

The Silent Classroom Phenomenon in Indonesian Language Learning: A Study on Barriers to Students' Speaking Skills

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Abstract

Speaking skills constitute a crucial competency in Indonesian language learning, as they are closely related to students' ability to express ideas, construct arguments, and participate in academic discussions. However, in instructional practice, the phenomenon of the silent classroom is frequently observed, referring to a relatively passive classroom condition characterized by low levels of students' oral participation during lectures. This study aims to describe the silent classroom phenomenon in Indonesian language learning and to analyze the factors contributing to students' low speaking proficiency. This research employs a descriptive qualitative approach, involving 40 first-semester students of the Indonesian Language and Literature Education Study Program at IKIP PGRI Bojonegoro, enrolled in a speaking skills course. Data were collected through classroom observations, interviews, and documentation, and subsequently analyzed using a data analysis model consisting of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. The findings reveal that students' speaking participation remains relatively low, with 20% categorized as active participants, 37.5% as moderately active, and 42.5% as passive or silent. The silent classroom phenomenon is influenced by several factors, including low self-confidence, anxiety about speaking in front of the class, limited vocabulary, and prior learning experiences that tend to be passive. In addition, pedagogical factors such as teaching methods still dominated by lectures, a lack of interactive discussion activities, and insufficient speaking practice also contribute to the low level of students' oral participation. These findings underscore the importance of developing more communicative, interactive, and participatory speaking instruction strategies in Indonesian language learning at the tertiary level.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received : 28 February 2026

Revised : 26 Maret 2026

Accepted : 27 April 2026

KEYWORDS

Indonesian language learning; Silent classroom; Speaking skills; Student participation;

PUBLISHER'S NOTE

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Introduction

Speaking skills constitute one of the fundamental competencies in language learning, playing a central role in both the communication process and the development of students' critical thinking abilities. In the context of higher education, particularly in the Indonesian Language and Literature Education Study Program, speaking skills function not only as a means of expressing ideas orally but also as a primary medium for developing argumentative abilities, participating in academic discussions, and fostering productive scholarly interaction. Proficient speaking enables students to articulate opinions logically, respond to others' ideas, and engage actively in various academic activities within the classroom.

However, the reality of instructional practice often reveals a significant gap between the ideal objectives of speaking instruction and what actually occurs in the classroom. In many learning situations, students tend to assume the role of passive listeners rather than active participants who contribute to classroom discussions. This phenomenon is referred to in language education studies as the silent classroom, a condition in which the classroom atmosphere becomes relatively quiet due

to low levels of students' verbal participation during the learning process (Hu, 2021; Sedova & Navratilova, 2020; Tenglet, 2023). This condition poses a serious challenge in Indonesian language learning, as it hinders the development of oral communication skills, which should constitute the core of speaking instruction.

The silent classroom phenomenon is not limited to primary and secondary education; it is also widely observed in higher education, both in Indonesia and in other countries. Setiyono (2022) explains that, in the context of Indonesian language learning at the tertiary level, students' speaking skills are often still at a concerning level, with many students unable to express ideas fluently and confidently. Research conducted by Suryani (2020) indicates that approximately 55 percent of students in Indonesian language classes at the university level rarely or almost never express their opinions during classroom discussions, while only around 20 percent actively participate in oral communication. Similar findings have been reported in international studies. Bao (2014) found that approximately 60 percent of students in language classes across various universities exhibit passive tendencies in classroom discussions, with only a small proportion consistently expressing their opinions. Furthermore, Liu and Jackson (2019) discovered that more than 50 percent of students experience significant anxiety when required to speak in front of the class, leading them to avoid oral communication activities. Another international study by Du, Van Duc, The, and Dung (2025) in Vietnam confirms that non-participation in second language learning remains a major obstacle requiring serious pedagogical intervention. These findings clearly demonstrate that low student participation in speaking is not an isolated local issue but rather a global problem that requires systematic attention and intervention.

