

## A Critical Review of Sibel Tatar's Article "Why Keep Silent? The Classroom Participation Experiences of Non- Native- English-Speaking Students"

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### Abstract:

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This study explores Sibel Tatar's contribution to the field of language teaching and learning. The main focus is to understand the functions and interpretations of silence from learners' insights through the prism of multidimensional factors such as learners' cultural, psychological and contextual perspectives to ensure a smooth teaching and learning. Tatar's interview with Turkish learners made us understand that there's more to silence than the word's literal meaning suggests - it is revelatory. Turkish learners have their own interpretations for their silence and to them, silence is logical. This study basically addresses the needs of the Turkish students and will help instructors to comprehend the background of learners' silence. Undoubtedly understanding the underlying causes of silence can come in handy in teaching. It also aims to elaborate the impact of learning behavior in the field of second language acquisition. It unfolds silence as an effective learning process. The study traces out the significance of learners' silence and found both silence and activity as quintessential learning tools. In order to clarify the connection of silent learners with their society and culture, I have taken ideas from Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory of cognitive development and quoted from different other journals and books of the related areas. I have tried also to justify the meaning and function of silence in Tatar's study based on my classroom observation in secondary schools and in tertiary level institutions. I have compared among the findings of learners' silence from many studies, analyze them and evaluate learners' needs.

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**Keywords:** Non-native English Speakers, Classroom Behavior, Silence, cultural barriers, psychological barriers, social factors in classroom

### 1. Introduction:

There is a heated debate in academia about "Which one contributes to learning?-activity? or silence?" Some studies indicate the monopolistic contribution of classroom activeness in the route to learning, and others document silence as detrimental to learning. Students who remain silent are thought to be less productive, indifferent and reluctant to their study (Hamouda, 2013). On the one hand, silent students found listening, thinking and reflecting as more vital ways of learning and as facilitative learning device to gain access, organize and absorb new materials (Jaworski and Sachdev, 1998:286 in Tatar, 2005). On the other hand, teachers' association with articulateness and talkativeness and their indifference to silent learners have ironically been documented in studies. Unlike other studies based on instructors' conception about silence, Tatar tries to find out the needs of non-native English speaker learners. To understand their necessities, Tatar observed their classroom, studied their psychology, and documented the meaning of silence. He found an influence of learners' cultural and social norms on their silence. Those causes of silence over ride their previous education system and predispose with their culture. So, silence is culture oriented. And culture fixes and evaluates the meaning of silence. Tatar investigates also the beliefs of Turkish students about talk and silence and observes how these beliefs influence their classroom behavior. He explores interconnectedness between Turkish students' silence and their culture, psychology and education system. He also traces out the meaning of silence from learners' comments and thus indicates learners' needs. The whole article is segregated into several divisions: introduction, literature review, discussion and conclusion.

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## 2. Objectives:

This article review generally will help to corroborate with the researchers' findings that are believed to fortify the field of language teaching. The novice researchers, who are willing to conduct a research in this area, will detect more ideas about learners' necessities of silence and encounter meanings and functions of silence associated with learners' context and culture. The apprentices may ascertain knowledge of how to conduct a secondary and qualitative research and how to write an article review. Besides, it will certainly help the co-learners to understand the meaning of silence and the needs of the silent learners. This article review, primarily, will bring into light some valuable factors of learners' silence and thus, will help instructors to feel the pulse of the silent students and to handle them accordingly. Simultaneously, because of the comparison between Tatar's article on silence and the current studies on the same, silence has been analyzed and evaluated as an effective learning process. Additionally, this review tries to comply with Vygotsky's Socio-cultural theory which theorizes that society and culture contribute to learners' cognitive development (Vygotsky, 1987).

## 3. Literature Review:

In different literatures on classroom behavior, learners' silence has been interpreted in many ways. Asper Giles et al, (1992 in Tatar, 2005), silence is interpreted as lack of interest; an unwillingness to communicate, anxiety, shyness and lack of communicative competence. Most of the cross-cultural researches mark silence as culture and context-dependent. Furthermore, silence may be either positive or negative to the members of any culture and it is measured asper the expectation of context (Taneen, 1985).

