Research on the Silence Phenomenon in High School English Classroom based on Discipline Theory

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Abstract: The new curriculum standard requires students to further use their English knowledge to communicate and develop intercultural communication skills on the basis of mastering basic knowledge, which requires teachers to carry out a variety of classroom activities in addition to teaching knowledge, so that students can actively participate in them and exercise their communicative skills. However, at present, classroom silence and low student motivation are still common in senior English classes, which hinders the implementation of classroom activities and has a negative impact on the progress of the classroom and the development of students. Many scholars at home and abroad have investigated this phenomenon and made corresponding recommendations, but the reference significance is limited by the differences in the subjects investigated. Therefore, this paper answers the following two questions based on Foucault’s theory of discipline: 1. What are the causes of the silence in high school English classrooms? 2. How can the silence phenomenon in classrooms be improved? The author divides the causes into three dimensions: classroom environment, teaching style and regulation system. The author also proposes suggestions to alleviate the silence in the classroom in response to the above dimensions. First, change the traditional teaching idea and take into account the self-esteem of some students when assessing their classmates. Secondly, reduce the absolute control of teachers over the classroom, and take students as the main focus to establish a harmonious teacher-student relationship. Third, rationalize the system of classroom norms to allow students to boldly break out of the constraints and increase their motivation.

Keywords: High School English; Silence; Reasons.

1. Introduction

The GCSE English Curriculum Standards (2017) stipulates that the GCSE English curriculum should promote the development of students’ English literacy, emphasizing the need to develop students’ multiple abilities to understand and express in social contexts. It aims to lay a good foundation for students continued English learning and lifelong development. In addition, the new Curriculum sets out six elements of the curriculum: thematic contexts, types of discourse, language knowledge, cultural knowledge, language skills and learning strategies. These six elements are an interrelated and organic whole. Students use language skills to acquire, sort and integrate linguistic and cultural knowledge, deepen their understanding of language, value the appreciation of discourse, compare and explore cultural connotations, and use learning strategies to improve their understanding and expression in the process of problem solving based on different types of discourse around a specific subject context. The fundamental aim of education is not only to impart knowledge to students, but also to improve their ability to apply knowledge and solve problems in real situations. However, silence is currently common in Chinese high school English classrooms, hindering the implementation of class activities. However, in real Chinese high school English classrooms, students tend to be silent and less motivated to actively learn and apply English. Most high school students tend to accept the teacher’s teaching unilaterally and think alone in the English classroom, rather than speaking, asking questions and exploring English issues.

Lin Hong (2011) analyses the causes of this “silence phenomenon” in terms of attitudes, motivation, strategies and emotions, and proposes a “humanized approach” of listening to silence, discovering it and breaking it. This kind of humanized teaching can help break the silence of students in high school English classrooms, which is conducive to the overall improvement, overall optimization and coordinated development of students’ comprehensive quality. It is also beneficial to the cultivation of students’ positive emotional attitudes, allowing students to experience the joy of learning English and teachers to enjoy the joy of teaching English. During a year of educational practice, the author found that silence was a frequent phenomenon in the high school English classroom. Students are more active when they follow the teacher’s words or answer questions with the teacher’s help, but when the teacher asks questions, most students remain silent and it is always the same students who answer the questions. There has been a lot of research on silence in the classroom at all levels, both nationally and internationally, and all have achieved some results. However, there is not enough research on the phenomenon of silence in the classroom from a theoretical point of view. Therefore, the author analyses the causes of classroom silence from three aspects: classroom environment, classroom teaching style and classroom norms, and seeks ways to solve this phenomenon from Foucault’s theory of discipline.

A number of scholars at home and abroad have conducted studies on the phenomenon of silence in the classroom, but most of them are from the perspective of the psychological domain, which has certain limitations. The New Curriculum (2017) points out that the fundamental purpose of education is not only to impart knowledge to students, but also to improve their ability to apply knowledge and solve problems in real life. In addition, Classroom atmosphere is crucial to students’ motivation to learn, and a cordial classroom atmosphere is conducive to students’ better engagement in
learning and better understanding of what they have learned. The new curriculum states that learning English has a significant impact on students’ future education and development, so it is important to explore the phenomenon of silence in the English classroom. However, the phenomenon of classroom silence is very common in high school English classrooms, which seriously hinders effective communication between teachers and students and reduces the learning effect of students. Therefore, the author starts from the field of sociology, based on Foucault’s theory of discipline, to explore the causes of the phenomenon of silence in high school English classrooms and try to give suggestions to this phenomenon.