The factors contributing to the emergence of the silent classroom phenomenon in language learning can generally be classified into two major categories: psychological factors originating from within the students and pedagogical factors related to instructional strategies and the learning environment. From a psychological perspective, low self-confidence is a dominant factor influencing students' willingness to speak in front of the class. MacIntyre (2017), in his research on language anxiety, explains that individuals with low self-confidence tend to fear making mistakes, being ridiculed by peers, and receiving negative evaluations from lecturers; consequently, they prefer to remain silent even when they have ideas or opinions to express. In addition to self-confidence, communication apprehension is another highly significant psychological factor. This anxiety may manifest in various forms, such as trembling, sweating, a quivering voice, or even mental blocks when asked to speak spontaneously in public. Matin (2023), in his study on affective factors in speaking instruction, emphasizes that communication anxiety has a strong negative correlation with students' oral participation: the higher the level of anxiety, the lower the likelihood of engaging in oral communication in the classroom. Another important psychological factor is limited vocabulary. Sholehhudin (2021) explains that students with limited vocabulary often feel unable to construct sentences spontaneously and accurately when attempting to express ideas, leading them to remain silent rather than risk making mistakes. Previous learning experiences that are predominantly passive also shape students' behavioral patterns in the classroom. Students who have been accustomed to teacher-centered learning throughout their earlier education often experience considerable difficulty when required to participate actively in discussions at the tertiary level.

In addition to psychological factors, pedagogical factors also play a crucial role in shaping classroom communication dynamics. Richards (2015), in *Key Issues in Language Teaching*,

emphasizes that language instruction that is overly teacher-centered reduces students' opportunities to practice speaking actively, resulting in less communicative and more monotonous classroom interaction. The lecture method, which still dominates instructional practices in many Indonesian universities, is one of the primary causes of low student participation in speaking. In this approach, lecturers act as the main source of knowledge, delivering information in a one-way manner, while students serve as passive recipients. This situation is further exacerbated by the limited implementation of interactive discussion activities involving all students. Setiyono (2022) critiques that many Indonesian language lecturers are still reluctant or insufficiently skilled in designing speaking instruction based on active and participatory communication activities. Activities such as group discussions, academic debates, presentations, simulations, and role-plays are rarely implemented systematically and continuously (Denvir & Briceland, 2023; Kohn, 2024). In fact, numerous studies have demonstrated that these activities are highly effective in improving students' speaking skills while simultaneously reducing their anxiety levels (Thornbury, 2005; Burns, 2010; Nabil, 2025).

The limited provision of structured speaking practice within the curriculum also constitutes a serious constraint. Sholehhudin (2021) found that most language skills courses still allocate more time to reading and writing skills, while the proportion dedicated to speaking and listening remains relatively small. As a result, students lack sufficient opportunities and time to practice speaking intensively, preventing the optimal development of their oral communication skills.

The silent classroom phenomenon has highly detrimental effects not only on the mastery of speaking skills but also on the overall development of students' academic competencies. In the context of 21st-century education, oral communication skills are among the key competencies that university graduates must possess to compete in the global job market. Trilling and Fadel (2018) assert that communication, collaboration, critical thinking, and creativity are the four core competencies required for success in both academic and professional life in the era of the Industrial Revolution 4.0. Students who remain silent in the classroom lose valuable opportunities to develop their ability to present logical arguments, defend their viewpoints, and negotiate in complex communicative situations. Furthermore, this condition also contributes to low levels of critical thinking, as critical thinking is often stimulated and refined through discussion and academic debate. Hanifaturrizkia, Aridah, Sucahyo, Rusmawaty, and Ping (2025), in their narrative study, found that classroom silence not only deprives students of their physical voice but also erodes their confidence in articulating their intellectual identity in public. In other words, the silent classroom phenomenon hinders not only language development but also the formation of students' academic identity.

Despite this, research in Indonesian language education remains largely focused on reading and writing skills, while studies addressing barriers to students' oral communication particularly those related to the silent classroom phenomenon are still relatively limited and have not received adequate attention. This research gap indicates the need for more in-depth investigation, especially in the context of Indonesian language learning in higher education. A comprehensive analysis of the psychological and pedagogical factors contributing to low student participation in speaking is essential for understanding classroom communication dynamics holistically and for formulating more effective instructional strategies to enhance speaking skills.

