Explaining the Silence in Seminars among Chinese Undergraduate Students in UK Universities

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Abstract: Recently, Britain is becoming the second most popular choice for international students, particularly, the Chinese students make up the largest proportion. The most common issue of Chinese students is silence in classrooms, that lead to negative engagement and academic performance. Four main factors to silence includes language proficiency, language anxiety, accent, and previous learning experience. However, only a few studies explore the impact of the current learning experience on silence. Therefore, this study will address this gap via a small-scale questionnaire study. The results show that language proficiency is the most crucial obstacle for Chinese students to actively engage. Anxiety also contributes to the silence in seminars, while the accent is less relevant. Moreover, the prior learning experience has an impact on students' engagement as expected. These findings disclose some theoretical evidence for UK universities' policymakers.

Keywords: Chinese international students; silence; language proficiency; language anxiety; accent; learning experience.

1. Introduction

The accelerating process of globalisation has substantially increased the scope and complexity of the international activities of universities, and the UK has been the second most popular choice in the world for international students [1], where 331,555 non-UK students coming to the UK to study in the 2020/21 academic year, and Chinese students made up the largest group of these, reaching 99,160 and accounting for 30% of the total [2]. One possible motivating force for this is that studying in British universities will enhance the student's employability and social recognition in the home country [1] In addition, since recruiting international students is essential for bolstering revenue and raising an understanding of diversity as well as multiculturalism, higher education institutions (HEIs) in the UK should not take international students for granted as 'cash cows' [3]. Instead, their educational and cultural experiences have to be carefully valued with appropriate support [3]. Therefore, this research will pay specific attention to Chinese students, since they make up the largest proportion of international students in the UK. The focus here will be on the issue of silence among Chinese students in English-speaking classrooms, which has led them to be frequently depicted as passive learners taking fewer active roles in seminar discussions [4].

2. Literature Review

2.1. Silence

Silence is an absence of sound or failure to communicate [5]. However, the reticence to speak might weaken and hinder students' participation in active learning and multicultural activities, leading to lower psychological engagement and academic performance [3,4]. Then, it might also compromise students' sense of belonging within the classroom, which results in social exclusion [6]. Brown [4]argues that the general non-participation among Chinese students will cause frustration and embarrassment on the part of other students. For example, a student from Germany reported that she felt awkward and distressed for dominating the discussion, which made her feel that she was a bully. Acknowledging these issues, it is worthwhile to seek to understand why Chinese students tend to keep taciturn in English-speaking seminars. Based on the existing literature, four main factors to silence included language proficiency, language anxiety, accent, and previous learning experience are investigated. However, few studies explore the impact of the current learning experience on silence.

2.2. English Language Proficiency

Language difficulties, especially in speaking, constitute possibly the most urgent and significant aspect of Chinese international students' academic and social lives. Indeed, most Chinese students attribute their lack of engagement in class to poor language skills [1,3,4,7]. At the same time, students can also have problems with listening, as they find it demanding to comprehend lecturers and peers, and difficulties with writing, in terms of grammar, accuracy, and criticality [7]. Brown found that even all students enter universities with a minimum IELTS score of 6.0, most of them still develop a sense of disadvantage, anxiety, and even inferiority, particularly due to their poor spoken English[4].

2.3. Language Anxiety

Language anxiety is related to second language performance, including communication apprehension and fear of negative evaluation [8]. Such students are worried about not only understanding others but also expressing their ideas, hindering class discussion [8]. For instance, one interviewee in Brown (2008, p. 80) exclaims[4], 'Oh my God, everything is in English, and I don't know what it all means!!' Students are also afraid of being negatively evaluated by their teachers and peers, compounding the fear of making mistakes [8]. This fear might give rise to silence, and negatively impact students' confidence, self-concept, and performance [8].

2.4. Accent

Accent is an aspect of pronunciation indicating the speaker's individual and social identities Cheung and Sung[9], and Park *et al.* [10]argue that non-native accent is considered the main cause of miscommunication, reducing the intelligibility of what L2 students say. Accent appear to trigger a sense of inferiority, marginalisation, non-acceptance, and exclusion among Chinese students, hindering their participation and engagement in academic contexts[10-12]. Many students report that they would like to purify their accents, as they link it with an image of competent learners and perceive it as a precondition for enhancing engagement[12].

