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The social practice of silence in intercultural classrooms at a UK university

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Abstract

The paper offers an examination of the dynamics between silence, agency and power for students and instructors in intercultural classrooms at a UK university. Silent students are often stereotyped as passive learners or incompetent in critical thinking, lacking interest or having insufficient understanding. Despite the devaluation of silence, research reveals its significant role in pedagogy and its foundations in culture. The paper explores second language (L2) postgraduate international students' classroom experiences and voices behind the silence in comparison with their peers' and instructors' perceptions and interpretations of students' lack of vocal participation. Challenging talk as the privileged form of classroom communication mode, we argue for a better understanding of L2 international students' participation and call for recognition of the pedagogical merits of silence and legitimate some forms of it as a pattern of participation.

Keywords: silence; international students; agency; power negotiation; intercultural classrooms

Introduction

The internationalisation of higher education and growth of international student mobility make higher education classrooms culturally and linguistically more diverse than ever, especially among postgraduate students (Brown and Holloway 2008; Gu, Schweisfurth, and Day 2009; Yu and Moskal 2019). Given the extending internationalisation and growing diversity in UK higher education institutions, it is of great importance to investigate how second language (L2) international students¹ from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds negotiate classroom experience and socialisation into new academic communities (Zappa-Hollman and Duff 2015). A common finding in the literature on international students' classroom experience is their prevailing silence or reticence. Many earlier studies tend to problematise silence with the implication that participation is equal to talking. There is a prevalent focus among these studies on cultural and linguistic issues, identifying cultural differences, contrasting Confucian and Western² educational ideologies as well as language proficiency as explaining factors. However, they have been criticised for being impressionistic, and for stereotyping and oversimplifying the issue (Cruickshank, Chen, and Warren 2012). More recent studies recognise the significant role of silence and contextual influences in learning and teaching practices and call for recognition of silence as a means of engaged participation (Ollin 2008; Chanock 2010; Kim et al.

¹ In this study, we use 'L2 international students' to refer to students whose first language is not English and who are domiciled outside the UK.

² We acknowledge the risks of presenting 'western' and 'non-western' cultures and classrooms as intrinsically different or as geographical categories. However, patterns of student mobility from the Global South and from Asia to more developed and largely English-language contexts make these useful if crude categories.

2016).

The change in classroom context requires more insightful investigation into how silence is used, perceived and valued in the learning environment. Being linked to cultural differences and English communicative competence, silence is often attributed to students' individual characteristics (Ha and Li 2014). Research focusing on classroom interaction, and specifically silence in intercultural classrooms, has been scarce and mainly focused on the self-perceptions of participants. However, silence is more complex than this one-way interpretation can explain (Moskal and Schweisfurth 2018). Compounded by other contextual elements (Wang and Moskal 2019), silence can be co-constructed with others involved in interaction and silence can be misinterpreted in intercultural contexts (Nakane 2007). Thus, voice and silence are not essentialised choices of a given learner; they are socially constructed in classroom interactions between international students and their peers and instructors.

This paper explores the role, perception, and co-construction of silence in the context of postgraduate intercultural classrooms at a UK university. Based on empirical data from three selected 'focal' cases of L2 international students, we consider whether the focal students' perceptions were confirmed or contradicted by others (peers and instructors) involved in the interactions.

Theoretical considerations and previous research

In presenting empirical evidence, we use Bourdieu's theory of social practice (1977) to discuss the possible role of unequal power dynamics in the classroom. We also take some inspiration from Archer's original theory of human agency (2000) that foregrounds the non-social aspects of 'being human' to point out the agentic and transformative potential of international students' mobility. Here, we understand agency as an individual's independent capacity and power to act on one's 'intentionality' in

response to a given circumstance (Tran and Vu 2018). Silence, then, could be an exercise of agency, as an active choice or an imposed action.

Social Practice of Silence

Silence realises illocutionary force and carries propositional meaning, and it seems to exist almost universally. However, the social practice of silence may be culturally specific. For example, it is often argued that East Asian cultures such as China, Japan and Korea use silence more extensively to express politeness (Nakane 2012). Particular knowledge, models of expression, cultural and communication rituals reflect dominant social structures and are valued in education, whereas the other forms of these properties are excluded and devalued (Shim 2012, 214). Bourdieu (1977) argues that our perceptions, thoughts, and (re)actions are all undeniably constituted within social and political discourses, in which we grow up. Habitus is for Bourdieu (1990, 59) ‘a system of dispositions common to all products of the same conditionings’. Hence, people from different backgrounds are less likely to have shared similar social situations and thus, less likely to be predisposed to similar ways of perceiving and acting in the world. Bourdieu argues (1977, 16:81), ‘interpersonal relations are never, except in appearance, individual-to-individual relationships and that the truth of the interaction is never entirely contained in the interaction’.

Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992, 124) also argue that ‘human action is not an instantaneous reaction to immediate stimuli, and the slightest ‘reaction’ of an individual to another is pregnant with the whole history of these persons ...’ From this perspective, the barrier to interactions in intercultural classrooms is not just lack of knowledge about others. Instead, it may largely be the differences in the mode of interpretation of differences and meaning-making process that preclude mutual understanding (Shim

2012, 211). For example, Liu (2002), through an analysis of Chinese students in a US University, attributes silence of Chinese students partly to their attitude towards the teacher, who would not be challenged in their own culture. In the Bourdieuan sense, the Chinese students' habitus was formed under specific past conditions. As Shim (2012, 212 notes:

The differences in the dispositions and sustaining forces that generate each individual agent's thinking and interacting in intercultural contexts may collide. As a result, differences, discomfort, strangeness, withdrawal are often magnified in intercultural relations and education.

The practice of silence in educational settings is a perfect example of how habitus structures the use and interpretation of differences.

Dealing with the structure - agency dilemma, Archer (2000) gives priority to practice over language and society, while she develops a sequential account of nested identities, where self-identity and personal identity are the pillars of 'being human', while social identity intervenes in the middle as a subset of personal identity that expresses who we are as persons in society. At first, the human being is a (Bourdiesian) agent who involuntarily occupies a social position that defines his or her life-chances. Eventually, Archer argues, s/he becomes aware of the interests s/he shares with other members of the social group/ community, and becomes a social actor who can not only occupy the social role s/he takes on, but also personalise it in accord with his or her ultimate concerns. Following this logic, the transformative potential of international mobility for student development has to be acknowledged. An emerging literature reinforces this perspective and constructs international students as active self-forming agents (Marginson 2014; Montgomery and McDowell 2009; Moskal 2020; Tran 2016; Tran and Vu 2018), who are unlikely to passively accept the inequalities,

challenges and discriminations inscribed on them and who can enact self-change (Tran and Vu 2018, 170).

Binary Views of Voice and Silence in Classroom

In Western societies, voice and silence are often conceptualised as mutually exclusive and voice is privileged over silence (Hao 2011). An absence of voice or a lack of verbal skills are immediate associations with silence (Bosacki 2005). Cultural stereotypes of voice lead to negative perceptions of silence, as it does not conform to presumptions about the nature of participation and interaction (Ollin 2008). Influenced by social theories of learning, dialogic, communicative and interactive communication patterns are widely practiced in Western higher education classrooms (Dippold 2015).

Vygotsky's (1962) work has been of significant influence, emphasising the important role of social interaction in the process of cognitive development. However, 'social learning theory has been confused with 'sociable' learning theory' (Ollin 2008, 278) in that social interaction is often equated with verbal engagement. Vygotsky also highlighted the internalisation of cognitive development from 'vocalised cognitive processes to silent inner speech' (267).

In educational contexts, the role of voice and silence in classroom participation is contested. Most instructors relate classroom participation to verbal engagement in asking and answering questions, group discussions and debates (Straker 2016), while some argue that silent but attentive listening is also a form of participation for students who are mentally engaged (Thom 2010; Trahar 2010). Western understandings of 'best practice' promote participative and facilitative teaching approaches as superior to teacher centred approaches. Verbal participation and interaction are equated with leaning and critical thinking (Turner 2013). Weaver and Qi (2005) argue that students

who actively speak up in class learn more than those who do not because they believe verbal participation promotes critical thinking and fosters knowledge creation.

Kumpulainen and Wray (2003) agree that vocal discussion provides students more opportunities to question, reflect on and practise ways of knowing and thinking.

However, Elliott and Reynolds (2014) criticise the dominance of participative learning as a way of imposing instructors' own values and beliefs on the classroom. Carroll (2014) defines participation as active engagement and argues that thinking is cognitive participation while speaking is verbal participation. Silence also has pedagogical benefits that are often neglected in the teaching and learning process. While Kumpulainen and Wray (2003) recognise the benefits of speech, they also critique that interactive classroom modes do not guarantee meaningful learning experiences and special attention should be paid to the patterns and content of students' interactions in scaffolding or challenging their thinking. Ollin (2008) makes a distinction between vocalisation and verbalisation and argues that there is no direct link between vocalisation and learning. Classroom activities involve a broader sense of communication including silent interaction with materials and thinking time, whereas vocalisation refers to the immediate voiced responses. Silence can slow down time, allowing students to absorb information and thereby promoting further interactions between students and teachers (H. L. Li 2004). Beyond the instrumental value, silence has more intrinsic pedagogical merits, allowing interaction with resources such as written text or digital devices for reflections and reinforcement of knowledge (Ollin 2008).