2. Literature Review

2.1. The Definition of Classroom Silence

Silence is a complex linguistic phenomenon that is related to many disciplines, such as psychology, cognition, sociology, etc. In the study of communicative linguistics, Saville-Troike (1985) suggests that “silence is a silent and non-verbal behavior of a communicative subject that has no fixed semantic meaning”. Qiao Chunhua (2013) divides silence into a broad sense of silence, which is defined as a form of non-verbal communication, and a narrow sense of silence, which is a branch of the paralinguistic. A pause in discourse refers to a pause in conversation, while silence refers to a break in speech, as opposed to a silence of speech and a break in speech beyond a certain time limit. There are many scholars who classify silence, for example, Lehner (2004) suggests that “within the structure of English conversation, it is a mistake not to distinguish silence.” One cannot generalize silence in the course of interpersonal interaction, they serve different purposes in conversation. For example, some are a phenomenon of pauses in speech, while others express specific ideas in the form of non-speech. Some scholars therefore classify silences as pauses, gaps, blanks, meaningful silences, etc. In addition, Cultural differences can lead to a biased understanding of silence, and each country’s understanding of silence is unique. Westerners, for example, may understand silence as a negative phenomenon, as a sign of grief, or as an embarrassing situation. They regard speaking as a desecration of historical experience, and silence as a way of giving vent to one’s inner emotions. In the East, however, the understanding of silence differs greatly from that in the West. For example, we often say that “silence is golden”, which indicates the high value placed on silence. In the religious sphere, silence represents the prayer of Catholics and gives it a certain meaning.

The classroom is a bridge for teachers and students to communicate and learn, the main place for teachers to teach and educate students, and a platform for teachers to educate their minds. Classroom silence refers to a phenomenon of silence that occurs during teaching activities. According to Su Chunjing and Yang Huiqing (2013), they make definition of classroom silence, pointing out that classroom teaching activities are the process of interaction and communication between teachers and students, so teachers and students are the main subjects of the classroom, and there are two forms of communication in classroom activities, namely the interaction between teachers and students and the interaction between students and students. The two scholars also point out two understandings of classroom silence, divided into a broad sense and a narrow sense, with the broad sense of silence as the name implies having a broader scope including both teachers and students as subjects, while the narrow sense of silence often refers only to the phenomenon of student silence in classroom communication. Li Chuanyi (2014) points out that silence belongs to the category of communicative linguistics. He divides silence into positive and negative silence. Positive silence refers to the time students spend thinking after the teacher asks a question in a classroom activity, and also refers to the time students spend thinking while listening to the teacher’s explanation or a classmate’s answer to a question. Negative silence refers to non-cooperation and non-participation in teaching activities, which hinders the teaching and learning process and does not allow for good interaction between teachers and students. The aim of this paper is therefore to examine the phenomenon of student-led negative silence in classroom and to analyses its causes and in the light of Foucault’s theory of discipline.

2.2. Theoretical Basis

2.2.1. Foucault’s Theory of Discipline

Michel Foucault (1926-1984) was a leading French philosopher, thinker and sociologist, and is considered one of the most important philosophers of post-war France. Foucault wrote extensively throughout his life, and in a wide range of areas. Foucault treats Discipline and Punish as “his first book”, which published in 1975. In this book Foucault uses genealogy to analyses the mechanisms of power-knowledge, continuing the themes and methods of his previous writings. It describes the history of punishment patterns in France in the 18th and 19th centuries, explains the evolution and eventual formation of the institutions of discipline, and critiques their control over the human body and mind. Foucault analyses the evolution of discipline in power by describing the modes of punishment in France in three different periods:

(1) Torture in the classical period. A form of punishment primarily aimed at the flesh, representing a return to the power of the monarch. But this form of punishment, which was no less, or even more barbaric than the crime itself. The guillotine, one of the forms of punishment by which the monarch demonstrated to the people the power of the sovereign in this brutal way. But this form of execution was not only costly, it also aroused popular sympathy for the criminal, and the judge seemed to become the guilty in the execution. In the end, it seems that all the roles in the opposite position.

