

Exploratory practice model for and with English language teaching students

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Abstract

This study reports on practitioner research in which undergraduate-level English language learners studying in an English Language Teaching program were taught how to conduct practitioner research, specifically the exploratory practice model, to highlight the importance of exploring the language classroom issues and to improve their instructional skills by engaging in research. During the 2023-2024 academic year fall term, the instructor, who is also the author of this study, introduced practitioner research. The students participated in all phases of the collective exploration of the instructor's puzzlement, addressing the problem of English language anxiety among silent students. First, Paphamihel's (2002) English Language Anxiety Scale was used to measure the students' anxiety levels. Secondly, two volunteer students were co-researchers, who watched the lesson recordings to identify the silent students. Finally, those students were interviewed to investigate the reasons for their anxiety and silence. Our findings indicated that their silence could be attributed to personal issues, not the course or the course tutor.

Keywords

Practitioner research, exploratory research, pre-service teacher education, language anxiety, silent students.

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Introduction

It has not been long since the teacher's authority gained a different perspective. The focus on teacher-led classes has been changed to student-centered classes, giving more opportunities to use more discussions and pair and group work activities, requiring more student participation and engagement (Tang, 2023). In contemporary classrooms, teachers are expected to design activities that keep students active, engaged, and in good relationships with each other so that they interact more, not only with their teachers but also with their peers. However, in many cases, it is not possible to have the equal participation of all the students in classroom activities.

In today's multicultural and diverse classroom environments, instructors still face the problem of silent students (Sequeira, 2021) who do not partake in the activities or participate only minimally during class time. Students may demonstrate different types of behavior while interacting with different groups of people. For Saka and Meriç (2021) and Asmalı (2019), students find speaking with friends easy, and their cultural background influences their interaction with peers. For some researchers, like Bista (2011), if teachers can help silent students from different cultures to participate more in classroom discussions, all students would benefit from this interaction.

Similarly, the Department of English Language Teaching (ELT) at Final International University had silent students. The instructor, who is also the author of this study, found that puzzling and drew on this puzzlement to engage in practitioner research. She observed that the students who came to class tended to sit in the classroom silently, wait for the lesson to finish, and leave the class without interacting with others. Drawing on her puzzlement, she decided to conduct a seven-week-long practitioner research, more specifically, an exploratory practice project, to find out why some students were silent in the classroom and take the initiative to deal with this instructional problem while also demonstrating practitioner research as a tool for prospective language educators to explore and tackle classroom-based issues. With this aim in mind, the third-year students were taught exploratory practice and took part in every stage of the research procedure, except for the planning phase, which was done by the researcher, so that when they became teachers, they could conduct one themselves and be equipped with a way of solving classroom problems.

Literature Review

Silent students as a language classroom phenomenon

Quite a number of researchers have dealt with the issue of silent students in various environments, highlighting the importance of interaction. Börekçi and Aydın (2018) mentioned that interaction directly influenced every individual, causing changes in the mental and emotional well-being of human beings. Likewise, Wilkinson and Olliver-Gray (2006) argued that a learning environment should be created in the classroom where all the students could participate in whole-class discussions since it would make

teachers' job difficult to understand whether they achieved lesson objectives or not when students kept silent.

Another important theme regarding the reasons for silence can be considered as culture, upbringing, or values (Yamat et al., 2013; Yates & Trang, 2012; Aghazadeh & Abedi, 2014). More specifically, Yamat, Fisher, and Rich (2013) attributed student silence to cultural issues – an Asian identity in their case. Peng et al. (2023) looked at “the relationship between cultural distance and classroom silence” (p. 1), claiming that when the students felt culturally distant, their silence increased in order to protect themselves, which caused a decrease in their learning. Yates and Trang (2012) argued that students from Asian cultures did not value classroom participation, unlike their Anglo-western counterparts. To illustrate, Japanese students regarded interaction in the classroom as irrelevant.

