

Silence and Participation in Online and Face-to-Face ESL Classrooms: Perceptions of FYUP Students

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ABSTRACT

Silence in language classrooms has long been misread as disengagement, yet growing evidence in applied linguistics suggests it serves cognitive, affective, and strategic functions. This study examines how undergraduate students at Aligarh Muslim University experience and interpret silence and participation across traditional face-to-face and digital learning environments. Using a structured, closed-ended questionnaire administered to 60 students enrolled in a Four-Year Undergraduate Programme (FYUP), the study compares engagement patterns, barriers to participation, and learners' perceptions of silence across both instructional contexts. Findings reveal that 65% of students associate traditional classrooms primarily with verbal participation, while 62% report fear of negative evaluation as a key barrier. In contrast, 48% of students in digital classrooms interpret silence as a form of reflection, enabled partly by chat-based and asynchronous participation tools. The study argues for a reconceptualisation of participation as multimodal and context-sensitive, with significant implications for inclusive pedagogical practice in Indian higher education.

Keywords: Silence; Participation; FYUP; Digital & traditional classrooms; communicative strategy

INTRODUCTION

Silence has occupied an uneasy position in the language classroom. For much of the twentieth century, it was read as a problem, a gap in the lesson, a sign that something had gone wrong, or evidence that a student was disengaged or underprepared. This interpretation made a certain kind of sense within the pedagogical frameworks that dominated language teaching for decades. When the Communicative Language Teaching approach gained ground in the mid-1970s, verbal interaction became the central measure of learning. The assumption that followed was as simple as it was consequential: students who spoke were students who were engaged; students who stayed silent were students who were not (Nakane, 2007; King, 2013). The logic seemed straightforward, but it left something important unexamined.

With the learner's interior experience, the cognitive activity, emotional states, and social calculations that unfold beneath the surface of visible behaviour. A student who does not speak in class is not necessarily a student who is not thinking. Silence, as researchers in applied linguistics have increasingly argued, can be a form of cognitive

processing, emotional regulation, or deliberate strategic positioning within a social environment (Bao, 2014). It can reflect the weight of hierarchical classroom norms, the fear of public error, or the cultural conditioning that shapes how learners from particular backgrounds relate to authority (Bista, 2012; Tatar, 2005). To reduce all of this to disengagement is not only empirically inaccurate but also pedagogically damaging, because it causes teachers to misread their students and design instruction around a narrow definition of participation that excludes a significant portion of how learning actually happens.

This restricted understanding of participation takes on particular significance in the Indian higher education context. Research on postcolonial English-medium education suggests that asymmetrical teacher-student relations, in which the teacher retains exclusive epistemic authority, actively discourage student verbal contribution (Canagarajah, 1999; Mohanty, 2010). These dynamics are compounded in institutional settings where large class sizes structurally limit meaningful interaction (AISHE, 2023), and where students are navigating English not as a neutral medium of

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instruction but as a socially loaded language whose use in public carries real stakes for identity and belonging (Annamalai, 2004; Canagarajah, 2006).

At AMU, FYUP students encounter these pressures in a specific and acute form. Many have transitioned from Urdu- or Hindi-medium schooling into an English-medium university environment, a shift that is not merely linguistic but epistemological, requiring students to simultaneously acquire a language and perform competence in it before an audience of peers. Unlike students in later years who have had time to accumulate institutional familiarity and linguistic confidence, first-year students at this juncture occupy a position of compounded vulnerability: they are new to the university, new to its norms, and in many cases new to sustained academic English. A university culture that formally values verbal engagement while informally sustaining norms that make public speech feel risky does not affect all students equally; it falls most heavily on those who have had the least time and the fewest resources to prepare for it.

The situation has grown more complex with the widespread adoption of digital learning environments, particularly following the disruptions of the COVID-19 pandemic. Online classrooms do not simply replicate face-to-face interaction on a screen; they restructure the conditions of participation entirely. The absence of physical co-presence, the availability of text-based channels like chat boxes and discussion forums, the ability to turn a camera off or type a response rather than speak- all of these alter what silence means and what participation looks like. Xin and Feenberg (2006) observe that digital environments relieve learners of the pressure to respond immediately, which fundamentally changes the communicative dynamics of a classroom. Silence online may mean something quite different from silence in a lecture hall, and yet very little comparative research has examined how learners themselves understand and navigate this difference, particularly within Indian higher education.

