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Silence as Presence and Absence: Classroom Critical Discourse Analysis in Saudi Arabia

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Abstract

Silence in educational settings is often perceived as a passive absence of sound, yet it holds complex communicative and pedagogical significance. This study employs Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to examine silence in a Saudi Arabian university-level English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom, exploring its dual nature as both presence and absence. Through qualitative observation, 32 episodes of silence were analyzed, revealing how silence functions as a communicative tool, power dynamic, and cultural indicator. Findings indicate that silence as absence manifests in student withdrawal, resistance, or disengagement, often linked to fear of error, lack of confidence, or hierarchical classroom structures. Conversely, silence as presence reflects active listening, politeness, and cognitive processing, serving as a meaningful pedagogical interaction. The study highlights the nuanced interpretations of silence shaped by cultural norms, power relations, and instructional approaches, challenging conventional assumptions that equate participation solely with verbal engagement. Pedagogical implications suggest that educators should recognize silence as a form of communication, adapt teaching strategies to foster inclusive participation, and leverage silence for reflective learning. The research contributes to critical classroom discourse analysis by reframing silence as a dynamic element in educational interactions, offering insights for Saudi and global EFL contexts. Limitations include cultural subjectivity and observer influence, while future research recommendations advocate for cross-cultural comparisons, longitudinal studies, and teacher training on silence as a pedagogical tool.

Keywords

Silence, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), EFL Classroom, Communication, Pedagogy

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1. Introduction

Silence is often marginalized in educational discourse, frequently perceived as a void or passive absence rather than an active and meaningful presence. However, a closer investigation reveals that silence is not merely the lack of speech; it can function as a powerful communicative tool that reflects the nuanced dynamics of classroom interactions. This study employs a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) framework to explore the multifaceted nature of silence within Saudi university-level English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms. Specifically, it examines how silence operates as both a presence and absence that may signify contemplation, resistance, respect, disengagement, or imbalance in classroom power relations.

While dominant educational paradigms often equate engagement with vocal participation, this research challenges that view by positioning silence as a legitimate and meaningful form of communication. In line with [Mazzei \(2003\)](#), silence can represent more than mere muteness; it can signal the erasure or marginalization of student voices, especially in socioculturally complex learning environments. Similarly, [Assche and Costaglioli \(2011\)](#) emphasize that silence must be understood both literally and metaphorically, as it reflects the underlying structures that govern who speak and who remains unheard.

This investigation draws from Critical Classroom Discourse Analysis (CCDA), an approach grounded in poststructuralist and postcolonial thought, which provides tools to interrogate how power, identity, and ideology are negotiated in classroom discourse ([Kumaravadivelu, 1999](#); [Sadeghi et al., 2011](#)). In this context, silence becomes a site of discursive negotiation, shaped by cultural expectations, institutional norms, and linguistic hierarchies. [Matin \(2017\)](#) further illustrates the potential of CDA in educational settings, showing how textual and nonverbal elements—including silence—can reveal underlying power dynamics in classroom interactions.

Focusing on the Saudi Arabian educational context, this study investigates how student silence is interpreted by educators, what meanings are associated with that silence, and how students may use silence intentionally as a communicative tool in classroom settings. By addressing these interconnected dimensions, the research aims to critically analyze the dual nature of silence in educational contexts and to deepen understanding of its role in shaping pedagogical relationships and learning experiences. Through the lens of critical discourse analysis, the study seeks to contribute to more inclusive, responsive, and culturally grounded classroom practices.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Silence as Presence in Classroom Context

The impact of silence in the classroom is multifaceted, affecting both students and teachers. Classroom silence can lead to feelings of hopelessness among students, influenced by teachers' immediacy ([Juma et al., 2022](#)). Educators have to engage with silence as meaningful and purposeful rather than dismissing it as an omission or absence of empirical materials ([Mazzei, 2003](#)). At the same time, silence can negatively impact an anxious learner's speaking performance, depending on how they perceive their silence and others' evaluations of their behavior ([Maher, 2021](#)).

There is a relationship between silence as absence and exclusion and silence as a communicative act, highlighting the complexity of silence in different contexts ([Schweiger & Tomiak, 2022](#)). Silence in the classroom is a complex phenomenon influenced by various factors such as cultural background, individual characteristics, and contextual influences ([Yashima et al., 2016](#); [Peng et al., 2023](#); [Noman, 2023](#)). Japanese EFL learners, for example, exhibit silence influenced by enduring characteristics, including personality and proficiency, as well as contextual influences, such as other students' reactions and group-level talk-silence patterns ([Yashima et al., 2016](#)). Similarly, cultural distance has been found to increase classroom silence among migrant college students in Shanghai, reflecting a form of protection ([Peng et al., 2023](#)). Furthermore, Chinese undergraduate students in English as a medium of instruction classrooms exhibit silence due to reasons such as fear of losing face, lack of confidence, and fear of negative evaluation ([Noman, 2023](#)).

The cultural context plays a significant role in shaping perceptions and experiences of silence in the classroom. For instance, silence in the teaching and learning context is primarily evaluated in terms of classroom participation among Indian ESL learners ([Lakshmi et al., 2022](#)). The role of teachers in managing classroom silence is crucial. Teacher immediacy has been identified as an essential factor in influencing students' silence and hopelessness ([Juma et al., 2022](#)). Withal, teachers' understanding of classroom processes and interactions contributes to the active construction of the meanings of silence in its classroom context ([Djedid, 2020](#)).