Staying silent in the language classroom might also be a multidimensional issue. Some students may be silent because they may not have prepared for the class, whereas others may be silent due to linguistic limitations or lack of motivation to present their ideas in front of others (Giray et al., 2022). Some researchers have found a relationship between silence and teacher behavior, curriculum, materials used, etc. In the study conducted by Martin (2013), the correlation between the curriculum and student silence was studied. The results showed that the students thought the schools were not very important in developing their communication skills, and they rarely experienced oral assessments. In short, they were not given enough opportunities in the classroom. The students believed that neither the secondary nor the higher secondary syllabi were enough to improve their listening and speaking skills. To sum up, their reluctance to speak was attributed to the failure of the curriculum to provide enough opportunities to the students.

Some researchers believe that silence may result in students' failure in exams (Khorasgani et al., 2022), or some students may even drop the course if this silence continues. Such possibilities have led a lot of researchers to explore methods and strategies aiming at engaging silent students more during class time. It is based on such a criticality that the author of the recent study decided to exert agency and conduct

practitioner research to explore the issue of silent students in her language classroom further.

Silent students and foreign language anxiety

Foreign language anxiety (FLA) has been a popular topic in educational linguistics since the 1980s. FLA is defined as a “distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process” (Horwitz et al., 1986, p. 128). Along with its connection to cultural issues, it is also considered one of the psychological factors in the process of learning (Abdulrahman, 2023). In his study, Abdulrahman (2023) stated that psychological factors have a great effect on students.

Many studies were conducted to understand the instructional consequences of FLA. Zgutowicz (2009) tried to find out its effects on language learners' decisions to participate in discussions in English in a middle school classroom. To collect data, Paphamihel's (2002) English Anxiety Scale (ELAS) was used, and after interviewing 30 sixth-grade students, it was concluded that language anxiety was an important factor in students' decisions to use English. In another study conducted by Juhana (2012), three data collection techniques, including observations, questionnaires, and interviews, were used to see whether psychological factors hindered students from speaking or not. The results showed five psychological factors, ranked from highest to lowest prevalence: fear of making mistakes (37%), shyness (26%), anxiety (18%), lack of confidence (13%), and lack of motivation (6%). In Suleimenova's (2013) study, the researcher focused on the anxiety of Kazakh students. To collect data, Suleimenova used semi-structured interview questions, a version of the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) by Horwitz et al. (1986), and classroom observations. The results indicated that the students felt overwhelmed by the fear of failure, panic, and the presence of new material. Similarly, Aghazadeh and Abedi (2014) intended to understand the causes of Iranian students' reluctance to actively participate in discussions. The research results indicated that lack of motivation and confidence, anxiety, and introvertedness were the reasons for silence in the classroom. In a more recent study, Giray et al. (2022) aimed to determine university students' anxiety levels in the English language in Metro Manila, The Philippines. The results were analyzed under four topics: The first was the lack of language skills. Secondly, they had personal

insecurities and low confidence. Thirdly, they felt other people judged them. Lastly, their high level of anxiety resulted in a lack of motivation and interest.

Finally, there are some examples of research that combine all of the above mentioned factors. For example, in China, Xie (2010) searched for why some students were silent. They seldom answered, initiated questions, or mentioned their opinions, and when they did, the answers were very brief. The findings revealed that the students' passive role could be related to factors like culture, limited language resources, anxiety, and the absence of opportunities for interaction as a result of too much teacher control. The last example is the research conducted by Savaşçı (2014), who wanted to see the reasons for student silence. Her students participated in reading, listening, and writing classes but they were silent in the English as a foreign language (EFL) speaking class. The results were similar to the results mentioned in the previous studies. Anxiety, fear of being despised, teacher strategy, and culture were the factors influencing the students' motivation to speak in a negative way.

In sum, many studies have demonstrated the connection between silent learners and FLA, along with cultural factors. Therefore, the author of the current study needed to go beyond conventional methods of researching FLA and incorporate exploratory elements of practitioner research into the well-established ways of researching anxiety in the language classroom setting, aiming to fill the gap in the literature. With that in mind, and drawing on her puzzlement as the instructor (i.e., why are some students particularly silent in my class?), the author worked on the following research questions:

- What was the level of FLA among the silent students?
- What were the underlying factors that resulted in their silence in the classroom?