2.5. Previous Learning Experience

Previous learning experience has profound influences on students' English language proficiency [1]. For instance, Chinese students do not previously have an authentic English learning environment

which demands the same vocabulary, pronunciation, writing skills, and thinking process as in the UK (Ramachandran, 2011). Furthermore, the Chinese didactic pedagogy emphasizing grammar tends to neglect the importance of developing students as active speaking agents [13]. Thus, feelings of inadequacy in English prevent Chinese students from participating in seminar discussions [13].

3. Design and Methods

3.1. Sample

This is a small-scale online questionnaire study with 20 closed questions and two open questions conducted at University X in the West Midlands. The questionnaire was written in Chinese via a Chinese computer package called Wen Juan Xing and the link to the questionnaire posted on my Chinese social media platform. It was open for two weeks starting from 8 March 2022, receiving 21 responses.

3.2. Data Analysis

All responses were transferred to a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet for easier analysis. Except for the two open questions, the rest of the closed, multiple choice, and matrix scale questions were all pre-coded into numerical data, allowing quantitative analysis based on a descriptive approach. The frequencies, averages, and distributions were easily spotted to indicate the central tendency [14]. In addition, verbatim data from the open questions which were relevant and meaningful were selected and directly reported, as respondents' original responses are more illuminative without affecting faithfulness [14].

3.3. Ethics

Approval was obtained from the supervisor before distribution of the questionnaire to check whether extra clearance was needed [15]. Then, voluntary informed consent from respondents was obtained at the start of the online questionnaire. It included information about the researcher, the project's title and aim, and the research procedure, in order to ensure participants knew exactly what would happen with transparency[15]. Subsequently, the rights of participants were clarified explicitly, including the rights to withdraw at any point and not to complete certain items in the questionnaire [14]. Additionally, this questionnaire did not require participants to disclose any personal information, e.g. name, contact number, and email address, etc. Therefore, since there were no identifying marks and discourse of information, anonymity and confidentiality could be obtained [14]. Finally, this online questionnaire followed the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). The data collected was carefully stored in my OneDrive on the author's computer with a strong password, and the author will delete them after six months when this work is assessed, without need of further elaboration [16].

4. Findings and Discussions

4.1. Silence

The mean of the question used to examine Chinese international students' self-perception of silence in seminars is 5.43 (from 'very silent' (0) to 'very active' (10)) indicates that on average, participants show some level of engagement in classroom discussion. However, there were five students who rated themselves in the 7-10 range, suggesting that Chinese students' silence cannot be overgeneralised, as it is situation-specific rather than culturally predisposed [6]. The question evaluated students' willingness to engage in seminars, and the mean increased to 7 (0 for 'not at all' and 10 for 'very much'). It shows that salient increase may imply that such reticence was not what

Chinese students desired, and a range of negative feelings like anxiety, isolation, and loss of confidence may result from inabilities to participate in class discussion [6]. In addition, a matrix scale was designed to evaluate the effects of different factors related to silence by asking students to choose from 1 to 10 (0 for 'no impact', 10 for 'strong impact'). The mean of each item was calculated, and the results are shown in Figure 1.
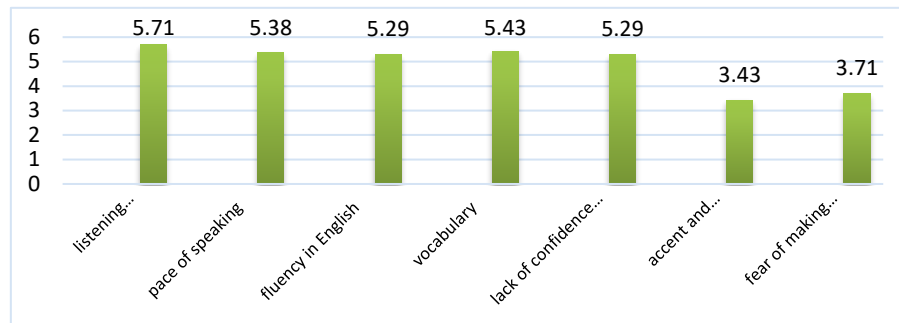

