

**Silence in an EFL Classroom: The Interplay of Schwab's Four Commonplaces**  
ความเงียบในชั้นเรียนวิชาภาษาอังกฤษเป็นภาษาต่างประเทศ: บทบาทความสัมพันธ์ของผู้สอน ผู้เรียน  
เนื้อหาวิชา และบรรยากาศในชั้นเรียนตามทฤษฎีของ Schwab

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**ABSTRACT**

This qualitative research aims to seek causes for silence in an English as a foreign language (EFL) classroom. To do so, the researchers went to one university in Thailand, and then interviewed and observed 10 students who enrolled in the Fundamental University English I course and consented to participate in the study. An analysis of the transcribed data helped the researchers identify four possible causes for silence in this particular EFL classroom. They were: (1) the EFL teacher, (2) the students themselves and their classmates, (3) the teaching material and its content, and (4) the classroom environment. More importantly, these four commonplaces appeared to be entwined. That is, the less friendly the student participants felt their teacher and their classmates were, the less the students enjoyed their English class; the more pressured the classroom environment was; the more the students would be silent, and vice versa.

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## บทคัดย่อ

งานวิจัยเชิงคุณภาพชิ้นนี้ศึกษาสาเหตุของความเงียบ การไม่พูด หรือไม่แสดงออกในการมีส่วนร่วมในชั้นเรียนของผู้เรียนภาษาอังกฤษเป็นภาษาต่างประเทศ ผู้วิจัยเก็บข้อมูลจากนักศึกษาระดับปริญญาตรีที่กำลังศึกษารายวิชาภาษาอังกฤษพื้นฐาน 1 ในมหาวิทยาลัยแห่งหนึ่งในประเทศไทย นักศึกษาจำนวน 10 คน ตกลงยินยอมเข้าร่วมวิจัยด้วยวิธีการให้สัมภาษณ์และยินยอมให้มีการสังเกตการณ์ในชั้นเรียน ผลจากการวิเคราะห์ข้อมูลช่วยให้ผู้วิจัยสามารถระบุสาเหตุของความเงียบ การไม่พูด หรือไม่แสดงออกในการมีส่วนร่วมในชั้นเรียนของนักศึกษากลุ่มนี้ได้ว่ามี 4 ประการ คือ 1) ครูผู้สอน และวิธีการสอนภาษาอังกฤษเป็นภาษาต่างประเทศ 2) ตัวนักศึกษาเอง และเพื่อนร่วมชั้นเรียน 3) สื่อและเนื้อหาของสื่อที่ใช้ในการสอน และ 4) สภาพแวดล้อมในชั้นเรียน นอกจากนี้ยังพบว่าสาเหตุทั้ง 4 ข้อนี้มีความเกี่ยวเนื่องสัมพันธ์ในลักษณะที่เป็นเหตุและผลต่อกันและกัน ไม่สามารถระบุได้ว่ามาจากสาเหตุใดสาเหตุหนึ่งเท่านั้น นั่นคือ ถ้านักศึกษารู้สึกว่าเป็นมิตรกับครูและเพื่อนร่วมชั้นเรียนน้อยเท่าใด ก็ยิ่งจะทำให้พวกเขาสงกกับชั้นเรียนภาษาอังกฤษน้อยลง และถ้านักศึกษารู้สึกว่าสภาพแวดล้อมในชั้นเรียนเป็นภัยคุกคามต่อพวกเขามากเท่าใด พวกเขาก็จะยิ่งเงียบมากขึ้นเท่านั้น ในทางกลับกันถ้าความเป็นมิตรกับอาจารย์และเพื่อนร่วมชั้นเรียนมีมาก และความรู้สึกว่าชั้นเรียนเป็นสถานที่ที่ปลอดภัยมีมาก นักศึกษาก็จะยิ่งแสดงออกและมีส่วนร่วมมากขึ้น

## Introduction

The issues of students' silence in EFL classrooms (especially among Asian students) have become one of the most studied topics in language education. A large body of literature in language education research has convincingly illustrated how students' silence could interfere with students' acquisition of a second language (Hanh, 2020; Harumi, 2011; Izumi, 2003; Juniati, Jabu, & Salija, 2018; King, 2013; Ping, 2010; Swain, 2005; Wu, 2019; Zhou & Chen, 2020). In response to this, much research has been undertaken not only to identify causes of students' silence but also to (possibly) redress such issues. The literature appears to indicate three primary causes for students' reluctance to speak English in a classroom. These three causes included: (1) teachers' pedagogical uses and their classroom behaviors (Humphris & Burns, 2015a; Humphries, Burns, & Tanaka, 2015b; Kikuchi, 2009), (2) cultural classroom norms (Nishimo & Watanabe, 2008; Reda, 2012; Sakui, 2004), and (3) students' cultural characteristics, identities, and traits (e.g., Banks, 2016; Ferris & Tagg, 1996; Littlewood, 1999; 2000; Morita, 2004; Sasaki & Ortlieb, 2017; Xie, 2010; Yahsima, MacIntyre, & Ikeda, 2018). Several language researchers have gone into actual EFL classes and drawn a connection between a cultural context and students' silence contending that contextual change could increase students' willingness to speak (Block, 2006; Harumi, 2001; Larsen-Freeman, 2006; Omoniyi, 2006).

