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Digital Silence and Linguistic Invisibility: Muted Participation in Online Learning

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When universities across Malaysia shifted their classes online during the COVID-19 pandemic, educators and students faced a new reality, which is teaching and learning through screens. Through these events, something else quietly emerged in those virtual classrooms: silence. It was not just any occasional quietness but a persistent absence of voices. A few students engaged in class discussions, and none unmuted their microphones or turned off their cameras. At first glance, it may appear to be disengagement, but for many of us who teach, observe, and reflect, we have realised that this 'digital silence' is not just about laziness or distraction. It is far more layered.

As educators, we might recall posing a straightforward question in our online language classes. "Can someone explain the meaning of this paragraph to me?" Silence. Then, a quiet "not sure, Miss" appeared in the chat box, followed by a smiley emoji, or there was generally no emoji given at all. No voices. We received no further responses. This repeated scenario led us to look deeper. Why were the students not speaking? Why did they prefer to stay muted? What did we overlook?



Research reveals that linguistic insecurity has a significant impact, particularly in online classes where English is the primary language (Hongnaphadol, 2023). In the Malaysian context, students frequently expressed anxiety about being judged for their pronunciation or grammar when learning English (Mahmud et al., 2023). For many, the pressure to sound "correct" in English overrides the desire to contribute.

Many students choose to use the chat box rather than speaking. They would type quickly, often in short phrases, and frequently use emojis. It is not that they have nothing to say, but typing feels safer. It gives them time to think, edit, and avoid mistakes. Moreover, they preferred asynchronous tasks or chat-based interactions as they were less stressful and embarrassing (Abdullah et al., 2022). In this situation, the chat box becomes a safer place for students who feel linguistically inadequate when using the language.

What is more fascinating is how this digital silence manifests differently for each student. Some students remain silent due to poor connectivity or a lack of private space to speak. Others do not feel confident when speaking in a language which they are not fully comfortable with.

We, too, as educators, contribute to the development of these dynamics. Our language choices have a significant influence on classroom dynamics and student engagement. We have heard ourselves say, "Why is no one answering?" – a question that, while innocent, might appear accusatory to anxious students (Bernardo, 2019). Instead, changing our language to something like "Take your time, and you are welcome to type or unmute when you are ready" can encourage participation rather than force involvement. This kind of shift exemplifies the symbolic power of

language, as mentioned by Bourdieu (1991), highlighting how language can either empower or intimidate students.

Educators need to start treating silence as a meaningful experience. Chimbo et al. (2023) found that the students reported insufficient support, virtual engagement, and online participation during online learning. This suggests that students encounter specific challenges with online engagement and that educators must foster online communities through a strong online presence. Silence should thus be seen as a message, not as a void. Students might be telling us, "I am not confident" or "I need more time". These are some doable changes that might be beneficial:

1. Allow students to respond with text, emoji, or bilingual messages.
2. Use tools like Mentimeter, Padlet, or Kahoot to make participation less intimidating.
3. Acknowledge and validate all forms of communication, either spoken or written.
4. Integrate multilingual prompts, allowing students to connect concepts in their preferred language.

Digital silence is not a failure of online education, but it is a clue. It tells us about who feels heard, who feels confident, and who feels excluded. By paying closer attention to this silence and modifying our digital teaching practices, we can turn invisible students into active, visible learners. After all, our job as educators is not just to fill the silence but to understand it.



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