This study takes that gap as its starting point. Drawing on data collected from sixty FYUP students at AMU who had experience of both face-to-face and online instruction, it examines how learners perceive and interpret silence and participation across these two contrasting environments, and what those perceptions mean for their engagement with English as an additional language. In an ESL

context, this question carries particular weight: oral participation is not only an index of engagement but a condition of language development, since it is through interaction that learners negotiate meaning, receive feedback, and extend the boundaries of their interlanguage (Long, 1996; Swain, 1985). How learners relate to silence, whether they experience it as protective, constraining, or generative, has direct consequences for the frequency and quality of their exposure to the target language and for their willingness to communicate within it (MacIntyre et al., 1998). The study is grounded in sociocultural perspectives on learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Vygotsky, 1978) and in the reconceptualisation of silence as a communicative and strategic resource rather than an absence of engagement (Bao, 2014, 2021). It proceeds from the position that participation is a multidimensional phenomenon, one that includes listening, reflecting, and writing as much as speaking, and that any pedagogy which recognises only its verbal form will inevitably marginalise a substantial number of learners.

The following research questions guide the study:

- **RQ1:** How do FYUP students at AMU perceive silence and participation in face-to-face classrooms?
- **RQ2:** How do FYUP students interpret silence and engagement in online classrooms?
- **RQ3:** What similarities and differences exist in students' perceptions of silence across the two instructional modalities?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholarly responses to the problematic equation of silence with disengagement have developed along three broad lines. A first strand of research has sought to reconceptualise silence itself, arguing that it functions not as an absence of engagement but as a communicative and cognitive resource that learners deploy with intention (Bao, 2014, 2021; Nakane, 2007). A second strand has examined how participation operates within traditional face-to-face classroom settings, attending to the social, affective, and cultural variables that shape whether and how students speak (King, 2013; Tatar, 2005; Bista, 2012). A third, more recent body of work has extended these questions into digital learning environments, where the altered conditions of interaction, asynchronous exchange, text-based communication, and reduced social visibility produce a different but equally complex relationship between silence, participation, and

language development (Hampel & Stickler, 2012; Lamy & Hampel, 2007). The present study draws on all three of these strands while attending to a context (the first-year undergraduate ESL learners in an Indian university) that remains underrepresented in each of them.

Silence as a Communicative and Cognitive Strategy in Face-to-Face Classrooms

This section argues that silence in the language classroom is not a passive condition but an active one, that it constitutes a form of cognitive engagement, and that learners draw on it as a resource for processing, self-regulation, and strategic social positioning. Understanding this argument requires first accounting for why the field took so long to reach it, and for the institutional conditions that continue to make silence a predictable and rational response to face-to-face classroom life.

Early research treated limited verbal production primarily as a deficit. Tsou (2005) identified student reticence as a barrier to oral skill development and recommended pedagogical strategies aimed at increasing the quantity of student talk, a position wholly consistent with a CLT framework in which spoken output was simultaneously the method and the measure of language learning. Meyer (2009) observes that this norm persists in post-secondary institutions, where verbal contribution continues to function as the primary index of student engagement, creating structural disadvantages for students who process information reflectively or who carry cultural inhibitions about speaking in public. What both positions leave unexamined is the cognitive activity that silence might be concealing or enabling.

The theoretical grounds for a reconceptualisation were already present in the broader SLA literature. Vygotsky's (1978) account of inner speech, the internalised, self-directed language through which cognition is organised, implies that meaningful linguistic activity can occur without any external verbalisation. Swain's (1985) output hypothesis, while focused on the productive value of spoken and written output, presupposes a stage of internal processing and rehearsal before output is produced. Silence, on this reading, is not the absence of language use but a phase within it. Van Lier (2004) makes the complementary empirical point that apparent non-participation in classroom settings frequently conceals active cognitive engagement that simply does not manifest as

visible verbal behaviour, a finding that calls into question the reliability of verbal output as a proxy for learning.

