discovered that their respondents were silent in the classroom as a result of apprehension. Due to anxiety, therefore, the respondents opt to keep silent in the classroom while they were found to be ‘vocal and voluble outside their classroom’ (Karim and Shah 2008, pp. 16-17). From the findings of Karim and Shah, it can be understood that anxiety in speaking English results in students’ silence in the classroom. The authors of the current study believe that at university level, students are engaged in numerous academic activities such as group work and tutorials, which require verbal participation from the students. The non-verbal contribution of the students in the academic activity is considered a problem. It is therefore important to find out how Malaysian undergraduate students use silence in academic discourse, and what factors contribute to their use of silence in academic discourse.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

This study is anchored on Brown and Levinson’s (1978) Politeness theory for its inclusion of strategies interlocutors use in order to safeguard their face. The theory is linked to the concept of ‘face’ as something that is highly valuable which must be guarded, ‘something that is emotionally invested, and that can be lost, maintained, or enhanced, and must be constantly attended to in interaction’ (Brown & Levinson 1978, p. 66). In other words, politeness can help maintain, enhance and promote one’s face; and impoliteness can lead to the loss of face thereby spoiling one’s dignity and honour.

In relation to the ‘want’ of the individual, Brown and Levinson divided the ‘face’ into negative and positive. Negative face refers to ‘the want of every competent adult member that his actions be unimpeded by others’, or ‘the need not to be imposed on by others’ (Tannen 1985, p. 97), while positive face refers to ‘the want of every member that his wants be desirable to at least some others’ (Brown & Levinson 1978, p. 67); or in short ‘the need to be approved by others’ (Tannen 1985, p. 97). This is to say positive face has to do with the self-image each member of a community has for himself, and his desire to be approved of that self-image by the community. In contrast, negative face pertains to non-infringement and non-trespassing of the ‘territory’ claimed by the individual. Every member of a community, therefore, has some needs or wants, and he expects some other members to respect those needs and wants. On his part, a member may not impose those needs and wants on others, or have others impose their wants on him. Acts which mitigate, show disapproval or impinge on the individual’s needs are considered Face-Threatening Acts (FTA). Brown and Levinson (1978) illustrated strategies for doing the FTA in the following figure:



Adopted from Brown and Levinson (1978, p. 74)

FIGURE 1. Possible strategies for doing FTA

The figure above illustrates that doing the FTA can be on record (in which the performer of an act does nothing to minimise threats to the hearer’s face) or off record (where the speaker or performer of an act tries to mitigate threats to the hearer’s face). Redressive action refers to action that avoid potential loss of face to the hearer (positive face), while action with redress refers to avoidance and seeking redress through ‘apologies and other softening mechanisms (negative face) (Brown & Levinson 1978, p. 75). For example, redressive action may include giving advice or requests for doing something. Both positive and negative face have dual nature: positive politeness and negative politeness. In order to satisfy the positive face of interlocutor, an expression of appreciation of one’s own self-image and being treated as a member of an in-group is necessary. As for the satisfaction of the negative face, the face of the interlocutor must be saved by reducing face-threatening acts through giving advice, for example, or by showing respect to the addressee’s right not to be imposed on by others.

Thus, silence can be used as an off-record strategy where the user of silence wants to avoid imposition on his/her partner or where potential loss of face is perceived. In their study of tweets among Malaysian female undergraduates, Maros and Rosli (2017) discovered that apologising, particularly the use of the word ‘sorry’ was prevalent as an off-record strategy by their subjects of study in order to minimize FTA. When face-to-face interaction is considered, silence can be considered an off-record strategy susceptible to various interpretations depending on the culture or situation. Consider the example below:

A (boy): Please marry me
 B (girl): [Silence; head and eyes lowered] (Saville-Troike 1985, p. 9)

In Japanese culture, silence in the above context signifies approval, while in the Igbo culture of Southern Nigeria it means disapproval if the girl continues to stand there saying nothing. Apart from signifying various meanings, the above example shows that silence is not simply an empty ‘locution’, but “a potent communicative weapon” (Wardhaugh 1985, p. 72). Silence, therefore, is a routinised behaviour used more frequently in human interaction, particularly where face-threatening acts are perceived to have occurred. Jaworski’s (1993) formulaic silence contains acts of saying nothing where loss of face is perceived to be occurring such as in a situation where someone passes gas, belches or spits in public. In various cultures of the world, nothing is said in such situations unless one wants to ridicule the performer of the action.