(2) The legal system in the modern period. With the economic development of the society, the earlier forms of execution were no longer suitable for the later period, and comes the milder forms of punishment. Punishment no longer consisted of torturing people physically, but of putting them in prison and controlling them physically and mentally by temporarily depriving their rights. The direct control of the body was abandoned in favor of the control of the mind and effective punishment was meted out through the establishment of laws and discipline. To prevent abuse of the monarch's power, the new legal system used juries to ensure that the judicial process was fair and impartial. The judge's main task is to judge every execution and the jury's main task is to assist the judge, but they could overturn the judge's verdict. Foucault suggested that prisoners in prison should be made public, and in this way, people would be warned against crime by seeing the deplorable conditions of prisoners in prison.
In a later year of research, he identified factors that influence students' silence. Tsui (1995) found that students were less likely to answer questions in an appropriate way is related to students' silence. Chaudron (1988) found that students' silence was also related to the impact on students' communicative competence. Chaudron is important, and that teachers' control of the classroom has a significant influence on students' silence. When the classroom atmosphere is tense, students feel anxious and anxious, and thus show silence, which hinders the classroom activities. When the classroom atmosphere is lively and relaxed, students tend to be more likely to respond to questions, thus facilitating the smooth running of classroom activities (Meyer, 2009). Samovar (1998) studied non-verbal behavior and found that the classroom environment has an impact on students' communication and interaction in the classroom, both as an environment for cognitive information processing and as an environment for students to learn the target language. As the classroom is an important place for communication between teachers and students, the classroom environment is crucial to the silence phenomenon.

2.3. Studies Abroad

In recent years, research on the phenomenon of silence in the classroom has been more advanced and comprehensive than in China, with most scholars at home and abroad focusing on the causes of silence in the classroom, but the majority of foreign scholars have focused on Asian students, while the majority of domestic studies have focused on primary and secondary schools.

2.3.1. Factors Resulting in Classroom Silence

(1) Students' factors

Littlewood (1996) stated in his study that students' expectations of grades are directly proportional to their feelings of anxiety, and that the main reason for students' anxiety comes from their expectations of academic performance, and that if they do not achieve their final expected grades, some students will feel a psychological gap and thus experience silence. Warr (2000) investigated the phenomenon of silence in the classroom and showed that classroom participation was closely related to students' anxiety and approach to learning. On one hand, the higher the students' anxiety, the lower the classroom participation. On the other hand, learning methods also have a significant impact on classroom participation, as students who have the right learning methods will increase their participation in class and thus reduce silence in class. Flowerdew (2000) suggested that students' self-confidence and comprehension have an impact on their participation in class, and that the higher the self-confidence and comprehension, the more likely students are to participate in class. Brown (2002) put forward the theory of self-confidence and argued that students' lack of confidence in their ability to express themselves in English is the main reason for their silence in the English classroom, and that most of the students who are silent in the classroom are those with poor speaking skills, which makes them choose to be silent in the classroom due to their lack of confidence.

(2) Teachers' factors

Riasati (2014) argues that students' communicative competence is important, and that teachers' control of the classroom and teacher-student interaction patterns have an impact on students' communicative competence. Chaudron (1988) found that students' silence was also related to the teacher's questioning style, and that whether the teacher asks questions in an appropriate way is related to students' silence. Tsui (1995) found that students were less likely to answer questions voluntarily and that most of the questions were asked by the teacher by name, with students being asked and answered passively, followed by feedback from the teacher. In a later year of research, he identified factors that influence silence in the classroom, such as teachers waiting too short a time for students to think, imbalanced allocation of time in the classroom, and teaching styles that are difficult for students to understand.