Bao (2014, 2021) develops this theoretical foundation into an empirically grounded framework, arguing that silence is a multidimensional phenomenon with cognitive, emotional, and sociocultural dimensions. Learners, he demonstrates, use silence productively for internal rehearsal, emotional regulation, and deliberate strategic positioning, activities that are invisible to the observing teacher but constitute genuine forms of linguistic engagement. King and Harumi (2020) extend this argument across multiple educational contexts, showing that the cognitive function of silence is not an individual idiosyncrasy but a patterned response to specific institutional conditions.

Those conditions deserve particular attention. Teacher behaviour plays a significant and often underacknowledged role in shaping the silence of individual students. When classroom interaction is predominantly evaluative and teacher-directed, silence functions as a form of self-protection for students who perceive the social cost of speaking incorrectly as prohibitively high (King, 2013). Dewaele and MacIntyre (2014) demonstrate that anxiety, self-confidence, and enjoyment directly mediate the relationship between linguistic competence and verbal production, meaning that a silent student may possess the cognitive resources to speak while being held back by emotional regulation processes that are themselves cognitively demanding. Bista (2012) situates these dynamics within learners' prior schooling experiences, showing that students from teacher-centred educational backgrounds frequently deploy silence as a contextually learned and purposeful response rather than a failure to engage. Tatar (2005) similarly found that non-native English speakers remained silent not because of linguistic incompetence but because of heightened sensitivity to public evaluation, a form of social cognition that shapes participation decisions in ways that purely linguistic assessments cannot capture.

Taken together, this body of scholarship reframes silence from a symptom of cognitive absence to a form of cognitive presence, one produced by the intersection of internal processing demands, emotional regulation, and the evaluative pressures of face-to-face classroom interaction. For studies of

ESL participation, this reframing has direct methodological consequences: measuring learning through verbal output alone will systematically misrepresent what is happening in a significant proportion of learners, particularly those navigating an additional language in institutionally asymmetrical settings.

Silence and Participation in Digital Learning Environments

The widespread adoption of online teaching has substantially changed the conditions under which participation and silence occur and has made it necessary to develop interpretive frameworks that are specific to digital contexts rather than simply transposing assumptions from face-to-face settings. Xin and Feenberg (2006) argue that digital environments alter communicative dynamics by removing the pressure to respond in real time, which creates space for more deliberate and reflective forms of engagement. Bates (2015) adds that the multimodal features of digital platforms, including chat functions, discussion boards, and asynchronous tools, provide participation channels that are simply unavailable in a traditional classroom. Students who would remain silent in a lecture hall can contribute in writing, at their own pace, and without the social exposure that spoken participation requires.

Digital settings also generate their own difficulties. Screen fatigue, environmental disruption, unclear task communication, and the particular anxiety many students experience when asked to participate on camera all produce forms of silence that have no direct equivalent in face-to-face instruction. Bao (2023) addresses this complexity through a four-dimensional framework for understanding online silence: cognitive, social, emotional, and technological, arguing that silence in digital environments cannot be adequately interpreted through any single lens. A student who does not respond in a synchronous online session may be processing content cognitively, managing emotional discomfort, navigating a technical difficulty, or withdrawing from a social dynamic that feels unsafe; these are categorically different phenomena that call for different pedagogical responses. Crucially, Bao (2023) argues that online silence is not uniformly negative; it functions simultaneously as a potential barrier to learning and as a condition that can enable deeper, more reflective engagement. This position underpins what he terms silence-inclusive pedagogy: an

approach in which a learner's choice to remain silent is treated as a productive exercise of agency over their own learning, rather than as non-participation requiring correction.

These studies suggest that the shift to digital instruction did not resolve the problems associated with the over-privileging of verbal output in face-to-face classrooms; it recontextualised them. The question of what silence means and how teachers should respond to it becomes, in online environments, both more urgent and more complex, requiring interpretive frameworks attentive to the full range of cognitive, affective, and technological factors that shape whether and how learners choose to participate.

Comparative Perspectives and Research Gaps

Despite growing scholarly interest in silence as a cognitive and communicative phenomenon, studies that compare how learners experience silence across different instructional modalities remain relatively scarce. The majority of existing research examines either face-to-face or online settings in isolation, and tends to privilege teacher perceptions over student experiences, a methodological orientation that limits what can be known about how learners themselves interpret and navigate silence across contrasting learning environments.