Many past studies of silence that have used Brown and Levinson’s Politeness Theory – Yu (2003), Haugh and Hinze (2003), Nakane (2006), Shafiee Nahrkhalaji, Khorasani and Ashjerdi (2013), have found that their subjects use silence in academic situations such as the

classroom and seminar as a face saving strategy, and such uses of silence can be traced to socio-cultural upbringings. Yu (2003), for example, believes that the concept of face in the Chinese culture can be traced to Confucianism which emphasises community desire rather than individual wants and satisfaction. The Chinese use of silence can therefore be linked to individual's attempt to preserve his face and at the same time recognizing the need to protect the face of others.

LITERATURE REVIEW

After a long period of neglect, silence is currently receiving an increased amount of attention in the literature of sociolinguistics and pragmatics. However, there is still a paucity of recent research on the use of silence in academic discourse, and how it can be classified. Silence, for example, has been classified as individual, group and institutional (Saville-Troike 1985), communicative and non-communicative (Jaworski 1993); and conversational, textual, situational and thematic (Kurzon 2007). This study focuses on conversational silence – a practice of saying nothing in a situation which requires verbal response, and where the conversational partner chooses to use silence instead of talk. Conversational silence can, therefore, be found during discussions among two or more people, where some individuals remain silent for some period of time even though they are physically present. In a situation involving two people, silence can be a powerful communicative tool used as a warning, a promise or an order such as in the following example:

A: Can I use your umbrella?

B: [silence]

A: Well, I can use Ben's.

In the foregoing example, A interprets B's silence as a warning or order which implies 'no don't take it' (a warning), or simply 'I ordered you not use it'.

Varying perceptions on the use of silence in both social and academic situations exist between Western countries and North America, on one hand and Asian countries on the other hand. Among the native speakers of English who are not close friends, for example, a silence longer than four seconds is not allowed because they become embarrassed when nothing is said after that period (Trudgill 1983, p. 127). Similarly, in a report on her research into the conversational style of three New Yorkers of East European Jewish background, Tannen (1985) states that the feature of their style 'can be understood as growing out of an effort to avoid silence' (p. 93). It is of little surprise then that Scollon (1985, p. 26), who uses the theory of metaphor in his study, describes silence as malfunction.

In cross-cultural conversations involving native and non-native speakers of English, native speakers perceived the silence of non-native speakers as a lack of cooperation, while non-native speakers perceived native speakers as dominating. As such, 'silence may be viewed as either a positive or disruptive behaviour depending on its place in the value catalogue of a culture' (Bao 2014, p. 2). Each society has its own way of transmitting world view to its younger generation and no practice is superior over the other. In a proposition, Saville-Troike (1985) states that 'children talk more when they are being acculturated into societies which place a high value on individual achievement (e.g. Britain and America), and less when family and group achievement is more valued (e.g. Chinese and Japanese)' (p. 11). To buttress her point Saville-Troike cited Wang (1977) who talked of Japanese child's upbringing practice that:

In order to keep the children from saying or doing something disapproved of by the authorities, Asian parents teach them to be obedient and to honour their families. Everything is arranged and decided for them. They are not given any choices, therefore, they do not have to make choices and justify their actions verbally. Silence is praised, and talkativeness is scolded. They are taught not to express their feelings. (pp. 11-12)

Agyekum (2002) reports similar child-upbringing practices among the Akan community of Ghana, in West Africa. He states that ‘the acquisition of silence is part of the Akan child’s developing communicative competence. Akan children are given the necessary training on the use of silence in everyday encounters’ (2002, p. 48). He states further that ‘during certain conversations, the children may not even be in the vicinity, let alone participate in the conversation by talking’ (p. 48). These reports indicate that there are certain similarities in the way Asians and Africans nurture their children. It is pertinent, however, to state that no child upbringing practice between Asia/Africa on the one hand and the West on the other is superior over the other. Volubility can be regarded as weird in Africa and Asia just as silence can be abnormal in the West. Each depends on the cultural practices, situation and context of use.

