| **RESEARCH ARTICLE**

Politeness Connotations of Silence in the Jordanian EFL Classroom

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| **ABSTRACT**

This study aims to identify the exact meaning of politeness in silence among Jordanian EFL students. It seeks to elaborate on the implicit meaning of silence between professors and their students in the EFL classroom. Professors and students were interviewed in the English and translation department. Brown & Levinson (1987) politeness theory was adopted to analyze the data. This research found that the professors and their students employed the silence strategy for various purposes. On the one hand, Professor silence was used to stop interruptions, unacceptable answers, and unaccepted behaviors. On the other hand, students' silence was used to show embarrassment, inadequate knowledge, and thinking for answers. This study recommends that future researchers look into the usage of silence among students in their communications.

1. Introduction

It is vital to have everyday conversations among people in all cultures, but the exact meaning of practicing some strategies in the conversation is important to be investigated. Silence is one of the practices that is used obviously by interactants in different cultures, which means that the meaning of using it in every culture is not the same. The specific meanings of silent messages are important to be examined. The main reason for conducting this research is related to the importance of understanding the messages of silence in the EFL classroom.

To have effective communication, the connotation of silence has to be significantly understood. It is part of communication in every society, particularly among Jordanian EFL classroom interactants. There is no doubt that silence has its roles among the interactants. Because of that, the positive and negative meanings of silence have to be elaborated. As is traditionally known, people use words to express their demands and feelings, but sometimes they use silence to express them without words. The non- verbal communication is employed by using silence, which means that it is an important language that has to be investigated. Gendron (2011) revealed that silence is fruitful in making a space within a conversation to reflect empathy and gain greater insight into one's own emotions, thoughts, and actions.

In general, silence cannot be comprehensively understood without understanding context. There are traditional norms and cultural perspectives that control the usage of silence to make it more effective and meaningful within communications. This study concentrates on the contextual meaning of silence among the interlocutors in the Jordanian EFL classroom to look for its exact meaning that is understood by the interlocutors while they communicate with each other in their classrooms.

2. Past studies

Many studies have been conducted on silence and its exact role in different context. Tatar (2005) stated that Turkish international students' learning used silence to perform the function of a face-saving strategy. Its role was to show respect for authority and a means of participation. Furthermore, Japanese students used silence as a teaching strategy and a form of engaged participation Kim et al. (2016). Cultural differences and English communicative competences are often attributed to individual characteristics of the student's silence (Ha and Li 2014). Culture determines behavior, and if someone wishes to interact with a person from a foreign culture, s/he should recognize that non-linguistic and linguistic patterns are significant Hall (1959). Silance practice is related precisely to the user's culture which gives evidence that the meaning of silence is differently employed and understood based on the culture of the interlocutors.

Benedicto, G., & Paschal, M. J. (2022) investigated silence in everyday conversations amongst students: a case of St. Augustine University of Tanzania. They found that silence among interlocutors depends on the context of a conversation in terms of place and its content. Wang, S., & Moskal, M. (2019) revealed what (Morita 2004) found. The findings presented various co-constructed nature of silence. Ambele, E. A., & Boonsuk, Y. (2018) examined silence of Thai students as a face-saving politeness strategy in a multicultural university context. They stated that uncertainty of language proficiency, expected hurting words from interlocutor, and unexpected negative changes in hearer's mood, amongst others, were the main circumstances where Thai students use silence as a face-saving politeness strategy.

Silence as a communication tool can be used to change the verbal intention to non-verbal channel of communication Lehtonen & Sajavaara (1997). (Goffman, 1981; Crown & Feldstein, 1985) explained that the speaker chooses to express him or herself by silence when it is his or her turn to talk. Tannen (1990), Jaworski (1993) and Buddharat et al. (2017) demonstrated how silence is employed to keep the channel of communication open, manage conflict and emotional tension, and lead to or signal an end in communication between groups of people. Brown & Levinson (1987) referred to silence as "Don't do the FTAs". Their model of politeness is principally based on the notion of face as adapted from (Goffman, 1967). They concentrate on the practices that are considered polite by societies based on the circumstances of politeness in their model. Face is socially or interactively based which exists in response to the presence of or interactions with others. It is a specific image we present to others; they prefer to be seen in a certain way by certain groups of people. Therefore, one should be aware of any possible actions that can pose a threat to a person's face. Silance is one of the responses that could be used non- verbally by the interactants which carries a specific meaning. Therefore, this study looked for in-depth understanding of silence among the professors and their students in their classrooms to know the reasons for using it and the role of silence once it is employed by each one of them.