Figure 1: The mean of each item.
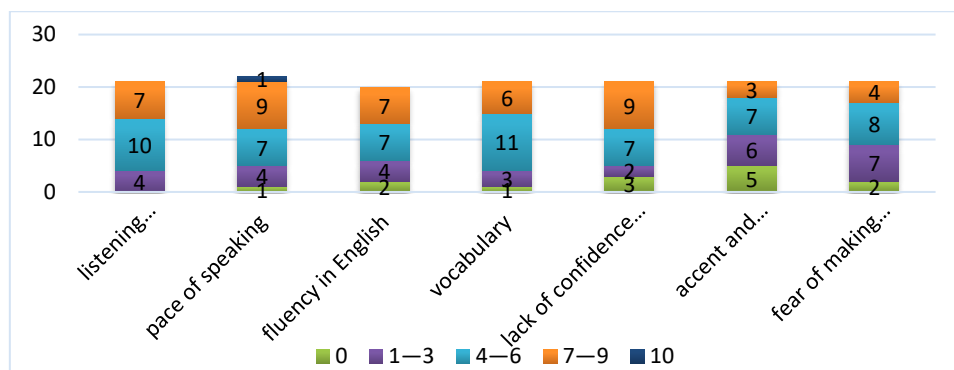
4.2. English Language Proficiency

Figure 2: The number of participants who chose different score range.

As shown in Figure 1 and Figure 2, respondents reported that listening comprehension (M=5.71) and vocabulary (M=5.43) strongly explained Chinese students' silence in seminars. Arguably, insufficient vocabulary could also to some extent explain the problems in listening comprehension and efficiency in class, as 71.43% of the participants stated that they checked the online dictionary more than three times per class, which may cause trouble in following the lecturer and peers. This finding is consistent with the research conducted by Sawir which showed that besides oral communication, problems of understanding and interpreting lecturers' and peers' spoken English could be the main obstacles[13].

Figure 3 and Figure 4 show that there was a disparity between comprehension of academic and of conversational language[13]. It is notable that all respondents said they understood 51% or more of what their tutors said. Nevertheless, it could be extrapolated that Chinese students might find it problematic to apprehend their native-speaker peers. While 15 students reflected that they could follow 51%-75% of what their peers said, only five students (23.81%) could understand most of them. Furthermore, most respondents claimed that peers from English-speaking countries who shared the same cultural background would use slang, which might exclude Chinese international students from active engagement in seminars [3].
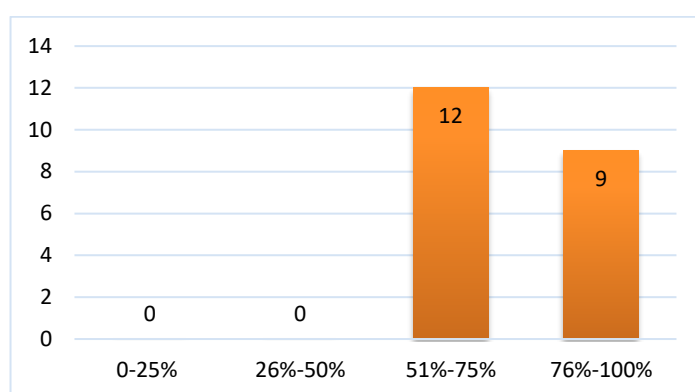
Figure 3: The fraction that students report understand from what their tutors tell them in seminars.
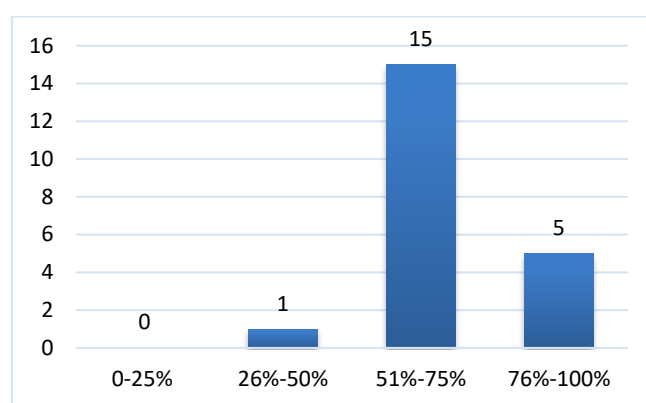

Figure 4: How well students understand their native-speaker peers in seminars.

4.3. Language Anxiety

According to respondents, the fear of making grammatical mistakes (M=3.71) was not a important reason for students' silence in class, which is in contrast with the findings of Sawir[13], according to which grammar awareness was a significant barrier to active participation. Students' self-perceived fluency (M=5.29) and confidence (M=5.29) in English might be possible factors to explain their avoidance behaviour in seminars, though they are not as solid as in the study implemented by Cheng and Erben [8]. Besides, nine participants stated that they never or seldom felt anxious about their language abilities (from 0 for 'never' to 10 for 'always'), while the rest chose 5-10, with two students being extremely uneasy and distressed (8-10). Arguably, their consistent and frequent sense of anxiety might negatively affect their motivation and self-efficacy, leading to silence in seminars [8].