Silence means more than an absence or a lack of speech and encompasses broader multi-dimensional aspects of participation, including visual, listening and

spatial. Silence potentially complements voice and is functionally equivalent to voice (H. L. Li 2004).

Meanings of Silence in Higher Education Classrooms

International students' classroom silence has been researched from multiple perspectives. Linguistic and anthropological research has explored the issue in particular academic or social communities through linking with cultural and language factors, while educational studies tend to explore pedagogical influences and classroom managements and arrangements. Tatar (2005), for example, presents silence as a face-saving strategy and as a sign of respect for authority when he explores the silence of three Turkish international students at an American university and he claims silence as a means of participation through active thinking, attentive listening, taking notes and non-verbal communication gestures. From the pedagogical perspective of teachers' understanding of silence, Schultz (2012, 2837) presents that silence might mean individual engagement, or 'lack of interest, boredom, and even hostility' and often indicates shyness, powerlessness, and fear. Silence is of different meanings, open to interpretation in different contexts.

Speech and silence are not merely different forms of dialogue or the exchange of ideas but a shift of power (Jones 2004). Speaking up can be enervating instead of empowering for silent groups. Kim (2012) presents the sense of inferiority that Korean international students have when comparing themselves to their American peers due to their feeling of powerless and language barriers, which is especially obvious among the formerly top students back in Korea. Hsieh's (2007) case study of a Chinese student's experience in American classrooms achieves similar findings to Kim's. The participant feels ignored and invisible in class because of her silence in group discussions and feels

like a 'useless person'. Hsieh presents that Chinese culture plays a role in students' silence, but she also argues that classroom settings and members disempower international students.

Fivush (2010, 88) makes a distinction between 'being silenced' and 'being silent', describing 'being silenced' as an imposed action signifying a loss of power and identity, while 'being silent' as 'a shared understanding that need not be voiced'. Silencing reveals imbalanced power relationships between individuals and between groups and it can have oppressive impacts. The key to providing voice to the silenced is to empower them. However, H. L. Li (2004) argues, 'the polarising of the silencers and the silenced seems to oversimplify the power structure within and beyond educational institutions' (70). Instead, there is a constant interaction between silence and speech due to tensions between culturally dominant norms and those of the deviation.

Why do silent students have to speak or engage in dialogue? Chanock (2010) argues silence is students' right and calls for respect for students' lack of vocalisation. On the other hand, silence is greatly influenced by students' social positioning, attitudes of their peers and pedagogical practices in their learning context. Jones (2004) claims that it is for the benefit of others or for meeting others' desires that the quiet students have to speak up, to ensure a plethora of views in discussions and to make learning visible. Educational mobility provides international students with unique conditions to mediate their needs-response agency to contribute to reciprocal intercultural learning (Tran and Vu 2018, 183).

Kurzon (1997) distinguishes different linguistic models of silence as 'intentional silence' and 'unintentional silence' from a psychological perspective. Intentional silence is a deliberate strategy to cope with a certain situation, while unintentional silence describes unwilling silence, which often comes with frustration and embarrassment.

Students enacting intentional silence use their agency to keep quiet in class and take silence as acceptable and normal behaviour. In contrast, students who engage in unintentional silence lose their agency or power in taking the ownership of their learning and feel unable to speak up,. The silence discussed in existing studies about international students' classroom participation normally focuses on unintentional silence. There is limited discussion or recognition of the benefits of intentional silence and the way students mediate their agency, which is influenced by various personal and contextual factors explored in the present study.

Method

This study employed a qualitative case study approach to enable close examination of the participants' lived classroom experiences and perspectives. Qualitative case study is an effective strategy in educational research to enhance understanding of contexts, communities and individuals through capturing the complexity of teaching and learning practices and the contexts surrounding them (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison 2017). The use of case study approach in this research enabled insights into international students' classroom participation through multiple data collection methods, examination of contextual factors and thick description of their ongoing development.

Research Context and Participants

This paper draws on empirical data from a study exploring L2 international students' negotiation of classroom participation at a UK university (Wang 2020). The study was conducted at a comprehensive research-intensive university during the academic year 2016-17 among three departments within the Faculty of Social Sciences: Education, Business, and Sociology and Social Policy. The classes in these schools were mainly in seminar mode, where discussions and group activities were common practices and

students' oral participation was expected. The primary participants were 10 L2 international students from seven different contexts, namely, mainland China, Hong Kong, Indonesia, Vietnam, Russia, Mexico and Kuwait. It was their first time to study and live in a foreign country. Additional groups of participants were 12 of their peers who interacted with them in class and 12 of their instructors who taught them.