Where comparative work does exist, it has yielded important but partial findings. Bao and Nguyen (2020), in a qualitative-quantitative case study of 239 Vietnamese university students, examined the relationship between silence and verbal participation, finding that learners actively and strategically use silent processing as a preparatory resource for subsequent speech. Their study is significant for foregrounding learner perception as the unit of analysis, but it does not examine how this relationship changes across instructional modalities. The question of modality is addressed more directly in recent phenomenographic research by Pham et al. (2025), which explored EFL lecturers' perceptions of undergraduate silence in both face-to-face and online settings. Their findings confirm that silence operates differently across these two environments and that teachers frequently misread its meaning in both, but the study's focus on lecturer perception leaves the student's experience largely uncharted. Similarly, research on silence in virtual classroom settings has established that online environments can create conditions more

amenable to participation for students who would remain silent in face-to-face classes, particularly those managing social anxiety or linguistic insecurity (Altuwairish, 2021; Bao, 2023), but these studies do not systematically attend to how learners perceive this difference or what it means for their language development.

Wang et al. (2022) make the broader methodological point that institutional and cultural contexts shape silence in ways that decontextualised studies cannot fully capture, a point that applies with particular force to the Indian higher education context, where large class sizes, hierarchical teacher-student relations, and the sociolinguistic pressures of English as an additional language produce conditions that international studies rarely address. Research on silence in South Asian ESL contexts is notably thin, and studies that centre the learner's own account of how silence functions differently in face-to-face and online settings remain, to the author's knowledge, absent from the literature.

The present study addresses this compound gap. By examining how FYUP students at AMU perceive silence and participation across both instructional settings, and by placing learner experience, rather than teacher perception, at the centre of the analysis, it contributes to a body of scholarship that has so far asked the right questions in the wrong direction.

METHODS

This study adopts a descriptive comparative research design to examine how undergraduate students at AMU perceive and experience silence and participation across traditional face-to-face and digital learning environments. Descriptive comparative research involves the systematic observation and documentation of a phenomenon across two or more conditions without manipulation of variables, to identify patterns of similarity and difference (Fraenkel, Wallen, & Hyun, 2012). It is distinguished from experimental designs in that it does not seek to establish causality, but rather to describe and compare phenomena as they naturally occur. This design was considered appropriate given the study's aim to compare student perceptions across two distinct instructional modalities, face-to-face and online, which function here as the primary grouping variable. The dependent variables under examination are students' perceptions of silence and participation within each setting, including the

cognitive, affective, and social dimensions of those perceptions, and the extent to which learners experience each modality as enabling or inhibiting their engagement with English. In the analysis of Likert-scale items, neutral responses are retained and reported alongside agree and disagree proportions. Where neutral response rates are notably high, they are interpreted as substantive data points reflecting ambivalence or context-dependence rather than as non-responses to be discarded.

Participants

The study involved sixty undergraduate students enrolled in the Four-Year Undergraduate Programme (FYUP) at the Department of English, Aligarh Muslim University at the time of data collection. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 23 years. The sample comprised male and female students, reflecting the gender composition of the FYUP cohort at the department. Gender is noted as a potentially relevant variable given existing evidence that male and female learners may experience classroom silence and participation differently, particularly in institutional contexts shaped by hierarchical norms (Cao & Philp, 2006; Peng, 2012).

Participants were selected through purposive non-probability sampling, a strategy in which individuals are chosen on the basis of specific characteristics relevant to the research questions rather than through random selection (Creswell, 2014). The defining criterion for inclusion was direct and sustained experience of both traditional face-to-face instruction and online digital learning, which all sixty participants had undergone during and after the COVID-19 pandemic period. This dual exposure made them particularly suitable for a comparative study of this nature, as their responses could draw on lived experience of both instructional contexts rather than speculation. A second criterion for inclusion was current enrolment in the FYUP at the Department of English at the time of data collection, ensuring that participants' institutional context was consistent and contemporaneous with the study.

Participation was entirely voluntary. Participants were assured of anonymity, and no personally identifiable information was collected at any stage of the data collection process.

