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How silence facilitates verbal participation

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ABSTRACT

The article reports a qualitative-quantitative case study of 239 Vietnamese university students' perspectives on the effects of their silence on the formulation and quality of their talk. It presents participants' voices with regards to whether and how their silent thinking influences verbal communication in the English language classroom and discusses the dynamics of productive learning strategies that would benefit the quality of speech. Data from an open-ended questionnaire reveal insights into students' silent and verbal learning with a focus on the logical relationship between the two modes. Three findings coming out of this project include different nuances of the silent learning behaviour, the frequency of success in producing speech after mental processing practice, and a range of practical strategies that helps turn thoughts into verbal output. The study unpacks the importance of silence as autonomous learning and proposes relevant classroom activities for more rewarding outcomes.

1. Introduction

This article, which draws upon research evidence, argues that language teachers should not simply promote learner talk by discouraging learner silence. We believe that doing this would represent a serious misunderstanding of how silence works because, without productive mental processing, talk either cannot happen or happens in poor quality. We would like to challenge the scholarly view, such as one advocated by Canary and MacGregor (2008), that ideal students are those who participate in classroom discussion and less ideal students are those who remain silent. Justified by that view, many intervention projects have been conducted to 'rescue' learners from silence. For instance, a study by Smith et al., (2005) was designed to put introverted students through pedagogical therapy with remedies for articulation. Such an experiment would produce temporary results rather than long-term educational impact because it treats students as if they were patients in the hospital. In other words, those treatments might help lessen the symptoms of being quiet but barely remove silence completely when it comes to introverted students' personality. This is only one example of research of this type among others, including classroom experiments by Boniecki and Moore (2003), Canary and MacGregor (2008), Dallimore et al., (2004), Weaver and Qi (2005), to cite a few.

Classroom intervention sometimes oversimplifies silence and ignores the fact that many learners employ silence to incubate thoughts and rehearse internal performance. Once such preparation brings readiness, these students would speak out and contribute to the lesson at their best. Any attempt to cut off silence from talk would mean to stop this productive process from happening and cause damage to students' learning mechanisms. To support our argument, we collected evidence about how learners use silence to prepare for talk. We hypothesise that although there may be

students who may use silence passively to relax and switch off from classroom discussion, there might be others who thoughtfully employ silent processing to build talk and hope to participate once they are ready to do so.

With this in mind, the study investigated Vietnamese university students' perspectives on the effects of their silence on the formulation and quality of their talk. Without pre-conceived evaluation of the value of learner silence in this community, the study is open to participants' voices with regards to whether and how their silent thinking influences verbal communication in the English language classroom, which can be either negative or positive, or both. In the case where positive use of silence is noted, the project looks further into the dynamics of such productive moments for learning strategies that would benefit the quality of speech.

Learner silence has gained a great deal of scholarly attention due to the challenge to both the understanding of silent behaviour and the use of silence in learning. To many teachers, quiet learners who seldom verbally contribute to the lessons are underestimated as being passive and unenthusiastic (Kalamaras, 1994). Silence is often viewed as a cultural phenomenon. Over the years, students' quietness in many East-Asian educational settings is construed as the demonstration of its unique culture. As Ramirez (1989) asserts, cultural factors and early experiences often direct learning styles; students from different backgrounds might develop divergent thinking, learning, and behaving. Studies into the relationship between socio-cultural aspects and learning habits (see, for example, Abede & Deneke, 2015; Bista, 2012; Santosa & Mardiana, 2018) have pointed to learner background of Confucian and Collectivist society to explain silence. Common characteristics associated with these philosophy systems are the appreciation of mercy, social order, responsibility, and interdependency. A study by Bao (2014) however, discovered that many East-Asian students who have studied in Australia do not believe in Confucianism as the explanation of their behaviour. Instead, they admit having adapted and modified their learning styles to a great extent to suit the new academic culture. Because of this, to hold on to students' cultural origins and deny students' ability to be flexible learners represents narrow-mindedness. It is unhelpful to develop research designs based on stereotypical thinking.