Research over the past two decades has not only located students' silence in EFL classrooms as one of the universal phenomena, but it has also painted a complex picture of such phenomenon. In the past decade, myriad Thai educators/researchers have ventured into actual Thai EFL classrooms with attempts to indicate reasons for Thai students' silence in the classrooms. Pattapong (2015) attributed factors underlying Thai university EFL students' unwillingness to speak in an EFL classroom to (1) culture, (2) anxiety and confidence, (3) self-efficacy, (4) interest and emotion, and (5) classroom environment. Karnchanachari's (2019) findings corroborated those of Pattapong (2015) to some extent. Factors affecting Thai university students' willingness to communicate in an EFL classroom, as she noted, were (1) experience in communication in English, (2) familiarity with and interest in the topic, (3) anxiety, (4) persons to whom students spoke, (5) English language competence, (6) teachers' feedback, and (7) language teaches used in the classrooms. Rungwarapong's (2019) findings were in line with those of Pattapong (2015) and Karnchanachari (2019). She identified

facilitating and hindering factors for students' willingness to talk in their EFL classes. The facilitating factors were (1) teachers' teaching techniques, (2) activities with clear aims and expectations, (3) internet-based classroom activities, (4) good classroom atmosphere, and (5) good relationships among students. The hindering factors were (1) Thai cultural concept of losing face, (2) students' perceptions toward knowledge and teaching, and (3) traditional classroom layout. Suvongse and Chanyoo's (2019) study investigated the relationship between psychosocial and psychocultural variables and students' willingness to communicate in the EFL classrooms. They concluded that these two variables were accounted for students' silence. Psychosocial variables were such as communication apprehension, self-perceived communication competence, motivation, personality, and international posture. Psychocultural variables included fear of losing face, and unity.

Given the complexity and interplay of students' anxiety and students' silence in Thai EFL classrooms, several Thai educators/researchers have attempted to clarify such the relationship. For instance, Booyaparakob, Puntai, and Ponata (2015) argued that anxiety could cause silence which, in turn, could interfere with student learning. Chinpakdee (2015) identified sources of Thai students' anxiety in university EFL classrooms, including (1) academic evaluations, (2) negative evaluations, (3) comprehension problems, and (4) teacher related factors. Looking particularly at the association between speaking anxiety and students' silence, Akkakoson (2016) concluded that students' limited knowledge of English vocabulary raised students' anxiety in participating in speaking activities. Hence, this increased students' silence in Thai EFL classrooms.

A brief review of this earlier research may offer possibilities to explain Thai students' silence in EFL classrooms to some extent. However, given a large number of students studying English in Thailand, pervasive students' silence particularly in EFL classes at tertiary level of education, and Thai students' poor English language proficiency (Abhasakun, 2021, Chaiyong, 2019; Kaur, Young, & Kirkpatrick, 2016; Mala, 2018; Teng & Sinwongsuwat, 2015), more research on such issue is indeed needed. Hence, the current research was implemented to investigate the reasons accounting for Thai university students' silence in the EFL classrooms. The study extends the existing literature by exploring and indicating, through the two theoretical concepts of Schwab's (1969, 1971, 1973, 1983) interactions among the four commonplaces (teachers, learners, subject matter, and milieu) and Cook-Sather's (2002, 2006) students' voices, causes for students' silence in an EFL classroom in one university in Thailand. The results could probably not only help situate a better understanding regarding students' silence in the EFL classrooms, but they could also provide insights for especially EFL instructors to grapple with students' silence.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Two educational theoretical notions help frame the present study. One is interactions among the four commonplaces; the other one is students' voices.

Interaction among the four commonplaces is one of the three conceptual elements of practical curriculum inquiry which Schwab (1969, 1971, 1973, 1983) had suggested as an alternative to scientific-based framework for curriculum development and instruction (e.g., Tyler's Rationale [Tyler, 1949]). The other two elements for practical curriculum inquiry are state of arts and eclectic arts. State of arts questions the practice of a utopia theory but highlights the uniqueness of each educational context. Eclectic arts emphasize the application of theories to address and solve problems in each particular context. Teachers of other adults involved in curriculum development and instruction must have a well of theoretical knowledge. Also they need to be aware of problems in a context of with which they are concerned. Hence, they could use a theory to solve such the problem. If no theories could be used; these people then could combine existing theories to redress the problem. Interaction among the four

commonplaces refers to constant and simultaneous interactions/communications among the four commonplaces representing curriculum development and instructional practice. They are: teachers, learners, subject matter, and milieu (or environment). Such constant and simultaneous interactions/communications continuously evolve curriculum development and instructional practices so a curriculum could meet the demand and the interest of both teachers and learners. The notion of interactions among the four commonplaces was employed to frame this study as previous research has revealed how such interactions affect students' classroom behaviors and participation. Sukhapabsuk (2012), for example, investigated learners' behaviors in classroom and found that students' behaviors in classroom affected classmates' behaviors and teachers' classroom management. In the same vein, how teachers used teaching materials and dealt with students' classroom behaviors were found to affect students' learning attention and classroom participation.

Student voice has been established as one of the key elements in the field of curriculum development and instruction due to its close association with teachers' instructional practice, teacher professional development, student outcome, and school reform (Ferguson, Hanreddy, & Draxton, 2011; Hargreaves, 1996; Mayes, 2020; Mitra, 2007; Murphey, Falout, Elwood, & Hood, 2009; Nelson & Charteris, 2021; Pekrul & Levin, 2007; Rudduck, 2007). Student voice is, as Cook-Sather (2020) defined, "a concept and a set of approaches that position students alongside credentialed educators as critics and creators of educational practice" (p. 182). Student voice is foregrounded on three guiding premises: rights, respect, and listening (Cook-Sather, 2002, 2006). Rights is the student's right to be heard; it is meant to guide educational practices that respond to students' ideas instead of focusing exclusively on teachers' or other adults' perspectives on what students need. Cruddas and Haddock (2003) asserted that educational practices should necessarily be guided by the "rights of children and young people to have a voice and an active role in decision making and planning in education" (p. 5). The term respect is closely linked to underlying efforts to reposition students in processes of education and in research on schools. Goldman and Newman (1998) suggested that; "[r]espect listens to divergent opinions and looks for the merits they possess" (p. 9). Based on the evidence they had gathered, Rudduck and Flutter (2004) stressed the benefits of respect. Students who were involved in schools and who felt respected as an individual and as an institutional and social group were "likely to feel a greater sense of respect and belonging, and are less likely to disengage from a school's purposes" (Rudduck & Flutter, 2004, p. 107). Listening refers to a process through which either teachers or other adults listen to student perspectives as a form of raw knowledge for either research or reform (Mitra, 2007). When students felt that they were being listened to, they not only felt empowered, but also were a member of a school. Hence, listening, as Delpit (1988) argued, "requires not only open eyes and ears but also open hearts and minds" (p. 298).