### 3.1 Cross-Cultural Views on Silence:

According to Vygotsky (1987), social, cultural and historical artifacts play a pivotal role in children's cognitive development and potential performance. According to Tatar, cultural values and norms prescribe the amount of talk and silence of the learners. It is culture which dictates what to talk, where to talk and when to talk. As per (Bichelmeyerand Cagiltay, 2000), being placed in a lower end of individualist culture, Turkish society socializes their children not to talk much because remaining silent is a kind of well-behaved attitude. In Turkish teaching compound, students are expected to listen and to respond only when asked a question. They are encouraged not to ask any question because it is a threat to their teachers' authority. In their studies, Turkish participants referred to the one-way communication between students and teachers. They also mentioned the lack of free participation in their classroom and traditional rote learning and memorization as effective strategies of learning and said that their learning is not based on talk and discussion. Language is embedded in culture which affects a child's cognitive and emotional development. Again, most of the basic learnings of the students depend on social, religious, educational and cultural institutions. In this regard, I quote the reaction of a Chinese student. He says, "There is only one way. My teacher says. I listen. That's it. So I never say. So I can't speak very well before coming here" (cited in Sawir, 2005, p.570). This is not a rare case in my classroom as well. Time and again, I come across a number of tertiary level tribal students from Chittagong Hill Tracts, a large swathe of hilly area of Southeastern Bangladesh, who are introvert in nature and express themselves very little. To these minority people, the causes of their silence are poor educational system, inadequate skills and dozens of socio-cultural and psychological issues. They feel uneasy with the students who are communicatively competent. Even though there is an internal urge for queries, they fail to frame questions with their insufficient fluency and accuracy. While others are advanced in language, profound in thought and quick in learning, those tribal pupils struggle with their mistakes and errors. According to them, their education system didn't encourage them to hone their communicative skill.

### 3.2 Silence as learning tool:

In previous studies, causes of learners' silence have been explored on the basis of experiences of teachers. But taking guard against the past studies, Sibel Tatar, a Turkish university teacher, in his study documented the reasons of silence based on classroom experiences, beliefs and thoughts of some non-native English speaking students from Turkey who were studying in English dominant institutions. All the way through this article, Tatar tries to disclose the causes of silence on basis of learners' psychology, culture, context and social norm and indicates that there is no room for denigrating silence rather it is a constructive classroom behavior. In this regard, Wang says that silence itself is a speech rather than the failure of communication (Wang, 2019).

Though humans need both speech and silence as means of communication, in previous studies, the latter is known to have been considered as a less productive learning attitude. Only students' talk and discussion are viewed very positively as a means of accelerating classroom learning.

According to Vygotsky's (1987) socio-cultural theory, learners' cognitive process developed through interaction between people. Previously, influence of culture, society, psychology and contextual factors on learners' silence in the classroom was studied depending on the teachers' perceptions only. However, students' classroom behavior has not been analyzed from the vantage point of multidisciplinary angle. The study of Tatar explored the probable reasons of students' silence on the basis of students' perspectives too.

#### **4. Analysis of the causes of Learners' Silence:**

Studies indicate that both cultural and educational background and lack of English communicative skills are traditional causes of students' silence in their classroom. Majority of the Asian non-native English speaking students has a set of drawbacks which act as stumbling blocks to their progression in learning (Bista, 2012). Multiple proportions of silence have been found from the experiences of non-native English speaking students in their academic courses in Tatar's study. To them silence is a face saving tendency because they think if they show their incompetence in fluency and accuracy of language and their insufficient content knowledge in front of their peers, they may be put to shame. Furthermore, silence is a product of a feeling of inarticulacy, and as whole a safeguard. Moreover, students' ineptitude both in verbal communication and content of the subject makes them silent. Again, when students are apprehensive of making phonetic, lexical, syntactic and semantic mistakes, they tend to remain silent. Moreover, they want to keep themselves aloof from confrontation with those students who want to dominate the class because they know that confrontation destroys the congenial atmosphere of a class. In this case, a student would rather remain silent instead of clashing with others with their insignificant and extraneous inputs. At this point, Japanese students' opinion about silence is related from a study of Donahue (Donahue, 1998). Here Japanese students are averse to social hostility which is the main cause of them remaining silent. In this study, Donahue uses the result of the study of Harumi (1999) on silence, where both Japanese and British students describe it in different ways such as face saving tendency, difficulty-avoiding strategy or a request for help from teachers which are productive if teachers cooperate with the students' nonverbal responses. But British learners interpret silence as a sign of insipidity, lethargy and boredom. Thus, from British point of view the degree of tolerance for silence is not ample. To remain silent is not avoiding or ignoring learning but an assistance to others' participation and an indication of internal association of ideas. In terms of the functions of mind, I recall John Locke (a British Empiricist philosopher) to whom knowledge is based on five senses and recollection in calmness. While keeping silent, students remain active in mind, engaging themselves in thinking and receiving information. So, tranquility or silence is helpful for better understanding and creativity. Moreover, students are willing to respond to the teachers' questions through gesture, body language or through taking notes. To them, listening, thinking and recollecting are different modes of chipping in the class rather than speaking only. One of the Turkish students added that nothing would be missed if he didn't speak.

