



**International Journal of Languages' Education and Teaching**  
**Volume 8, Issue 4, December 2020, p. 92-100**

Received	Reviewed	Published	Doi Number
14.09.2020	17.12.2020	30.12.2020	10.29228/ijlet.46359

**Student Academic Engagement in the EFL Classrooms:  
Silence as a Form of Classroom Participation**

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**ABSTRACT**

Silence in the classroom is mostly considered to be a negative and undesirable behavior of students. Teachers want their students to take part in the ongoing communication and activities in the classroom since student engagement is among the best predictors of learning and development. In fact, recent research has suggested a relationship between silence and learning, seeing it as a means of communication. The present study aims to investigate the perceptions of a group of EFL students about why they remain silent in the classroom and the relationship between silence and their learning. To this end, a questionnaire was distributed among 117 EFL undergraduate students which addressed several variables concerning the classroom engagement styles of students. Based on the interpretation of the results, it has been found that students are generally silent in the classroom and there is a significant difference between male and female students when it comes to participation. The study concludes that an understanding of the meanings of silence in the classroom may change a teacher's perspective and help them redefine participation in classrooms to include silence.

**Key Words:** Silence, student engagement, oral participation.

**EFL Sınıflarında Öğrencilerin Akademik Katılımı:  
Sınıfta Katılım Şekli Olarak Sessizlik**

**ÖZET**

Sınıftaki sessizlik çoğunlukla öğrencilerin olumsuz ve istenmeyen bir davranışı olarak değerlendirilmektedir. Öğretmenler, öğrencilerinin sınıfta iletişim kurmalarını ve devam eden etkinliklere katılmasını ister çünkü öğrenci katılımı, öğrenme ve gelişimin en iyi belirtisi olarak kabul edilir. Aslında, son araştırmalar sessizlik ve öğrenme arasında bir ilişki olduğunu ve öğrencilerin sessizliği bir iletişim aracı olarak gördüğünü öne sürmektedir. Bu çalışma, bir grup EFL öğrencisinin sınıfta neden sessiz kaldığını ve sessizlik ile öğrenme arasındaki ilişkiye dair algılarını incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır. Bu amaçla, 117 lisans öğrencisine, öğrencilerin sınıfta katılım stillerine ilişkin çeşitli değişkenleri ele alan bir anket dağıtılmıştır. Bulgular incelendiğinde öğrencilerin sınıfta genelde sessiz olduğu ve katılım söz konusu olduğunda erkek ve kız öğrenciler arasında önemli farklılıkların olduğu ortaya çıkmıştır. Çalışmanın sonuçlarına göre sınıftaki sessizliğin gelebileceği anlamlar tam olarak anlaşılduğunda öğretmenler farklı bakış açısına sahip olacak ve sınıfta katılımı sessizliği içerecek şekilde yeniden tanımlayabilecek.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Sessizlik, öğrenci katılımı, sözlü katılım.

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## Introduction

Student engagement is a necessary element for both learning and teaching since it comprises all behaviors or activities related to education. Between student engagement and learning, there is a strong relationship that has an important impact on student achievement. As a result of this relationship, lecturers or instructors desire students to be engaged in the classroom, and they try to encourage it. Students may engage in the classroom in different ways. Some students may engage by participating orally such as asking questions and providing comments while some remain silent by taking notes and listening actively. This indicates that there are two main different engagement styles: oral and silent (Meyer, 2009). Participation as a component of engagement in the classroom is generally considered to be a necessary feature for learning, and this participation is believed to be oral. Instructors want their students to participate in classes by speaking, asking questions, and discussing, and therefore, students who do not speak or participate orally are seen to feel anxiety and shyness or to be not interested in the course or material. Oral participation is a sign of good engagement of students since teachers or instructors do not have enough time to observe and interpret other engagement styles in the classroom. However, silence can be an engagement style, and participation style, as it has been proved by some studies such as Hittleman (1989), Kim et al. (2016), and Ling (2003). These studies have found that students may be engaged silently and being silent does not always indicate that the student is not engaged. At this point, the true interpretation of silence has an essential role. Students may participate in courses in silence by taking down notes, listening actively, and trying to comprehend what is being told.

Since silent students are assumed not to care about the course, instructors try to encourage them to participate orally in courses. And also, it is seen as a barrier to learning. However; silence can be a form of participation in addition to the oral one and also, it can be a good indicator of efficient participation and engaged learning (Kim et al., 2016). The current study assumes that participation does not have to be oral, which means silence is a method of participation. Additionally, it can be said that if participation should be oral, this means while one student is speaking, others do not participate (Meyer, 2009).