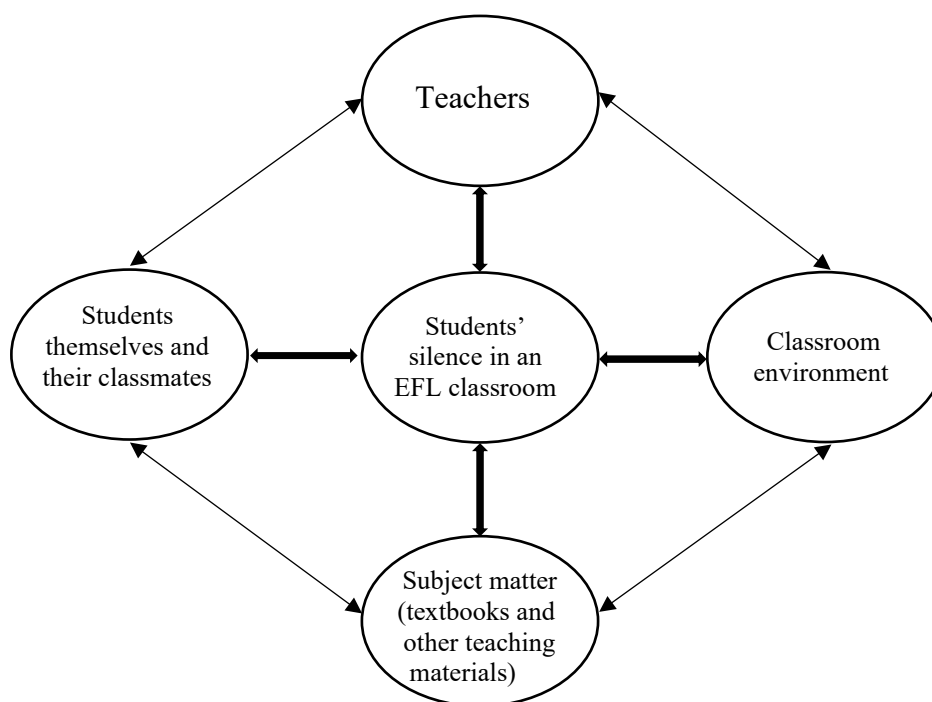
These three premises are central to student voice as they raise questions as well as concerns that could possibly lead to a significant shift in education. Students "raise questions and concerns as well as signal possible productive shifts in power dynamics and practices that might, in turn, lead to a significant cultural shift" (Cook-Sather, 2006, p. 381). Hence, their voices offer, as Cook-Sather (2006) argued, "unique perspectives on learning, teaching, and schooling, that their insights warrant not only the attention but also the responses of adults, and that they should be afforded opportunities to actively shape their education" (p. 383). Moreover, it is necessary for either teachers or other adults involved in education to begin;

listening and responding to a diverse set of perspectives and not just tolerating or tokenizing them but always destabilizing the center; to acknowledging that what you don't know is much bigger than what you know; to the notion that the project of school is an ongoing negotiation rather than transmission; to the idea that

education is a process based on rights and relationship; to the most basic premise that education is about change (Cook-Sather, 2006, p. 382).

Existing literature concerning EFL education in recent years has documented researchers going into actual EFL classrooms in the Asian region with Cook-Sather's (2002, 2006) notions of student voice to study students' perceptions in EFL teaching and learning. For example, Hongboontri and Noipinit (2014) went into one university in Thailand and documented students' perceptions of EFL curriculum development and instruction. Findings of Hongboontri and Darling's (2020) study with 12 Thai university EFL students portrayed students' perceptions toward their EFL teachers' approaches to curriculum implementation in a classroom. With data obtained from EFL students in one university in China, Hongboontri and Chen (forthcoming) identified characteristics of an effective EFL teacher. Duangsaeng's (2019) study reported Thai university LGBTQ students' perceptions of their EFL classes in terms of teachers, themselves and their classmates, subject matter, and classroom environment.

Heeding to Schwab's (1969, 1971, 1973, 1983) notions of interaction among the four commonplaces and Cook-Sather's (2006) three premises of student voice, the current researchers went to an actual educational context and allowed students to share what they perceived as causes of their silence in an EFL classroom in terms of their perceptions toward teachers, themselves and their classmates, subject matter, and milieu (environment) (Schubert, 1986). Figure I demonstrates the constant interaction between students and the four commonplaces. Their voices on this particular issue were listened to and were respected as one of the major sources for educational improvement.



**Figure 1** Students' Interactions with the Four Commonplaces

## Methods

To gather data, the researchers followed the notions of a qualitative research paradigm (De Villiers, Dumay, & Maroun, 2019; Dörnyei, 2007; Merriam, 2009; Patton, 2002) and designed and developed three different data collection tools: (1) a semi-structured interview, (2) a classroom observation, and (3) a collection of written documents and artifacts.

## Instruments and Data Collection

### *A Semi-structured Interview*

Hinging on the notions of a semi-structured interview (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019; Merriam, 2009; Spradley, 1979), the researchers designed and developed a list of open-ended questions for an interview. These questions were then piloted and were reworded and rearranged. Of total, 12 questions were drawn. Each interview took approximately 30 to 45 minutes depending on the informant's responses. With permission from the research participants, all interviews were audio-taped; field-notes were observed as well as recorded. Tapes and field-notes were transcribed for further analysis.