While each of the cases exemplified certain classroom participation patterns, every participant case was unique in their negotiating processes. This paper presents three cases: Farah, Qiang and Haijun, in order to introduce their different silence patterns and the influencing factors. While other cases are equally important to this research, these three cases can strongly present the current theme. In addition, perspectives from the peers and instructors, who interacted with the selected cases during the observation or reported in the interviews, are included to compare and contrast their conceptions and understandings of the concept silence. We are aware that none of the individual students can represent a country or a culture and generalisation is not the aim of this study; rather, this study aims to draw out implications for those who are in similar contexts to relate to the participants' experiences.

Data Collection

Triangulation of multiple data collection methods was used to capture different dimensions of students' participation, including classroom observation, semi-structured and unstructured interviews as well as reflective journals. Taking a non-participant observation approach (Bryman 2012), the first author sat at the back of the classroom and noted down details in observation protocols. Spontaneous unstructured interviews before or after class helped to capture focal students' instant reactions and impressions of class practices. Their changing perspectives and feelings were documented through

semi-structured interviews at three stages, namely, in the beginning of the academic year, at the end of the first semester and at the end of the academic year. In addition, the reflective journals kept by the students complemented the interviews to explore their classroom experiences. Meanwhile, semi-structured interviews with focal students' instructors and peers at the end of the course presented their perceptions and viewpoints of the international students' classroom participation. In total, the fieldwork generated 80 hours of interviews, 78 sets of field notes and 60 reflective journal entries.

Data Analysis

Correspondent with the exploratory nature of the current study, the data analysis is mainly inductive. The whole dataset was coded through thematic analysis, moving from a broad reading of the data towards discovering patterns and developing themes (Ryan and Bernard 2003). It synthesised different sources of data from multiple participant perspectives in different research stages, allowing for an analysis which incorporates the changes in student behaviours and emotions, as well as peers' and instructors' perceptions. Data collected in the first phase of research - from classroom observations and spontaneous interviews - were synthesised. For example, the classroom observation protocol and the spontaneous interview after class, about the same student and on the same date, were coded together to present a connected whole picture of the individual student's classroom experience. Meanwhile, semi-structured interview data collected throughout the three research stages were compared and contrasted to identify any differences in students' classroom participation patterns and the similarities and differences between different community members' perceptions and interpretations of classroom participation. After the development of the main themes, tentative narratives were established about each individual student and then tested among different sources

of data in specific contexts. Triangulation of multiple perspectives and regular checks on interpretation with the participants increased the trustworthiness and credibility of the analysis process (Thanh and Thanh 2015). Pseudonyms were applied for all participants' and courses' names to protect participants' confidentiality and anonymity.

Findings

This section presents the voices behind the silence by discussing three cases in detail. Pseudonyms are used for all three. The three cases represent three different motivations and enactments of silence. The findings present various and inter-connected reasons that make students less likely to speak up in class and reveal classroom tensions resulting from different conceptualisations of silence.

The Case of Farah: Unintentional Silence Imposed by Peers and Instructors

Farah, a 27-year-old Indonesian student, came to pursue her master's degree in International Communication Studies at the Department of Sociology and Social Policy. Before her postgraduate study in the UK, Farah worked in a newspaper publisher in Indonesia for six years. She described herself as one of the top students during undergraduate study and she had close relationships with both her classmates and instructors. Farah demonstrated strong motivation to study in the new learning environment: 'I gave up my job to study here. I hope I can expand my horizons and make the best of it' (Interview 1). Farah was so impressed with some of her active peers' verbal participation that she told me from the first interview that she would make efforts to become a member of the verbally active students. Farah did achieve that in the majority of her courses except in two optional courses: Politics and Democracy as well as Internet Communications, in which Haijun also found difficult to participate. Farah's

experiences in the optional courses illustrated the unintentional silence created in interaction with peers and pedagogical practices.

Negotiation of Membership

Politics and Democracy was an optional course for Farah. There were around 30 students in the class, the majority of whom were native English speakers from another major and who had courses together more often. The classroom atmosphere was always dynamic, but Farah was usually silent. Farah struggled to enact her agency in this course while she faced marginal status and failed to achieve her goals of becoming of member of the verbally active students. Farah described her peers as passionate in their discussions and sometimes the discussion went back and forth among them so fast that she could not follow it. Farah felt inferior to them when she compared her own oral contributions with theirs: 'I feel stupid sometimes. I feel like, why people are asking questions and say what in their mind, and why I am just sitting here and say nothing' (Interview 1). Farah had a hard time negotiating the unintentional silence with the feeling of being inferior, excluded and powerless.