2.2. Silence as Absence in Classroom Context

Silence in the classroom is not merely the absence of noise but can be categorized as notable silence, which refers to the absence of relevant talk (King, 2013). This silence is common in language learning environments and can be frustrating for instructors as it hinders language input and output necessary for learning (Pham, 2023). Furthermore, studies have shown that students' silence in the classroom is influenced by individual characteristics, classroom experience, and learning adjustment despite their opposition to it (Xu et al., 2022). Cultural distance has been found to increase classroom silence among migrant college students, serving as a form of protection (Peng et al., 2023). Additionally, the impact of teachers' immediacy on students' classroom silence has been highlighted, emphasizing the need for a better understanding of the factors influencing students' silence (Juma et al., 2022).

It has been noted that classroom silence encompasses both teachers and students, with teachers' mechanical teaching and students' tendency to avoid asking or answering questions contributing to this phenomenon (Xie et al., 2022). Furthermore, the social practice of silence in intercultural classrooms has been explored, challenging the notion that 'talk' is the privileged form of classroom communication and advocating for the recognition of the pedagogical merits of silence (Wang et al., 2020). By the same token, the concept of silent pedagogy has been introduced, suggesting that structuring teaching through silence rather than talk can be a valuable approach in classroom practice (Ollin, 2008).

The concept of silence has been researched through the prism of student invisibility in the classroom (Alerby & Brown, 2021). Specifically, it was recognized that silence among students usually leads to adverse outcomes, including absenteeism and decreased academic productivity (Peng, 2023). While some of the studies point to the actual impact of students' absence or inability to express their opinions in classrooms, it is critical to investigate how silence affects the learning process from a different perspective.

2.3. Classroom Critical Discourse Analysis

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) applies to the educational field, where it is applied as a methodology and a framework focusing on language use and interaction. CDA can be applied to analyze power dynamics and cultural impact on teaching and learning processes in the context of school (Rachmawati, 2022). Yet, in this case, it is more effective to apply the classroom discourse analysis, which is a part of CDA, since it is more applicable in the analysis of student-teacher interactions (Woodward-Kron & Remedios, 2007). Moreover, critical classroom discourse analysis (CCDA) can be applied as a tool for the analysis of the authority of an educator in the classroom, the position of a student, and the balance of power between them (Sadeghi et al., 2011). In this instance, CCDA can be more applicable and adaptable for the analysis of the relationship dynamics in the classroom by focusing on actual discourse and those involved in it.

Over and above that, the use of CCDA principles proved to be effective in improving meta-discursive reflection for teachers and students, as it could be important in the context of multilingual education (Zaki, 2021). The use of CDA in the classroom was connected to the identification and decrease of discourses that promote intolerance and racism, which shows the ability of this framework to reinforce inclusivity (Sayer et al., 2019). Consequently, the application of CDA or CCDA could be a valuable approach for analyzing classroom interactions, language use, and power dynamics. As evidence showed, its application in classrooms could provide educators with insights into the nature of student-teacher interactions, the impact of power dynamics and culture, as well as the presence of inequality.

3. Methodology

3.1. Discourse Analysis

This study applied a qualitative observational approach to the methodology. Explicitly, critical discourse analysis (CDA), used as a methodological tool and as a lens through which student silence episodes are interpreted. CDA implies that language is not only a method of communication but a means of power and control, which allows this study to focus on the interpretation of silence as the phenomenon of presence or absence (Fan, 2019). In educational settings, educators and students apply language to develop, reinforce, or challenge power dynamics (Sidky, 2017). Since CDA emphasizes the significance of context, the episodes of silence in the classroom are viewed through the prism of meaning. This study follows the "discourse of silence" framework developed by Sulzer (2022), who proposed to apply the descriptions of silence (as presence or absence) by the teachers. The researcher looked at both

the reasons leading to silence and the way silence is manifested in the classroom to determine how these elements position students in the educational context.

In the context of this study, CDA uncovers the often-unspoken ideologies that influence educational practices and students in particular. This approach exposed how certain interactive practices between educators and students lead to silence episodes or how assessment practices reinforce conventional knowledge hierarchies (Ochoa & Pineda, 2008). It is crucial to admit that CDA is used in this study as the interpretive source of student interactive power for the opportunity to determine the discourse within the specific educational setting. CDA allows the detection of how students and teachers can use discourse to challenge existing power dynamics in the classroom and advocate for more equitable educational practices (Maftoon & Shakouri, 2012). This analysis focuses on how learners resist, conform to, or negotiate their presence or absence in the classroom in response to the discursive practices they face.

3.2. Participants and Setting

This study was conducted in the setting of one EFL classroom in a Saudi Arabia university. Lessons attended by the researcher varied, lessons were dedicated to Reading and Writing skills. The classroom consists of 24 female students who learn English as their second language. The students were recruited as the respondents for this observational research. The convenient sampling technique was applied, as the researcher has access to this classroom as an English teacher and department member.

The observed classroom is classified as mixed abilities, ranging from different proficiency levels: intermediate and upper-intermediate. It is crucial to note that most students were at the upper-intermediate level. This in turn allows most of the class to be regularly involved in classroom discussions, also the language used within the lesson is tailored to their level.

The participants agreed to be involved in this study, and informal ethical approval was obtained from the university dean and the English lecturer teaching the class. Students were also informed of the researcher's visit beforehand, which did not cause any issues as the teacher already taught the same class, and anonymity was maintained by not recording names or identifying details.