2.3.2. Solutions to Reduce Classroom Silence

Chaudron (1988) proposed a solution to the problem of silence in the classroom, pointing out that silence in the classroom has a great deal to do with the way the teacher asks questions. He suggests that there is a strong relationship between classroom silence and the way teachers ask questions, and that teachers need to use appropriate questioning to reduce silence in the classroom. Nunan (1991) pointed out that when teachers ask questions, they often do not give students enough time to think about them, which makes them afraid to answer the question and thus contributes to the silence. Flowerdew (1998) pointed out that one of the reasons for silence is the fear of answering questions and the fear of losing self-esteem, and pointed out the importance of group activities, which help to alleviate students' anxiety and make them more willing to speak. Tsui (1996) suggested that a harmonious teacher-student relationship can reduce students' anxiety and silence in the classroom. In addition, teachers should allow enough time for students to think after asking questions, and appropriate group activities are necessary to help students to speak up in class.

2.4. Studies at Home

2.4.1. Factors Resulting in Classroom Silence

(1) Students’ factors

Zhang Huiqin (2009) investigated the phenomenon of silence among university students and showed that anxiety was the main reason for students' silence and hindered the course. Xu Nana (2012) also conducted a study on the phenomenon of classroom silence among university students and found that most students experience anxiety and nervousness due to a lack of self-confidence, which leads to a fear of speaking in class, and as a result, classroom silence occurs. Wu Meisheng (2010) pointed out that student silence is influenced by a variety of factors, including fear of losing face in front of classmates, students' lack of interest in the questions asked by the teacher, lack of understanding, and negative attitudes. Liu Qianqiang (2005) pointed out that students' personalities are related to their performance in the classroom. In general, extroverted students are more likely to participate in class, while on the contrary, introverted students
tend to participate passively in class or choose to be silent.

(2) Teachers’ factors

Yin Lixin (2010) argues that the lack of innovation in teachers’ traditional teaching methods and their difficulty in engaging students are the reasons for students’ silence. Shi Yunyu (2012) pointed out that the traditional Confucianism is deeply rooted in China and teachers have always occupied the main position in classroom teaching. It is difficult to achieve true equality between teachers and students, and in the vast majority of schools in China, teachers generally occupy a dominant position and students passively receive knowledge, which will slowly make students lose their determination to actively participate in the classroom. Huang Cuihua (2018) conducted a survey on teachers’ questioning methods, and the results showed that teachers mostly used the collective response method, followed by the roll call response, and the least frequent questioning method was voluntary response. However, this approach also discourages students from taking the initiative to answer questions, and it is difficult for teachers to understand individual students’ responses to questions in group responses, which also hinders students’ motivation to learn.

(3) Classroom environment

Wang Jian (2008) pointed out that some students believe that teachers are too traditional in their approach to class and that the classroom lacks an atmosphere of equality and cooperation. In such an environment, a depressing and dull classroom atmosphere is created and students tend to remain silent. Worse still, students who are active in such an environment are also affected, and coupled with the herd mentality, they are also reluctant to participate actively in class. Zhang Donghai (2019) suggested that factors in the classroom environment that have a significant negative effect on students’ silence are the key to solving the problem, and in order to reduce the occurrence of classroom silence, teachers need to create a positive classroom atmosphere in which students actively participate in classroom interactions. In her study, Xie Yuanhua (2006) found that classroom environment has a significant impact on students’ classroom silence, and that students tend to be more likely to participate in classroom activities in a relaxed and active classroom atmosphere. On the contrary, in a rigid and serious classroom environment, students would choose to be silent or listen to the teacher’s explanation.

2.4.2. Solutions to Reduce Classroom Silence

Domestic scholars have proposed corresponding solutions to the phenomenon of silence in China’s classroom teaching, mostly focusing on the teacher factors. Qiao Chunhua (2013) pointed out the importance of a good teacher-student relationship, which is conducive to bringing teachers and students closer together and increasing the opportunities for interactive communication in the classroom. Teachers also need to adopt different solutions to the different causes of students’ silence and give them personalized help. In addition, the scholar also stated that teaching activities should be student-centred, and teachers should trigger students’ interest in learning and use innovative forms of activities to attract students to participate in classroom activities. Wu Xiaoyn and Du Haifang (2008) pointed out that students produce silence for different reasons, and teachers should adjust their teaching methods according to the different silence phenomena. Wang Yanning (2008) pointed out that teachers’ questioning style is very important to classroom teaching, and that teachers should adopt appropriate questioning styles and master certain questioning techniques to stimulate students’ interest and provoke them to think. Ye Lijun (2013) pointed out that when teachers ask questions, they should take into account the difficulty of the questions and should proceed step by step to make it easier for students to participate in the classroom.