### *A Classroom Observation*

Furthermore, the researchers also followed Spada's (2019) concepts of classroom observation and observed a total of six EFL classrooms. During the observations, the researchers took the role of observer as participant (Merriam, 2009) and sat at the back of the classroom and recorded what happened in the classrooms on the observation protocol adapted from Hongboontri and Jantayasakorn's (2016) study. These observation field-notes were kept and were later analyzed.

### *Written Documents and Artifacts*

The researchers heeded to benefits of written documents and artifacts in qualitative research (Bowen, 2009, O'Leary, 2014) and collected various written documents and artifacts for the current research (e.g., language curricula and syllabi and teaching materials). These written documents and artifacts were assessed and later organized into what was "related to central questions of the research" (Bowen, 2009, p. 32). In other words, the curricula and syllabi, and teaching materials were analyzed for their content for their aspects concerning teachers, learners, subject matter, and the environment in classrooms.

### *Participants*

*Essence University* (a pseudonym used to replace the actual name of the participating university) was purposively selected as a research site, for it had specific targeted characteristics that this research aimed to explore. Despite its specific uniqueness, the university itself was considered a typical of other similar autonomous universities in Thailand, it offered fundamental English courses for students from different fields to study together within the same classes, and the phenomenon of students' silence was informally observed in the chosen context.

With permission from *Essence University* and approval from its ethical research committee, the researchers approached the potential research participants and requested their consent for participation. To do so, the researchers went to several Fundamental University English I classes and informed the students of the research details, participating procedures, their rights and risks involved in participating in the research (Eisner, 2017). Of total, 10 students consented to participate (See Table 1 for the participants' information).

**Table 1.** Participant Profiles

Name*	Field of Study	Gender
Catherine	Physical Therapy	F
Cathy	Conservation Biology	F
Jennifer	Accounting	F
June	Nursing	F
Kate	Nursing	F
Kim	Nursing	F
Margaret	Nursing	F
Maria	Medical Educational Technology	F
Matthew	Agricultural Science	M
Nancy	Accounting	F

\*Note: All names are pseudonyms.

## Data Analysis

The researchers' analysis of their interview and observational data was centralized around Strauss and Corbin's (1990) concepts of open and axial coding techniques. These techniques urged the researchers to read and re-read their descriptive data and to break these data into smaller parts. These smaller parts were later condensed and codes were formulated in terms of their core meaning. These formulated codes were then compared and contrasted to create emerging themes.

Collected written documents and artifacts were analyzed with content analysis. These documents and artifacts were read and re-read to gain a general understanding of, for example, the content in the teaching materials and the activities used in this EFL classroom. These data then were coded; codes were later sorted into categories that depicted the themes of these documents and artifacts (Erlingsson & Brysiewicz, 2017; Krippendorf, 2013).

Finally, the data gathered by different methods were compared and contrasted in terms of consistency, inconsistency, and contradiction (Carter, Bryant-Lukosius, DiCenso, Blythe, & Neville, 2014; Mathison, 1988; Morse, 2009). Later, they were put together not only to increase the validity of the research findings, but they could also (better) depict the interplay of these categories.

## Findings and Discussion

Findings reveal that the students became silent due to the interaction among the four commonplaces. The participating teachers were found to give lectures as a dominant teaching approach, and put emphasis on grammar accuracy. Without the teachers' initiation of interaction, opportunities for students' talk were rare and their attention was replaced with boredom, especially when the teachers only sat in front of the class strictly following materials, which also focused on grammar. When the students talked, they were corrected for grammar accuracy. This resulted in their low level of confidence and prevented them from later interaction. The students' confidence even became lower when the teachers negatively interacted to some of them with bad temper, criticized and treated them unfairly. The students who perceived themselves having low language proficiency level than their peers, even remained silent especially in large classes due to their shyness and embarrassment, or when their lessons were not scheduled at the right time.

### What was the Relationship between the Four Commonplaces and Students' Silence?

#### *EFL Teachers*

Based on the data derived from course syllabus and learning materials, interviews with and classroom observations of the 10 student participants, it was abundantly clear that EFL teachers were regarded as one of the primary factors that caused students to keep silent in the EFL classrooms. EFL teachers related factors that jointly contributed to students' quietness in the EFL classrooms included (1) teachers' instructional features and (2) teachers' personal characteristics.

#### *Teachers' Teaching/Pedagogical Styles*

More than half of the student participants considered EFL teachers' over emphasis on lectures with a mere and strong focus on grammar points to be a major source of quietness within the students. As Margaret said:

*If the teacher does a lot of lectures, the class won't be interesting to me. This is because I would only have fewer chances to speak up. Worse yet, the class will become quiet and every one will easily lose their attention. Sooner or later, some students will be bored and begin to pick up their phones; some will be sleepy.*  
(Margaret)

Kate agreed, maintaining; “If the teacher only gives lectures, the classroom will become mundane and quiet. Then, I’ll feel like not wanting to study but wanting to go to sleep.” Likewise, teachers’ over-emphasis on lectures and grammar points not only silenced Cathy and Nancy but also lowered their attention to the lessons. Cathy explained, “My EFL teacher sits in front of the class and gives lectures; she has no interactions or whatsoever with the students. This silences me. Worse still, my intention of being in a classroom is lessened.” Jennifer concurred, noting, “The teacher’s sitting in front of the class and going through the textbook only silences me.”

In addition, half of the student participants mentioned that the EFL teachers’ exceptional rigorousness toward language accuracy not only pressured students but also propagated students’ silence. Nancy recalled her experiences in an EFL classroom and explained how this drawback contributed to her silence.

