ENGLISH LEARNERS' PERSPECTIVE ON CULTURE AND SILENCE IN AN EFL UNIVERSITY CLASSROOM

Bernadette Santosa and Rizdika Mardiana

Applied English Linguistic Doctoral Program, Atma Jaya Catholic University of Indonesia, Jakarta, Indonesia

ABSTRACT: *So far, studies about silence in EFL classrooms show that there is a correlation between students' silence and their culture (among others King, 2011; Nakane, 2016; Wilang, 2017). Focusing on whether there is a relation between EFL students' cultural identity and silence in the classroom, this study looks at the relation between culture and silence from a different perspective. Forty-nine first-semester EFL university students who took part in this study were asked to fill out a questionnaire about (1) how they identified themselves – whether they tend to be western or eastern in their attitudes – and (2) why they tend to be silent in the EFL classrooms. Using Hofstede's (1970) cultural dimensions and Brown & Levinson's (1987) Management of Face Theory, we found that although 86% of the participants identified themselves as being more western, those who responded to their lecturers' questions by silence are more motivated by eastern values. Although students' silence was indeed related with face wants, this study shows that culture is not a factor which causes the students' silence in the classroom.*

KEYWORDS: Silence, Culture, Face Wants

INTRODUCTION

Silence is a common response when students are asked a question by their teacher, particularly in the eastern culture. This also happens in EFL classrooms. Based on researches which have been done about this, mostly silence is culturally motivated. Nakane (2006), who studied silence in university seminar classes in Australia, found that Japanese university students who were studying in Australia tend to keep silent in class because they do not want to make a mistake and thus be humiliated by it. Wilang (2017), who did a research on visiting Japanese students" silence in Thailand, found that the main reason for silence done by the Japanese students there is because they want to show solidarity with their friends. This reflects one of the eastern values, which is collectivism. In their study done in Ethiopia, Abebe and Deneke (2015) found that students" silence occured because they were shy, not confident and were afraid to make mistakes. The result of those studies show that in addition to culture, students" silence is motivated by face wants.

In her research, Wang (2011) found out that Chinese students in EFL classrooms in China kept quiet because there were cultural differences between the students and their teachers who come from English-speaking countries due to the different teaching methods from the eastern and western culture. Yates and Trang (2012) also found that Vietnamese students" silence happens because of cultural influences besides language proficiency. They explain that Vietnamese students were very aware of the status difference between them and their teachers. Therefore, they tend to keep silent in class when their teacher is present. Li and Jia (2006) see that although East Asian students were known as being reticent in class because of cultural issues, when they are comfortable about the topic and with the context, they will be active participants. In his

dissertation, King (2011) found that in addition to cultural reasons, Japanese students are silent because they were not interested in the discussion, they were thinking about other things and that they prefer listening to talking.

Globalisation has massive impact on the Indonesian younger generation nowadays. Despite being of the eastern culture, they may feel that they are more western. Thus, it is interesting to see whether Indonesian students" silence in the EFL classroom is cultural, and to find out what makes them to silent when they are faced with a question from their lecturer.

So far there has only been one study about this with Indonesian students as participants. This is why it is interesting to study silence in an Indonesian EFL classroom. And study attempts to find out how the students identify themselves: western or eastern; and why they tend to be silent in the EFL classrooms.

In pragmatics, politeness is "a strategy (or series of strategies) employed by a speaker to achieve a variety of goals, such as promoting or maintaining harmonious relations." (Thomas, 2013) Following Goffman (1967), Thomas (2013) explains that "related to politeness theory, 'face' is a person's self-worth or self-image which, in interaction with others. It can be damaged, maintained or enhanced.

One's positive face is one's "desire to be liked, approved of, respected and appreciated by others." (Thomas, 2013), while one's negative face is one's "desire not to be impeded or put upon, to have the freedom to act as one chooses." (Thomas, 2013).

Brown and Levinson (1978) explains that a person's actions can cause others to lose their face or *face threatening*. Insults or expressions of disapproval is seen as a threat to the hearer's positive face. Orders can threaten the hearer's negative face, i.e. his/her desire of freedom to do what s/he likes.

Hofstede (1983) believes that people of different nationalities have different ways of thinking and behaving. He believes that "culture is collective mental programming: it is that part of our conditioning that we share with other members of our nation, region, or group, but not with members of other nation, region or group." Hofstede proposes four dimensions of national culture. They are: individualism versus collectivism, large versus small power distance, strong versus weak uncertainty avoidance, masculinity versus femininity.

Individualism vs. Collectivism is about an individual's relationship with the people around him/her. On the one end, there is this believe that an individual is responsible for his/her own well-being and should prioritize his/her freedom. This is the western culture. On the other end, the eastern culture, there is this very close tie between individuals, not only belonging to the same family.