2.5. Review of Studies

Through the above studies by domestic and international scholars, we can find that both domestic and international scholars have made certain insights in the study of classroom silence, which has promoted the progress of the field. Three influencing factors can be summarized in the investigation and analysis of the causes of students’ classroom silence: the student factors, the teacher factors and the classroom environment factors. Different scholars have also proposed countermeasures to the causes of silence, such as using appropriate questioning methods, tailoring teaching to the students’ needs, and making the students the main focus of teaching activities. However, there are still some research gaps in this area, and further research is needed.

Most of the foreign research is focused on overseas students, and there are significant differences in learning environments and study habits at home and abroad. However, students in high school are at a special stage in their education, where they are stressed, sensitive and vulnerable, and have high self-esteem, so it is difficult to apply these findings and solutions directly to the high school English classroom. In addition, from the perspective of research, most scholars at home and abroad have explored the phenomenon of silence in the classroom from the teacher’s perspective, trying to find the teacher’s problems and propose solutions, but rarely from the student’s perspective, which is a narrower perspective. This paper examines the causes of silence in the high school English classroom in the context of Foucault’s theory of discipline, analyzing the causes of silence in the high school English classroom from three perspectives: the physical classroom environment, the classroom teaching process and the classroom teaching norms, and proposing corresponding solutions.

3. Reasons of Classroom Silence

Foucault argues that the silence of students in the classroom is the result of being “disciplined”, which he analyses in three ways: the implicit environment of the classroom, the way of teaching and classroom norms.

3.1. The Implicit Environment of the Classroom

Foucault saw the classroom as an important place for interaction between teachers and students, and as high school students spent most of their day at school, and the majority of their time in the classroom, Foucault pointed out that the classroom was also the main place for teachers to discipline students. In the eighteenth-century people used “ranks” to define the distribution of people within the educational system, such as the ranking of students on weekly, monthly and final exams, their seating in the classroom, their position in the schoolyard where they were expected to move and the ranking of the results of each classroom activity. Students are sometimes in one rank and after a while in another, based on their height, age and grades, in this compulsory sequence, which is not fixed but constantly moves through the spatial
sequence. Some spaces refer to grades of knowledge and ability, and others to the physical university or classroom spaces that indicate values and achievements. Students are constantly shifting positions under such spaces. Foucault likens the classroom to a learning machine, monitors screening and rewards. If students do not interact with the teacher and understand what the teacher taught, he becomes an individual supervised by the teacher, and in this environment the student is prone to depression, boredom, and thus classroom silence occurs.

3.2. The Ways of Teaching

In this section, the main focus is on the impact of the dominant role of the teacher on the student. The sociology of knowledge argues that there are clear hierarchical differences within knowledge. Precise knowledge, especially knowledge that can be summarized as numbers, has the highest status. Knowledge that can be expressed in writing has a higher status than oral and folklore knowledge. Knowledge that is far from life has a higher status than daily knowledge. In contrast to the pupils, the teacher has absolute authority in the classroom, in terms of the pace of teaching, the choice of content, the way in which the lesson is delivered and the way in which questions are asked. In this situation, student motivation is curbed and their interest in learning is easily suppressed, and they can only passively accept the knowledge imparted by the teacher and participate in the activities. Over time, students become accustomed to this teaching mode in which the teacher controls the classroom, and classroom silences become frequent.

3.3. Classroom Norms

The Foucault saw classroom norms as a series of rules and judgments set by teachers or school administrators, which he called “micro-penalties”. The normative system includes rewards and punishments, criticism and praise, and covers all aspects of students’ learning lives. But under such normative rulings, students like controlled machines, forgetting to be themselves, to find themselves, and to pursue the highest standards of the normative model, taking what has been done by others or can be done by others as valuable. By being under the control of such norm for so long, students fear making mistakes and thus become stagnant and passive, and as a result classroom silence occurs.

