UNIVERSITY OF HELSINKI

# Beyond Not Speaking: Chinese Master's Students' Situated Negotiation of Classroom Participation in Finnish English-Medium Higher Education

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**Abstract:**

Chinese students' classroom silence is often explained by language difficulties, anxiety, or cultural background. However, these explanations may present silence as a fixed personal characteristic and pay less attention to how the same student may respond differently across classroom situations. This study explores how Chinese master's students in Finnish English-medium classrooms experience and explain their own silence. Seven students participated in semi-structured interviews conducted in Mandarin. During the interviews, participants responded to four classroom situations, used a visual self-positioning chart to indicate their perceived ease of speaking and willingness to speak, and explained the reasons for their positions before reflecting on their wider classroom experiences. The data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis.

The findings show that silence is not a single state or simply an absence of participation. Participants remained silent while listening and preparing ideas, avoiding evaluation, protecting relationships, or withdrawing when they saw little value in speaking. Their responses were shaped by four connected considerations: their readiness to participate, the value of speaking, their understanding of the classroom situation, and concerns about how others might judge them. Factors such as who asked the question, how speaking turns were given, class size, familiarity with classmates, and knowledge of the topic could change their responses. The self-positioning patterns varied across situations and participants, and perceived ease of speaking did not always correspond with willingness to speak. Language also influenced silence, but often through its effects on attention, understanding, confidence, and the ability to respond under pressure.

This study argues that classroom silence should be understood as a situated response within classroom participation processes rather than as a fixed personal weakness. To understand students' participation, it is necessary to consider not only how often they speak, but also what they are doing while silent and what their silence means in a particular situation. The study therefore suggests that teachers should provide different ways and conditions for students to enter classroom interaction.

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# 1 Introduction

In most conceptions of the classroom, speaking up tends to be treated as the most easily recognized and most readily endorsed form of participation. This is especially the case in teaching environments that emphasize interaction, discussion, and verbal expression, in which whether or not a student speaks tends to become the most immediate basis for judging their level of engagement. When students do not speak, teachers and researchers frequently interpret their silence as indicating disengagement or a lack of willingness to participate (King & Harumi, 2020). Within this framing, classroom silence is easily cast as a problem that needs to be solved. This understanding, however, may not be sufficient. Existing research suggests that silence is not simply the absence of speech. It can involve active cognitive processing, self-monitoring, and in some situations may represent a deliberate choice about how to position oneself in the classroom rather than a failure to participate (Bao, 2014; King, 2013).

This tendency to equate silence with non-participation has been particularly visible in research on Chinese students. International researchers have often interpreted their classroom silence as the result of limited speaking opportunities in prior schooling, together with teacher-centered pedagogy that leaves little room for spontaneous oral expression (Cortazzi & Jin, 1996; Jackson, 2002). From this perspective, silence is conceptualized as a pedagogical outcome rooted in traditional learning environments where teachers dominate classroom talk and students are expected to listen attentively and respect authority rather than question or openly challenge it. Chinese scholars have largely followed the same explanatory path, arguing that students' quietness is further sustained by long-term learning habits, lay theories about what counts as "good learning," and early educational experiences that emphasize accuracy and discipline (Lei et al., 2017; Lv, 2016). Although the two bodies of scholarship differ in their points of emphasis, they converge on a similar conclusion: silence is treated as a behavioral tendency carried over from educational and cultural traditions, rather than as a communicative choice that students consciously make in specific classroom situations.

When Chinese students enter international classrooms, the limitations of these accounts become more apparent. Communicative norms in international higher

education tend to foreground verbal exchange, open debate, and the public articulation of individual viewpoints. Such expectations may sit uneasily alongside the participation patterns Chinese students have developed through years of prior schooling (Hodkinson & Poropat, 2014). Even so, a considerable portion of existing research on Chinese students' silence in international classrooms still approaches the phenomenon through a familiar set of variables. Low self-confidence, and classroom anxiety have often been identified as the main factors behind their silence (Liu, 2009). These explanations are not without merit. At the same time, they share a tendency to treat silence as a relatively fixed response, one that is assumed to travel with the student from one classroom to another regardless of who else is in the room, what is being discussed, or how the interaction is structured. As a result, what tends to fall out of view is precisely the variability of silence in everyday classroom life. The same student may speak freely in a small group discussion and withdraw entirely during a lecture, or participate actively in one course while remaining silent throughout another. As Tang et al. (2020) suggest, silence is better understood as a learnt and situated behavior than as a stable disposition inherited from culture or habit. If so, understanding why Chinese students fall silent in international classrooms requires more than cataloguing the barriers they face. It calls for closer attention to how they actually respond to the specific interactional demands of particular classroom settings.

Finland offers a particularly instructive setting in which to examine this question. Its higher education system has undergone rapid internationalization in recent years, with the expansion of English-medium degree programs drawing a growing international student population, within which Chinese students have consistently formed a substantial share (Välimaa & Weimer, 2014). What makes this context worth examining, however, is not only the presence of international students, but also the teaching culture they step into. Classrooms in Finnish higher education tend to favor informal, dialogic forms of instruction, in which students are expected to speak up, question ideas, and interact with their teachers on relatively equal footing (Suviniitty, 2012; Hahl, 2016). At the same time, Suviniitty (2012) notes that Finns tend to tolerate silence more readily than people from many other cultural backgrounds, and are less inclined to rush in with the first word or to initiate conversation actively. Finnish classrooms thus present an environment where dialogic participation is encouraged yet silence is not necessarily treated as a

communicative failure. For Chinese graduate students who enter this environment carrying different interactional norms, such classrooms may generate a particular kind of tension, one that does not fit easily into the familiar "Chinese culture versus Western expectations" framework. Since Finland has its distinctive cultural tolerance for silence. It does not belong straightforwardly to the Anglo-American educational tradition that this framework typically presupposes. How Chinese students actually experience and respond to these differing participation expectations within Finland's distinctive classroom culture remains insufficiently explored.