3.3. Data Collection and Sources

The data was collected with the help of observations of student silence episodes by using CDA as an interpretive tool. The data was collected in several ways, including audio recording and a reflective journal used by the EFL educator. The teacher recorded the data for one educational week (five days). The episodes of silence were recorded with the help of a built-in, existing iPhone recording application. While students were aware that they were recorded, the microphone was located in a way to prevent student distraction. In addition, the researcher used the reflective journal to mark the episodes of silence and its predeceasing event for convenience. The journals were used as a matter of convenience, while the audio recordings of lessons were utilized as the corpus of data for further transcription and interpretation.

As a result of observation, 32 episodes of silence were retrieved during the transcription of auditory data. By using the transcribed data, the episodes were retrieved sporadically without considering the context and content of the episodes. It was critical to ensure the internal validity and avoid bias during the retrieval of the episodes, which resulted in the corpus of data that included the information on the time the episode occurred, the number of students involved, the predeceasing events (e.g., teacher's instructions, Q&A session, individual assignment), the timing of the episode (when it started and when it ended), and the outcome of silence for student and teacher. To simplify the interpretation and data analysis processes, several potential explanations of silence were added to the corpus of data.

3.4. Data Analysis

The transcription of audio data was performed manually. After the data was transcribed, the recursive coding technique was applied by adopting the approach from Sulzer (2022) (Figure 1).

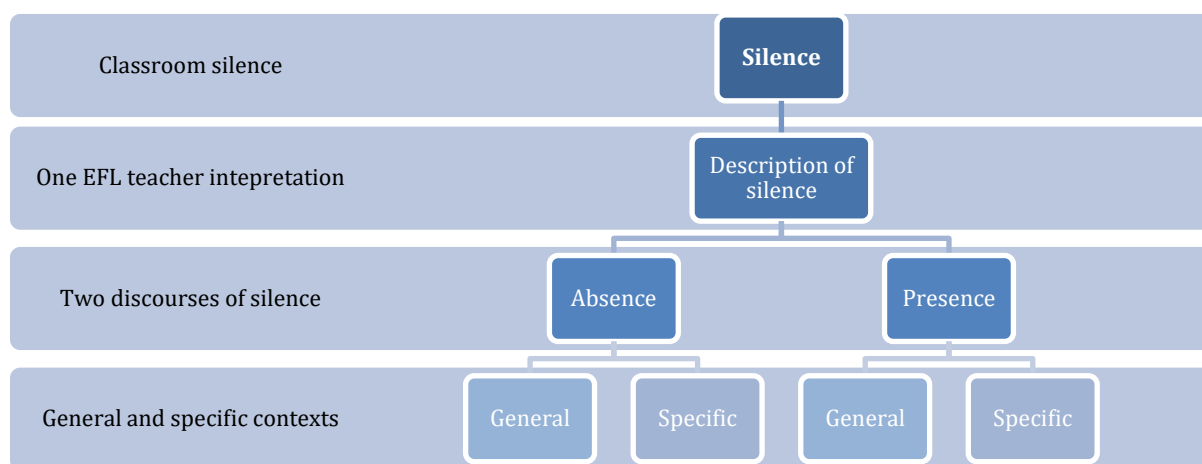


Figure 1. Recursive Coding Technique

Coding was performed by closely reading the transcribed audio material and manually developing and assigning codes to the pieces of data. Precisely, the researcher read the transcribed text and highlighted it with different colors according to the categories of silence (presence – blue highlight; absence – green highlight; general and specific – various hues of blue or green accordingly). Coding was guided by the research questions. For instance, the first step in coding required determining what episodes related to "absence" and "presence." After, these episodes were categorized (coded) as general or specific episodes of presence or absence. The decision of whether to code a particular episode was based on the chosen discourse. The recursive coding technique was applied to retrieve episodes of silence and code them for further interpretation. Figure 1 shows that the episodes of silence were marked, and the descriptions of silence (by the EFL educator) were conducted by using two discourses (absence or presence). Each of these discourses was categorized further to determine if the meaning was specific or general. The coding was performed manually. After the coding was completed, the thematic analysis was applied to retrieve meaning from each episode of silence and interpret it.

The analysis of episodes of silence is conducted by using the three-dimensional framework of CDA developed by Fairclough (1995), which includes description, interpretation, and explanation. The first dimension of description requires a detailed analysis of evidence (information or text), which consists of the examination of linguistic features and how language is used to convey meanings. The description dimension in Fairclough's (1995) framework is closely connected to linguistic analysis. The second dimension of interpretation (discursive practice) explores the processes involved in the production and meaning of the text in a specific context (Fairclough, 1995). This process takes into account the nature of the communicative event, including the roles and relationships of the participants (e.g., teacher, students), the goal of this event, and the medium through which the text is delivered (spoken, unspoken). Nevertheless, this dimension focuses on the intertextuality of the discourse. The third dimension is explanation, which extends the analysis of evidence to the broader social or cultural context where discourse occurs (Fairclough, 1995). At this point, the researcher has to analyze the social structures, power relations, and ideologies that occur within a specific discursive practice.

The thematic analysis was conducted through several steps. The first step was to search for the overarching themes within all episodes to detect how silence exists in the classroom discourse. The second step was the detection of subtopics within each overarching theme. The subtopics were deemed credible if at least three episodes of silence manifested them. After, the examples for each subtopic were retrieved in the form of citations of the characteristics of an episode of silence by providing their characteristics and context. Correspondingly, contextual remarks for the silence episodes are provided by the EFL educator.