Nakane (2003), citing Labera (1987), for example, reported that ‘Japanese silence stands out not only in comparison with Southern Europeans or New Yorkers but also with East Asian neighbours such as the Koreans and Chinese as well’ (p. 31). Silence is used more often by the Japanese in highly emotional situations such as courtship. ‘Young spouses who are deeply in love, for example, often express their affection for each other by nonverbal means and silence’ (Jaworski, 1993, p. 68).

STUDIES OF SILENCE IN SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNING CLASSROOM

Some researchers studied the use of silence particularly by non-native speakers of English in English speaking countries such as America and Australia. The non-native speakers are considered non-proficient in speaking English due to their reticent behaviour. Harumi (1999) and Nakane (2003, 2006), for example, conducted a research on Japanese learners of English in Australia. Alharahsheh (2012) and Phuong (2014) did research on Jordanians and Vietnamese students in Australia respectively. Researchers have indicated that many Asian learners of English as a second language tend to be silent in the classroom mostly as a face-saving strategy – Shafiee Nahrkhalaji, Khorasani and Ashjerdi (2013), Nakane (2003/2006), Haugh and Hinze (2003), and Harumi (1999). Some Asian learners, therefore, opt for silent behaviour in the classroom in order to avoid loss of face.

Asian silent behavior particularly among the Japanese, has become a major concern for researchers, and the ‘image has been damaging to both the educational institutions involved and to the Asian students themselves’ (Liu 2000, 2002 as cited in Nakane, 2003, p. 1) because the reticent behavior was interpreted, particularly in native English speaking countries, as a sign of non-learning or even simply incompetence of the Asian learners. Nakane believes that silence as a politeness strategy is used in communication by people who have limited capacity in verbal communication. This view is supported by King (2011) who believes that ‘for many Japanese students their lack of talk has nothing to do with choosing to be silent but is primarily a consequence of significant deficiencies in their L2 abilities particularly when interacting with native speakers of English’ (p. 10). This view, however, was contested by Jones (1999 as cited in Phuong, 2014, p. 13) that ‘silent students are not necessarily unable to orally interact with native speakers, rather they are unaware of the culture-specific discourse conventions assumed by native speakers in academic discussion’. The examples above show that there are conflicting views in relation to Asian silence behavior in second language learning classrooms.

On her part, Phuong (2014), who studied Vietnamese university students in Australian classrooms believes that it is not only culture that influences students' reticence. She highlighted a number of other factors which contribute to the trait including a tendency for hiding one's feelings, preservation of face and fear of losing it, respect for hierarchy, and maintenance of social/interpersonal harmony. She believes that 'Confucianism has permeated Vietnamese culture for centuries and continues to have a strong impact on the social behavior of Asians' (Phuong 2014, p. 17). From the foregoing, it can be understood that social upbringing, with emphasis on respect for authorities plays a key role in Asian student's silence in university classroom.

Furthermore, in their study of Vietnamese postgraduate students in Australian university classroom, Yates and Nguyen (2012) enumerated a number of reasons why Asians were more silent in classroom than their course mates from Australia. Among these reasons is what they called 'the culture of learning' (p. 24). Yates and Nguyen believe that 'there are different expectations regarding the goals of education, teaching and learning styles, including assumptions about patterns of interaction deemed appropriate in the classroom, that is, issues such as who has the right to speak, when and what should they be saying' (p. 24). The importance of this argument lies in the fact that the Western style of teaching and learning differs significantly from that of other non-native English-speaking countries. In English speaking countries, the role of the teacher is more of a facilitator while in non-native English speaking countries the teacher is an instructor and an authority. Therefore, the silence of Asian students in the English speaking countries can be of great concern to the teacher just as loquacious ones can be considered troublesome in non-English speaking ones. In this case, 'one may need to be cautious when concluding which mode of learning, talk or silence, is superior' (Bao, 2014, p. 2). Despite the preponderance of communicative language teaching methods in the West, the method might not work well in situations 'where talk is employed sparingly and silent attentiveness is valued' (Bao 2014, p. 1). Learning through silence, therefore, has become a common feature of many non-English speaking countries as reported by Kaur and Che Lah (1996) in the case of Malaysian learners:

Most Malaysian students have a history of resorting to rote learning and memorisation techniques in their attempt to acquire good grades in their subjects. Many learners still expect their teachers to "spoon feed" them at all levels [...] Perhaps this can be attributed to a cultural trait that has become the norm in the history of our educational system.
(p. 177)

The above assertion by Kaur and Che Lah points at the Malaysian learning style which is characterised by silence, as the phrase "spoon feed" points at the tendency.

VARIOUS INTERPRETATIONS OF CLASSROOM SILENCE

Many a time, teachers were exasperated by their students' reticent behavior particularly in a Western multicultural classroom, or in the case of teachers who would like to immediately change the attitude of their students' reticent behaviour in the English as a second or foreign language situations. Harumi (1999), for example, who studied Japanese students learning English at a London University has this to say on returning to Japan with full expectation of changing the learning situation of his Japanese classroom:

"Returning to Japan, in the first lesson at a Junior college. I was full of hope and expectation, my ambition was broken by an invisible wall between students and myself. The direct import from the U. K., the Western way of teaching struck my students who sat back and had been wondered what I was expecting. As a teacher, I felt frustrated like an outsider. As a learner, I realized how difficult it is for students to change their learning style or strategies automatically as expected".
(pp. 9-10)

The above quotation points at the difficulty of changing students' learning behaviour immediately and automatically in the classroom context where attentive listening is valued more than oral participation.

In the Western multicultural classroom or in cases where teachers expect their students to be talking during the lecture, silence is perceived as a sign of non-learning or lack of attention. The problem of silence among minority students in the mainstream English language background classrooms in Western countries has been attributed to many factors. Losey (1997, as cited in Nakane 2003, p. 41) believes that interruptions by mainstream students contribute to silence of the minority. This may include fear of derision or a remark that may signal loss of face. Students from minority groups, therefore, are hampered by two great barriers: linguistic and ethnic. As a result, both their teachers and their school mates interpret their silence negatively as lack of attention to learning or simply plain incompetence.

In her study, Nakane (2003) reported that the Japanese students in Australia 'hold stereotypical images of themselves as being 'silent' and of Australian students as being 'talkative' (p. 56). Therefore, the Japanese students 'regarded these differences as a problematic and negative aspect of their learning experience' (p. 56). Similarly in his study of Chinese students studying in Australia, Liu (2002 as cited in Phuong, 2014, pp. 14-15) believe that the reticence of the Chinese students was considered by their teachers as 'a sign of passiveness; something negative'; while the Chinese believe that their silence was a sign of respect for their teachers and classmates.

Following past research on the use of silence in academic situation, this study investigated factors contributing to the use of silence by Malaysian undergraduate students. It is the belief of the authors that university students not only attend lectures but also engage in other academic activities which may require their oral participation. This study is perceived to be significant as it will help reveal the nature of the silent behaviour of the participants in academic discourse so as to add to our knowledge on the nature of their style of learning that tends to be prevalent among them, and probably among other undergraduate students in Malaysia.

METHODOLOGY

DATA COLLECTION METHOD

This study is grounded in a qualitative research design, collecting data by means of focus group interviews and audio recordings. The data was collected using a series of focus group interviews with both science and non-science undergraduate students from a Malaysian local university. Mini-focus group (Krueger 1994, p. 17) comprising a maximum of 5 participants per group was used.