Participants of the study shared that it was better to be silent than to argue with their limited knowledge. This can save their public image. Moreover they are shy to express themselves in the classroom. According to them, though, keeping silent might not necessarily bring prestige, it would at least protect them from losing their self-image. According to Sibel Tatar, to Turkish learners, silence is a protest to an irrelevant and meaningless free flowing discussion. It is a protest to an indirect and low quality contribution. As per those students, their fellow mates talk constantly without any reason and they gain nothing from their irrational participation. Their talk has no direction and purpose; and they feel lost and that's why they don't talk. They reported that if what they had in their mind were not really valuable, they had better not say anything. So, to them this is a kind of talkativeness that steals from class time and a deprivation of learning opportunities. Sibel Tatar from the report of the learners indicates the significance of silence in learning. She suggests that learner should think before they ink and points out that excessive talk interrupts learners' opportunity to learn. Finally he agrees with beliefs of the students that meaningful silence is better than excessive and irrelevant talk.

In Tatar's study, Turkish learners' belief is that silence is a kind of modesty to their teachers' authority and a strong protest to their friends' incoherent and irrelevant talks. Students remain silent until they have been invited by their teacher's questions or if they are unable to express their ideas. Moreover, majority of the students think that they had better remain silent without killing time through asking unnecessary questions and passing trivial comments which can't contribute to others' learning. To Turkish students relevance and meaningfulness are the common concerns while contributing to classroom discussion. To me, this sort of behavior is relatable. The general sources of silence which occur frequently in the classroom and their opinions are very interesting to me as I find an affinity between causes of silence of the Turkish students and my own students in Bangladesh.

One of my students said that teachers get disappointed when, they see, their ideas, philosophies and conceptions are unpleasantly refuted by students and added that if he was a teacher he would not be interested in those students who audaciously confront him. There is a common trait among students of Japan, China and Turkey. To Chinese and Japanese students, silence is a kind of politeness and avoidance of confrontation respectively. Most of the time, they remain silent in the classroom because of their social norms. Likewise in Tatars' study, Turkish students are silent because in their country children are taught not to talk much in social settings since quietness is a well behaved attitude for children. Moreover, to be bold in a classroom is considered to be threat to teachers' authority. Moreover, in Turkish educational system learning strategy is a one-way interaction between the teacher and the student. Sometimes, we find such education system responsible for students' silence in their classroom like traditional rote learning and memorization found in Turkey.

### **Conclusion:**

All the way through this article, Tatar tries to feel the pulse of learners' silence on the basis of multidisciplinary perspectives like learners' psychology, culture, context and social norms and indicated the interconnectedness between those multidimensional factors and learner's silence. He also hints that there is no room for degrading silence rather it is a constructive classroom behavior in many cases. On the basis of the review of Tatar's article and on the basis of the results of previous studies on learners' silence, we came to know both positive and negative roles silence and its different interpretations. But these functions and meanings of silence are deeply entangled with Turkish learners' cultural beliefs and norms and their psychology shaped by their social and educational institutions. Tatar finally ascertains the beliefs of Turkish learners about their silence. He felt it necessary to investigate multidisciplinary causes of silence deeply rooted in learners' culture and beliefs. He points out that everything has a background, a cause, a belief and a meaning which act as impetus. This study discloses necessities of learners. It helps language teachers to keep in mind learners advantages and also helps them to evaluate learners' silence and thus, to assist teaching.

In Tatar's study, learners' silence signifies modesty to their teachers' authority and non-verbal protest to their friends' incoherent and irrelevant talks, learners face saving tendency and verbal incompetence etc. which are not surprising in our teaching environment and are quite logical. Because cultural influence in educational system has been manifested even by the shyness and silence of minority students of Bangladesh too. Both Chinese and Japanese students' silence also symbolizes politeness and avoidance of clash respectively. Thus, silence as a symbol politeness is also oriented by their cultural creeds, psychology and education system. Thus the findings of the study is generalizable. Tatar's study made us understand the functions, meanings and importance of silence on the ground of Turkish learners' cultural and contextual necessities. The findings of the studies are universal and generalizable. In fine, we can say that in the compound of learning both silence and expressiveness should be appreciable. Moreover, silence is an internal speech through which reproduction and confection of ideas is made possible. So, we can't look at silence as exclusively detrimental but as a favorable tool for learning. Though to some extent, silence is a breakdown of communication, a skilled teacher should be able to distinguish between meaningful and unproductive silence. Sibel Tatar's interview, observation of the non-native English speaker Turkish students studying in US compound help us the researchers and instructors to understand that learners' silence is embedded in their native culture and the context which they are in. Additionally, silence in many cases, prompted by their psychology and preoccupied with their education system. To conclude the voice of Taneen rings true as she says that the use of silence as a tool of communication is context-dependent and silence is seen as both positive and negative learning tool among the cultural communities Taneen (1985:98 in Tatar, 2005).

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