Power distance refers to "how society deals with inequality." (Hofstede, 1983) Basically, no society is equal. There is always inequality.

In some societies, the people accept uncertainty and are not upset by it. As a result, they tend not to work hard. This type of society also accepts differences more easily. They are more tolerant. This is the weak-uncertainty-avoidance society. The opposite is a society which cannot accept the fact that the future is uncertain. Therefore, they are more anxious, nervous and aggressive. They are the strong-uncertainty-avoidance society. Hofstede terms this *Uncertainty Avoidance*.

Societies which strongly emphasize on and practice social sex role are "masculine". Achievement, performance, making money and anything big are better and important. Therefore, successful people are admired. Whereas a society with "a relatively small social sex role division" is called "feminine" (Hofstede, 1983) They do not like showing off, put relationship between individuals before money, care more about life and the environment and are more helpful to others. Consequently, they favour the underdog and the unfortunate. This is the *Masculinity vs. Feminity* dimension.

METHODOLOGY

Forty-nine of university students took part in this study. They were asked to fill out a questionnaire about (1) how they identified themselves – whether they tend to be western or eastern in their attitudes – and (2) why they tend to be silent in the EFL classrooms.

Hofstede's (1970) dimensions of eastern and western cultures and Brown & Levinson's (1987) Management of Face Theory are used to find out what motivated the students to keep silent in terms of face wants, and if it correlated with their claim that they were more western than eastern or vice versa.

In addition to Hofstede's cultural dimensions and Brown and Levinson's theory on face management, a statistical analysis was done to prove the correlation between silence and culture.

The instrument used in this study was a questionnaire consisting of two parts. The first part is a list of norms and values of both the eastern and western culture. The items were taken from Hofstede's dimensions of eastern and western culture (1970).

In terms of power distance, the students were asked whether they believed they always had to obey their parents, had no freedom to express their ideas and feelings to their parents, and if they believed children had to abide by their parents" rules. The students were also asked whether they believed older people including their teachers were to be respected no matter what and if they preferred the teacher-centred approach. Students who chose these values and norms were considered as ones who identified themselves as being more eastern-cultured.

Concerning uncertainty avoidance, the students were asked to identify whether they believed teachers must have all the answers and if they agreed that conflicts and difference of opinions were not acceptable. According to Hofstede (2011), those values and norms are typical of the Eastern countries.

As for individualism versus collectivism, the students were asked if they believed harmony should always be maintained regardless of the situation, and if they believed the purpose of education is learning to learn (Wang, 2011; Yates and Trang, 2012). The two values and norms show collectivism which is favoured by the less developed and Eastern countries (Hofstede, 2011).

Regarding masculinity versus femininity, students were asked whether they think there should be clearly different social roles between the genders. This belongs to the feminine value and norm (Hofstede, 2011). Therefore, students who chose these values and norms most likely identified themselves for being eastern-cultured.

The second part of the questionnaire contains a list of possible reasons for being silent in classroom which were taken from some previous studies. They are studies done by Vassilopoulos and Konstantinidis (2012), Pranasti (2013) and Wilang (2017).

Possible reasons from Vassilopoulos and Konstantinidis (2012) study are taken because, as Vassilopoulos and Konstantinidis say, the Greek culture is typically portrayed similar to the Indonesian culture namely collectivistic, large power distance, and high-context culture. Some other reasons were taken from the study done by Pranasti (2013) which investigated why Indonesian undergraduate students fell silent in EFL classrooms. Pranasti found that the reasons were students‟ anxiety and fear of losing face. Possible reasons are also taken from Wilang's (2017) study such as not wanting to give the wrong answer and not interested.

Statistical Analysis

Based on the objectives of this study, there were two hypotheses had to be proven. Statistical analysis was used to prove hypotheses which were made by the researcher. In this study, there are two hypotheses:

1. H0: there is no correlation or relationship between cultural values and students' silence

2. H1: there is a correlation or relationship between cultural values with students' silence

The test that was used to analyze this correlation is called the Fisher exact test. This test was applied to substitute the chi-square test which cannot be used to analyze the data because the requirements are not fulfilled (Kim, 2017). The requirements are:

1. There is no cell with a reality frequency value named Actual Count (F0) which is 0 (Zero).

2. If the contingency table form is 2 X 2, then there should be only one cell that has an expected frequency named expected count ("Fh") which is less than 5.

The rules of the Fisher exact test are:

1. Respondents who chose more western cultural values were put in the western category and those who chose more of the eastern cultural values were put in the eastern category. If the value is similar, then they are put in the eastern category. This consideration came from the origin and the mother tongue of the respondent which was eastern.