Method

Exploratory practice was utilized in this practitioner research. Accordingly, the instructor's puzzlement drove the practitioner research while volunteering students were included into the collective exploration of the puzzlement intentionally and explicitly. Smith and Rebolledo's framework for conducting exploratory practitioner research (2018, p. 22) was adopted to guide this study.

More specifically, the instructor began with “Plan[ning] to explore (plan questions and how to get data).” At this phase, the instructor reflected on her practice and chose an area to focus on. The author also ideated the puzzlement, identified the research questions, and decided on ways of collecting data at this stage. Secondly, in the “Explore (gather data)” phase, data were collected to be analyzed and interpreted later on. This was followed by the third phase, “Analyse and reflect (answer the questions on the basis of the data),” in which the puzzle was clarified, and action was planned.

As Allwright (2005) puts forward, exploratory practice brings together practice pedagogy and research in the classroom and helps teachers “... to develop their own understanding of life in the language classroom” (p.361). In exploratory practice, an instructor’s aim is not to overcome an existing issue (i.e., silent students) but to explore it in a collective meaning-making, radically positioning learners as co-researchers. For Allwright (2005), practitioner research is devoted to understanding classroom life quality. So, the emphasis is on understanding, not taking action or solving a problem. In this research type, the students are seen as practitioners, as they are also responsible for developing classroom life as much as teachers. Its emphasis is on puzzling, and it “... places learners, teachers, and researchers as co-investigators at the heart of the research-practice nexus” (Hanks, 2019, p.143).

Participants

The study was undertaken at an international private university in Kyrenia, Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus. The participants were nineteen female and seven male students, aged between nineteen and twenty-one. Out of twenty-six students in total, twenty-four of them were Turkish, one Russian, and one Moroccan by nationality. They were third-year students at the Faculty of Education, Department of English Language Teaching, where the medium of education was English. The study was conducted as a part of the ‘Special Teaching Methods’ course, in which the students learn different research methods in order to help them identify their problems in the classroom and try to solve them to improve their teaching.

Data collection and procedure

The study employed three methods of collecting data: surveys, observations, and interviews. The survey, given to the students in English, was an adapted version of a

scale based on the English Language Anxiety Scale (ELAS) from Pappamihiel (2002). As mentioned by Pappamihiel (p. 334), the scale has “an internal consistency reliability of .89.” The original version consists of twenty Likert-type questions both in English and Spanish, with ten questions in English and ten Spanish equivalents. In this study, since the students did not know Spanish, only the English version was used, reducing the number of questions to ten. ELAS aims to evaluate the anxiety levels of English language students when learning foreign languages. Students rated responses on a Likert scale of 1 to 5, from strongly agree to strongly disagree.

In the first stage, the students were given a lecture about FLA and its possible effects on causing silence in the classroom. Later, all the participants (twenty-six in total) were given the scale to detect the ones with high levels of anxiety. Students who scored twenty-six and above in the survey were regarded as language learners with higher FLA. The students were asked to write their names because later on, only the ones with high scores were going to be the focus of this study.

In the second stage, observation, the silent students were detected by the researcher with the help of two students. This was done by watching the lesson recordings from the Learning Management System (LMS), where all the lessons were recorded. In total, five lessons were observed. The observers were given a sheet with all the students’ names. Each time a student participated in the lesson, they coded the participation into the classroom interaction for that particular student. Later, the three observers came together, and their codings were compared to identify the silent students. The comparison of codings revealed that of the nine students with high anxiety scores, three did not have a problem participating in the lessons. So, only the remaining six students were identified as focal participants and were invited to an interview.

In the third stage, the six silent students who were detected by watching the recordings were interviewed face-to-face, using semi-structured questions. While preparing the questions, the researcher asked the students to suggest some questions first, then, from that collection, the researcher consolidated the suggested questions, omitting the repeated or irrelevant ones after member-checking the final slate of interview questions with the students. The interviews were conducted by the two students to get more reliable results since the second part was about the teacher. The

interview consisted of eighteen questions, divided into two sub-categories. The interview was designed in English, and the students' answers were recorded using an audio-recorder device. In the first part, consisting of ten questions, the focus was on the student's characteristics, perceptions, and abilities. The second part, consisting of eight questions, was designed to examine the relationship between the reluctance to speak and teacher-related points. The findings from these interview questions gave some idea about the internal and external factors affecting student participation. The questions are presented in Table 1:

Table 1.