4.4. Accent

Accent and pronunciation might not be a salient factor explaining why Chinese students are silent in seminars (M=3.43). In addition, in responding to the dichotomous question 'Do you think accent is relevant to the silence in seminars?', up to 12 respondents answered 'no'. This data is opposed to the findings in previous report [10-12], and probable reasons could be the limited sample size and the fact that accent-related problems are context-based. In other words, although these studies were carried out in an English-speaking country, Australia, it would be problematic to transfer the results to the UK. Besides, concerning about the question 'Have you ever tried to change your accent to help you sound more like the native speakers, and why?', whilst 12 respondents answered 'no', nine answered 'yes'. For those who did not want to purify their accents gave the following explanations:

'I do not think accent is really important as long as others can understand me.'
'I am not a native.'
For those who tried to acquire a native-like accent, they provided reasons such as:
'It's just personal preference I believe, if I learn a new language I desire to speak like natives.'
'I just like copying different accents which is a fun thing to do for me.'

Most of the participating Chinese international students believed that accent was less relevant to classroom silence, as they place more emphasis on intelligibility and show reluctance to lose their local identity [12]. Debatably, some of them still try to get rid of their Chinese-accented English to sound like natives for various reasons. However, the incentive tends to be more related to personal preference rather than associating a native accent with power and superiority [9].

4.5. Previous Learning Experience

Figure 5 shows the types of secondary school the respondents had studied in, and Figure 6 presents the distribution of frequencies of communicating with native-speaker teachers by school type. Students who received the Gaokao-oriented secondary education in China are less likely to have had opportunities to learn English in an authentic language-learning environment (Ramachandran, 2011)[1]. Additionally, this group of students had higher means on items related to dogmatic previous learning experience, quietness in group discussion, avoidance of asking questions, uncritical compliance with teachers' instructions, importance attached to active listening, and note-taking.
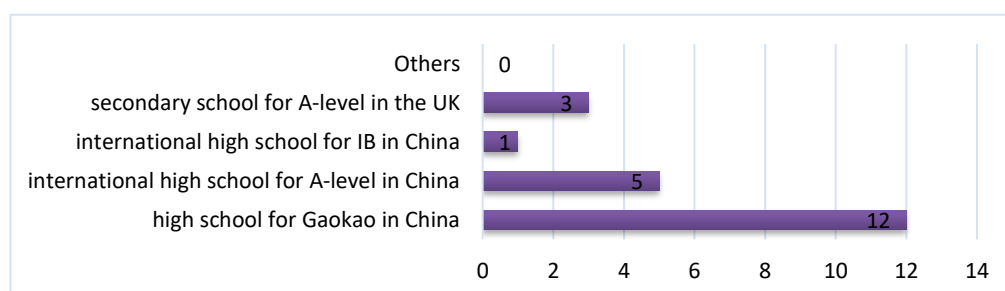

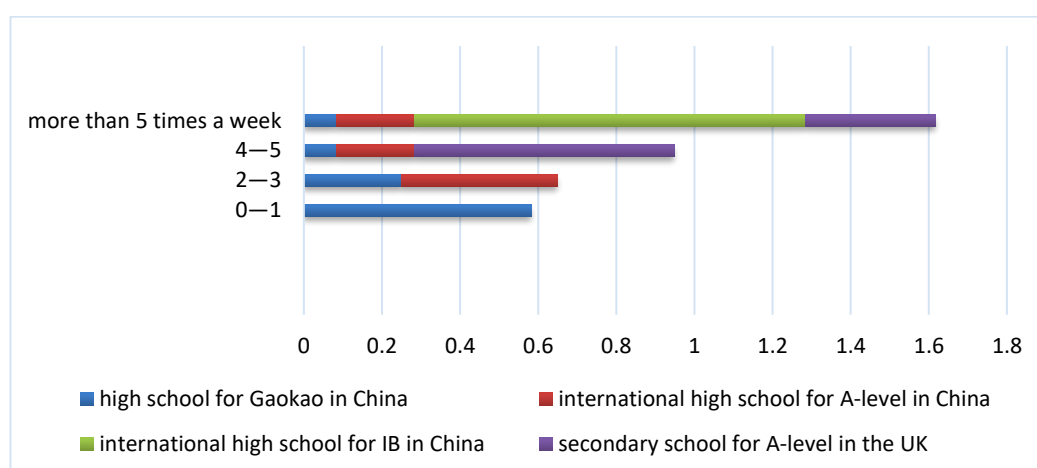Figure 5: The type of school the respondents entered.