4. Results and Discussion

The analysis of the corpus of data retrieved 32 episodes of silence throughout the observational period (five days). Different aspects of discourse and meanings were generated during the course of the analysis, which were initially assigned to two discourses (silence as absence and silence as presence) based on Sulzer (2022) and the approach to CDA developed by Fairclough (1995). The analysis of the episodes of silence is structured by using two of these

frameworks. In addition, thematic analysis is applied to analyze the entire corpus of included data. The participants included in this study are marked with a random letter (e.g., Student A or Student B) when the episodes of silence are described to preserve their anonymity and retain the validity of this study.

4.1. Silence as Absence

Many episodes of silence were retrieved, demonstrating how it can be the protest of absence in the contextual and physical meanings. Overall, the analysis of data showed that 12 episodes of silence can be interpreted through the discourse of absence. The following evidence shows a pattern of using silence as an attempt to avoid any participation in classroom activities, which was manifested by several different students:

Table 1. Silence as Withdrawal

Episode 1 (01/04/2024)	
Teacher	During the last lesson, we discussed a specific literary text that focused on the topic of interaction between parents and children. A, would you remind us about it?
Student A	..... (silence) (Seems confused)
Teacher	A, don't you remember the book?
Student A	..... (Long pause) No
Episode 2 (03/04/2024)	
Teacher	What did we learn about during yesterday's lesson? Student B?
Student B	..... (silence) (looks at the window)
Teacher	B, would you mind answering my question, please?
Student B	(seems distracted) I'm sorry, can I go out to the bathroom?
Teacher	Sure, B. Do you feel sick? Do I need to call a nurse?
Student B	..... (silence) (shakes her head)
Episode 3 (04/04/2024)	
Teacher	We have just watched the video of two people communicating. What do you think about it? Who showed aggressive behavior and why?
Students	..... (silence)
Teacher	There are no wrong answers, and I just want to know what you think. Student D?
Student D	..... (silence) (looks in her textbook, seemingly uncomfortable)
Teacher	Do not be afraid to make a mistake. This lesson is designed for you to practice conversing in English.
Student C	(Seems like she wants to say something) (after a long pause). I think we did not understand what one of the people in the video was saying. Some words were not clear.
Teacher	Alright, let's watch it in several parts.

In each of these cases, students chose not to talk, withdraw from the classroom, show preoccupation with other things, or remain distracted (Table 1). As Fairclough (1995) showed in his three-dimensional model, the actual meaning of the discourse has to be followed by the interpretation of the contextual factors and explanation of the power, social, and cultural relationships in the evidence. In this case, students use silence in the meaning of absence, as they want to withdraw from interacting with the teacher, initiate communication, or answer a direct question. For example, one of the students manifested confusion while trying to remember the materials of the last lesson ("silence...seems confused"), even when considering that the previous lesson was a day before. The desire to avoid the conversation or responsibility of involving in the discussion with the teacher could be explained by different factors, including the lack of interest in the subject matter, a fear of making a mistake, a lack of attention to the materials, not knowing the answer, or a fear of speaking out in general. Specifically, one of the students asked to go to

the toilet immediately after being asked a question to escape the classroom ("I'm sorry, can I go out to the bathroom?").

As several scholars admitted, the power dynamics between the teacher and students are different, with the educator assuming a leadership role and a position of power while students have to follow the instructions (Kumaravadivelu, 1999; Maftoon & Shakouri, 2012; Sadeghi et al., 2011; Sidky, 2017). Such different power dynamics can instill fear in some of the students who use silence to withdraw from the lesson and remain unnoticeable or absent from the discourse of the lesson. In some instances, however, students could not express that they did not understand the material or instruction. For example, in one of the instances, the teacher chose a complex video where the entire classroom was confused ("seems like she wants to say something...after a long pause...I think we did not understand what one of the people in the video was saying").

The cultural effect has to be taken into account as well. In Saudi Arabia's educational sectors, most teachers apply authoritarian or directive approaches to classroom management, which could affect the intention and attempts of students to use silence as their safe escape from making an error or speaking up in front of the classroom (Alamri, 2022). Social status in the classroom and outside of it could potentially affect the use of silence as an absence in the classroom. The Saudi Arabian society has a highly hierarchal structure, which could potentially affect the desire (or absence of one) to speak up aloud in the educational setting.

Another important factor noticed during the analysis of the episodes and reflective journals was students' group or individual behavior, including their non-verbal language, mimics, and attitude. Specifically, when learners are unwilling to answer a teacher's question (given to the entire class), they tend to lower their heads, look in a textbook, or pretend to consult their writing. These are demonstrations of absence, as students showed visual cues that they did not want to be in the classroom at the moment. It is possible to speculate that students either did not understand the material, were afraid to make a mistake, or were fearful to express initiative. Individual students who were too shy to answer were easily detectable in the classroom, as they usually did not meet the teacher's gaze and hid their faces (consciously or subconsciously). However, the group-led silence as absence episodes were more common when the teacher presented new material or when the information was visibly more complex compared to the learners' proficiency in English.

Other episodes of using silence as absence have been demonstrated by some of the students in the attempt to challenge the teacher or a peer by withdrawing from the conversation or demonstratively avoiding it.