*Once, one EFL teacher asked me in English “What are you doing this weekend?” My response to her contained some grammatical errors. She corrected me right away and I was told to repeat her corrected sentence over and over again. I felt terrible and humiliated. From that time onwards, I am worried when speaking English whether I would be making any grammatical errors. If I could, I would sit in class and remain silent throughout. (Nancy)*

June mentioned about the same teacher, stating:

*I remembered one time I couldn’t answer her question correctly. From that one, whenever I made any mistake, she would not only make a poker face but would also criticize me harshly. I learn to keep myself quiet during class. (June)*

Matthew also explained how EFL teachers’ over-emphases on language accuracy could silent students.

*The teachers’ expectation for students to get it ‘right’, to me, would only pressure the students and push them to be more silent than they already have been. Students would not feel confident enough to talk in the classrooms as they are worried that they might make some mistakes and that would upset the teachers. (Matthew)*

Maria’s response not only regurgitated that of Matthew but also highlighted the drawbacks caused by teachers’ obvious focus on language accuracy.

*I would be much more inclined to be silent in a classroom where the teacher heavily emphasizes the importance of language accuracy. If the teacher requires me to speak accurately or to have the so-called ‘correct’ accent, I would not want to speak. I would be worried whether I would be making any mistake and that would upset the teacher. (Maria)*

While these EFL teachers emphasized language accuracy and constantly corrected students’ errors, they, however, made errors from time to time. Nonetheless, these teachers, as the students noticed, did not want to be corrected especially by the students. Some even became upset when they were. Matthew once mentioned to his teacher of the mistakes she was making; she shunned him and became defensive.

*During the lecture, I realized that what the teacher was teaching was wrong. I then asked her for more explanation. She became upset. Then I tried arguing because I was certain that it was wrong. She then shouted; “No! It is not that way.” Well, then I learn that I should not be arguing with the teacher. (Matthew)*

### **Teachers’ Personal Characteristics**

Another teacher-related factor the student participants indicated as a cause for students’ quietness in the EFL classrooms was teachers’ personal characteristics. These personal traits included being critical, unfair, and bad-tempered, among many others. EFL teachers’ heavy criticisms could initiate students’ silence. Worse yet, they could bring about anxiety and



depression in students. Matthew's EFL teacher in his first semester at *Essence University* was critical. Her heavy criticisms depressed *Matthew* enough to make him consider leaving the university.

*My EFL teacher of the first semester often criticized me. Her criticisms were always harsh. Oftentimes, I felt discouraged and anxious. I'd like to tell her that I could leave the university if that would make her happy.* (Matthew)

This, however, did not happen to Matthew alone. Matthew told the researchers that one of his classmates had left the university as he became heavily depressed as a result of the teacher's repeated criticisms.

*This didn't only happen to me. It also happened to others. One of my classmates had left the university as he had been repeatedly criticized by the teacher. He's also developed a major depressive disorder.* (Matthew)

Because of continual humiliation from EFL teachers, June was discouraged and often questioned about her English language proficiencies. As a consequence, she preferred to remain silent in her EFL class.

*When I was young, I was told by my EFL teacher to never speak English because my English was poor. Worse yet, she kept complaining about our performances. 'Why are you guys so stupid? It's very easy.' I felt discouraged and I doubted myself whether I was really that bad. I had no desire to speak up in the class. And I still do.* (June)

Kim's response resonated those of the other students here. In her EFL class, Kim was mostly silent as:

*The teacher always scolded me whenever I try to say something. 'No! You can't use it like that!' 'No! You misunderstand the whole point!' 'No! The question doesn't mean that!'* (Kim)

Students' silence could also be attributed to EFL teachers' being unfair and ill-tempered. Maria disliked EFL teachers who treated students unfairly. Some teachers favored students with good language proficiencies but ignored others. This brought about silence especially in those students being ignored. Speaking from her own experience as a student in an EFL classroom, Maria explained:

*There are many EFL teachers who interact only with students with higher language proficiencies. These teachers simply pay no attention to students who fall behind because their language proficiencies are not as good. Because of this, the students who are left behind choose to remain quiet or speak as little as they could.* (Maria)

The same student further concluded,

*Teachers should give students equal chances to speak up, not just giving particular groups of students more chances than others.* (Maria)

The association between EFL teachers' unfairness and students' silence was also echoed in another two students' own interview responses. Both *Catherine* and *Kate* admitted that they mostly kept silent during classes as their teacher evidently displayed her favoritism of certain students during her teaching. Catherine complained,

*My EFL teacher often compares me with other classmates of mine. Apparently, my ability to learn English is lower than my classmates. Her complaints pushed me to be as silent as possible in the class.* (Catherine)

Jennifer felt insulted, became anxious, and preferred to be silent when her EFL teacher compared her to students from other classes.

*My EFL teacher is disappointed with our performances. She keeps comparing my classmates and me with students from other classes and complains about our low English language proficiencies. "Why can't you guys pass the exam?" This has*

*become a big insult to me and my classmates. As a result, we hardly say anything in the class. (Jennifer)*

EFL teachers' ill temper could, as two students added, raise silence within students. In general, Nancy explained how ill-tempered EFL teachers could pressure students to remain silent in the classrooms.

*Some teachers walk into the classrooms with frustration and it is clear from the get go that everything would only annoy them more. When students see that, they'd prefer to remain silent and speak as little as possible. This is because they don't want to get into any trouble afterward. (Nancy)*

Cathy's experiences with her ill-tempered EFL teacher were not pleasant; she was oftentimes shunned as well as yelled at by the teacher. As a consequence, she chose to keep silent during the class time.