Interview questions that were created collectively in the exploratory practice

Questions related to characteristics, perceptions, and abilities of reticent students	Are you an extrovert or an introvert person?
	Are you a shy person?
	Do you like your classroom?
	Do you like your classmates?
	Do you have any health problems that hinder you from speaking?
	Do you have big problems you have difficulty solving?
	Do you have financial problems?
	Do you have difficulties understanding the coursebook/materials?
	Are you motivated to come to the course?
	Are you happy to be in this department?
Questions related to course or teacher-based issues	Are the classroom activities suitable for your level?
	Does the teacher give you enough time and opportunity to speak?
	How does the teacher approach you? Does she consider your personal characteristics?
	Do you have difficulties understanding the teacher?
	Does the teacher treat you badly?
	Is the teacher fair?
	When you get low grades, do you blame your teacher?
	Have you ever been reprimanded by the teacher?

Data analysis

The FLA scale results were analyzed by looking at the frequencies and descriptively evaluating the total scores taken from the scale. Since the highest score that can be taken from the scale was fifty, the students with a score of twenty-six and above were taken

as the ones with high anxiety. Only those students were invited to the next phase of data collection, which comprised the student-led interviews. For the current classroom-based study, the FLA scale was used as a survey to promote conceptual understanding of FLA among language learners while engaging them in the research procedure. In other words, it is important to highlight that the FLA scale was used to contribute to the collective meaning-making of the instructor and the language learners in an academic and established way. For this reason, the instructor did not run generic quantitative analyses of the scale results and only used it as a survey to gauge interest among learners. That said, the instructor relied on previous studies, which confirmed the validity and reliability of the FLA scale (Khalaf & Omara, 2022; Yim, 2014; Yim & Yu, 2011).

Findings

Surveying the level of foreign language anxiety among learners

In terms of the first research question, ‘What was the level of FLA among the silent students?’, it was discovered that out of twenty-six students, nine of them got scores above twenty-six, which showed a high level of anxiety. Table 2 shows the scores and frequencies (Yaratan, 2020).>

Table 2.

FLA Scale Scores

Scores taken from the FLA Scale	f	Anxiety Level
5 -9	4	Very Relaxed
10 – 14	2	
15 – 19	3	Relaxed
20 – 24	6	
25 – 29	3	Anxious
30 – 34	2	
35 – 39	3	Very Anxious
40 – 44	1	

As can be seen from Table 2, nine students were detected to be either ‘anxious’ or ‘very anxious.’ At that stage, the decision was to interview those nine students with high levels

of anxiety. However, as explained above, the number was reduced to six after the lesson observations.

Detecting the students who remained silent during the sessions

The lesson observations were conducted in a classroom of twenty-six students. Since it was an English medium department, students were encouraged to speak in English during the lessons. Moreover, there were students from different cultural and national backgrounds in the department, such as Libya, Morocco, Russia, Iran, Pakistan, etc. Since they did not know Turkish, all the students were institutionally encouraged to use English during the sessions. However, it should be noted that not all these nationalities are observed in every course. For example, in this study, only students from Russia, Morocco, and Turkey took the Special Teaching Methods course.

Data from the observations demonstrated that the instructor mostly explained the topic and then directed questions to check understanding, which were answered by non-silent students. It was seen that most of the students were able to participate verbally in the lesson activities. After waiting for some time, the instructor nominated the silent ones several times in each lesson. Most of the silent students did not volunteer to talk at all.

Exploring the factors for staying silent

In terms of the second research question, ‘What are the underlying factors that result in students’ silence in the classroom?’, the following findings were detected:

The findings related to the characteristics, perceptions, and abilities of silent students

Inductive coding of the interviews revealed that many students attributed their behavior in the classroom and their level of participation to perceptions and abilities. To illustrate, five out of six students said they believed they were introverts; one said it differed depending on where and who s/he was with. Below are some examples from the interview data:

Student 3: “I like interacting with others and sharing my problems with my friends. I can express myself easily.”