To understand the core of the study, some terms should be introduced in advance. Classroom engagement means participation in any kind of practice related to education within the classroom or not (Quaye and Harper, 2015). Classroom engagement style refers to any way chosen by students to participate in the educational practices in the classroom. Finally, global engagement style means an inherent tendency of preference which may not vary depending on specific situations, that is, overall engagement (Meyer, 2009). Another definition should be provided for who is a silent student. A silent student does not speak or participate orally in the courses. Also, a silent student is someone who acts shyly or someone who is unlike ideal students participating orally or making contributions by asking questions or posing his/her thoughts. Generally, as Askari and Moinzadeh say (2015); "These students are seen by what they do not do rather than what they choose to do". It indicates that being silent does not mean not participating. Students who are silent may be engaged with the course at the same time but choose not to speak for several reasons. The current study aims to reconstruct this assumption. If the role of in-class silence is interpreted appropriately, the diversity of student engagement can be understood better. With this understanding, a more encouraging learning and teaching environment can be achieved. The current study has a crucial role in identifying the meaning of silence in the EFL classroom and helping lecturers or instructors to understand the engagement styles of students.

## Literature Review

Student engagement can be divided into two different categories: social engagement and academic engagement (Dunleavy and Milton, 2009). While social engagement refers to the actions of students out classroom such as student clubs, academic engagement indicates the behaviors of students in the classroom, especially for this study. Student academic engagement is defined as comprising of all kinds of course-related actions or behaviors of students that they commit in the classroom. And academic engagement can be in two ways: silent way and oral way (Meyer, 2009). Academic engagement is generally accepted to be oral, and therefore, oral participation is considered to be a good indicator of the level of student academic engagement (Frymier and Houser, 2016). Even some instructors may apply several incentives to support or increase oral participation in the EFL classroom. Grading oral participation is one of these incentives because it is believed to increase the communication skills of students (MacKenzie, 2015). Nevertheless, grading participation may fail to satisfy the expectations of instructors on oral participation because some students still remain silent (Juniati et al. (2018).

Because of the fact that silence is accepted as a problem in classrooms, studies tend to investigate the factors behind or causing silence. In literature, the silence of students is generally considered to be an obstacle in front of teaching and learning (Min, 2016). This is why studies are generally focused on the reasons for student silence and solutions to these reasons such as Chang (2011), Juniati et al. (2018), Li and Liu (2011), and Min (2016). While there could be some reasons for silence linguistically, there are also other problems covering lecturers' teaching style, classroom context, learning environment, etc. A study shows that students choose to be silent in the EFL classrooms because they feel tense and nervous while speaking, as well as having a lack of English competence (Baktash and Chalak, 2015). In addition to these reasons, Tatar (2005) has investigated the reasons for the silence of some Turkish graduate students in the USA and found that some students may use silence strategically, for example, to save face in front of their teacher or friends, to show their interest to others' thought and ideas, to express their respect to their teachers, and to convey their reactions to other comments.

Silence as a problem to be solved has been studied currently and authors like Zhouyuan (2016) and Wang (2019) have tried to find some solutions and implications for both students and instructors. Yet, it is not the case always in line with a study supporting that communication or participation in the classroom indicates more than oral contribution (Meyer, 2009). The silence of students should not be considered as a negative trait of students since silent students may be cognitively engaged and not showing it orally (Hittleman, 1989). And, a study also indicates that some students are silent while others are more willing to participate orally and that this means students have different participation styles and preferences in the classroom (Bista, 2012). But silence is not generally included in engagement or participation patterns of students, which makes it an area to be investigated deeply. Moreover, different engagement styles of students need further research as well as the genuine meaning of the silence. The current study tried to fill the gap in reinterpreting the notoriety of silence in the EFL classroom in the relevant literature.

## Methodology

### The Aim of the Study

The current study aimed to investigate the global engagement styles and engagement frequency of EFL students. In addition, it was also targeted to study whether there was a difference between genders concerning their participation styles and frequencies.

### Research Questions

In the light of the background knowledge and literature review stated above, the current study tried to find a solution to the below-mentioned questions.