Farah attributed her lack of membership to the competent student group to her insufficient knowledge of politics so that she could not achieve in-depth discussion with her peers. Corresponding to the findings that silence could result from lack of knowledge (Morita 2004; Turner 2013), Farah mentioned very often in the interviews that she struggled to understand the discussion topics and she could not join in the discussion within a short period of time:

When the lecturer asked this and that and people started to talk and I was like, 'What is this?' It's because politics is not something that I can study in three weeks. It takes long time to understand. It takes some time to be in the situation, to

understand the pattern of politics because it's really complicated. No matter how many books I read about politics, I cannot immediately understand it in two or three weeks (Interview 1).

In addition, peers can be a significant social context for learners' development (J. Li 2012). Her peers' reactions to her silence reinforced her feeling of being an outsider and her powerless positioning. Farah reported in the reflective journal that her peers would not invite her opinions if she remained silent. Farah felt they were indifferent to her silence and she did not want to break their discussion flow. She described, 'I was so upset in that class. I couldn't say anything' (Interview 3). Farah's silence was unintentional while she was in constant negotiation of membership, power and agency. Despite the personal reason of lack of knowledge in politics, Farah's silence was co-constructed with her peers involved in the classroom interactions.

Instructors' Awareness of International Students' Difficulties

Another course in which Farah felt it was challenging to participate was Internet Communications. It was an optional course for her, having a similar student cohort as that of Politics and Democracy. Farah was not completely silent in this course and she asked the tutor questions a couple of times. However, Farah told me that those questions were prepared before class just to make her feel so she could say something. She did not manage to achieve in-depth discussions as she expected. Farah attributed it to two main factors: insufficient knowledge and the tutor's lack of awareness of international students' difficulties. Farah described that although the course was titled Internet Communication, it was closely related to politics. Farah felt the lecturer had little awareness of international students' difficulties and he spoke very fast:

The teacher from America, he speaks really fast and he assumes everybody understands what he said so he never controlled his speed and sometimes we were like, ‘What was it? What was it?’ (Interview 3).

Haijun, who took the same course, echoed this opinion. They both found the instructor spoke so fast that they could not understand him well. However, what Farah found disappointing was that she approached the lecturer once to express her difficulties in understanding him. The lecturer acknowledged her request, but he did not slow down in the rest of the lectures.

Farah also complained about the instructor’s reaction to some international students’ silence, which made her feel nervous and stressed. Farah described that there was usually ‘a quiet corner’ in the class and once the instructor, in front of the class, put the blame on that quiet group for not participating in discussions. The group remained silent for the rest of the semester. Farah noted that sometimes they did not understand the instructor’s questions and there was a lack of time for reflection after the questions were posed to the class. The instructor’s reaction to the quiet group reflected his negative perceptions of silence. Moreover, Farah felt a lack of connection with the instructor because she was not a member of the instructor’s subject group. Farah felt she did not get as much attention as she did from her core course instructors. It affected her motivation to speak up in class. Farah’s silence demonstrated the effects of membership in class as well as instructors’ awareness of international students’ difficulties.

The Case of Qiang: Silence as an Intentional Choice of Participation Pattern

Qiang was from China, 24 years old. He was enrolled in Finance at the Department of Business. Qiang worked in a bank for a year before he came to study. There were around 300 students in his programme and around 290 students were from China. Qiang

was completely silent throughout the whole academic year in both lectures and seminars; however, he was an attentive listener and usually sat at the front listening to the lecture carefully and taking notes. Qiang argued throughout the study that silence is ‘my way of participation’ (Journal 8). The silence that Qiang negotiated was his proactive choice as a learning strategy. As Kim et al. (2016) argue, verbal engagement is not the only way of participating in class; silence is also a mode of classroom participation. Resisting voice as the only classroom participating mode, Qiang exercised his agency to reinterpret what a good class is like rather than to conform to the prevailing understanding. A comparison of Qiang’s experience and feelings in International Accounting (IA) Seminars and International Finance (IF) Seminars reveals his conception of silence as his way of participating. IA, as one of the core courses, is lecture-oriented with around 150 students in class. In addition, there were four sessions of seminar, which were of much smaller size, around 20 students in each seminar. IF was an optional course with around 70 students in the lecture and it also came with seminars of around 20 students. Qiang’s classroom behaviours was observed in these two courses, both lectures and tutorials. Qiang exercised his personal agency in keeping silent in both lectures and seminars as he felt getting the correct result was more significant than the discussion process. According to Qiang’s understanding, ‘The nature of accounting is to give the correct results and I do not see the meaning of discussion’ (Interview during class breaks).