Table 2. Silence as Disruption

Episode 4 (02/04/2024)	
Teacher	Let's discuss the text in the form of a mini-debate. Students F and Student I, please debate different opinions presented in the text.
Student F	I think that the character is trying to prove his loyalty to his sister.
Student I	No, you misunderstood the text. I think she did not understand the meaning of words (to the teacher).
Student F	I did not. I won't be debating with you. (Sits down demonstratively).
Teacher	F and I, it is a debate; please accept the opinions of each other and continue.
Student F	..... silence (remains seated, looks away from her adversary)
Student I	..... (Long pause). I won't talk to her either.
Episode 5 (04/04/2024)	
Teacher	We learned several new words today. Could you repeat to us what we learned, Student M?
Student M	No, I do not remember.
Teacher	M, we have just repeated these words in the previous assignment.
Student M	..... (Remains silent)
Teacher	Are you going to remind us of the words, M?
Student M	..... (silence) (shakes her head)

Episode 6 (01/04/2024)	
Student L	(She is visibly sad and sits silently through the entire lesson)
Teacher	L, is something bothering you? Do you have any questions about the lesson?
Student L	..... (silence) (shrugs her shoulders without looking at the teacher)
Episode 7 (05/04/2024)	
Teacher	(Two students had a conflict during the lesson). D and C, please stop arguing and whispering at each other; it is inappropriate.
Student C	..... (turns away from the teacher and another student, looks at the window)
Student E	..... (silence, looks in the textbook angrily)
Teacher	Say you are sorry, both of you.
Students C and E	..... (both are silent and visibly angry)

Conflicts are expected in the classroom. Yet, the silence in these episodes is weaponized by students against their opponents and the teacher ("both are silent and visibly angry ") (Table 2). The refusal to interact is active, yet it is the attempt to withdraw from the discourse and use silence as a means to avoid accountability for the actions. The aggressive withdrawal from the conversation and the use of silence as a method of avoiding responsibility could be the active methods students use to maintain the sense of power that they usually lack in the classroom. Particularly, in one of the episodes, the student chose to be oppositional towards the teacher by using silence as a tool ("silence...shrugs her shoulders without looking at the teacher). As [Rachmawati \(2022\)](#) implied, the attempts to use silence as the means of power could be observed in the discourse with unequal or hierarchal power distribution. However, it is critical to remember that some students tend to be too shy to answer the question (Student: "remains silent" / Teacher: "Are you going to remind us of the words, M?" / "... silence...shakes her head"). In this case, an educator has to remember the students who demonstrate this behavior, as it is usually an ongoing pattern.

In the classroom discourse, students choose to use this approach during the episodes when they need to withdraw from the conversation. Particularly, in the episode where a conflict emerged between two students, both of them used silence as the means of power play ("silence...remains seated, looks away from her opponent/ long pause...I won't talk to her either"). Such attempts to change the power dynamics demonstrate the desire to obtain more autonomy from an educator and the lesson. In this case, the silent discourse in the classroom has to be monitored by an educator closely to ensure that they retain the initiative without usurping the power completely. In the latter case, the disruptive aspects of silence could be more prevalent.

In essence, these seven episodes are vivid examples of how silence is interpreted through the discourse of absence, where students choose to avoid the interaction or answer the question for different reasons. Some of these episodes were somewhat disruptive and required more attention from the educator. Two topics were retrieved from this analysis, showing that silence in the absence of discourse was used as a way of withdrawal from the interaction or as a disruptor to gain power.

4.2. Silence as Presence

Around 20 episodes of silence were labeled and can be interpreted through the discourse of presence. This approach to silence is radically different compared to the examples of episodes presented earlier. The examples of evidence are demonstrated through the episodes 8-14:

Table 3. Silence as Active Listening

Episode 8 (05/04/2024)	
Teacher	D and H, please think about the last time you spent time with your friends. What were the happiest moments during your activity? Please compare your experiences in a short conversation.
Student D	..... (silence) (Thinking)
Student H	Should I start?
Teacher	Sure
Student H	For me, it was the time when two of my friends and their families went to Riyadh season where they had a many restaurants and shops, bowling. We had so much fun there.
Student D	..... (silence) (actively listening)
Teacher	Good H, it sounds like fun. (smiling)
Episode 9 (04/04/2024)	
Teacher	We are going to learn new material today about using Present Perfect in casual conversations.
Students	..... (silence) (actively listening)
Teacher	Could you remember when we usually use Present Perfect?
Student J	Could you please provide an example of a Present Perfect phrase?
Teacher	Sure, "I have been to a shopping mall recently."
Students	..... (silence) (writing down the example)
Episode 10 (03/04/2024)	
Teacher	I am going to show you a video of a short conversation between a native person and a foreigner. You have to write down the differences between them in terms of speech. Explain the grammar structure and stress in the pronunciation of the words.
Students	..... (silence) (actively listening)
Teacher	Have you ever noticed how your language differs from the native speakers? Student C?
Student C	..... (brief moment of silence). Yes, I have an accent.
Teacher	No, your accent is lovely! Who else noticed a difference?
Students K	..... (brief moment of silence) Are there other differences? Or only difference in accents?
Teacher	Yes, let us watch the video and find out.

In this case, the moments of silence represent the student's active presence in the classroom (Table 3). They are visibly active and involved in the interaction with their peers or the teacher ("actively listening," "writing down an example"). They are respectful and attentive to the material or the conversations among them. It is clear that the interaction among students is still ongoing during the moments of silence. For instance, students choose to actively listen to the teacher or their peers and ask additional questions if they need more information about a specific activity. For instance, the student asked, "Are there other differences? Or only difference in accents?" after a short moment of silence, which evidenced her attention on the material and the teacher. Here, learners do not have any intention to maintain power or change the power dynamics. Instead, they are listening and using silence in the form of an activity that provides them with time and resources for involvement in learning or answering the question. Another aspect noticed during these episodes was the visible interest of students in the instructional materials presented in the classroom.