*My teacher often has an ill-temper. In class, she grumbles and scolds me. This makes me feel bad so I'd rather say nothing in the class. This also happens to a lot of my classmates. (Cathy)*

### ***Themselves and their Classmates***

The researchers' analysis of their data captured another factor contributing to students' silence in an EFL classroom. That is, students' perceptions of themselves and their classmates. These perceptions included students' lack of English language proficiency, lack of confidence, their personal traits, and the characteristics of their classmates.

Interestingly, responses from half of the participants (June, Maria, Nancy, Catherine, and Margaret) demonstrated an interrelation between lack of language proficiency, lack of confidence, and students' personal traits (i.e., shyness and embarrassment). That is, the poorer students thought their English language proficiency was, the less confident they were; the more withdrawn and introverted they were; and the more silent they would be. As June said:

*I don't really want to talk in my EFL class. My English is poor. I often feel terrible as I most of the time do not understand what my teacher says in the classroom. (June)*

The thoughts of speaking English in the classroom startled Maria as she was not proficient enough in English.

*Whenever I need to speak English, I feel uneasy and rather embarrassed. I ain't sure if my English is either correct or understandable. I often mix up the word order; my English sentences are also broken. I hardly speak during the EFL lessons. (Maria)*

Similarly, Nancy added,

*I don't dare speak up in the class as my English is rather weak. I don't know much vocabulary. I am very afraid that I would embarrass myself and other students would laugh at me. (Nancy)*

Catherine's low confidence resulted from, she believed, her difficulty in English pronunciation.

*I love to speak English. However, I do have a huge problem with English pronunciation. Most of the time, I am unable to pronounce those English words clearly. And some words are very difficult to pronounce. This hugely lowers my confidence and makes me anxious to speak English in the classroom. (Catherine)*

Margaret claimed that her silence came from her poor listening skills.

*My listening skills are not that good. Most of the time, I couldn't follow what people are saying especially if they speak really fast. I would never ever think about asking them to repeat themselves because I am afraid that I would upset them even more. So, I choose to keep silent. (Margaret)*

Apart from lack of proficiency, confidence, and students' personal traits, characteristics of students' classmates also played a role. Classmates' characteristics such as unfriendly, judgmental, inactive, and overconfident could pressure students to become silent in the EFL classrooms. Half of the student participants noted that they might be reluctant to speak in the EFL classrooms for their classmates were too critical of their English. Catherine, Kathy, June, Kate, and Margaret were bullied by their classmates when they spoke English in their classrooms. Catherine and Kathy recalled their experiences of being bullied when they were in high schools. Catherine was bullied by some students with stronger English language proficiencies.

*When I was in high school, I was selected to represent the school for an English speech contest. While I was practicing for the contest, some students laughed at and strongly criticized my mispronunciation. I lost my confidence and didn't want to speak English ever again. (Catherine)*

Insensitive criticisms from Kate's high school classmates also lowered her confidence in English speaking.

*When I was in high school, my classmates harshly criticized me when I spoke English. This lowered my confidence as I am even now not sure of my English skills. (Kate)*

The other three students had been a subject of bullying in their current university English class. June's classmates often laughed at her whenever she made any mistakes. This drove her to become more silent in her EFL class.

*When I say something wrong, my classmates laugh at me. This is what Thai people normally do and it upsets me a lot. Now I don't talk much in the class. (June)*

Both Kate and Margaret complained about being criticized as a "know-it-all" when they spoke English in their classes. As Margaret said:

*Now, I am reluctant to speak English in my classroom. My classmates gossiped about me for wanting to 'show off' my English as I used to speak English with them all the time in the class. I don't do that anymore. Now I just sit and listen. (Margaret)*

Similarly, Kate was bullied by her classmates.

*When I try to pronounce the English words correctly, some of my classmates would make sarcastic comments like, "Wow, you have such a perfect accent." Or they would say something like, "Hey, gal! This is Thailand! And I am Thai. Go to America if you want to talk like that." So, I speak less and less English as I am afraid that they'd make fun at me. (Kate)*

### **Subject Matter**

This group of student participants further explained how subject matter was accounted for their silence in the EFL classrooms. Their responses were centralized around four issues; i.e., (1) lack of interest, (2) lack of knowledge, (3) difficulty of contents, and (4) repeated grammatical points. Kate explained how the impracticality of some topics affected her interest, resulting in her silence:

*I find some topics impractical in real life and I generally lose my interest. For example, there are conversations in the textbook about people having an argument on buying trees. Then, there are more arguments on different topics. I don't think this makes any sense. What could I learn from these arguments? The more interest I lose, the more I tend to be silent in the classroom. (Kate)*

Matthew noted that his lack of knowledge in the culture of the target language reinforced his silence in the classroom.

*In some topics, especially exotic cultures of the English-speaking countries, I have no idea to share or to discuss during the lessons. As I don't know about these enough, I don't think I can either question or criticize them. I don't see any advantages from these discussions. (Matthew)*

Similarly, Maria shared:

*When I come across any contents that I have no understanding of, I would remain silent as I have nothing to talk about. I can't make any contribution to the discussion. (Maria)*

Nancy added:

*When I come across any contents that I neither am interested in nor have any knowledge of, I would keep quiet. There was one time that the EFL teacher required us to read one article about medical technology for a class discussion. Not the article was too difficult to read but it also contained many technical terms in the medical field. None of us could understand the article. So we all sat in silence; nobody said anything. (Nancy)*

Another student participant, Jennifer, concluded:

*If the topic doesn't meet my interest, I will shut myself. I don't see any needs in pursuing something that I have no interest in. (Jennifer)*

Teaching content with a heavy focus on linguistic variables such as grammar points was another reason that promoted silence among students in the EFL classrooms. Kim admitted that grammar was important; however, EFL teachers did not necessarily repeat the same grammar points. Worse yet, teachers' mere focus on grammar points discouraged students from wanting to speak in the classrooms. In her own words:

*I think that grammatical content is important. However, I feel like most of the lessons focus on the same grammatical points over and over again. I honestly feel bored having to study all these grammar points. And they eventually stop me from speaking up in the class. (Kim)*

Maria had the same opinion toward the repeated grammatical content in her textbook.