This study is therefore significant, as it contributes not only to the theoretical development of language education but also to the practical improvement of instructional design in language

education programs. Matin (2025) emphasizes that appropriate pedagogical interventions—such as the implementation of communicative approaches and the creation of supportive learning environments can significantly reduce students' speaking anxiety while increasing their oral participation. Nabil (2025) further demonstrates that transforming the dynamics of question-and-answer interactions between lecturers and students, as well as among students themselves, can serve as a powerful catalyst for developing idea articulation and communicative confidence.

Based on the comprehensive background outlined above, this study is directed toward an in-depth examination of the silent classroom phenomenon in Indonesian language learning, specifically in the speaking skills course within the Indonesian Language and Literature Education Study Program at IKIP PGRI Bojonegoro. This study specifically seeks to analyze the psychological and pedagogical factors that contribute to the emergence of the silent classroom phenomenon in the learning process, as well as to identify the various obstacles faced by students in developing their speaking skills in the classroom. Through a systematic and in-depth investigation, this study also aims to accurately describe the condition of students' speaking participation and to critically analyze the factors influencing their low level of engagement in oral communication.

Ultimately, the findings of this study are expected to make a significant contribution to the development of instructional strategies that enhance students' speaking skills while fostering a more communicative, interactive, and participatory classroom environment. More broadly, this study is also expected to serve as a foundation for further, more comprehensive research on the dynamics of oral communication in Indonesian language learning across various levels of education.

Method

This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach to describe the silent classroom phenomenon and to analyze the factors contributing to low student speaking participation. The selection of this approach is based on John W. Creswell (2014), who argues that qualitative research enables researchers to explore social phenomena in depth within their natural settings.

The research subjects consisted of 40 first-semester students from the Indonesian Language and Literature Education Study Program at IKIP PGRI Bojonegoro, enrolled in a Speaking Skills course. The sampling technique used was purposive sampling, as explained by Katherine A. Palinkas et al. (2015), which aims to select participants who are the most informative and relevant to the focus of the study.

Data were collected through three techniques. Classroom observation was conducted to directly observe students' speaking participation. Semi-structured interviews were carried out with 12 purposively selected students to explore the psychological and pedagogical factors underlying classroom silence. According to Mendoza and Ou (2022), semi-structured interviews provide a balance between structured guidance and flexibility to obtain in-depth responses. Documentation, including the Semester Learning Plan and instructional materials, was also used as supporting data.

Data analysis followed the model proposed by Matthew B. Miles, A. Michael Huberman, and Johnny Saldaña (2014), which consists of three stages: data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing. Data validity was ensured through source and method triangulation, as well as member checking to verify the findings with the participants.

Result and Discussion

Result

This study aims to describe the phenomenon of the *silent classroom* in Indonesian language learning and to analyze the factors contributing to the low level of students' speaking participation. Based on observations conducted over eight class meetings in the Speaking Skills course involving 40 first-semester students of the Indonesian Language and Literature Education Study Program at IKIP PGRI Bojonegoro, data on the distribution of students' speaking participation were obtained, as presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Distribution of Students' Speaking Participation

Participation Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Active Participation	8	20.0
Moderate Participation	15	37.5
Silent/Passive	17	42.5
Total	40	100

Based on Table 1, it can be seen that students categorized as silent or passive constitute the highest percentage, accounting for 42.5% of the total 40 students. Meanwhile, only 20% of students are categorized as actively participating, and the remaining 37.5% fall into the moderate participation category. These data indicate that the majority of students have not demonstrated optimal verbal engagement in the learning process. This condition suggests the presence of the *silent classroom* phenomenon, in which classroom interaction is dominated by a small number of active students, while most students tend to act as passive listeners. These findings are consistent with those of Suryani (2020), who reported that approximately 55% of students in Indonesian language classes rarely express their opinions, and only around 20% actively participate.

To facilitate a clearer visual understanding of the data, Diagram 1 below illustrates the distribution of students' speaking participation.