Scholars have recognized the importance of educators engaging students in activities more effectively to ensure that every second of classroom time matters and that silence is used as a presence (Mazzei, 2003). The analyzed episodes confirm the statement that silence is not only the absence of speech; it is the taking of conversation with a specific discourse that contains multiple cues and meanings (Meyer, 2015; Simões, 2018). The analysis of the episodes in

Table 3 showed that students often choose silence as the tool of active listening. However, it is critical to pay more attention to the discourse of silence to distinguish the instances of presence from absence through the analysis of the student's gaze, eye movement ("silence...writing down the example"), and if they look in the eyes of their peers or the teacher. In similar episodes, the students could be trying to withdraw by changing their activity or suddenly involving in something learning-specific, yet unrelated to the current task.

The analysis of the silence episodes used as presence revealed that learners use it as a tool of active listening or involvement in the lesson consciously. For example, they are silent when their peer is answering or a teacher is talking. Students look directly at the person who is speaking at the moment as well as they are listening to the material during the presentations. Silence is a communicative act where teacher interactions with students could show different dissemination of roles (Jenks, 2020; Schweiger & Tomiak, 2022). In the individual manifestations of silence as presence, students actively listened to their peers by nodding or a smile, which emphasized their interest in the material and encouragement of their classmates.

It was noted earlier that when students demonstrated their desire to be absent from the classroom, they were more likely to show it with some non-verbal language cues and facial expressions of their intentions. In these episodes, however, students were more visually alert. For example, learners were looking at the visual aids, met the teacher's gaze, and listened actively to their peers. The group-led behavior was noticed during the episodes of silence as a presence when students were proactively asked questions if they did not understand the material or required an example. During the episodes of such silence, they were looking at the teacher or nodded their heads, showing they understood the assignment. Generally, the visual cues of alertness and active involvement were the vivid demonstration of silence as a presence in the classroom.

Table 4. Silence as Politeness

Episode 11 (01/04/2024)	
Teacher	L and A, please create a conversation about your favorite food. It can be anything: a dessert, a main meal, or a snack you like.
Student L	..... (silence)
Student A	Should I start? (Talking to L)
Student L	... (brief moment of silence) (nods her head)
Teacher	Alright, L, you can start.
Student L	I love ice cream (smiles). My favorite flavors are chocolate and mango.
Student A	..... (silence) (nods her head encouragingly)
Episode 12 (02/04/2024)	
Teacher	We have to talk about holidays. Focus on celebrations here in Saudi Arabia and in other countries. It is your choice whatever countries you choose.
Student N	Can you please provide an example from another country?
Teacher	Sure. For example, Chinese New Year is celebrated differently, even the date of celebration is different compared to other parts of the world. They eat moon cake, dress-up and visit family. They even give out money like how us Muslims do in Eid.
Students	..... (Remain silent)
Teacher	Do you understand the exercise?
Student N	..... (brief silence) (shakes her head)
Episode 13 (04/04/2024)	
Student C	(She is actively listening but not participating in the activities)
Teacher	C, do you want to add something to this conversation?
Student L	..... (silence) (shrugs her shoulders). I do not know, and I need more time to think.
Episode 14 (05/04/2024)	

Teacher	Please open your textbooks on page 85. Student D, please read the instructions for exercise 3.
Students	..... (silence)
Student D	..... (silence, looks in the textbook confused)
Teacher	D, can you see the exercise?
Student D	..... (silence). (Shakes her head)

Here, the use of silence is completely different, as students choose to use silence as presence in the classroom. Students use silence as a means of active listening or expression of politeness. For instance, when a student listened to her peer, she was silent ("brief moment of silence") and encouraged her with non-verbal cues ("nods her head"). Another student used silence by showing the teacher that she did not understand the assignment ("brief silence...shakes her head"). Non-verbal language during moments of silence is important for the educator, as it allows to decode students' attitudes, understanding of the instructions, and perception of the material. Specifically, during one of the episodes, the learner expressed her insecurity about the assignment ("silence...shrugs her shoulders"). In another episode, the student was unable to find the page required for the exercise, leading to the moment of silence ("silence...looks in the textbook confused"). It is important to note that in this case, the student looking in the textbook represents the episode of presence, unlike a similar occasion discussed earlier where students pretended to look in the book as an attempt to escape.

These episodes show how it is essential to interact with students correctly and actively involve them in exciting and engaging assignments. When students are interested in the activities, they choose to be more positive and active during the assignments and use silence as presence. The difference between the episodes showing silence as absence compared to the silence as presence was quite vivid and clear, as students "supported" their manifestations of silence with the evidence of non-verbal language, behavior, and an overall attitude. In the episodes where students demonstrated their presence in the moments of silence, it was clear that they were interested in the material and were more engaged in the lessons. Non-verbal language and visual cues were more profound compared to episodes of absence. For instance, students shrugged their shoulders, nodded or shook their heads, and smiled to demonstrate their engagement in classroom activities and their position in the discourse. In the episodes of silence as absence, the mimic and non-verbal language were less vivid, as the students were trying to avoid contact with the teacher. This aspect is essential for educators to consider when encountering silence in the classroom.