In Confucian and collectivist societies, students often refrain from impulsive talk as a way of maintaining social harmony. Arguments and critique are not highly recommended in these educational contexts; thus, the communication between teachers and students in the classroom is usually one-way, initiated by teachers in most cases (Wursten & Jacobs, 2013). Some students speak only when being called by teachers to show respect to status. Talking less or keeping quiet also serves to refrain from negative behaviour during a conversation when one feels upset. In many international settings, when learners behave within such cultural reasoning, they may be perceived as uncooperative and over-dependent on knowledge transmission (Nguyen, A. T. H., 2002; Nguyen, H. T., 2002; Tran, 2013). While each culture embraces its values, it seems to be senseless to determine which is more rational without consideration of the social context of learning.

While becoming too busy looking into cultures to explain silence as a problem, many forget that silence is laden with important cognitive values, which contain preconditions for composing thoughts that can become verbal participation. For example, in the context of a law-school setting, the fast pace of high-pressure discussion where both the accuracy and fluency in speaking contribute to the persuasiveness of a speech seems to be required of eloquent students. A silent pause provided during such discussion may encourage silent learners to express their voices and join a debate. Silence allows less verbal students to think and break eloquent peers' verbal dominance when needed (Roberts, 2010). Silence can be a preparatory step for verbal involvement after learners have sufficiently employed their personal space for attentive listening and proactive thinking.

The internalization of language input usually occurs in silence when the stimulus domain in the learner's brain turns on a more conscious mode. As Krashen's distinction (1981) between acquisition and learning indicates, simple data are stored in explicit knowledge source and the more challenging abstract rules are stored in implicit knowledge source. Simply put, when the mind struggles with complex data, learners need more thinking time to boost the creative ideas and problem-solving skills (Nijstad et al., 2010). Besides ideas, mental processing also benefits language rehearsal. If in actual conversation, linguistic self-repair is constructed through pauses, hesitation, tracks, and corrections such as 'ah', 'well', 'I mean', in the mind, such repair manifests in silence (Goodwin, 1981; Tannen, 1993). According to Guerrero (1991), many learners practice self-talking, a kind of metatalk or inner speech, consecutively over the years before the time an accurate and meaningful

utterance is officially produced. Thus, the quality of language output can be improved thanks to the adequate amount of time devoted to thoughtful participation.

There are also other circumstances under which silence is advisable. For instance, silence is preferably observed in libraries for its favourable earning conditions (Ollin, 2008; Zembylas & Michaelides, 2004). Silence serves as disciplinary classroom management and precondition for studying (Bista, 2012), especially when excessive talk turns into chaotic noise and distraction. Although many teachers are acutely aware of this, when it comes to academic performance, some disvalue the use of silence and regard it as inferior to speech. The current study challenges this common perception and presents a more truthful picture of learning by collecting students' voices. These voices will help justify the nature of their use of silence as well as how such silence supports or fails to support verbal participation in the English language classroom. After all, learners themselves must be given the opportunity to explain their own behaviour instead of scholars or teachers always speaking for them on the basis of presumption.

2. Research Method

This case study was conducted at a tertiary school located in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam in 2020. The choice of research location has to do with the researchers' professional network and travel practicality. Students from various bachelor year levels in a wide range of discipline majors were recruited on the foundation of voluntary participation in the project. Their English proficiency ranged from basic (A2) to upper-intermediate (B2) in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), as identified by the name of their current English classes reported in a questionnaire. Data on learner reflection were collected to explore both silent and verbal learning with a focus on the relationship between the two modes. More specifically, the questionnaire including eight open-ended questions was developed to seek data in response to four research questions:

1. Do students prefer silence or talk in their everyday learning?
2. Why do they make such choices?
3. How much silence can turn into talk?
4. What strategies enable that to happen?

The reason for open-ended questioning has to do with the need to foster free thoughts and encourage participants' voice, a philosophy inspired by Johnson and Christensen (2017). The open nature of this questionnaire acts simultaneously as a qualitative and quantitative tool of data collection. It is qualitative in the sense that participants can write their thoughts in free-styled reflection; it is quantitative in the sense that it yields statistical data to show the proportion of different inclinations in the use of classroom silence. Thanks to this mixed-method exploration, the outcome of the project will be presented both statistically and insightfully.

3. Findings and Discussion

This section presents students' favourite learning behaviour with regards to silent and verbal learning. In this regard, participants stated how much they enjoy talking, cherish silence, prefer to think then talk, or prefer to talk then think. These four varieties were created to tap into the nuances of learning behaviour as we do not want silence and talk to be the only choices of behaviour. Research conducted by Bao (2014) on international students has demonstrated that between speech and silence there are often a variety of learning modes that are in-betweens. Below is the breakdown of students' choices.