*I don't find any difference between the contents in my textbook. They are what I did when I was in Grade 7. Oftentimes, I feel bored having to study what I've already known over and over again. (Maria)*

Similarly, Cathy complained how the repetitive grammar points in her textbook not only lessened her interest in English but also reduced her desire to speak in her EFL class.

*I dislike especially the grammar parts in my textbook. They are nothing new; I had been through them since my high school. I feel like; "Oh! Do I have to study them again for real?" This is probably I rarely speak up in the class. Most of the time, I would either sit in silence or do something else. (Cathy)*

### **Classroom Environment**

More than quite a few student participants cited class size and class time as reasons for their silence in the EFL classrooms. Half of the student participants admitted that the large the class size, the quieter they would be. Catherine explained:

*If the class has far too many students, I will not dare to speak up at all. I would be OK with a class with fewer students. (Catherine)*

Kate drew a connection between the class size, her confidence, and her becoming silent. That is, the more students, the less confident she became, and the more silent she would be.

*The class with fewer classmates increases my confidence to speak up and to share ideas with others. But if the class has far too many students, my confidence will drop and I would probably be more silent. (Kate)*

Margaret's response was similar to those of Catherine and Kate. That is, the larger number of students pressured her to be more silent.

*If there are too many students in the classroom, I will not dare to speak English that much. However, if the class has fewer students, my confidence in English would increase and I would speak more.* (Margaret)

Matthew also became quiet in the large classroom with too many classmates. Specifically, his shyness and his awkwardness made him feel uncomfortable to share his opinions and ideas in the large classroom.

*I prefer a class with fewer classmates. This is because I'd feel more comfortable as I don't feel like being watched all the time. Worse yet, I fear other students would judge my English and they would laugh at my mistakes. I don't want to make a fool of myself in front of a big crowd.* (Matthew)

Succinctly, June replied:

*The larger the classroom, the more silent I would be. Speaking up in a large classroom scares me.* (June)

Class time also determined students' silence in the EFL classrooms. Cathy disliked the late afternoon EFL class. She was tired from other earlier classes and would rather be reluctant to share either ideas or opinions in the classroom.

*I feel too tired to have a class in the late afternoon especially on my tough Tuesday. On Tuesday, my timetable starts at 8:30 am and finishes at 5:30 pm with only one hour lunch break. My English class is from 3:30 to 5:30 pm. It is almost at the end of the day!!! I rarely have any energy left to do anything in the English class, let alone speaking up.* (Cathy)

Nor did Kate like the late afternoon EFL class. She complained:

*I'm pretty much dead. I am too tired to do anything. It's not just me. I look around and most of my classmates would be either sleeping or half-sleeping. The class is very quiet.* (Kate)

In sum, what made the students silent were: 1) the teachers' teaching with the over emphasis on lectures with a mere and strong focus on grammar points. Such focus lowered students' attention to the lessons and their confidence, pressured them, and propagated their silence. The students even become quieter when the teachers made mistakes because the teachers did not accept comments on their mistakes. 2) Teachers' personal traits. The teachers' continual humiliation discouraged and lowered students' confidence. Teachers' favor of students with good language proficiency made students feel being ignored, and teachers' ill-temper pressured the students to choose to stay quiet. 3) Students' perceptions of themselves. Students' personal traits, and their lack of English language proficiency and confidence were found to interrelate. In other words, the perception of their low level of language proficiency led to their low confidence; and the perception of themselves being withdrawn and introverted made them become silent. 4) Characteristics of students' classmates. Students' experiences with classmates' bullying, strong and insensitive criticisms stopped them to speak. 5) Subject matter. When the student participants lacked interest in the materials due to the irrelevance of the topic to life, lacked knowledge of content and culture of the target language, did not understand the materials because of the difficulty, and became bored with the repetition of the same grammar points, they had no desire to speak.

## **What Happened in the Reality of the Classrooms?**

### ***The Silence in EFL Classrooms***

Data from the classes observed were found to accurately reflect the students' voices gathered from the interview data. The teachers from both classes were observed to adhere closely to their assigned syllabus and teaching materials, but rarely created real interaction

between themselves and the students and among the students themselves. In one of the classes, the teacher created short talk with the students at the beginning of the class, but the real communication ended once the teacher started the lesson, focusing on grammar. During that class, even though one of the teachers organized group activities, the activities were limited to just students sitting in groups working together to complete grammar or reading exercises in the textbooks. Evidence also showed how both teachers strictly followed pages of the textbook and put emphasis on grammar instruction. In the other class, the teacher even spent time translating reading texts and spent most of the time talking. The interaction in one class took place only when the students were called to answer questions from the exercises, and in the other class when the teacher talked to each group during group work. The observations of these two classes are reported as follows.

*Class A* had approximately 65 students. Seats were lined up in rows; a teacher's desk was in one corner of the classroom; and the classroom was equipped with a computer, a screen, a projector, and a whiteboard. The students seated themselves in rows facing the whiteboard; the teacher usually stood in the middle of the classroom. As soon as the class began, the teacher asked the students to open the textbook and turn to the page where they had left off from the previous class. Typically, she dove into the textbook and explained the required grammar structures in Thai. After that, she assigned the students to complete the exercises in the textbook. Then she went over the exercises with the students by randomly calling on students to answer the questions. The students were assigned to read the reading passage in the textbook and to individually complete the exercise. The teacher went over the reading passage by translating it into Thai. Then she called upon each individual student to answer the exercise in the textbook. Overall, the class was eerily quiet as the students sat in silence but the teacher was the only one talking. Interactions between the teacher and the students were rare; so were they among the students. During the class, the students were frequently asked to complete seatwork exercises and to answer teacher's questions. There was no evidence of teacher's uses of any classroom activities to promote actual communication within the classroom.