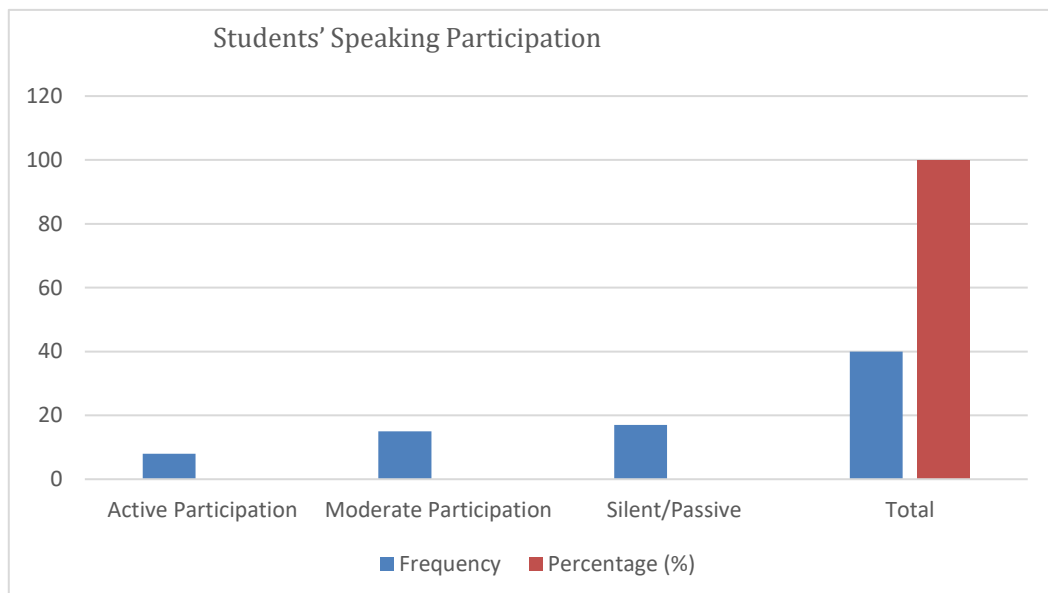


Diagram 1. Distribution of Students' Speaking Participation

Diagram 1 visually reinforces the finding that more than two-fifths of the students are in a silent or passive condition. Only one-fifth of the students consistently participate actively in

classroom discussions. The dominance of the silent category serves as an initial indication that speaking skills instruction has not been implemented optimally.

Furthermore, to identify the factors contributing to low speaking participation, the researcher conducted in-depth interviews with 12 students selected purposively from the three participation categories. Based on the analysis of the interview data, two main groups of factors were identified: psychological factors and pedagogical factors. Table 2 below presents the distribution of psychological factors influencing students' speaking participation.

Table 2. Psychological Factors Affecting Speaking Participation

Psychological Factors	Number of Respondents	Percentage (%)
Low self-confidence	12	35.3
Speaking anxiety in front of the class	9	26.5
Limited vocabulary	8	23.5
Previous passive learning experience	5	14.7
Total	34	100

Table 2 shows that the most dominant factor is low self-confidence, experienced by 35.3% of the respondents. This is followed by speaking anxiety in front of the class at 26.5%, limited vocabulary at 23.5%, and previous passive learning experiences at 14.7%. These findings are consistent with MacIntyre (2017), who argues that communication anxiety has a significant relationship with low student participation in speaking activities in language learning. The distribution of these psychological factors is further illustrated in Diagram 2 below.