According to Sifianou (1997), Brown & Levinson (1987) discovered the relationship between silence and politeness, but they considered silence as lacking in politeness. Thus, silence is correlated with off-record politeness, "because both positive politeness and negative politeness are usually enacted through the elaboration of redress action" (Sifianou, 1997, p. 73). Sifianou (1997) claims that it is wrong to ascribe silence to the highest degree of "Don't do the FTAs", as silence has many functions in interaction. Silence also manifests positive, negative or off- record politeness (Sifianou, 1997). This study sought to identify that silence can be analyzed politely based on the strategies mentioned in their politeness model.

Pon, Goldstein & Schecter (2003) found that students were reluctant to speak because if they were making mistakes, they feared that their English would be despised by English speaking peers (Canadian students) or by their immigrant Chinese peers as doing "show off". Brick and Louine (1994) stated that Chinese students usually believed that correctness as the most important quality in classroom activities. Therefore, the students are required to answer questions correctly, which means failure is not an option. Cheng (2000) stated the false method, since teachers who use too much control in the classroom can make the students become anxious to learn in the classroom. Hadziosmanovic (2012) mentioned that the benefits of teaching strategies and scaffolding of speaking activities could really decrease the silence in the classroom. The students suggest working with common parts of presentations. In this way, the teachers should be able to provide different techniques challenging students' silence behavior. It is assumed that based on the definition by Nakane (2002) that implied the resistance in classroom participation, students who remain listen in the classroom all the time are subjugated to the term of silence. It proves that students have low classroom participation 14 and therefore they tend to be silent. Furthermore, speaking is vice versa. Student who feels that they have a higher classroom participation rate is considered very active and speak a lot in the classroom.

3. Methodology

To achieve the objectives of this study, the researcher utilized qualitative instruments to collect the data from the professors and students. He utilized interviews and observation. The interviews were held in a suitable place in the faculty of Arts at Jerash university. The observation was held during the researcher's lectures because he is one of the professors in the English and translation department. The observation was made in three courses that the researcher taught last semester. Musante, K., & DeWalt, B. R. (2010) suggested that the observers study what is happening and why; sort out the regular from the irregular activities; look for variation to view the event in its entirety from a variety of viewpoints; look for the negative cases or exceptions; and, when behaviors exemplify the theoretical purposes for the observation, seek similar opportunities for observation and plan systematic observations of those events and behaviors.

Interviews and observations were collected till the saturation of the data repeatedly occurred. Saturation means the repeated result that occur once the researcher collects more data and there is no new information can be collected Hennink, M., Hutter I., & Bailey, A. (2020). Therefore, the researcher collected the data till he reached saturation, and then he stopped collecting more data from the participants. The researcher got permission from the head of English and translation department to collect the data. After that, he requested the informants to sign a consent form to participate in this study. He informed them that the data will be used for the purpose of the study and will not be used for any other purposes.

4. Analysis And Findings

This section was divided based on the connotations of silence employed by the professors and the students. Therefore, the researcher divided the analysis into two sections: Professors' silence connotations and students' silence connotations. Each one of these sections analyzed the examples in detail to adequately reflect their exact meaning. Then, the relationship between the usage of these silence strategies and their meaning is explained based on the politeness perspective. Brown & Levinson (1987) politeness model was used to analyze the politeness connotations based on the context of the interaction between the professors and their students in the classrooms.

A-   Professor silence connotations:
1.   Stopping interruption

While the professors explain the topics to their students in class, sometimes the students interrupt their speeches by talking to their peers. As observed, most of the professors' reactions, as they stated in their responses, were silent for a few seconds in order to show their rejection of the students' behavior. They threatened the faces of the students by using the silence strategy to avoid embarrassing them.