The classroom atmosphere of the IA seminar was more dynamic than that of IF. More students asked questions in IA. Being immersed in both tutorials, the first author felt more relaxed in IA because of tutor Khalid’s teaching style, while in IF, the atmosphere was nervous even as an observer, because when nobody answered the tutor Eanraig’s questions, Eanraig would say, ‘Hello, are you still here. Are you sleeping?’ or

‘How can you come to class without reading the materials?’ Qiang remained silent in both tutorials. Nonetheless, he preferred Eanraig’s tutorial to Khalid’s, since his criterion of a good lesson was the structure of the content rather than the interactive format. He did not take any initiative to join in the discussion seminars. Qiang commented,

It was not a difficult question. I could figure it out myself without attending the tutorials. There were answers anyway to the question uploaded to Moodle. I still don’t see the necessity of discussions.

Qiang achieved a Merit based on his final average grades. He also achieved A1 for a group project, the highest mark. Qiang reported that he focused ‘more on the result than on the process’. As an active agent with clear goals, Qiang took control of his learning and participating mode with confidence and achieved a new way of understanding himself (Morita 2004). He explained he would not treat himself as a student anymore but as a fast learner. He understood that he had strong independent learning skills:

I might be slow in the beginning but it’s because I always have deep thinking about questions. It will be stuck in my head after I figure it out on my own. I will be confused if I learn by discussing with others (Interview 3).

In summary, Qiang exercised his personal agency in choosing silence intentionally as his way of participating in class and as a learning strategy. His habitus of being a silent learner in class was formed during his previous learning experience in China, where silence is a common classroom participation pattern. Qiang expected the classes during his study abroad could be more informative so that he could acquire more knowledge. Processing knowledge silently while listening to the instructor was his usual way of learning. Silence allowed Qiang to process the information and think further, and for his purposes, discussion was not useful. Although Qiang did not participate

verbally in class, he demonstrated good understanding of the teaching content and assignment.

The Case of Haijun: Negotiating Intentional and Unintentional Silence in Different Courses

Haijun was 26 years old from China. He came to pursue his master's degree in International Communication Studies, the same programme as Farah. Before Haijun came to study, he worked as a documentary editor for three years in one of the top media companies in China. He described being the top student during his bachelor's studies and he also found a more prestigious job compared with his peers. Haijun had two compulsory courses and one optional course each semester. While Haijun attended the courses together with his peers most of the time, he reported no sense of community. Haijun's case presented his negotiation of both intentional and unintentional silence in two different courses and revealed the influences from different conceptualisations of silence and disparities between old and new identities.

Different Conceptualisation of Silence

Haijun's experience in the International History course presented the culturally specific nature of silence as well as his enactment of agency in being silent, although accompanied with some reluctant feelings. International History, one of the core courses for Haijun's programme, took the form of seminars. There were 21 students in this course at the beginning, 16 Chinese, one Indonesian and four from UK. However, two UK students quit the subject and changed to a different one. A common observation of the class was the silence of most of the Chinese students, as noted in all the field notes of this course. In contrast, the rest had more interactions in classroom activities. Haijun negotiated intentional silence in this course and developed different perceptions of

verbal participation at different stages. Haijun was not completely silent in classroom activities and he spoke more during group discussion. He reported that he had a strong desire to speak up in whole-class discussions in the beginning when he was impressed by the interactive modes of class in the new learning context (Journal 1). He observed that his English proficiency was above the average of Chinese students, which made him more confident to have his voice heard in this class. However, as time passed by, he said he lost the motivation to speak up because he did not see the point of discussion:

I only feel motivated or inspired to speak up when someone comes up with original and in-depth ideas. I have not met any students like this yet in this class. I only participate when I feel my opinions will contribute to the teaching content and may benefit other students (Interview 1).

Haijun commented that he did not like speaking up for the sake of drawing attention or just making some noise in class (Journal 5). He felt the discussion was normally at a superficial level. While Haijun stopped seeing the value of speaking up, he negotiated a comfortable and calm silence pattern. Haijun's intentional silence in this course demonstrated his perception and valuing of verbal participation. It was his strategy to resist discussions on 'superficial questions' or talking for the sake of making his presence known in class.

However, Haijun's UK peer Tracy, one of the two students who dropped out of the course, treated verbal participation as an essential part of the learning process because she felt, 'The participation part of the seminar is when the information really sticks in your head'. Tracy found it difficult to learn in the quiet classroom atmosphere,

There was no dialogue; there was no participation in the seminars. It made me feel very unhappy and I had to change because I didn't feel I was getting much out of the classes because everybody was quiet.

Tracy associated international students' silence with 'insufficient background knowledge' of the subject, 'language barrier' and lack of preparation for subsequent discussions. Regarding Tracy's dropping out, Haijun told me that he understood Tracy's decision. However, he felt that Chinese students were looked down on:

I think she must think communicating with people from other countries is more important. They chose to leave. It's their choice. I think, more or less, Chinese students are discriminated overseas. It's not because what we did but just because of the big population of Chinese students. Of course, they will not say anything rude or offensive, but you can feel they try to avoid you (Haijun, Interview 2).