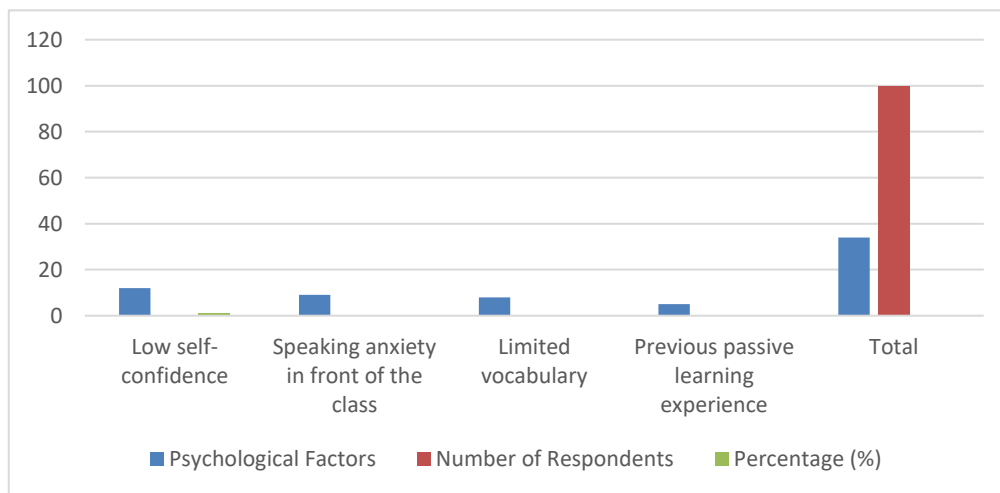


Figure 2. Pedagogical Factors Affecting Speaking Participation

In addition to psychological factors, this study also identified pedagogical factors that contribute to the silent classroom phenomenon. Table 3 presents the distribution of pedagogical factors based on the results of observations and interviews.

Table 3. Pedagogical Factors Affecting Speaking Participation

Pedagogical Factors	Observation Frequency	Percentage (%)
Dominance of lecture-based teaching methods	8	40.0
Lack of interactive discussion activities	7	35.0
Limited structured speaking practice	5	25.0
Total	20	100

The data in Table 3 indicate that the dominance of lecture-based teaching methods is the most frequently observed pedagogical factor, accounting for 40%. This is followed by a lack of interactive

discussion activities at 35% and limited structured speaking practice at 25%. These findings reinforce Richards' (2015) assertion that language instruction that is overly teacher-centered reduces students' opportunities to practice speaking. The visualization of these pedagogical factors is presented in Diagram 3 below.

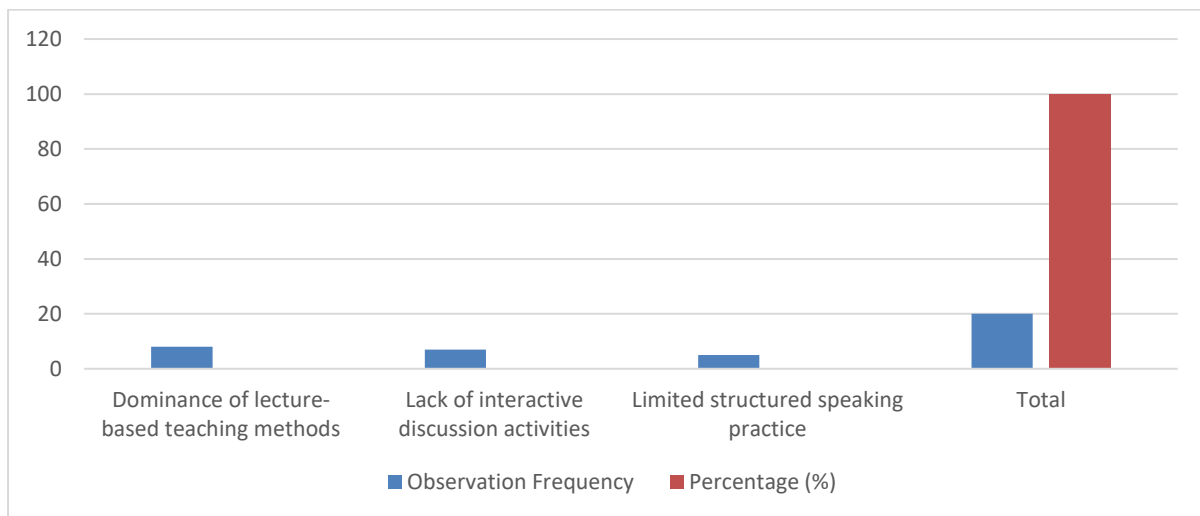


Diagram 3. Pedagogical Factors Affecting Speaking Participation

Discussion

The findings of this study reveal a clear indication of the *silent classroom* phenomenon in Indonesian language learning, particularly in the speaking skills course. The data demonstrate that a significant proportion of students fall into the passive or silent category (42.5%), while only a small percentage actively engage in classroom discussions (20%). This imbalance suggests that the learning environment has not yet effectively facilitated students' oral participation. From a pedagogical perspective, such a condition raises concerns about the effectiveness of instructional strategies employed in developing students' communicative competence.