The size of *Class B* was similar to *Class A*. There were approximately 60 students in the class. *Class B* was similarly arranged; seats were in rows; a teacher's desk stood in the left-hand corner; and the class was equipped with a computer, a projector, and a rolled-down screen. Unlike the teacher in *Class A*, the teacher of *Class B* started her teaching with a small conversation with the students by asking the students some questions such as "How are you doing?" or "How has your day been?" A couple of students not only responded but also asked the teacher about how her day had been. After all the students had seated, the teacher assigned the students to complete the grammatical exercises in the textbook. After that, she went over those exercises with the students by asking the students to check their answers with the answers she projected on the screen. Then the teacher asked the students to form groups of five and read and completed the reading exercise. During this, the teacher walked around the classroom and talked with each student group. She went over the exercise with the students by randomly calling on students to answer the questions provided in the textbook. Then she assigned the students to work within their groups and wrote new endings for the story they had read. Each group then was asked to share its ending with the class. Notably different in *Class B* were teacher's attempts to generate interactions within the classroom. Though *Class B* was not as silent as *Class A*, interactions between the teacher and the students and among the students themselves were rather limited.

## Conclusion

This study indicates reasons for students' silence in an EFL classroom. In essence, the findings reported in this study offer evidence of the interdependence of the four commonplaces; i.e., teachers, students, subject matter, and environment) (Schwab, 1969, 1971, 1973, and

1983). Equally importantly, it portrays the dynamics of the three premises of student voice. Once undertaken together, these premises construct “unique perspectives on learning, teaching, and schooling,” which, in turn, could be used to “actively shape their education.” (Cook-Sather, 2006, pp. 359-360).

In this study, students’ silence in an EFL classroom was associated with EFL teachers, to a great extent. The participants highlighted the interplay of teachers’ teaching and pedagogical styles (e.g., constantly correcting errors and giving lectures) and their personal characteristics (e.g., being too critical, unfair, and ill-tempered) as key determinants of their being silent in the classroom. Students’ silence in an EFL classroom was also attributed to students’ perceptions of themselves and their colleagues. Some students were silent in the classrooms because they were shy and unconfident. Bullying among students also related to students’ silence in the classrooms. In addition, students were more reluctant to participate orally in classrooms unless they found the subject matter interesting, up-to-date, in accordance with their needs, and beneficial for their future career. A classroom environment also drove silence among students in an EFL classroom. Some students chose to remain silent in a large size classroom; and class time also affected students’ silence.

The findings of this study are in line with earlier research on students’ silence in Thai EFL classrooms which has shown culture, teachers, interest, English language proficiencies, confidence, and classroom environment, to name only a few as key elements in driving students to remain silent in the EFL classrooms (Karnchanachari, 2019; Pattapong, 2015; Rungwarapong, 2019; and Suvongse & Chanyoo, 2019). Moreover, they also acknowledge the mutual influence of anxiety and silence that might hinder students’ willingness (Akkakoson, 2016; Boonyaparakob, Puntai, & Ponata, 2015; and Chinpakdee, 2015).

The findings of this study might have only scratched the surface of student voice on their reasons for being silent in an EFL classroom. It is important for researchers to continue to seek for a plural understanding of students’ silence in an EFL classroom particularly in Asia in which student voice has received too little attention (Murphey, Falout, Elwood, & Hood, 2009). This is because the factors that cause silence may constantly change for individuals depending on how students are shaped or re-shaped by their existing contexts. As Hooks (1994) warned, “the engaged voice must never be fixed and absolute but always changing, always evolving in dialogue with a world beyond itself” (p. 11). More importantly, student voice not only could enable partnership in learning between teachers and learners (Fielding, 2004), but also could serve as an enquiry and guiding process for teacher professional development (Commeyras, 1995; Dahl, 1995; Cook-Sather, 2006; Mitra, 2003; Parr & Hawe, 2020; Rodgers, 2006; Schulz, 2003). As Murphey, Falout, Elwood, and Hood (2009) argued:

[I]nviting the voices of students places the onus on teachers to listen and reflect upon their own practices in the classroom and then take intelligent action by making changes as needed. Learning occurs in a social context, and when teachers become co-learners with their students, the classroom becomes a supportive community where teachers and students continually collaborate to learn from each other (pp. 17-18).

### **Competing Interest**

The authors reported no potential conflict of interest.

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#### Appendix I: Interview Questions

1. What is your major? When did you first study English? How important do you think English is nowadays?
2. How often do you use English in your everyday life?
3. What are your English learning experiences? Did you only study English in Thailand? What were your likes and dislikes of English? Why? What do you think of your English language proficiency?
4. Have you ever been abroad? What were your experiences in having to communicate in English?
5. How do you feel when having to speak English in your EFL classroom?
6. Are you confident enough to speak English in your EFL classroom? Have you ever felt anxious when being required to speak English in a classroom? What do you think causes this anxiety?
7. How often do you talk with your EFL teachers in English? What do you think about your EFL teacher?
8. What does your EFL teacher typically do in your EFL classroom? In what way do you think your EFL teacher could influence student silence in a classroom?
9. What do you think about the classmates in your EFL classroom? How often do you talk with your classmates in English?
10. What do you think of your English teaching materials? In what way do you think the content of the materials relate to your being silent in a classroom?
11. What do think of your EFL classroom in general? What sort of classroom environment would foster student silence in an EFL classroom?
12. Is there anything else you'd like to add?