Although Haijun did not take Tracy's leaving personally, his feeling of being excluded as a member of the Chinese group was reinforced even when Chinese students were the majority in the class.

Participants' perceptions of voice and silence have significant influence on their classroom performances and efforts to speak up (Guo and Chase 2011; Ellwood and Nakane 2009). The silence of Haijun and the expectations of Tracy are a clash of perceptions and understandings of silence. When Tracy perceived international students' silence as deficiency, such perceptions were not invented entirely by herself as an individual because her perceptions of silence were largely based on what she had been socialised to perceive as normal, self-evident and objective practice in class. Tracy was consequently disposed to devalue silence in the class, which was neither entirely conscious nor intentional, but her specific understanding of the role of silence within the UK educational culture,. Haijun was confident in his knowledge of the subject, but he did not see verbal participation as crucial for his learning. However, Tracy found it unacceptable to have such a quiet class and she misunderstood her peers' silence. In line with Bourdieu's perspective of habitus, people from different backgrounds and with

different experiences are likely to perceive and act differently in the world. As a result, misunderstanding, tension and discomfort were observed among students' interactions and relationships.

Disparities between Identities in the New Environment and back Home

Haijun's unintentional silence in the optional course in Politics and Democracy reflects his negotiation of identities. Haijun had a depressing period of time at the beginning of the semester due to the disparities between his identities in this new learning environment and back in China, which were closely related to his communicative competence and concerns over his image among peers and instructors. As Haijun described, there were around 30 students in this class and the majority of students in this course were native-English speakers. The classroom atmosphere was always dynamic. Haijun showed a strong desire to participate and he was impressed by the depth and quality of his peers' questions and comments. However, he was often silent: 'It's not that I don't want to participate but I don't have a space to talk. Everyone talks very fluently and fast' (Interview 2). Haijun attributed his silence to the gaps of communicative competence in Mandarin and in English as he reflected,

When I was in China, my colleague called me 'fox' because I am good at socialising. My communicative competence was good, and I usually can leave a good impression on people after a conversation. But here, I am not sure of my use of words. For example, a peer stopped talking to me after we talked about some political issues between China and her country. I am more careful about what I say now due to different cultures and potential misinterpretations (Interview 2).

Haijun thought the language barrier stopped him from having his voice in this class as it represented his identity and determined others' impressions of him. Haijun reflected that he usually felt lost in class when his peers or instructors spoke very fast or had very

strong accents. Haijun confessed that he was also concerned about damaging his image if he could not give a good answer to the question. He would rather keep silent than give a wrong answer:

If you gave an answer off the track, it may cause disagreement with the instructor and damages your image in your peers' impression. I was worried about whether my answer was too superficial. And then the teacher may say that's very interesting and then my peers would know my answer was not good (Interview 2).

Haijun found a disparity between his status in the postgraduate course and that in his bachelor's studies. He lost his labels of 'top student', 'competent' and 'outstanding' and he did not have special attention from his peers and instructors anymore. He thought they hardly noticed his existence in class due to his silence:

During my bachelor's I think I can use outstanding to describe myself. There is a big drop of my image when I came here. I was very competent students in both peers' and lecturers' impressions. Even my lecturers would like to catch up with me after class. However, I don't think my lecturers here would have any impression of me. I think their impressions of students should be based on in-class performance since our essay is marked anonymously. But I don't have much verbal participation in class. I think none of the lecturers would have any impression of me (Interview 2).

In addition, the reactions of Haijun's peers reinforced his reticence in this course. Haijun shared his experience of being excluded in a group discussion once when they talked about American presidential elections. Haijun commented that although he could understand their reactions and found it reasonable, he still felt depressed and frustrated from not being able to join their discussion.

Once, I was assigned into a group with all English-speaking students. During the whole discussion, they totally ignored me. Five people in the group they didn't..., if I were in their position, I would ask the quiet members' opinions even though I

can understand they had a very in-depth discussion of the issue and they may not bother to waste their time on me whose English is not fluent and might take up some time to express myself. I even gave up attempting to join in. I am not complaining about their attitude. Instead, I feel it's reasonable though I feel dumped and frustrated. I can totally understand and will not be angry or mad at them since I know it's my problem (Interview 2).

Haijun's unintentional silence in the Politics and Democracy course presented the interactive influence of linguistic factors and disparities of identities. The identity disparities he experienced in the transition made him reserved about communicating with others, while his newly lowered self-perception of communicative competence in English made him construct a self-image of being less competent than his peers are. The process of constructing and reconstructing his identities in the intercultural classroom is a negotiation of competence, cultures, and power relations (Duff 2010). In addition, his peers' attitudes and response reinforced his silence with frustration and unease. However, his silence in the other course was of a slightly different origin and nature, demonstrating that silence is not necessarily an essentialised aspect of a given student.