**RQ1:** What is the level of participation that students choose in the EFL classroom?

**RQ2:** Is there a statistically significant relationship between participation and gender?

**RQ3:** Whether silent students participate in the courses in other ways or not?

### Research Design

For the research, a quantitative approach was adopted to investigate the role of silence as an engagement style in the EFL classrooms. As Bryman (1988) claims, quantitative research makes it possible for researchers to establish a causal relationship between concepts in question, to generalize the findings to a larger population, and to treat individuals as the center of empirical studies. In the same way, the quantitative research method enables researchers to reach a high number of participants. Also, it is effective in saving time and gathering data in groups such as gender, class, language proficiency level, and education level. Similarly, Creswell (2017) also states that the quantitative approach is used to find or search for relationships between the variables of the related study. Lastly, Creswell (2019) adds that the quantitative approach has some advantages: it can reach a huge number of participants, it enables the researcher to analyze the data productively, it investigates relationships and questions possible cause and effect relations, and it controls bias as well as it addresses the numerical choices of people. These reasons were the driving force behind why it was adopted as a research approach for the current study.

### Setting and Participants

As a setting for the study, a state university in the Black Sea Region in Turkey was chosen. The students studying at the department of English Language and Literature, which offers a four-year education at the university level, were selected as participants of the study within the scope of convenience sampling. The overall participant number was 117, and %69 of them was female while 26% was male, and the rest did not provide their gender information (Table 1). Additionally, the mean age of the participants was 22, and Grade Point Average (GPA) was 3.14 (Table 1). 59 of the participants (50.4%) were second grade and 15 (12.8%) were third grade whereas 40 (34.2) were fourth grade.

**Table 1.** *The Demographic Information of the Participants*

	Female	Male
Number (n)	81 (69.2%)	32 (27.4%)
Mean Age	21	22
Mean GPA	3.19	3.00

### Data Collection and Analysis Tools

To shed light on the aforementioned questions, a survey adapted from Meyer (2009) was utilized as a data collection tool. The questionnaire included 19 questions in addition to demographic data such as gender, GPA, and grade. These questions were provided under different scales: Global Engagement Style Frequency, Global Engagement Style Preference, Ethics and Rights, and Learning and Oral Participation. The reliability of these scales was measured with Cronbach's Alpha, and the values were, respectively: 0.888, 0.823, 0.604, and 0.846. Some of the survey items were reverse coded to increase the reliability of the measurement. Demographic data was collected at the end of the survey due to the fact that some participants may feel uncomfortable with some personal details such as gender, GPA, etc. The data gathered was analyzed on software called SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences).

### Ethical Consideration and Confidentiality

Ethics should be taken into consideration while conducting research (Creswell, 2011). Ethical issues were concerned during the application procedure of the questionnaire. The participants were informed that filling the questionnaire was voluntary and their personal information would not be revealed to any other third parties. In addition, their names were not asked in the survey.

### Results and Discussion

For the purpose of making the analysis easier, the questionnaire was divided into four different scales: Global Engagement Styles, Global Engagement Style Preference, Ethics and Rights, and Learning and Oral Participation. These scales will be analyzed and interpreted, respectively. As indicated in table 1, the students chose to be silent generally in the classroom. Being a volunteer to answer questions, providing some comments, or asking questions were generally marked rarely, which shows that the students, male or female, tend to remain silent in classrooms. The global engagement style of the participants can be said to be silent generally based on the findings given in Table 1.

**Table 2.** *Global Engagement Styles - Scale 1 Frequency Table*

Scale 1 Variables	N	Percentage (%)	Frequency
Participation in most classes	46	39.0	Rarely
Being volunteer	44	37.3	Rarely
Providing comments	49	41.5	Rarely
Remaining silent	40	33.9	Often
Asking questions	41	34.7	Rarely

Table 2 shows that the students do not enjoy participating orally in the classroom and hesitate while providing a comment. The reasons behind this hesitation of the students are another research subject which should be investigated deeply since hesitation might be a problem in front of oral participation when it is necessary. Although students do not believe that they would appear unintelligent to neither their instructors nor classmates, they do remain silent. However, the fact that students may use silence as a tool for saving face in front of their instructors or friends is a proved reason behind silence in the literature (Tatar, 2005).

**Table 3.** *Global Engagement Style Preference - Scale 2 Frequency Table*

Scale 2 Variables	n	Percentage (%)	Frequency
Enjoying participation	38	32.2	Rarely
Preferring to remain silent	39	33.1	Often
Commenting without hesitation	38	32.2	Rarely
Organizing thoughts for oral participation	37	31.4	Rarely
Fearing appearing unintelligent to instructor	35	29.7	Never
Fearing appearing unintelligent to classmates	41	34.7	Never

The third scale, which was ethics and rights, has proved that the students do not have a definite side about whether oral participation is an ethical obligation or not. And hence, they remained neutral. Also, they do not have a certain positive or negative approach to the expectations of their instructors about in-class talk. It emphasizes that their opinion of whether they should participate orally in classes is not completed in their minds. In addition, they believe that talking in the classroom is their own responsibility.