RESPONDENTS OF THE STUDY

There was a total of 17 respondents in this study, with an age-range of 25 years and below. There were four groups – two science undergraduate groups and two non-science undergraduate groups. The science undergraduates were from the Department of Computer and Communication System, while the non-science were undergraduates from the Department of English. The respondents from the respective departments were from the same year and taking the same course. From the Department of English, there were five respondents in Group 1, and four in Group 2. While from the Department of Computer and Communication System, there were four respondents in each of the two groups. The

discussion lasted twenty minutes with each group. The two departments were selected to determine whether there was any difference among the respondents, based on their field of study, on the factors that can contribute to their use of silence in academic discourse.

The focus group interview data were transcribed verbatim. The interview respondents from the different groups were coded as indicated below (Table 2):

TABLE 2. Transcription Codes of Focus Group Interview Respondents

Group 1 (Department of English)		Group 2 (Department of English)		Group 3 Department of Computer and Communication System Engineering		Group 4 Department of Computer and Communication System Engineering	
Code	Speaker	Code	Speaker	Code	Speaker	Code	Speaker
M1	Malay Speaker 1	MM1	Malay Speaker 1	ML	Malay speaker	ML1	Malay speaker 1
M2	Malay Speaker 2	MM2	Malay Speaker 2	IM	Indian-Malaysian speaker	ML2	Malay speaker 2
M3	Malay Speaker 3	MM3	Malay Speaker 3	CM1	Chinese-Malaysian speaker 1	ML3	Malay speaker 3
M4	Malay Speaker 4	MM4	Malay Speaker 4	CM2	Chinese-Malaysian speaker 2	ML4	Malay Speaker 4
PM	Pakistani-Malaysian Speaker						

CONDUCT OF THE FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW

Each group had separate sessions for the interview, and the respondents decided for themselves which group they would want to belong to. The researcher only conducted the interview after each group decided on its composition as well as the day and time that they felt was convenient for them. Before the commencement of the focus group interview, the researcher introduced himself and gave each participant an information sheet on the study, a consent form, and confidentiality agreement form. Respondents were asked to read through the documents and ask questions if they had any. Once the respondents had read through the information, the researcher asked respondents whether they had comprehended the study and whether they understood that their participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw from the study at any time they wished. The researcher then asked the respondents to sign the consent and confidentiality forms if they agreed to participate in the study. The forms were collected, and the audio recording started after seeking permission from the respondents, who were asked the following questions:

1. Tell me about the beliefs of your culture on the use of silence.
2. How often do you talk during academic activities such as lectures, seminars or group work?
3. Tell me of any factors which you feel influence the way people use silence instead of talk during conversation.

CODING METHOD AND METHOD OF DATA ANALYSIS

In Vivo Coding was used as a method of data analysis (Saldana, 2013, p. 88) where data were transcribed verbatim before they were categorised into particular themes that were guided by the interview questions. The discussion section, therefore, contained three main headings: The beliefs of the respondents about the use of silence, the extent to which they use silence in academic discourse, and factors contributing to the use of silence.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

THE BELIEFS OF THE RESPONDENTS ABOUT THE USE OF SILENCE

SILENCE RULE

The findings of this study revealed that silence is perceived in the cultures of the respondents mainly as don't do FTA strategy. As already highlighted above, the face is highly valuable and should be maintained and preserved in interaction. In many Asian cultures, children are taught to preserve their face by being silent where loss of face is perceived. Some responses obtained from the respondents of this study include:

‘And then in our culture there’s a lot of politeness in conversation with others. Like she said, actually we allow the person talk first and then we respond to that in conversation. Not like in a very argument (sic) [Not in a form of argument]. So, is not polite in our culture’ (MM3).

‘In our culture, when you want to do something, you’re raised by, you know, by norms. So, we’re, when we actually grow up, we tend to believe that by showing silence, like my friend says, is a norm’ (MM1).