3.1. Preference for Silence and Talk

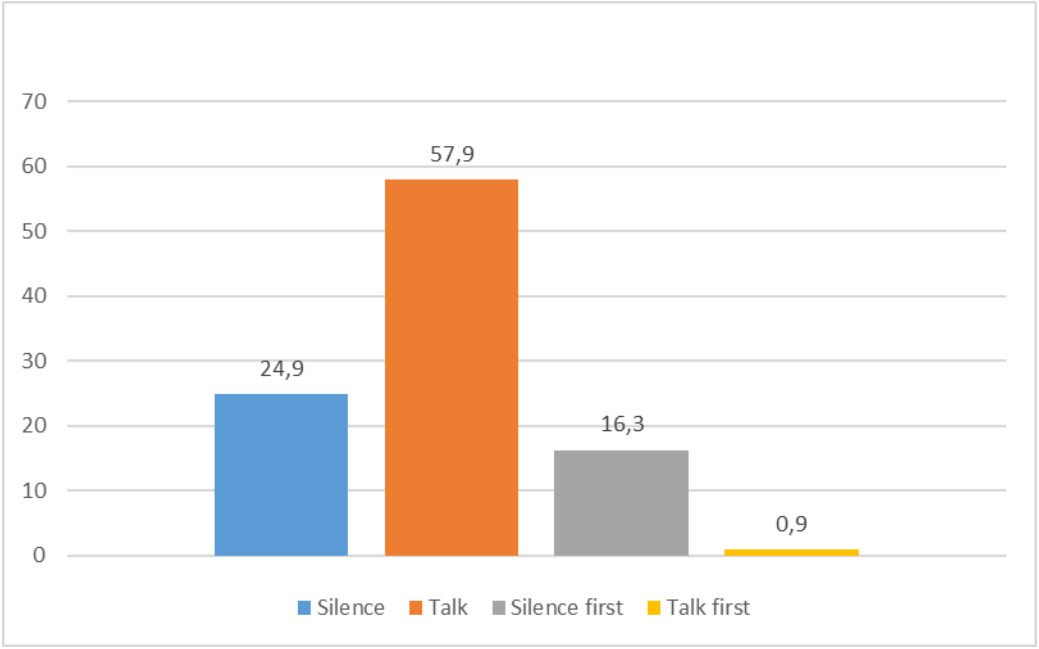

Fig. 1. Student Choice of Silence and Talk

Although the study focuses on silence, talk stands out as the most favourite choice in students' learning modes. The chart above shows the number of students (out of 239 participants) who opt for their favourite mode of practicing communicative skills. Talk (coded in orange) takes up the most choice among 137 participants (57.9%) as their ultimate aim of classroom learning; while silence (blue) represents the preference of a quarter of the participants (60 students) who enjoy practising verbal skills quietly (24.9%). Silence first (gray) is the choice of 39 students who wish to incubate thoughts and will try to speak (16.3%). Talk first (yellow) is the choice of only 3 students (0.9%) who feel the need to speak first and reflect later. The open-ended data reveal four reasons for silence and three reasons for talk.

3.2. Four Reasons for Silence

First, silence benefits speech. Half the number of participants acknowledge that their ultimate aim in learning is to speak rather than keep silence. However, without planning on the intended performance, that aim would be impossible. For example, some would polish their words in the mind until they are ready to speak, elaborating that such autonomous space is important if one wishes to exercise control over the quality of speech. Autonomy is sometimes interpreted in the discourse as personal freedom (Bosacki & Bosacki, 2005). As one student reflected:

> After formulating the ideas, I will arrange how to speak about it, and check my language to be accurate so that my talk has fewer mistakes.

Second, silence has its value without the need to speak. The remaining students, on the contrary, emphasise silence as a learning tool in itself, that is, to serve comprehension and analytical thinking without having to finally say that out loud. One explained:

> Not all the time I say aloud helps me understand the lesson. When I keep silent, I understand better. I have more time to brainstorm.