The reactions of the students occurred in two ways. The first way was by using a verbal reaction which was apologizing. They apologize if they interrupt the speech of the professors by saying 'عفوا، اعتذر، أنا اسف' which mean 'I am sorry'. The second way was by using non-verbal reaction. They avoided saying anything which means that they preferred to be silent. Part of them raise one of their hand without saying anything in order to show their understanding of the rejection of the professors for their behaviors.

Part of the professors used this strategy to show that they were surprised once one of the students interrupted the other students while they were speaking to him. He wanted to stop the interruption of the students by being careless about their answers because the students who got permission to speak were talking. Silance is an essential strategy that is used by professors in their classrooms. It carried different meanings based on the situation and the context of the speech. The exact meaning was identified as explained in the above examples based on the context of the speech and the relationship between the interactants. The professors have a power that is over the power of the students. As stated by Al-Natour (2024) The distance between the professors and their students was preserved indirectly as the academic context indirectly required that both parties interact. Thus, the meaning of their silence is different from the silence of the students among each other.

2. Unacceptable Answers

The professors sometimes did not accept the students' answers to their questions. The did not want to threaten the students' face once they used this strategy because they followed the exact meaning of 'do not do FTA' which is mentioned in Brown & Levinson (1987) politeness model. This strategy as they claimed, is used to avoid threats by being silent and avoiding doing anything. As the professors explained in the interviews, they tried to be kind to the students who participated in the lectures and avoided

threatening their faces. This kind of reaction, as they stated, is polite because they want to appreciate the participation of the students, even if they do not answer their questions correctly.

The professors also ensured that they used another non-verbal reaction with the students which was smiling. This reaction emphasizes the positive reaction of the professors to the students' answers. This result establishes another connotation for silence, which is a positive policy strategy that is understood by professors and their students in the EFL classroom. The exact meaning of being silent and integrating this silence with a smile by the professors exhibited that they wanted to make a reaction that was unimpeded by the students. The meaning of silence and smiling represented the positive face want that the professors sought to epitomize.

Particularly, the meaning of the silence and its function could be classified based on the context of the speech and other variables such as relationship, level of imposition, culture and the flow of the speech among the interlocutors. These variables can help to identify the exact meaning of silence. As the examples showed, sometimes, using silence by the professors for the students' answers could be negatively understood. In other situations, the students understood it positively. This result supported the idea that the exact meaning of the speech can be identified based on its context. It is not related only to the words or employing a specific non- verbal action; otherwise, it is related to other variables that can identify the meaning that is comprehensively understood by the interlocutors.

3. Unaccepted behaviors

Part of the students sometimes committed inappropriate behaviors that were unaccepted by their professors. So, some of the professors rejected those behaviors by being silent in order to let them understand that their behaviors were not acceptable. One of these behaviors, as the participant explained, was attending the class after the professor had entered it. They did not talk to them and told them to nonverbally leave the classes by moving their head and eyebrows. They did not even want to talk to them and wanted to show their rejection for doing this behavior in the class.

Another repeated action that was saliently rejected by the professors was using mobile by the students in the lectures. Some students were texting while the professors were speaking. This inappropriate action was evaluated by the professors as impolite behavior. Therefore, they just stopped talking to the students and looked at them directly. This silent strategy in this situation was direct and threatened the face of the students. Once the researcher asked them for the reasons for using this strategy with the students in this situation, they answered that interactants commonly sought to show interest in the speakers in normal interactions. Thus, showing interest in the lectures is more important, especially once the professor is talking. Although silence is utilized to avoid saying anything, the reaction to silence is terrible for the students. Most of the students, as the professors explained, came to their offices after the lecture to apologize or explain the reasons for texting in the lectures. They were concerned to avoid leaving negative images about themselves in front of the professors.

B- Students silence:
1. Embarrassment

Regarding the connotations of silence by the students, one of the reasons for that was embarrassment. The students used the silence strategy once they generally felt that they could be embarrassed if they wrongly reacted. This performance of silence connoted that they were polite and shy when doing an act in class.