Research Instrument

Data were collected through a structured, closed-ended questionnaire developed specifically for this study. The questionnaire was organised into two

parallel sections, one addressing face-to-face classroom experiences and the other addressing digital classroom experiences, allowing for direct comparison of responses across the two modalities. The traditional classroom section contained items related to three participation indicators: the role of spoken responses as a marker of engagement, the influence of teacher encouragement and questioning techniques on willingness to participate verbally, and the experience of fear of negative evaluation or peer judgement as a barrier to participation. The digital classroom section addressed three corresponding areas: the interpretation of silence as a form of reflection in online settings, the perceived usefulness of digital affordances such as chat functions and asynchronous participation tools, and the influence of environmental factors such as background noise, network instability, and screen fatigue on engagement.

All items were rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree. The closed-ended format was chosen deliberately. Given the sensitivity of the topics addressed, particularly fear of judgement and classroom anxiety, a structured format allowed participants to respond candidly without the pressure of articulating personal experiences in open-ended prose. The questionnaire was administered in a single sitting under standardised conditions to minimise variability across responses.

DATA ANALYSIS

Responses were tabulated and analysed using descriptive statistics. Frequency counts and percentage distributions were calculated for each item across both sections of the questionnaire. Agree and Strongly Agree responses were combined into a single affirmative category to provide a clearer picture of the direction of student perception on each item. Results are presented through pie chart representations for each of the three participation indicators in traditional classrooms and the three indicators in digital classrooms, followed by a comparative figure that places the two instructional modalities alongside each other for direct analysis. The analysis does not claim statistical generalisation beyond the study sample. Rather, it offers a contextually grounded account of how a specific group of FYUP students at AMU perceive silence and participation, with implications for pedagogical practice in similar institutional settings.

Ethical Considerations

All participants were informed of the study's purpose before data collection. Participation was voluntary, and the identity of the participants was kept anonymous. The study followed institutional norms governing student research participation at Aligarh Muslim University.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings are organised according to the three research questions and interpreted in relation to existing scholarship on silence and classroom participation. The analysis uses frequencies and percentages to identify broad patterns in participants' responses. Comparisons across items represent group-level tendencies and should not be interpreted as statistically significant relationships or causal effects.

Silence and Participation in Face-to-Face Classrooms

The first research question examined how FYUP students perceive silence and participation in face-to-face classrooms. The findings indicate that verbal interaction remains an important, although not universally accepted, indicator of classroom engagement.

As shown in Figure 4.1, 65% of participants agreed that spoken responses were a primary indicator of participation, while 15% disagreed and 20% remained neutral. Although speaking was the most widely recognised form of participation, the combined 35% who disagreed or selected a neutral response indicates that this view was not shared by all participants. The neutral responses may reflect uncertainty or recognition that engagement can also take non-verbal forms, such as attentive listening, note-taking, reflection, or task completion. Meyer (2009) observes that verbal participation is deeply embedded in post-secondary classroom culture, often making less visible forms of engagement difficult for teachers and students to recognise. The present findings support this interpretation at the group level: speaking remains the dominant indicator, but a substantial minority appears unwilling to equate participation exclusively with verbal contribution.

Teacher behaviour received even stronger endorsement than speaking as an indicator of participation. Seventy-eight per cent of participants agreed that teacher encouragement and questioning techniques influenced their willingness

to speak, compared with 7% who disagreed and 15% who remained neutral. This level of agreement was 13 percentage points higher than the proportion identifying spoken responses as the primary indicator of participation. The comparison suggests that students' willingness to contribute may depend not only on established participation norms but also on how teachers invite, acknowledge, and respond to contributions.

Van Lier (2004) argues that opportunities for participation are actively shaped by teachers' instructional choices. Questions presented primarily as tests of correctness may make students

more cautious, whereas open-ended prompts, adequate response time, and constructive feedback may reduce the perceived risk of speaking. Teacher behaviour should therefore be understood as part of the classroom conditions within which students decide whether to participate verbally. In traditional classrooms specifically, the influence of teacher questioning style on student willingness to participate, reported by 78% of students in this study, suggests that relatively small changes in how teachers ask questions and respond to student contributions can meaningfully alter the participation climate of a classroom.