Conclusions

Drawing on in-depth analysis of three L2 international students' silence within intercultural classrooms at a UK university, this paper reveals the tensions with their peers and tutors in the classroom resulting from different expectations and perceptions of silence. It suggests that silence is not equal to lack of knowledge, disengagement, or incompetence, although some students' silence may be subject to the influence of these factors in certain contexts. Comparing and contrasting the selected participants' experiences in their courses, we explain their different negotiating processes by mapping out factors that lead to their silence. Consistent with previous research, findings indicate that linguistic factors or communicative competence greatly affected

students' classroom participation (Duff 2010; Ha and Li 2014; S. Kim et al. 2016; Morita 2004; Schultz 2012; Tatar 2005). However, the fact that the students' backgrounds and instructors' beliefs and attitudes matter in the intercultural classroom interaction, unavoidably make silence a social practice marked with exclusionary or inclusionary behaviours.

Questioning the primacy of voice in classes, this paper advances theoretical understandings of silences by discussing silence in context and linking it to the influence of factors such as participants' negotiation of membership and their emotional attitudes and feelings. In addition, this paper argues for recognition of 'intentional silence' in contrast to 'unintentional silence' to better reflect students' active choice, agency and power, or lack of them while negotiating their participation in the class (Kim et al. 2016). The paper demonstrates how participants with unique experiences, backgrounds and values, take ownership of their learning and classroom participation modes through exercising their agency and negotiating power when they interact with the new learning environments. Corresponding with Archer's (2000) view of agency as both unique to individuals and socially co-constructed, the participants' agency was closely linked to what they felt significant to their learning and depended on their relative power within specific learning communities. In these international students' perceptions, learning can happen through silent activities such as 'listening, cognitively processing, emotionally processing and emotionally withdrawing' and not talking (Ollin 2008, 272). Ha and Li (2014, 245) argue for 'the need to optimise silence as pedagogy' to recognise learning diversity rather than to compromise for 'a shared behaviour'. This is not to encourage students to keep silent, but rather to remove the misunderstanding and negative stereotypes of silence as non-participation or passive learning.

There are implications of this for the intercultural learning environment. To facilitate the formation of a positive classroom atmosphere, more interactions, inside and outside the classroom, should be encouraged and arranged to get students to know each other and thus foster mutual understanding. Zhou, Knoke and Sakamoto (2005, 307) argue that familiarity with peers and instructors can contribute to ‘sense of safety’ and ‘sense of belonging’. When international students feel they are members of the class and their ideas are welcomed, they would make extra efforts to contribute to the discussion. The paper also highlights how some instructor behaviours may create the conditions for reluctant silence.

Rather than silencing voice, this paper calls for ‘a middle way’ to identify the interconnections between voice and silence, to reclaim voices for the unintentionally silent, to silence oppressive voices, to legitimate intentional silence, and to appreciate constructive voices. In a truly inclusive classroom, there are space and opportunities for both voice and silence. Silence and voice form a continuum of communication (H. L. Li 2004). However, while some teachers feel uneasy with silence and treat it as a gap to fill (Ollin 2008), silence as pedagogy requires instructors’ skills and conscious strategies based on a full understanding of the learning environment and the needs of a range of learners. There are no quantifiable characteristics to tell whether students’ silence was an intentional choice or an unintentional situation but being aware of different types of silence would help them to be attentive and responsive to students’ learning needs and feelings. As for intentional silence, instructors should leave time and space for students to process information and respect their active choice. In contrast, unintentionally silent learners feel they could learn better in an environment that meets their needs. In this case, intervention should be considered based on understanding of the causes, e.g. to

leave students some time for reflection to organise language and ideas or to invite gently quiet students' opinions while some students are dominating the discussion.

Fostering an appreciation of diversity in the classroom requires the open exchange of ideas and experiences of students from different backgrounds. In line with Bourdieu's frame of thinking, despite the fact that misrecognition, devaluation, and lack of acceptance are systemic social conditions, if change is going to occur, it will be largely a function of how we as individuals act and think in relation to each other (Shim 2012, 218). Classroom participation is a collective responsibility of the class rather than just an individual responsibility (Hollander 2002). It is neither international student's sole responsibility to adapt, or their peers' or instructors' obligation to compromise. To make learning an interactive and mutually inclusive process, it is important to promote an appreciation of diversity in the classroom community to legitimise different participation modes. We are aware, given the power imbalances at hand, there is unlikely to be an immediate change in effective use of silence. However, if this paper raises awareness of diversity and fosters mutual understanding of silence and what it says about learners' experiences, it is a good beginning.

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