4. Suggestions to Reduce Classroom Silence

Silence in the classroom is a relatively common phenomenon in English classroom, and it is influenced by a number of factors. According to Foucault’s theory of discipline, the phenomenon of classroom silence is related to teaching ranking, teacher control of the classroom, and the classroom norms. The author makes the following recommendations to address these different aspects:

4.1. Changing the Traditional Grading Idea

The development of a series of rankings with grade implications for students in schools has a positive effect in that it regulates classroom behaviour, enables students to understand where they stand in the class, and has a facilitating effect on higher achieving students by fostering their motivation. However, this practice also has many negative effects and at the same time, it goes against the relevant regulations in the new curriculum standards. For students who are more psychologically vulnerable, this can increase their psychological burden, undermine their self-confidence and motivation, and even make them develop an inferiority complex. Schools should take the promotion of students’ all-round and healthy development as the ultimate goal, and establish a variety of assessment mechanisms to motivate students’ progress while at the same time pay attention to protecting the self-esteem and self-confidence of some students. Classifying students into different levels can restrict students to communicate with peers within their own level, limiting their opportunities for more social interaction.

4.2. Reduce Teacher’s Control

As the main subject of classroom activities, students should participate in more classroom activities and speak up actively. However, the teacher’s authority over students inhibits them from showing their classroom activities. In this regard, teachers should change the traditional way of communicating with students by understanding their interests and reaching out to their inner world to better communicate with them. In normal classroom interaction, teachers should change the traditional way of criticising students who fail to answer questions correctly, and should use guidance to prompt students to say their answers and, if necessary, give them comfort, so that they will not be afraid to answer questions and will dare to take the initiative to answer them. In addition to verbal praise from the teacher, the class can also applaud the student who answers correctly. The affirmation of the teacher and classmates will increase the student’s self-confidence, and the student will be more interested in the lesson and will be more active in answering questions. In addition, when organising classroom activities, teachers can take a more relaxed approach to the activities. Teachers themselves should participate in the activities, understand students’ ideas and give them some guidance, if necessary, thus bringing teachers and students closer together and reducing students’ tension. For students who do not speak up much in class, teachers can ask about the situation in private, take appropriate solutions to specific problems, and give some time for students to get used to the class, rather than rushing into it. When setting questions, teachers should take into account students of different levels of English, so that students of every level can have opportunity to answer, gain satisfaction in learning and increase their confidence in learning English.

4.3. Reasonable Adjustments to the Classroom Regulation

The establishment of certain classroom regulations through a series of rewards and punishments will regulate students’ behavior in the classroom and develop their sense of discipline. However, excessive regulation can make students feel like they are trapped in a cage and affect the spread of their thinking. Learning English at senior level is no longer about repetitive mechanical memorization, but about mastering a great deal of knowledge from other subjects and forming their own insightful ideas, which requires students to have the ability to think outside the box. Students should be encouraged to think and act creatively and to develop a sense of creativity. When setting classroom norms, teachers should consider not limiting of students’ imagination and stimulating their interest. For example, teachers can choose some fashion topic that teenagers are more interested in, so that they will
want to discuss in English and express their opinions freely. Except that, students can voluntarily collect information and dig deeper into the content. Thereby students will be free from the shackles of the existing system, develop their abilities and release their potential.

5. Conclusion

This paper explores the causes of silence in high school English classrooms based on Foucault’s theory of discipline, which can be divided into three factors: classroom environment, teaching style, and classroom norms. Firstly, the classroom environment is reflected in the hidden hierarchical rankings within the classroom, such as grades, seating, age as well as the seating position of students in the classroom and on campus, which can contribute to students’ silence. Secondly, the authority or dominance of the teacher can inhibit students’ interest in learning and limit their participation in classroom activities, thus contributing to the occurrence of silence in the classroom. Finally, the classroom regulation, the way in which students are assessed by imposing rewards, punishments, criticism and praise also fetters students’ creativity and causes them to forget to be themselves and instead to emulate the behaviour of other students. In such cases, students’ motivation is discouraged and classroom silence occurs. For these reasons, the author suggests three ways to reduce classroom silence. First, change the traditional teaching idea to take into account the self-esteem of some students when appraising other classmates. Secondly, reduce the absolute control of the teacher over the classroom, take the students as the main body, and establish a harmonious teacher-student relationship. Thirdly, classroom norms should be reasonably adjusted to allow students to break out of their constraints and increase their motivation. Teachers should work together with students to improve classroom silence.

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References