The dominance of passive participation aligns with previous studies in language education. Suryani (2020) reported similar patterns in Indonesian higher education, where the majority of students tend to remain silent during classroom interaction. Internationally, Bao (2014) also found that students in Asian educational contexts often exhibit reticence in speaking due to cultural and educational backgrounds that emphasize listening over speaking. This suggests that the silent classroom phenomenon is not merely situational but is also influenced by broader sociocultural and educational traditions.

From the perspective of communicative language teaching (CLT), the low level of student participation contradicts the fundamental principles of language learning. According to Richards (2006), language learning should prioritize meaningful interaction and communication as the central processes through which learners acquire language skills. When students remain silent, opportunities for negotiation of meaning, feedback, and language production are significantly reduced. As a result, the development of speaking proficiency becomes constrained. Thornbury (2005) further emphasizes that speaking is a skill that can only be developed through consistent practice and active use, not through passive reception of knowledge.

The psychological factors identified in this study play a crucial role in shaping students' participation. Among these, low self-confidence emerges as the most dominant factor. This finding is

consistent with MacIntyre (2017), who argues that self-confidence is a key predictor of willingness to communicate (WTC) in a second language. Students with low confidence are more likely to avoid speaking situations due to fear of making mistakes or being negatively evaluated. This avoidance behavior ultimately reinforces their silence and limits their opportunities for improvement.

In addition to self-confidence, communication anxiety is another significant barrier. Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986) introduced the concept of Foreign Language Anxiety, which includes communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and test anxiety. These forms of anxiety can severely hinder students' ability to participate in speaking activities. The findings of this study support Matin (2023), who highlights that higher levels of anxiety are associated with lower levels of oral participation. When students experience anxiety, their cognitive resources are diverted from language processing to managing emotional stress, resulting in reduced fluency and willingness to speak.

Limited vocabulary is also identified as a contributing factor. Nation (2001) emphasizes that vocabulary knowledge is a fundamental component of language proficiency, as it directly affects learners' ability to express ideas. Students with insufficient vocabulary often struggle to construct sentences, leading to hesitation and silence. This supports Sholehudin (2021), who found that vocabulary limitations frequently cause students to withdraw from speaking activities due to fear of making linguistic errors.

Another important psychological factor is students' previous learning experiences. Many students come from educational backgrounds that emphasize teacher-centered instruction, where they are accustomed to listening rather than actively participating. Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory suggests that learning is shaped by social interaction and prior experiences. When students have limited exposure to interactive learning environments, they may lack the skills and confidence needed to engage in discussion-based activities at the university level.

In addition to psychological factors, pedagogical factors significantly contribute to the emergence of the silent classroom phenomenon. The findings indicate that lecture-based teaching methods remain dominant, accounting for 40% of observed practices. This supports Richards (2015), who argues that teacher-centered approaches limit students' opportunities to practice speaking and reduce classroom interaction. In such environments, students are positioned as passive recipients of knowledge rather than active participants in the learning process.

The lack of interactive discussion activities further exacerbates the problem. According to Long (1996), interaction plays a crucial role in language acquisition, as it allows learners to negotiate meaning and receive feedback. Without sufficient opportunities for interaction, students are less likely to develop their speaking skills. Similarly, Swain (1985) emphasizes the importance of output in language learning, arguing that learners need to produce language in order to develop accuracy and fluency. The absence of interactive activities such as group discussions, debates, and role-plays limits students' opportunities to produce language.