Some of the students were embarrassed to reply to simple questions that were not related to the course. So, this kind of silence indicated the positive face want that the students sought to have if they got a situation that required them to have an absolute reaction. Based on the responses of the interviewees, they preferred to be silent even if they knew what they had to say. The reason was related to their shyness in speaking in front of others. This kind of silence was considered an effective way to escape from embarrassment.

One of the interviewees said 'I can answer a lot of the questions and introduce my opinion for different issues that were discussed in the lecture, but I did not like to do that because I was not brave enough to speak in in front of other students'. Other students stated 'as you remember, my professor, I like to come to your office to explain many issues related to the course, but I did not like to discuss them in the class. I preferred to be silent to evade criticism'. These examples represented one of the essential roles of the silence strategy that was used by the students in the class. They obviously told the professors about things in their minds, although they were not speaking. This means that silence is an effective non- verbal language that has to be investigated

to make a full understanding of the different types of silence connotations that are performed by the professors or the students in an academic setting.

2. Inadequate knowledge

This kind of silence was performed by the students once they had incomplete knowledge about the topic that they were talking about it. They preferred to be silent and reply to the professors once they discussed some issues related to their course with them. Inadequate knowledge silence was used while the students were speaking. It was not used before or at the beginning of their speeches. So, this point made this strategy different from the next kind of silence, which is *thinking for answers*.

The participants explained that they used this strategy without thinking about using it while they were speaking. They unconsciously used it once they observed that they had an incomplete knowledge about the topic they talked about it. So, they considered themselves consciously knowing all of the points that they wanted to explain before they started speaking, but unfortunately, they felt surprised once they forgot part of the knowledge that was related to their speech.

Students were shocked by such a situation like this one. They felt that they had forgotten the knowledge, which made them feel sad and kept them silent. This kind of silence was understood positively by the professors because they had many situations in the process of teaching and learning it. Therefore, the professor's reaction was direct, reminding the students or redirecting the question to other students to get the rest of the knowledge that the first students forgot. Female students were the most used to this kind of silence because they felt sad once they suddenly forgot the knowledge. As much research indicates, females try to be prestigious and indirect, so they do not like to have this situation, which makes them embarrassed in front of their peers.

3. Thinking for answers

This kind of silence was used by both male and female students. They use this kind of silence once they do not know the answers to the questions. Their silence was understood meaningfully by the professors, and they did not embarrass them by redirecting the questions to other students in the class. This kind of silence is different from the previous one because it is used by the students from the beginning of their speeches to answer the professor's questions.

Once the interviewees were asked the reasons for using this kind of silence, they mostly answered the same question, which was related to their inability to answer the question. They wanted to save their faces by avoiding answering the question. They knew the professors' reaction by saving their faces. Part of them got silent for a while, then spoke. They said we did not know who could be asked in the class, so once they got the questions from the professors, they tried to remember the answers, and then they spoke. This was another usage of silence in the EFL classroom. They did not want to appear careless. Therefore, they tried to remember the answers and told the professors about it. The sudden question threatened the students' face, but the silence strategy they used helped them to avoid threatening their faces, as they stated in their answers.

4. Conclusion

Silence is speaking, although it is not a verbal act. As the analysis indicated, salience had different meanings, which were specified based on the situation, setting, interlocutors and context. These factors helped to identify the exact meaning of silence. Not all the silent performances had the same connotations because the performers of the silence obviously had an internal intention that was understood by others in a particular context. The analysis showed that the professors used three main kinds of silence which were stopping interruption, unacceptable answers, and unaccepted behaviors. Contrastively, the student's silence was used once they got embarrassed, had inadequate knowledge, and thought for answers. The result exhibited that silence is a precise phenomenon that has to be investigated in different cultures and contexts to explain the various connotations they indicated within the speeches of the interlocutors. Although it is one of the non-verbal language strategies, it has in-depth connotations that have to be explained. The EFL classroom interactions in this study manifested part of the silence connotations among Jordanians. This study insists on the necessity of conducting more research on the meaning of silence in other contexts, such as the silence of superiors with the subordinates among the top management committee members in their meetings at universities, parliaments, political meetings, and companies.

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