From what was shared by the respondents, avoidance of argument is a way of don't do FTA, and has become a norm in the respondents' culture. Even where someone has something to say, where there is perceived threat to interlocutor's face, silence is used instead of involving themselves in arguments. Politeness, therefore, in form of don't do FTA, is a crucial aspect of the respondents' culture, and silence is portrayed as a norm which every child has been raised to abide by, and the use of silence in conversation is a sign of respect to conversation partner, particularly the elderly. The respondents of this study tend to use silence particularly during conversation with elders even if what the elder is saying is thought to be wrong:

‘Maybe also silence can mean polite (sic) [politeness]. Being polite. For example like if our mums, If we say something like ‘no I don't [do] this [and] this’. It means we're rude. We just have to keep silent even though is not our fault or maybe our fault’ (MM2).

‘To add on this point, because of the silent (sic) [silence], so the children they tend to be more respect (sic) [so the children tend to be more respectful] towards their parents. That's why we need silence at certain point; it means if we talk we're not respect them' (sic) [it means if we talk, we did not respect them] (M3).

The norm of silence is a sign of respect to the elders, according to some respondents of this study. As has been highlighted, the silence norm is believed to have been socialised in early childhood when acquiring the first language (Scollon & Scollon 1981 cited in Knapp, Enninger & Knapp-Potthoff 1987, p. 279). As such, some respondents believed that when silence is used when talking to elders, its use in that situation implies respect for elders. Therefore, instead of looking at the use of silence as something that culture imposed, it (silence) is believed to be a desirable human trait that is expected when talking to elders. One of the respondents said:

I think actually we can't really consider this as culture, is part like a manner, is a respect. So, we cannot like saying oh our culture implement this. So, I think this's part of human manner. So, it doesn't mean that every culture, it looks like every culture do it, it doesn't mean that it's culture already. (CM1)

Unlike the assumption of most previous researches (Harumi 1999, Kitamura 2000, Phuong 2014, Yu 2003) which posit that silence is part of culture, silence was viewed by the

respondents of this study not as a part of culture but as good manners or behaviour, as a mark of respect to the elders. Another participant added that:

In my culture is just a belief. So, that's like a point of respect. But there's no written law or anything that they're stating no you should be quiet when the elder is talking. No. There's no such thing. So is like [] to the family tradition (IM)

Some respondents, however, believed that such acquired norms of silence have impacted them negatively, particularly among the Malays, as they are perceived as being 'inexpressive', and 'least likeable' as one of the respondents said:

Okay. If you notice on Malay culture, most of us are quite silent, although we have a lot to say or to talk about. And it does affect the []. Okay, I'm not been racist or anything but of course as we know, the Malays are the least likeable in Malaysia, right. And because of, maybe there aren't any discussion because we're educated not to say a lot because whenever you want to speak up we gonna [be] slam[ed] or smash[ed] by our parents because they'll say it's not a discussion is an argument. In a way, the more our parents suppress us, the more we rebel. But yes, it does affect us. [It] made us more not bold to speak up, and not a person who's outspoken and expressive. So it does give a lot of impact to us especially the Malays. (M2)

The above extract has added to our knowledge on some of the child-rearing practices particularly in relation to the use of silence in conversation among the Malays. Parents tend to 'slam' or 'smash' their children when they talk in situations where the children are not expected to. The tendency, according to the participant, made some Malay speakers 'not bold to speak up', or 'not a person who's outspoken and expressive'. Another Malay participant added that:

It's, it's true that we Malay are being (blurred). And, but we still can talk. (ML2)

Although, they feel that the silence norm has affected them negatively by making them inexpressive, they believe that the practice of suppressing the child when he wants to talk is gradually diminishing because:

[...] nowadays parents tend to be more open-minded. So, they also ask their children's opinion. But in days of old days they don't really bother [to listen to] their children's opinion. So, now is getting, not getting better, but is something different. Parents like when they're talking, the children will be silent. But in the end of the discussion they'll ask of the children's opinion too. (IM)

Another participant added that:

Am, personally, my father is a Pakistani, Malaysian-Pakistani. So for Pakistani we're allowed to express in our homes. We're allowed to argue with our parents, we're allowed to not practice silence. In fact, Pakistanis are known to be frank (PM)

As all the respondents of this study are below 25 years old, many of them seemed to perceive silence as a problem, and that the 'old tradition' of suppressing a child's view is now beginning to diminish, giving way to expressiveness.