4.3. Implications and Pedagogical Applications

Three research questions were developed to guide this research. The findings showed that student silence can be interpreted in Saudi Arabia classrooms through the discourses of absence and presence, where students use it as a form of interaction. Multiple meanings were retrieved from the evidence collected in this study. Specifically, learners could use silence in their favor to withdraw from the exercises or interaction. They also used silence as a way of providing space for their peers and teachers, as well as following rules of politeness and choosing to listen to the covered material or their peers. As a communicative tool, silence is used as a multifaceted means that provides students with some aspects of autonomy, power, or non-verbal language in the classroom.

The outcomes of this study support the past research conducted in this area. Specifically, it was recognized by [King \(2013\)](#), and [Pham \(2023\)](#) that silence in the classroom is not merely the absence of noise or the behavior that hinders language input, but rather silence can be the discourse that teachers misinterpret or ignore. The implications showed that silence as a discourse includes a wide variety of cues, characteristics, and signs pointing to poorly organized classroom management, overcomplicated material, or, the opposite, a well-developed teaching plan. It was discovered earlier that students' silence in the classroom is affected by their individual characteristics, classroom experience, and learning organization ([Xu et al., 2022](#)). This study supported this idea by showing that students were more likely to be silent if they were shy or did not understand the material. Moreover, the class timing played a vital role, as classes at midday were most engaging for students, unlike courses in the early morning or late afternoon. Contrariwise, they are more likely to be engaged in more interesting and relevant topics, which shows silence as presence.

Additionally, it was recognized the impact of teachers' immediacy on students' classroom silence shows the need for a better understanding of the silence discourse ([Juma et al., 2022](#)). It was noted in this study that on many occasions, the educator does not consciously analyze silence or address it adequately due to its misinterpretation or inability to

address it at once. As a result, many negative situations emerged, showing that the teacher was unprepared to read silence as a discourse. For example, the teacher was prone to interpret silence as the cue of students' rudeness or lack of understanding of the material, while the clear non-verbal cues showed that the student was too shy or confused.

The findings provide valuable implications for teachers and pedagogical practice in general. Teachers should develop a nuanced understanding of silence, recognizing it not just as a lack of speech, but as a complex communicative behavior. This involves interpreting both the 'presence' and 'absence' aspects of silence. The study suggests that certain types of silence (discourse of absence) are indicators of underlying issues in teaching methods or classroom management. Teachers should use these signals to reflect on and adapt their teaching strategies, seeking to engage students more effectively. Although this misunderstanding can be resolved and developed, when teacher is more acquainted with the students, thus addressing their needs and understanding students' personalities. This can be done by creating activities or eliciting questions to help students build knowledge and generate guidance of ideas linking learners to the covered content.

Silent behaviors linked to fear, shyness, or disengagement signals the need for teachers to modify their approach to managing the classroom. This might involve creating a more supportive and inclusive environment that encourages participation and reduces anxiety about making mistakes. Implementing differentiated instruction and active learning strategies can help draw out students who tend to withdraw into silence. This might include using small group discussions, peer-to-peer teaching, and interactive activities that promote a safe space for all voices. Since silence can also be used by students to shift power dynamics in their favor, teachers can harness this aspect to empower students.

Additional to this, allowing moments of silence during discussions or decision-making processes can give students time to form their thoughts and contribute meaningfully. This also enables students to positively reflect on their own productive skills, since prepared material is present for error correction. Along with that, assigning classroom silence time can influence students to express their opinions confidently, especially with productive skills commonly found as a weakness in Saudi learners. This can be exemplified, due to their previous high school experience, where no productive practice was expected. Learners merely had to memorize and were not allowed to express themselves, unless they were using a controlled practice structure that must be followed. Another approach to overcome this hurdle is by educators distancing themselves closer to the students to break their power resilience and encourage active participation by showing students that language production and engagement are required.

The rejection to connect is active, yet it is the attempt to take out from the discourse and usage silence as a means to avoid responsibility for the activities. The hostile withdrawal from the discussion and the use of silence as a technique of staying clear of duty could be the active approaches students use to maintain the feeling of power they usually lack in the classroom. As indicated, the efforts to make use of silence as the means of power might be observed in the discourse with unequal or hierarchal power distribution. In the classroom discourse, learners pick to use this strategy throughout the episodes when they need to take out from the conversation. Educators must address students by explaining the benefits of participating in the classroom and clarifying the classroom is a zone of development. Furthermore, moving between students can endorse and create a level of democracy that meets the comfort zone of the learner. Meanwhile, indirectly pressuring students who choose power resilience of power to conduct the task. As well as support lower-level students or shy students to ask questions and show the educator their answers; this can allow students to be more active in class and resolve anxiety, leading students to participate in class as the teacher prior checked their answers.

Overall, these seven episodes are intense instances of how silence is analyzed through the discourse of absence, where students select to prevent communication or answer the concern for different reasons. A few of these episodes were rather turbulent and called for more attention from the educator. Two topics were retrieved from this analysis, showing that silence in the absence of discourse was used to withdraw from the interaction or as a disruptor to acquire power.

In this case, the minutes of silence represent the learners' energetic presence in the classroom. They show up active and associated with communicating with their peers or the educator. They are considerate and attentive to the product or the discussions among them. It is clear that the interaction among students is still continuous during the minutes of silence. For circumstances, students choose to actively listen to the teacher or their peers and ask additional concerns if they require more details about a detail's activity. Hence, students do not have a purpose to

maintain power or transform the power dynamics. Instead, they are paying attention and utilizing silence in the form of the task that gives them time and resources to be involved in discovering or answering the question.