Third, silence plays the role of maintaining communication rules. It occurs in between two talking turns, that is, when one person finishes what they need to say, a moment of silence would indicate that the turn is now ready to pass on to the next person, turn-giving. Suppose this rule is not well observed, everyone might be confused, as one participant reasoned:

> Talking out of turn will cause distraction. The speaker must have a listener. It is very common for everyone to take turns to say.

This way of practicing the silent rule is acknowledged in the relevant discourse as having a communicative function (see, for example, Jensen, 1973).

Fourth, silence allows an internal dialogue between the listener and the speaker. While being attentive to someone else's verbal contribution, the listener not only tries to comprehend the message but also quietly interacts with that message. Such interaction, according to the data, involves interpreting information, forming an opinion, and planning a response. These ways of utilising silence are not mutually independent but rather interrelated. They demonstrate several graded ways of thinking, ranging from silence for understanding and thinking to silence for supporting the rule and performing. The choice of such a decision would be contingent upon classroom situations, personality, and the degree of learning challenge.

3.3. Three Reasons for Talk

Students who opt for talk as their optimal learning choice also share their rationale. First, the aim of talk is to receive feedback. One student explains:

> Even when I know how to pronounce the words and make a sentence; I still want to say it aloud so that my teacher can listen and fix my mistakes. Sometimes what you perceive is not always correct; therefore, communication is to learn from each other which makes our perspectives richer.

Second, talk serves to build confidence in communication, as one reveals:

> When we share our thoughts, we have a chance to know how good our communication skills are. We notice our current level from that awareness and know what gaps in our knowledge should be filled. Doing is always harder than thinking.

Third, talk makes teamwork possible. Silence affects teamwork efficiency since the lack of communication among members leading to low performance of roles and responsibilities. One participant expresses concern over excessive silence:

> It is great to prepare before speaking but thinking too long will lead to stagnation. A person who thinks too carefully cannot give quick responses. Someone who thinks too much may forget the initial ideas.

As data speak, silence can be useful or useless. Although silence proves to be a useful conceptual tool to construct ideas and language, excessive silence might turn out to be a negative factor in learning. Simply put, thinking about how language works in silence is advantageous; however, it is not advisable to remain silent all the time. Learner silence becomes productive when one utilises quiet space for thoughts and output, while not properly employing it might also result in low learning impacts.

3.4. How Much Silence Transforms into Talk

This discussion takes a closer look at the productive side of silence in supporting verbal output. The finding illuminates the extent to which the students' mental processing practice yields speech performance. It is important to note that not all moments of preparation for verbal participation are successful. Sometimes, one thinks hard for a way to participate but might end up producing little or nothing to say. In the questionnaire design, we lined up such possibilities in a nuanced frequency ranging from the most to the least often when they attempt to use silence works or fails to work as planned.