Moreover, the limited provision of structured speaking practice in the curriculum is another critical issue. Burns and Joyce (1997) highlight that effective speaking instruction requires carefully designed activities that provide students with opportunities to practice in a supportive environment. Without structured practice, students may not develop the necessary skills to participate in spontaneous communication. This finding is consistent with Thornbury (2005), who emphasizes that

speaking activities should be systematically integrated into the curriculum to ensure continuous skill development.

The interplay between psychological and pedagogical factors creates a cycle that reinforces the silent classroom phenomenon. For example, a lack of interactive teaching methods may increase students' anxiety and reduce their confidence, which in turn leads to lower participation. Conversely, students who rarely participate may not develop their speaking skills, further reinforcing their reluctance to speak. This cyclical relationship highlights the need for comprehensive interventions that address both internal and external factors.

To overcome the silent classroom phenomenon, it is essential to adopt more student-centered and communicative teaching approaches. The implementation of CLT principles can encourage active participation by creating opportunities for meaningful interaction. Activities such as group discussions, problem-based learning, and collaborative tasks can help students build confidence and reduce anxiety. Nunan (2004) suggests that task-based language teaching (TBLT) is particularly effective in promoting communication, as it focuses on the use of language in real-life contexts.

Creating a supportive classroom environment is also crucial. Dörnyei (2001) emphasizes the importance of motivation in language learning, suggesting that teachers should foster a positive and encouraging atmosphere where students feel safe to express their ideas. Providing constructive feedback, acknowledging students' efforts, and reducing the fear of negative evaluation can significantly improve students' willingness to participate.

Furthermore, integrating technology into language learning can offer alternative avenues for participation. Digital platforms, such as online discussion forums and video presentations, can provide students with additional opportunities to practice speaking in less intimidating environments. Research by Chappelle (2003) indicates that technology-enhanced language learning can increase student engagement and participation.

In conclusion, the findings of this study highlight that the silent classroom phenomenon is a multifaceted issue influenced by both psychological and pedagogical factors. Addressing this issue requires a holistic approach that combines the development of students' confidence and language competence with the implementation of interactive and communicative teaching strategies. By fostering a more engaging and supportive learning environment, educators can enhance students' speaking participation and ultimately improve the effectiveness of language learning in higher education.

Conclusion

This study aimed to examine the silent classroom phenomenon in Indonesian language learning, particularly within tertiary-level speaking skills courses, and to identify the psychological and pedagogical factors that shape students' verbal participation. The findings demonstrate that classroom interaction remains uneven, with 42.5% of students categorized as silent or passive and only 20% actively participating in discussions. This pattern confirms that students' speaking engagement has not yet reached an optimal level and that oral classroom participation is concentrated among a relatively small group of active learners. The results also show that students' reluctance to speak is not caused by a single factor, but by the interaction of psychological barriers and instructional conditions. Low self-confidence, speaking anxiety, limited vocabulary, and previous passive learning experiences contribute to students' hesitation, while lecture-dominated teaching, insufficient interactive activities, and limited structured speaking practice further sustain classroom

silence. Thus, the study answers the research questions by showing that the silent classroom phenomenon is both an internal learner-related issue and an external pedagogical challenge.

Theoretically, this study contributes to a deeper conceptual understanding of silence in language classrooms by positioning it as a multidimensional phenomenon shaped by affective, cognitive, and instructional factors. Practically, the findings imply that speaking instruction in higher education should move beyond conventional teacher-centered approaches and adopt more communicative, supportive, and student-centered learning strategies. Lecturers need to design structured speaking tasks, create psychologically safe classroom environments, and provide gradual opportunities for students to build confidence through meaningful oral interaction. Nevertheless, this study is limited by its specific institutional context, sample scope, and cross-sectional design, which may restrict the generalizability of the findings to broader educational settings. Future studies may extend this work by involving larger and more diverse samples, comparing different institutional contexts, applying longitudinal designs, or testing specific intervention models to reduce classroom silence. Overall, this study underscores that addressing the silent classroom phenomenon requires balanced pedagogical intervention that simultaneously strengthens students' psychological readiness and transforms classroom interaction patterns. By foregrounding silence as a critical issue in speaking instruction, the study offers a valuable foundation for developing more participatory, inclusive, and effective language learning environments in higher education.

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