THE USE OF SILENCE IN ACADEMIC DISCOURSE

SILENCE AS POLITENESS STRATEGY

Some responses obtained in this study indicated that silence is used by some respondents in academic discourse as a politeness strategy in order to reduce acts that threaten their face or that of the interlocutor. Consider the following extracts:

‘I would rather be silent in classes, during group work, and I just, I’m that kind of person who just follow the floor’ (M4),

‘I’m also not that outstanding person. I just talk when needed, and talk when asked. So, in the class, I just talk when needed’ (M3),

‘because actually the lecturer is busy teaching us and then, I think what if we raise our hand it will delay the [], you know. So, is part of a problem lah’ (CM2).

The above extracts tended to support what has been widely discussed in the literature about the tendency of Asians to remain quiet in academic situations (Harumi 1999, Haugh and Hinze 2003, King 2011, Nakane 2003, Phuong 2014, Shafiee Nahrkhalaji, Khorasani and Ashjerdi 2013, Yates and Nguyen 2012) mainly to save their face.

Various past studies have discussed silence in terms of the number of turns the subjects take during classroom activities. Sato (1982 as cited in Chaudron 1988), for example, who studied different turn-taking styles of Asians and non-Asians, found that the Chinese, Japanese, and Koreans took significantly fewer turns than non-Asians from Latin America, Europe, and Middle East. A possible reason for silence in this situation was to avoid “showing off” in class, an act discouraged by a number of Asian cultures (Liu, 1989, cited in Bailey & Nunan 1996). Avoidance of showing off has a relationship with negative politeness where the face of the interlocutor is saved from being viewed as indication of superiority over other members of the class. During small group discussion, Crookes and Gass (1993, p. 28) found that there were respondents who tended to dominate the discussion while there were others who refrained from talking at all.

In this study, the amount of verbal participation has been discovered to have a relationship with group formation. Even though the respondents in each group were course mates and they knew each other, it has been found that the size of their verbal contribution is related to their level of familiarity with each other. If they are familiar with each other, they will contribute rather than remain silent as shared by a participant of this study:

In a group discussion, if my group mate is the one that I’m very comfortable like my friends, I can voice out my opinions. But if the person, the member is someone I’m not familiar I tend to keep silent (MM4)

The above extract suggests that silence serves a phatic function (Ephratt 2008) for bringing respondents closer or separating them.

Likewise during seminars/workshops where the audience is often larger can be akin to speaking in public or speaking to a larger crowd. Only one participant unequivocally expressed her willingness to talk in public:

Depending on the event. For seminars if they allow us to talk, I wouldn’t, it wouldn’t be a problem for me to talk in front of the public because I believe like being outspoken. But if there’re (sic) [there is] a session they just want to teach, they just want the audience to be quiet, it would be appropriate for us to be quiet lah (M1).

Other respondents, however, revealed that they prefer to remain silent rather than to talk during seminars, as expressed by one of the respondents:

Most of the time I tend to keep quiet because I feel like I don't have enough knowledge in what they're talking. So, when I raise any question I always have this fear that they'll ask any question I don't know how to answer. (IM)

The extracts from the respondents indicated that most of them seldom talk during seminars/workshops. They felt that they have nothing worth sharing due to a perceived lack of knowledge or self-esteem.

FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO THE USE OF CONVERSATIONAL SILENCE IN ACADEMIC DISCOURSE

The respondents of this study have mentioned some factors they felt contributed to the use of conversational silence in academic discourse. While some of these factors can be said to have a relationship with the personality of the user of the act of silence, others were thought to be linked to competence in the use of English language. Both science and non-science undergraduate respondents of this study have mentioned lack of confidence, having the feeling of shyness as well as fear as some of the factors that contribute to the use of silence in academic discourse. One of the respondents from science department mentioned that:

I don't think the Malay are silent because we interact a lot with ourselves (sic) [one another]. It's quite hard for us or some of us to interact with international students. That's why we keep silent. Because not most of us are good in English. If we can speak English fluently, I don't think Malaysia, Malay people will be silent when they're having discussion. That's why. (ML4, FGI 4)

ML4 believes that the lack of fluency in using English has deterred some Malay students from talking and even interacting with international students. His first sentence indicates that Malays interact in local language among themselves. When talking in English language, however, some Malay students kept away from discussions due to their perception of themselves as non-fluent in the use of English.