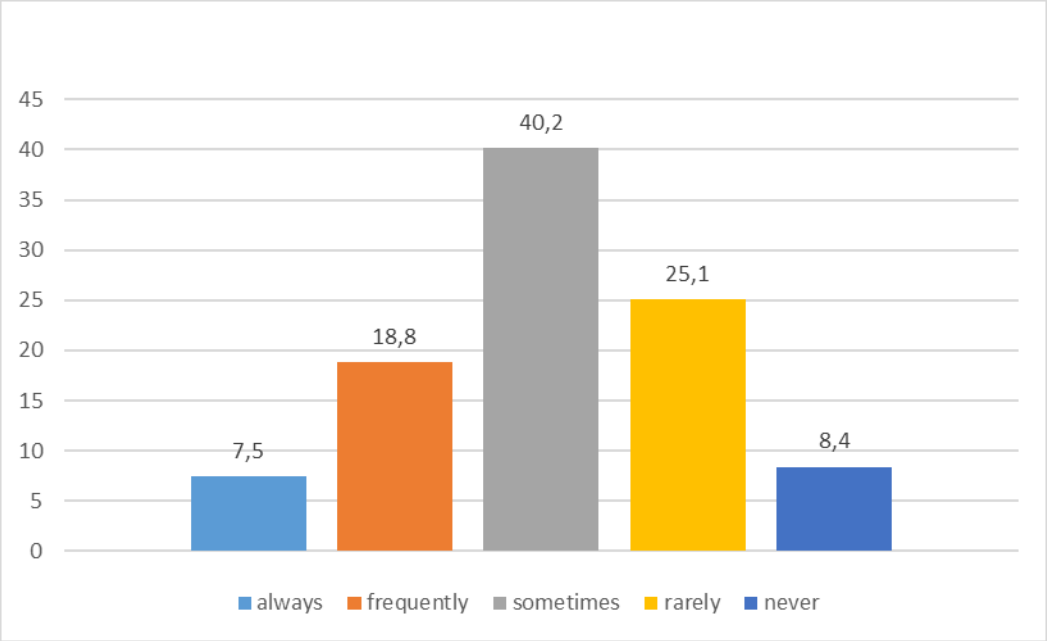

Fig. 2. How often Silence become talk

Figure 2 demonstrates various degrees of student confidence in silent learning or the possibilities of how often cognitive processing in silence can lead to immediate verbal participation reported by the participants in this case study. It is interesting to see that the percentage mostly distributed in the middle of the scale, demonstrating the fair effectiveness of learner silence in preparing the talk. As revealed by the data, is that on average, 18 students (7.5%) disclose that their attempts to turn silent thinking into verbal participation always succeed and 45 students (18.8%) remember they frequently succeed (as shown in the dark blue and orange columns). That is, one quarter of the 239 participants (26.3%) have that confidence that there is a strong connection between mental processing and verbal articulation. These are students who feel they have great control over the efficiency of their silent learning. One participant internalised:

> I usually keep quiet when I need to brainstorm ideas. While my friends are talking, I will arrange the ideas in mind, translate my thoughts into English. That approach is much better because thinking and talking at the same time is too risky to make mistakes.

The gray column in the middle shows that nearly half the number of participants are less certain about how silence can become talk. That is, 69 students (40.2%) remember that out of ten times they try to think for talk, 4 times they might end up talking and 6 times they might remain silent. Although this group do not have great control over their mental rehearsal, they do believe in the value of silence in forming speech. One of the reasons for silence is students' ambition of high-quality participation, that is, the belief that talking meaningfully is far more important than talking nonsense. Below are some thoughts from participants:

> A Vietnamese proverb says, words must be weighed not counted; spend time on saying what is worthwhile.
>
> I usually concentrate silently on thinking about the answers. Funny talks are only useful for socialisation. While studying, students should think more and talk less.

The remaining 80 students (33.5%), as shown in the yellow and light blue columns, do not make effort in verbal participation but most of the time stay within their silent thinking. In this group, some students do not see the lack of participation is a problem but feel that they can learn to listen and observe without having to speak. As several participants elaborate:

When I am quiet, I focus more on the ideas and I feel like I can complete my work in silence more quickly rather than talking with someone else.

You should probably keep quiet for a while waiting for someone to answer first. Then you will understand how to tackle the task and be more ready to contribute the next answers.

When I stop talking, I can watch other people working and I learn more from them. That is why the following speakers will often make fewer mistakes than the antecedent ones.

When I was quiet to observe and listen to my friends, I was able to refine what I agreed with and I had plenty of time to formulate sharper ideas before joining the discussion.

Others take a cautious stance towards participation for different psychological reasons, as stated in students' words:

I did not want people to judge me when I contribute something new first. I would rather listen to others and join the discussion to express my agreement or disagreement.

I usually keep quiet at the beginning of the lesson or before the presentation. Probably I cannot speak anything until I feel ready enough.

Overall, the data show a reasonable balance between silent thinking and verbal contribution. This reality reflects what the discourse highlights about communication, that is, effective communication is about both speech and silence (Bao, 2020a). As evident in the data, silence proves to be useful for speech as it is employed more proactively than demonstrate passively in the learning process. These figures, which represent the efficiency of silence, are not commonly documented in the current discourse in silence research. Although this is only a case study of 239 students in one context, the breakdown in the silent-talk relationship signifies the extent to which learners treat silence as a learning tool. It also consolidates the significant reality that silence has a closer relationship with talk than we often know. From this awareness, it would be unhelpful if teachers think twice before blaming quiet students for not learning. Depending on students' intellectual ability, character traits, and classroom dynamics, silent rehearsal might experience a delay until students feel ready to speak. Teachers might learn to be tolerant of all this and maintain a conducive atmosphere for mental engagement among individuals.