Student 6: “When I am with close Turkish friends, I feel I am an extrovert, but in class discussions with classmates, I am an introvert.”

Shyness was a recurrent issue that emerged in the interviews. Three of them said they were shy; two said it depended on the situation. One said s/he was not shy. Examples were:

Student 1: “I am shy, especially when I meet new people.”

Student 2: “I am sometimes shy, depending on the situation.”

Student 3: “I think I am talkative. I am not shy at all.”

About the classroom environment, five students said they liked their classroom, but one student was not so sure about it. They all said they liked their classmates.

Student 6: “So so! I am not sure about some of my classmates.”

Student 5: “I like almost all of them.”

In terms of health problems, none of them had such a problem. Similarly, five of them did not have big problems in their lives in general. Only one said s/he had some problems with her family. Four of them did not have financial problems, and two of them had difficulty paying for their general expenses.

Student 5: “My problems are just like anybody else’s, not very important.”

Student 6: “Sometimes I disagree with some decisions of my father.”

Student 4: “In Cyprus, the rents are very high. I have to work part-time.”

Student 6: “In some months, I have trouble paying my bills.”

Similar to perceived characteristic features such as being an introvert or extrovert and shyness, perceived linguistic abilities also emerged as an important factor underlying the silent behavior among language learners. To be specific, five of them commented that they often experienced difficulties in understanding the coursebook, lesson materials, or instructions. One said s/he found almost all of the materials difficult to comprehend, as illustrated in the data excerpts below:

Student 2: “Some parts in the book are difficult to understand; I ask my friends to explain.”

Student 3: “When I am bored or tired, I have difficulty understanding the material.”

Student 5: “When I read the topic beforehand, I can understand, but when I don’t, I have difficulty.”

Student 6: “I have difficulty understanding the lessons in LMS. I study with a friend.”

The final personal attribution that emerged in the interview data was their perceived motivation in studying English. Three of the learners were motivated to come to the course; one was sometimes motivated, and two were not motivated at all.

Student 1: “I am not sure of being an English teacher. I might find another job.”

Student 6: “Sometimes I don’t want to study English. I find it difficult and boring.”

Relatedly, their motivation was not only related to studying English as a language learner but also studying in an English major program, pointing out a more social aspect of their motivation or the lack of it. Four were happy to be in that department; two were not happy (one wanted to study psychology instead, and the other wanted to study arts).

Student 4: “I didn’t want to be an English teacher; my family forced me. I am mostly unmotivated.”

Student 6: “I wanted to study arts at Arkin University but my parents rejected.”

The findings related to course or teacher-based issues

The teacher’s implementation of the topics and her behavior in the classroom were among the important issues that emerged in the interviews. There were points about the difficulty level of the activities and understanding the teacher. To illustrate, four students said the classroom activities brought to the sessions were generally suitable for them, but two of them said they had difficulty coping with the tasks given.

Student 5: “Sometimes I ask my friends to repeat the instructions.”

Student 6: “I cannot understand the tasks, cannot finish them.”

Secondly, all of them reported that they found the time given to the students to speak adequate. For example:

Student 1: “Our class is not a big one, so we have enough time to speak and tell our opinions.”

Student 2: “The teacher tries to make everybody speak.”

Student 4: “When we do pair or group work activities, we all speak more.”

Another point was about understanding the teacher. The responses revealed that the students did not have a problem with this issue. Five students said they did not have any difficulties understanding her. Only one said s/he sometimes had difficulties because of her lack of background knowledge. Examples were:

Student 5: “I sometimes have difficulties understanding, but I can always ask the teacher to explain again.”

Yet another point was about the teacher’s behavior towards the students in general. All the students said the teacher approached them in a kind and considerate way and was careful with their personal characteristics. None of them said that the teacher behaved them in a bad way. All of them said she was very kind. To illustrate:

Student 3: “Our teacher does not judge us.”

Student 4: “The teacher is not authoritative; she is kind.”

Student 6: “The teacher helped me when I forgot to send the assignment on time. She always helps us.”