Lack of fluency did not only contribute to the use of silence in academic situations but also affect social relationships among students because those who perceived themselves as non-proficient in the use of English tended to restrain themselves from socialising with other students, particularly international students. The perceived lack of fluency in the use of English made some students lose confidence as shared by other respondents:

It all depends on the mentally and biologically factors. By a mentally, maybe your heart is like not confident enough, and then sometimes is a physically. I mean neurologically is not feeling well (CM1, FGI 3)

Another respondent has this to say:

She, when she speak[s], you know, in her mother tongue or Malay, she can speak very well. But when you're talking in English she remain quiet because she don't have the fluency in English. She feel like not confident enough, she's scared to make mistake. So, she tend to stay quiet (IM, FGI 3)

From what was shared by the respondents of this study, lack of confidence was a factor that contributed to the use of silence in academic discourse. Some students are afraid of making mistakes, so they become scared when talking in English. When these students talk in their mother tongue, however, they speak fluently, and even sometimes talk a lot in the mother tongue.

For some other respondents of this study, personality plays a role in the use of silence in academic discourse. While some students are naturally talkative others are silent as expressed by another participant:

I think is about personality. Some of us is (sic) [are] extrovert and some of us introvert. That's why most of the introvert people they always keep silent (ML3, FGI 4)

ML3 views the use of silence in academic discourse from a psychological perspective. He believes that introverts always keep silent, while extroverts like talking. In academic situations, therefore, the introverts tend to remain silent.

Other factors contributing to the use of silence as mentioned by the respondents of this study include fear, shyness and lack of fluency. Another participant stated that:

Yes. But he, because of the dialect or maybe the accent of himself (sic) [his accent is] different from others so he tend to be silent (MM4, FGI 2).

According to MM4, some students remain silent in academic discourse due to their perceived poor accent. Such students feel that even if they talk they will not be understood by others. So, they opt for silence instead of talk. Similar opinion was expressed by MM2 who stated that:

Maybe their pronunciation because as we know that we're from different races and different countries. The way we pronounce our English is different from other ones. So, sometimes we cannot get the gist of what they're talking about. Something like that (MM2, FGI 2).

MM2 refers to poor pronunciation as a contributing factor to the use of silence in academic discourse. Fear of being misunderstood by others in the academic environment results in the use of silence by some students. As the academic community comprised students from different socio-cultural backgrounds, some students feel that even if they talk they will not be understood. As the university academic environment seemed new to some students, they 'feel intimidated by the environment' (MM1, FGI 2). As a result, they resort to silence as an alternative to talk.

In summary, the use of silence in academic discourse has been attributed to many factors, which can be described as internal (within the person using silence) such as the lack of confidence, shyness or a facet of the individual's personality, and external (outside factors) such as cultural imposition, and intimidation by the environment. These factors are common among both science and non-science students that informed this study. Field of study, therefore, plays little role in the use of silence among the respondents of this research.

CONCLUSION

This study discussed some factors contributing to the use of conversational silence in academic discourse by some undergraduate students in a Malaysian local university. The tendency of using silence in academic discourse appears to be linked to early socio-cultural upbringing which emphasised the use of silence as a sign of respect for the elderly. Some factors such as personality, perceived lack of competence in the use of English as well as intimidation by the environment are discovered to have contributed to the use of silence in academic discourse by the respondents of this study. The findings revealed that the respondents of this study practice silence as a face-saving strategy, and therefore, prefer silence to talk in academic discourse so as to save their face. These findings have gone some

way towards enhancing our understanding of the use of silence among the respondents of this study. Further research, however, can explore the use of silence in ‘authentic’ academic situations using some other methods of data collection such as observation or individual interview.

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