Figure 6: Frequencies of communicating with native-speaker teachers by school type.

In addition, this questionnaire also asked participants to give a score for the question about the impact of their previous learning experience on learning habits, ranging from 0 for 'no influence' to 100 for 'very strong influence'. The mean was about 67, indicating that participants attribute some of

their silence to their previous learning experience, during which they tended to be listeners without opportunities to learn English in an authentic context and express themselves vividly [6]. Arguably, students' previous learning experience might explain their difficulties in listening comprehension, vocabulary, and language anxiety [13]. As it shown in Figure 7, Chinese international students who had limited opportunities to communicate with native-speaker teachers in secondary school, are at higher risks of feeling anxious about their language capacities when studying aboard.
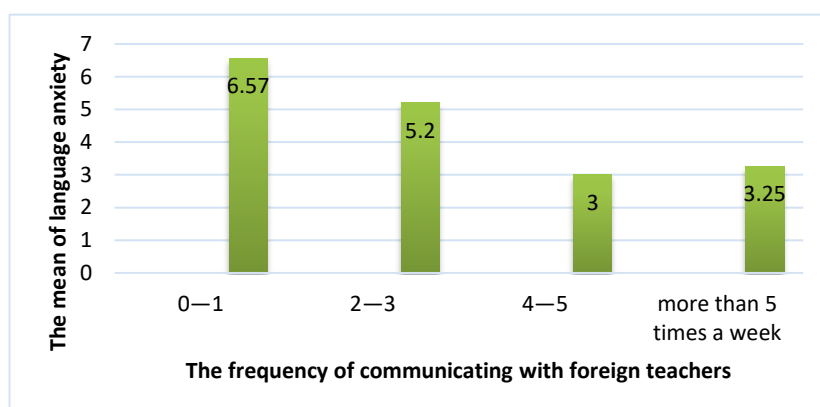

Figure 7: The relationship between communication opportunities and language anxiety.

4.6. Current Learning Experience

This questionnaire also examined Chinese international students' familiarity with the UK context to ascertain whether this was related to their silence. Generally, students familiar with the UK are more likely to actively contribute to the seminars. However, there are some students who have very limited knowledge about the UK showing high engagement in seminars, which indicates that individual differences cannot be ignored.

Another question evaluated whether the curriculum is inclusive to encourage international students' involvement. The results present that the curriculum in University X is overall friendly. However, certain UK-specific modules are demotivating for international students, leading to silence in the classroom. For example, three respondents mentioned the same issue about the policies module, commenting:

'We have a module that mainly discuss English policies of education, which could be totally unfamiliar for me as a Chinese Student.'

'Too many local policies introduced without clearly explaining the content.'

Moreover, one student also pointed out that the idea of work-based placement was a burden, saying:

'I think the idea of work placement is also unfriendly since we don't have any resources and context knowledge.'

Another question was designed to analyze whether there was a space for Chinese students to share their indigenous knowledge and whether they were willing to share. In general, most students noted that they were willing to share Chinese-related knowledge if someone were curious about it, which gave them a sense of belonging. Though the result is mainly positive compared with Zhou *et al*. [6], some participants still reported feeling unpleasant about sharing their ideas related to China, as others showed limited interest.

Finally, around 81% of the participants showed a positive attitude, among them, about 10% saying they extremely enjoyed group work. Nonetheless, one phenomenon is that most of them worked with their Chinese peers, in which they tended to speak Chinese, which prevented multicultural discussion.

Indeed, discussing with and sitting next to co-nationals is one of the most unproductive behaviours of international students, hindering whole-class involvement in a cultural perspective[3].

5.   Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper explored the factors explaining the silence among Chinese undergraduate students in seminars within the UK context. Linguistic factors such as proficiency in the target language and interpretive competence could be the most crucial obstacles to active engagement, which indicates that British universities could provide international students with pre-session and in-session English training. Interestingly, it also seems that cultural factors are also potentially more important than accent. Besides, affective factors like anxiety and lack of confidence and motivation also contribute to the reticence of students in seminars. Moreover, sociocultural and cognitive factors such as prior learning experience and the norm of being a good listener to be a good student exert influences on Chinese students' engagement in classrooms, whether positive or negative. In addition, pedagogical factors involving curriculum and opportunities to share indigenous knowledge also affect international students' willingness and ability to be active.

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Appendix

The questionnaire instrument (English version) could be seen at:
https://www.wjx.cn/vj/tMaNNky.aspx