3.5. Strategies for Transforming Silence to Talk

It has been proved from research from research that learner behaviour is never static, because learners constantly adjust their participation mode (Bao & Ye, 2000). When taking a closer look at how students treat silence as a set of learning skills we realize that silence is not one single behaviour but is made up of a range of practical strategies with the potential to connect thoughts into verbal output. Data collected from one of the open-ended questions reveal eight different ways of employing silence as outlined below.

Table 1. List of Strategies for transforming silence to talk

Silent learning strategies	Frequency	Percentage of Cases
Gathering thoughts	181	75.7
Mental rehearsal	179	74.9
Writing down ideas	163	68.2
Self-talk	125	52.3
Listening to peers	107	44.8
Doing nothing	6	2.5
Using a dictionary		
Visualising	5	2.1
Others		

The strategies in Table 1 are not employed separately from one another. Instead, most students resort to more than one strategy as arising from both classroom circumstances and individualised ways of learning. As the data show, the five most frequently employed strategies in this case study

include gathering thoughts (75.7%, n=181), rehearsing talk in the mind (74.9%, n=179), writing down ideas (68.2%, n=163), self-talk (52.3%, n=125), and listening to peers (44.8%, n=107). Visualising was reported by a minority of participants (2.1%, n=5 in all). Very few students treat silence as an idle time and do nothing, that is, making no effort to think or speak (2.5%, n=6). It is important to note that a large percentage of students, that is, between 52.3% and 75.7% of all respondents, acknowledge that they employ silence in intensive mental work such as gathering thoughts, rehearsing participation in the mind, talking to oneself, and writing down what they wish to say. Such practices demonstrate an autonomous tendency to make pro-active use of silence for learning rather than to use silent time for relaxation.

4. Conclusion

Three implications can be drawn from this study to benefit ELT pedagogy. First, teachers need to be attentive to learner needs for silent processing. A time can be allocated for this practice when tasks are designed, with instructions for how much time students might need as well as how to follow up on that in the end. Second, silence needs to have an outcome, whether it is speech, or it results in students' enhanced L2 input, the latter of which can be evident in form of note-taking or improved assessment performance at a later time. Third, teaching needs to recognise silence as multiple learning strategies rather than perceive it as one type of behaviour. With this understanding in mind, classroom activities can include these ways of learning to be communicated to learners for clear expectations and for maximizing the potential of mental processing.

The study has provided evidence of students' diverse ways of using silence. This goes well with the discourse that recognizes silence as a form of engagement (Bao, 2020b) and a strong association with vocal manipulation (Bao, 2019). We appeal for teacher support to ensure that learners can exercise more choices and control over the learning process. The ultimate aim of such endeavour is to help learners take advantage of productive silence for speaking practice through various strategies. From a learner perspective, silence both facilitates and hinders the learning process. Besides, it is important to be mindful of learners who might be off task during silence, that is, simply relaxing and not knowing how to employ mental rehearsal for learning. Teachers might wish to develop a balanced understanding that not all positive silences lead to speech, but it all depends on class time availability, classroom circumstances, and individual decisions to contribute. The exploration of learner perspectives on the role of silence in producing verbal output in this article only representes one specific case. There is the need to replicate this type of research in other contexts for a more generalised view on how silence can boost speech. A second recommendation for research is how pedagogy responds to this silence-speech productive model with a relevant instructional procedure and strategies. A third topic is to compare teacher and learner attitudes towards reflective learning and how that understanding influences classroom learning.

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APPENDIX – QUESTIONNAIRE

1. Do you feel comfortable or uncomfortable when keeping silent in an English-speaking classroom? Why?
2. Do you feel annoyed or comfortable if your partners tend to keep quiet without sharing ideas with you in a speaking activity? Please explain.
3. Do you think silent students are unintelligent and passive or do you have another opinion?
4. In a speaking activity in a classroom, do you initiate or respond?
5. Do you improve English speaking skills by talking aloud or processing ideas quietly? How?
6. Does your teacher provide sufficient thinking time during English speaking activities? Please comment on how and in what case you might need such a time.
7. How often does your silent thinking result in talk? If possible, give an example of how silence help you prepare for class participation.
8. Which of these do you usually do during your own silence while preparing for interaction? Writing down ideas, self-talk, mental rehearsal, listening to peers, gathering thoughts, doing nothing, others (please explain).