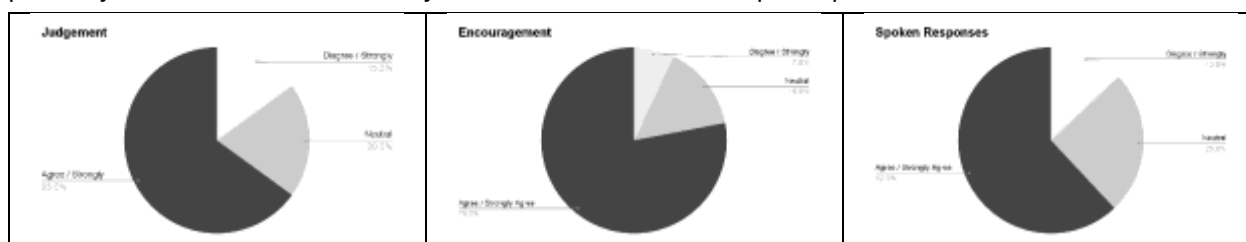


Figure 1. Participation Indicators in Face-to-Face Classroom Settings

Fear of negative evaluation was the specific affective factor examined in the study. It was measured through the survey item asking whether concern about negative evaluation by peers acted as a barrier to verbal participation. Sixty-two per cent of participants agreed that it did. This proportion was slightly lower than the 65% who associated participation with speaking, but it still represented a clear majority. Tatar (2005) identifies fear of public error and social judgement as important contributors to silence among non-native English speakers, while Bista (2012) associates such concerns with previous experiences of hierarchical schooling. In the present study, the combination of strong verbal-participation expectations, sensitivity to teacher behaviour, and fear of peer evaluation suggests that silence may arise from the social and emotional conditions of the classroom rather than from disengagement alone. However, the aggregate percentages do not establish whether the students who feared negative evaluation were the same students whose willingness to speak was influenced by teacher behaviour. Respondent-level analysis would be required to determine such a relationship.

Silence and Participation in Digital Classrooms

The second research question examined how students interpret silence and engagement in digital learning environments. Compared with the relatively concentrated responses concerning spoken participation in face-to-face classrooms, the findings

from digital settings were more varied.

As Figure 4.2 shows, 48% of participants associated digital silence with reflection, while 22% disagreed and 30% remained neutral. Although agreement was the largest response category, it did not constitute a clear majority. The 30% neutral response is particularly important because it indicates uncertainty about whether silence online represents reflection, disengagement, technical difficulty, or environmental interruption. Digital silence therefore appears to have several possible meanings and cannot be interpreted reliably through the absence of spoken interaction alone.

Sixty per cent of participants valued digital features such as chat boxes and asynchronous tools as meaningful alternatives to spoken interaction. This proportion was 12 percentage points higher than the percentage who interpreted digital silence as reflection. These findings suggest that students may value the broader range of participation channels available online even when the meaning of silence itself remains uncertain. Bates (2015) identifies multiple channels of expression as an important strength of digital learning environments, particularly for students who experience anxiety during spoken interaction. Xin and Feenberg (2006) similarly argue that digital tools can redistribute communicative opportunities by reducing the pressure to respond immediately. The present findings support the potential value of these tools, but they do not establish that digital participation

automatically reduces anxiety or increases engagement for every student.



Figure 2. Participation Indicators in Digital Classroom Settings

Environmental conditions further complicated students' digital participation. Forty-one per cent agreed that background noise affected their engagement, while 36% disagreed. The difference of only five percentage points reveals a divided pattern rather than a uniform experience. This variation may reflect differences in students' access to quiet study spaces, private rooms, stable devices, or supportive home and hostel environments.

Bao (2023) notes that digital silence may result from environmental withdrawal as well as reflection. Consequently, teachers should avoid treating all instances of online silence as evidence of either

disengagement or thoughtful attention. The distribution of responses in this study indicates that the meaning of digital silence depends partly on the circumstances in which students access online learning.

Comparative Analysis Across Both Modalities

The third research question examined similarities and differences in silence and participation across face-to-face and digital classrooms. Figure 4.3 presents the principal findings from both modalities.



Figure 3. Comparative Representation of Silence and Participation in Face-to-Face and Digital Classrooms

The clearest difference concerns the forms through which participation is recognised. In face-to-face classrooms, 65% of participants identified speaking as a primary indicator of participation. In digital classrooms, 60% valued written and asynchronous tools as meaningful alternatives to speaking. Although these items measure related rather than identical concepts, the comparison indicates that digital environments provide a wider range of visible participation options.