Student 1: “The teacher never behaves in a rude way.”

Student 3: “The teacher is always calm and kind.”

The last point concerning the teacher was about her fairness. Four students said the teacher was fair. Two of them said she was sometimes fair, and she never reprimanded them, as can be seen in the examples:

Student 2: “She is a fair teacher.”

Student 4: “Sometimes she is not fair in giving grades.”

Student 5: “She has been unfair a few times.”

Student 1: “She never does such a thing (reprimanding)”

Student 2: “She doesn’t reprimand us.”

Student 3: “ I have never been reprimanded by her.”

The last issue was about the grades of students. Five of them said their grades were low but that it was their own fault, and they were aware of their need to study more. One said both the teacher and himself/herself were to blame. The examples were:

Student 4: “My grade is low, but I know I should improve my English.”

Student 6: “My grade is low. I am not a graduate of the language department from high school. I have pronunciation and grammar mistakes.”

Discussion and Conclusion

In this study, the instructor first aimed to demonstrate to the third-year language learners an example of classroom-based practitioner research and second, to explore the reasons for student silence in her classroom collaboratively with her students.

Anxiety was the primary issue that was investigated since it was known that high levels of it could make the students silent and reluctant to take part in classroom activities (Horwitz et al., 1986; Pappamihel, 2002). Using the ELAS (Pappamihel, 2002) as a survey, an important proportion of the learners (nine out of twenty-six) were found to experience high levels of FLA. The findings of the current study were in alignment with previous studies, which demonstrated foreign language anxiety in similar contexts (e.g., Turkey and Northern Cyprus) (Uştuk & Aydın, 2015; Elaldi, 2016).

While exploring the factors underlying anxiety, several issues, including personality-related problems, emerged. More specifically, those issues included shyness, motivation (Juhana, 2012), or introvertedness (Aghazadeh & Abedi, 2014). Also, learners’ perceived linguistic abilities constituted another anxiety-provoking factor that resulted in silence among students. This included difficulty in keeping abreast with the curriculum, materials, and teacher instructions, which also corroborated the prior research (e.g., Martin, 2013).

In a nutshell, the results gathered from all of the above-mentioned points showed that the reasons for being silent could be attributed to high levels of anxiety, lack of necessary background knowledge and language barrier (English, in this study); difficulty of understanding materials and lastly, some personality traits like being shy and introvert. However, as mentioned before, the aim of the study was to explore issues within our context. It was meant to enhance learning and help students in their educational journeys. The findings cannot be generalized but are believed to be valuable for practitioners working in similar contexts.

Practical implications

As a practitioner research exploring student silence in English language classrooms, the current study provides implications regarding language teaching practice. Teachers of silent students should try to explore the underlying factors of silent behavior in the language classroom. In the context of the current practitioner research, many of the factors were related to the ‘perceptions’ of learners, such as the perceived characteristic traits or perceived language abilities. This shows that understanding learners’ perceptions of self and self-efficacy is of critical importance for language instructors who are experiencing similar problems. Language teachers also need to take into account that language learners often face challenges in their social relationships with their colleagues or families that may influence their level of motivation. As Bao (2023, p. 87) mentioned, “[learners] struggle with themselves, with the present and with the past). So, it is the teachers’ job to find ways to help these students to become more active in the classroom. For Juma et al. (2022), there is a relationship between teachers’ immediacy, students’ silence, and hopelessness.

Limitations of the study

The study was conducted with a small number of students, so the results cannot be generalized. In such studies, the researcher— in this case, the instructor—identifies a problem, seeks to understand its causes, and proposes potential solutions. If the study were repeated with a larger group of students, we would gather more quantitative data, leading to more reliable results.

Additionally, the junior students engaged in learning about the research process could have benefited from greater involvement in the study's planning phase. Participation was limited to a small number of students, as only those who volunteered were included. As Allwright (2005, p. 353) stated, "...the learners... should be seen as classroom practitioners developing their own understanding of language classroom life." Thus, increased participation would enhance the overall outcome.

Ethics Committee Permission Information

This study was administered with the approval of The Research Ethics Committee, Final International University, dated 24.09.2024 and numbered 14/100/89.

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