2. Similar to no. 1, if the respondent did not answer the question, then the reason was categorized to eastern and western with the same rule as no 1.

These rules were made in order to make the data valid to be tested. The indicator was determined by the researchers. The indicators were perceptions of being eastern or western culture.

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

By using Hofstede's (1970) dimensions of eastern and western cultures and Brown & Levinson's (1987) Management of Face Theory, it was found that despite the fact that 86% of the participants identified themselves as being more western, those who responded to their lecturers' questions by silence are more motivated by eastern values. Eighteen out of the forty-

nine participants responded to their lecturers' questions by remaining silent. By keeping silent, they were considered as people who identify themselves as being eastern. From their choices about values, out of the eighteen students, sixteen identify themselves as being more western than eastern. From the students' answers it is discovered that out of eleven possibilities, the mostly chosen reasons for the students' being silent show collectivism and strong uncertainty avoidance. All of these reflect the eastern culture values.

However, some students also chose reasons which reflect the western culture. About 72% of the eighteen students responded to their lecturer's question with silence because they were thinking hard to find the answer and were discussing the answer with a classmate. About 44% of the eighteen students were silent as they were still digesting the material. About 38% of the eighteen students were silent because they were trying to look for the answer in their course book. Those reasons reflect individualism which is typical of the western culture.

In relation to Brown and Levinson's face wants, the students' choice of reasons clearly show that being given a question to answer is face threatening to them. Being asked a question, the students are obliged to answer it. It is similar to an order. And, still according to Brown and Levinson, it restricts the hearers", in this case the students', freedom to do what they like. Here, the teachers asking a question threats the students' negative face.

The fear of giving the wrong answer, one of the reasons which was selected by eight out of the eighteen students, shows that the students see the lecturers' questions as threatening their positive face. A wrong answer will naturally be corrected. This is a form of disapproval. And as Brown and Levison explain, an expression of disapproval will threat one's positive face.

For the students, responding to their lecturers' question by remaining silent is actually not an expression of challenging their authority but because they are actually trying to comply to their lecturers' request. But having the eastern culture as their background, instead of asking for some time to find the answer, the students said nothing.

Questionnaires were given to the students as respondents of this study. There are two kinds of data obtained from this questionnaire. The first data were students' answers related to values and norms that they hold as their principles. The second data were students' answers related to reasons for being silent in classroom. These two kinds of data were analyzed using statistics to prove one of the two hypotheses mentioned in the methodology section.

Chi-square was used first to see the relationship between students' silence and culture. Based on the chi-square test, the data did not satisfy the requirements of the chi-square test. Hence, the Fisher exact test was used to substitute the chi-square test. The test is practically used only in analyzing small samples, although actually this test is also valid for all sample sizes. It assesses the null hypothesis of independence applying hyper-geometric distribution of the numbers in the cells of the table. Many packages provide the results of the Fisher exact test for 2 x 2 contingency tables but not for bigger contingency tables with more rows or column (Kim, 2017). This test is able to give more reliable results. The degree of freedom used in this study was 0.05.

The result of the statistical analysis shows that the p value of the Fisher exact test is 0.612 which is greater than 0.05 (degree of freedom). So, it can be concluded that H0 is rejected and H1 is accepted. This means that there is no relationship between cultural values and students' silence.

This statistical finding showed that the silence of Indonesian students has no relation to culture. This is different from the result of the studies done by Nakane (2006), Wang (2011) and Wilang (2017).

The findings of this research are more in line with Abebe and Deneke (2015), who found that silence had no relation with culture. Instead, silence happened because of students' shyness, fear of losing face, inability to understand concepts, passive learning style they were accustomed to, lack of preparation before coming to class, and their lack of perceived linguistic ability.

CONCLUSION

From the findings and discussion it can be seen that EFL students' response to their teacher's question by silence is not always motivated by culture. It is interesting that despite the fact that all of the participants were Indonesians, based on the choices they made in the questionnaire, most of them were of the opinion that they were more western that eastern. This may have happened because in the past ten years there has been hardly any boundaries at all between nations, and thus, cultures, thanks to the Internet. This, naturally, has a very significant impact to how people all over the world identify themselves with, including their cultural identification. So, a person born and raised in a western country may feel more comfortable with the eastern culture. Likewise, a person born and raised in a country may feel that the western norms and values suit them better.

As an implication of this study, students' silence is not always bad. If it is done appropriately such as when solving a task, digesting the information which has just been explained or trying to find lecturer's question by having discussion with a fellow classmate. This is also stated by Vassilopoulos and Konstantinidis (2012). For further study, it may be contributable if a research on students" silence is conducted by looking at other factors such as socio-culture, psychology, personality, pedagogy, etc.

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