The response patterns also differed in their degree of agreement. Face-to-face items produced comparatively stronger agreement, including 78% for the influence of teacher behaviour and 62% for fear of negative evaluation. Digital responses were more divided: 48% interpreted silence as reflection, while opinions about the effect of background noise were almost evenly divided between agreement and disagreement. Thus, face-to-face silence appears to be associated more clearly with interpersonal and instructional conditions, while digital silence is more difficult to interpret as it may reflect cognitive,

environmental, or technological circumstances.

Neutral responses ranged from 15% to 30% across the reported items. These percentages should not be interpreted as evidence that the same students repeatedly selected the neutral category because the present analysis does not track individual response patterns across items. Nevertheless, the presence of sizeable neutral groups shows that students do not attach a single, stable meaning to silence. As Chung (2021) observes, students' relationships with silence can shift according to the conditions of a particular classroom encounter.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that silence is context-dependent rather than a uniform indication of disengagement. In face-to-face classrooms, teachers need to consider how questioning practices, peer judgement, and expectations of verbal performance influence participation. In digital classrooms, they must recognise written and asynchronous contributions while also accounting for students' environmental circumstances. Further analysis of respondent-level data would be required

to determine whether the observed differences are statistically significant and whether variables such as fear of evaluation, teacher encouragement, and access to digital resources are related.

CONCLUSION

This study examined how FYUP students at Aligarh Muslim University perceive and experience silence and participation across traditional face-to-face and digital learning environments. The findings across all three research questions indicate that silence is not a uniform phenomenon and cannot be interpreted through a single pedagogical lens. In traditional classrooms, it is shaped primarily by affective and institutional pressures such as fear of negative evaluation, hierarchical teacher-student relations, and the deeply embedded norm that participation means speaking. In digital classrooms, silence operates differently, carrying a more reflective connotation for nearly half the participants while remaining contested for the rest. Across the comparable perception items, 20% of participants in face-to-face classrooms and 30% in digital classrooms selected neutral responses, indicating uncertainty and reinforcing the context-dependent nature of silence.

These findings have important implications for English language teaching (ELT) in Indian higher education, where multilingual learners may remain silent because of limited confidence in English, fear of linguistic error, peer judgement, or hierarchical teacher-student relationships. When silence is interpreted automatically as disengagement, teachers may pressure students into immediate verbal responses and inadvertently privilege confident speakers. This can reduce participation to the public performance of spoken English while overlooking listening, reflection, note-taking, written responses, and other meaningful forms of language engagement.

An inclusive ELT approach should therefore recognise participation as multimodal and design structured pathways from silent reflection to spoken interaction. In face-to-face classrooms, teachers can use extended wait time, think-pair-share activities, individual pre-writing, small-group discussion, anonymous question slips, and written exit responses before inviting whole-class contributions. Teachers should also frame errors as part of language learning and respond to emerging ideas before correcting linguistic form. In digital classrooms, chat boxes, polls, collaborative documents, discussion forums, recorded

responses, and asynchronous tasks can enable students to participate without the pressure of immediate public speaking. These alternatives should complement, rather than replace, opportunities for oral language development.

The paper therefore contributes to ELT by proposing that silence should be treated as a context-dependent pedagogical signal rather than as automatic evidence of passivity. Teachers need to examine what precedes silence, what students are doing while silent, and which participation channel may enable them to contribute. Such an approach allows ELT classrooms to support oral proficiency while also recognising reflective, written, observational, and digitally mediated engagement as legitimate stages in language learning.

Future research would benefit from a mixed-methods design that combines questionnaire data with classroom observation and student interviews, allowing for a richer and more complete account of how silence functions as a communicative resource across different instructional modalities. Studies that extend this comparative framework to other Indian universities and disciplines would also help establish how far the patterns identified here are specific to the AMU context and how far they reflect broader trends in Indian higher education. The study has limitations that should be acknowledged. The sample of sixty students from a single department at one institution limits the generalisability of the findings. The reliance on self-reported questionnaire data means that actual classroom behaviour, which may differ from perceived behaviour, was not captured.

Silence is not the absence of participation. It is participation in another form shaped by context, affect, culture, and the material conditions of the classroom. Recognising this is not merely a theoretical refinement. It is a practical necessity for any teacher who wants to reach all of the students, not only those who are willing to speak.

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