**Table 4.** *Ethics and Rights - Scale 3 Frequency Table*

Scale 3 Variables	n	Percentage (%)	Frequency
Ethical obligation to participate	39	33.1	Neutral
Instructors' expectation to talk	45	38.1	Neutral
Responsibility to talk	39	33.1	Agree

The fifth table reflects the participation frequencies of the students. As it is shown in the table, while students think that oral participation is an important part of learning, they still remain silent. In addition, they also think that oral participation is an efficient tool in learning. However, when they were asked whether they learned best by remaining silent, they were neutral. An exact differentiation between learning and participation could not be achieved since the participants were neutral generally.

**Table 5.** *Learning and Oral Participation - Scale 4 Frequency Table*

Scale 4 Variables	n	Percentage (%)	Frequency
Retaining information by participating orally	37	34.4	Neutral
Learning more by remaining silent	35	29.7	Neutral
Oral participation as a part of learning	34	28.8	Agree
Oral participation helps learning	35	29.7	Agree
Learning best by remaining silent	38	32.2	Neutral

### Gender Comparison

The most significant finding of the study was the statistical difference between the genders. According to the statistical analysis of the data, it is concluded that female students choose to be silent more frequently than male students, and they think that they do not have to participate orally to learn, which means they believe that they can learn one way or the other.

**Table 6.** Gender Comparison of the Variables - Independent Group T-Test between Gender and Scales

	Female		Male		Sig. **
	M	SD	M	SD	
Participation in most classes	2,38	1,06	2,84	,92	<b>0,25</b>
Being volunteer	2,27	1,04	2,94	1,01	<b>0,003</b>
Providing comments	2,21	1,01	2,77	,95	<b>0,008</b>
Enjoying participation	2,48	1,15	3,06	1,01	<b>0,10</b>
Fearing appearing unintelligent to instructor	2,67	1,30	2,06	1,15	<b>0,20</b>
Fearing appearing unintelligent to classmates	2,57	1,32	1,94	1,16	<b>0,15</b>
Instructors` expectation to talk	3,18	1,0	3,62	,79	<b>0,14</b>
Oral participation helps learning	3,07	1,13	3,68	1,01	<b>0,008</b>

\*\*P< .01

However; male students choose to participate orally more than female students, and they think that they can learn best by participating orally. This is a statistically significant finding positing the gender difference. Another result is that female students` GPA is higher than male students`. It is not possible to know how the GPA of the male or female students is achieved, and hence; an assumption that students may be more successful by being silent cannot be concluded. In addition; while male students believe that they should participate orally in the classroom, female students think that it is not a responsibility for them to participate orally in class.

Additionally, the study has shown that male students more tend to participate in class orally when it is compared to female students, and also they desire to be voluntary to answer the questions asked in the course. While male students enjoy orally participating, female students feel shy to participate. On the other hand, female students think that instructors should not expect them to participate orally. This indicates that grading participation or other methods applied to encourage oral participation may not be necessary all the time. And finally, male students think that participating orally helps them learn while female students remain neutral. According to the last finding, male students trigger their learning by participating orally such as asking questions, commenting, or answering the questions. However, female students are not sure about whether they learn by participating orally. This result may stem from the belief that they do not always want to participate orally. Forcing them to orally participate may lead them to unwillingly-participation.

## Conclusion

By contrast to the general perception in the literature, the current study proves that silence may be used as an engagement mean in EFL classrooms and that a student is silent does not mean he or she does not engage in the course. As an overall conclusion, the current study has shown that oral participation is not always preferable by the students, and female and male students differ in engagement styles. While female students frequently remain silent, male students are more open to oral participation. The first research question seeks an answer for "What is the level of participation that students choose in the EFL classroom?" The first scale provides the answer since it shows that students remain mostly silent in the EFL classrooms. In terms of oral participation, the level was very limited by the reason that students prefer remaining silent frequently. When it comes to the second research question, it asked "Is there a statistically significant relationship between participation and gender?" The analysis of the data claims that gender is a significant determinant in the participation

level in the EFL classrooms. The third research question “Whether silent students participate in the courses in other ways or not?” This question can be only answered with the finding that students prefer remaining silent in the EFL classrooms. That is, participation should not be interpreted as merely oral but as both oral and silent.

Based on the findings of the study, it is recommended to lecturers or instructors that they should take into consideration different engagement styles of students and conduct some research for possible engagement ways of their students to reach a healthier teaching environment. The current study has some limitations. According to the findings, the differentiation between the claim that students do not know how they learn and the claim that students can learn in two ways –participating orally and silently- cannot be achieved. The survey may be improved depending on the findings of the current study. Further studies should have more participants from different schools or regions.

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