From a broader perspective, teachers can encourage students to use silence constructively as a tool for deep thinking and reflection. Educators can structure activities that promote silent contemplation or individual problem-solving, helping students develop their independent learning skills. Recognizing that the use and interpretation of silence can vary significantly across cultural contexts, teachers should be culturally sensitive in their interpretation and response to silent behaviors. This involves understanding their students' cultural background and mental, social, or educational illnesses and adapting communication and teaching strategies accordingly. Although this is challenging since teachers can't create material to meet every student's needs or pinpoint students' troubles. Help can be requested from responsible members within the educational sector's administration, such as student counselors. At last, teachers can ask students about their troubles while maintaining comfort and to create goals for students to improve while subsequently attending the class, such as self-confidence, answering out loud or public speaking skills.

Professional development programs for teachers can include training in recognizing and interpreting non-verbal cues such as silence. This can enhance teachers' ability to respond to students' needs effectively and adjust their teaching tactics dynamically. Educators have to share insights and strategies regarding the use of silence in educational settings through workshops and discussion groups. This collaborative approach can lead to a deeper understanding and more innovative methods of addressing classroom silence. Teachers can work on building a classroom atmosphere where students feel comfortable expressing themselves without fear of judgment or error. This involves reinforcing positive feedback and providing multiple communication channels for students to express their thoughts and concerns.

5. Conclusion

This study aimed to determine how student silence is interpreted in Saudi Arabia classrooms by applying CDA. The results showed that student silence can be categorized through the discourses of presence and absence. When students tend to withdraw from the lesson, a specific activity, or an interaction actively or passively, it allows the teacher to recognize how this "absence" of students affects the educational process and their performance. The discourse of absence affects the learning process destructively. Usually, it points to problems in the teaching approach, gaps in the classroom management strategies, potential shyness of learners, a fear of making an error, or disruptive behaviors. At the same time, many silence episodes can be interpreted through the discourse of presence, with students remaining silent when listening to the teacher or their peers, focusing on materials, or investing time in their thinking process. The findings also showed that students use silence to change power dynamics in the classroom (in their favor), and they apply it as a way to remain polite. Silence remains the communication method that instills different meanings, especially when the educator has an opportunity to reflect on it.

Some similarities were observed in the findings. Particularly, students tended to be involved in similar episodes of absence when they did not understand the material or when no one wanted to express initiative. During these episodes, students usually pretended to look in their textbooks or take notes in order to avoid being asked to answer the questions. When students demonstrated presence, they were usually on full alert and looked at the teacher or their peer (who was answering). It became clear that the demonstration of silence as presence or absence can be rooted in the group behaviors of students. At the same time, some differences in silence episodes were observed only in students who usually have either a tendency to demonstrate disruption or are too shy to talk in front of the class. In essence, it became clear that the discourse of silence in a classroom can depend on different factors, from the students' perception of the instructional materials to their personal character traits and behavioral patterns.

6. Limitations

In Saudi Arabian culture, the interpretation of silence can differ significantly from Western contexts. Silence may be valued differently and play a distinct role in communication styles. Misinterpretations by researchers unfamiliar with these nuances can lead to inaccurate conclusions. Given the gender-segregated education system in much of Saudi Arabia, the dynamics of silence could vary significantly between male and female classrooms. These differences might require separate studies or methodologies to ensure accurate representation and interpretation. In addition, researchers' preconceptions and biases can affect how they interpret silence in the classroom. To clarify, the researcher's presence as their teachers or as colleagues might have influenced the participants to act in an unusual

way or unordinary behavior in a usual classroom setting. This additionally leads to subjectivity in the analysis at times.

Therefore, understanding and mitigating these biases is crucial for objective analysis. Deciding what constitutes silence (e.g., pauses in speech, non-verbal periods) and how long it lasts requires clear and consistent criteria that might be difficult to standardize across different classrooms. Consistency in observational conditions over time can be challenging to maintain. Changes in classroom dynamics, curriculum, or even student compositions across terms can impact the role and nature of silence. The specific educational, social, and political context of Saudi Arabia might limit the generalizability of findings to other contexts. What is observed in Saudi classrooms might not hold true in other cultural or educational environments. Silence is influenced by many factors – cultural, social, psychological, and pedagogical. Disentangling these influences to attribute specific roles or effects to silence can be complex and might lead to oversimplified conclusions.

7. Recommendations

Future studies should involve local researchers or consultants who are deeply familiar with Saudi cultural norms and educational practices. This collaboration could help ensure that the interpretation of silence and its implications are contextually accurate and culturally sensitive. Expanding research to various educational settings within Saudi Arabia, such as different age groups, regions, and types of universities/schools (public vs. private), could provide a more comprehensive view of how silence functions across diverse contexts. Conducting longitudinal studies could provide insights into how the role and interpretation of silence evolves over time, both within individual academic years and across different stages of educational development.

To better understand the uniqueness and universality of findings, comparative studies involving Saudi Arabian classrooms and those from other cultural backgrounds could be beneficial. Such studies might explore how cultural, social, and educational variables influence the use and perception of silence. Future research should consider developing and employing innovative methodologies that minimize observer influence and improve the accuracy of measuring silence. Techniques such as unobtrusive observation, the use of technology for recording and analyzing interactions, and self-reported measures from students and teachers could be explored. Integrating insights from psychology, sociology, and anthropology could enrich the understanding of silence in classrooms. This interdisciplinary approach would allow researchers to examine the psychological impacts of silence, its social functions, and its cultural significance in depth. Research could also explore the development of training programs for teachers that focus on the strategic use of silence as a pedagogical tool. Understanding when and how to utilize silence effectively could enhance teaching practices and student engagement.

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