This study therefore approaches silence not as a deficit to be remedied, but as a meaningful communicative choice that is shaped by the specific circumstances of classroom interaction. Through qualitative inquiry involving seven Chinese postgraduate students enrolled in English-medium master's programmes in Finland, all interviewed in Mandarin Chinese, it seeks to understand how these students experience, interpret, and navigate their own silence within the interactional demands of Finnish international classrooms. Particular attention is given to the relationship between how participants explain their silence and how they actually practice it across different classroom situations.

# 2 Literature review

Classroom silence has been examined across second-language education, intercultural communication and international higher education, but these literatures do not always study the same phenomenon. Some focus on reticence or unwillingness to communicate, where silence is treated principally as an obstacle to oral participation; others examine silence as an interactional resource whose meaning depends on what the learner is doing while not speaking (Bao, 2014; Cheng, 2000; King & Harumi, 2020). This distinction matters for the present study. A low frequency of talk can result from limited linguistic resources, anxiety, prior educational experience or exclusion from an interaction, but it can also accompany attentive listening, private reasoning, relational caution or a strategic decision not to take a turn. The review therefore proceeds in four stages. It first considers the principal explanations offered for Chinese students' classroom silence, then reviews work that reconceptualises silence as situated participation, identifies the empirical and conceptual gaps that remain, and finally sets out the concepts used to interpret the present data.

## 2.1 Explanations Offered for Chinese Students' Classroom Silence

Research on Chinese learners commonly clusters around linguistic and cognitive demands, anxiety and face, cultural and educational socialisation, and the pedagogical and relational organisation of classroom interaction (Bao, 2014; Hodkinson & Poropat, 2014; Liu & Jackson, 2008). These explanations are analytically distinguishable but empirically entangled. For example, an English-medium question may be difficult because it must be processed quickly, risky because the answer will be publicly evaluated, and unfamiliar because the learner has had little experience of entering a seminar discussion without nomination. Treating one of these conditions as a complete explanation can therefore obscure how silence is produced in a particular moment.

### 2.1.1 Linguistic and Cognitive Demands

Limited proficiency is among the most frequent explanations for reduced oral participation. English teaching in China has historically placed substantial weight on grammar, reading and examination performance, and many learners have

consequently had fewer opportunities to develop spontaneous conversational competence than their written knowledge would suggest (Hu, 2002; Liu & Jackson, 2008; Sawir, 2005). Speaking in an English-medium classroom is also temporally demanding. Learners must follow an unfolding question, identify what kind of answer is relevant, formulate content and produce it before the conversational opportunity closes. A learner may therefore understand course material yet be unable to convert that understanding into sufficiently rapid public speech. In Liu and Jackson's (2008) study of Chinese university students, unwillingness to communicate was associated with foreign-language anxiety and self-perceived oral limitations. Chou's (2018) study of English-medium instruction in Taiwan similarly identified vocabulary, fluency, disciplinary content and online processing as interconnected sources of speaking difficulty. These findings support the importance of language, but they do not warrant equating non-participation with low general proficiency: what matters is the relation between a learner's resources and the time, topic and interactional demands of a particular occasion.

Evidence from international higher education also suggests that language difficulties are neither uniform nor static. Sawir (2005) linked difficulties reported by Asian international students in Australia to earlier language-learning conditions that offered limited conversational exposure. By contrast, Zhang and Mi's (2010) interviews with Chinese students across Australian universities indicated that listening and speaking difficulties were often most acute during the first two years and varied by discipline, whereas difficulties in academic writing could persist longer. Language therefore changes in explanatory weight as students gain experience and as classroom tasks change. It can also operate indirectly. Uncertainty about whether a problem lies in one's comprehension or in a speaker's explanation may make asking for clarification risky; time spent translating may compete with attention to disciplinary content; and a contribution that would be adequate in writing may feel insufficiently precise when produced publicly. Linguistic resources are thus best understood as one component in a situated decision rather than as a stable threshold that mechanically determines speech.

### 2.1.2 Anxiety, Evaluation and Face

The language account overlaps with, but should not be collapsed into, anxiety. Horwitz et al. (1986) conceptualised foreign-language classroom anxiety as a situation-specific complex involving communication apprehension, test anxiety and fear of negative evaluation. Their formulation is useful because it separates what a learner can say from what the learner feels able to risk saying under observation. Public classroom talk can expose pronunciation, grammatical accuracy and disciplinary knowledge simultaneously, and its consequences are witnessed by both teachers and peers. Anxiety may therefore remain high even when proficiency is adequate, while a less proficient learner may speak when the interaction is supportive or the cost of error is low. Liu and Jackson (2008) found a positive association between unwillingness to communicate and anxiety, but their questionnaire design also shows the limit of inference at the aggregate level: an association between two learner variables does not specify which classroom conditions activate the relation.

Research on face gives a relational account of evaluative pressure. In classroom interaction, learners may be concerned not only with appearing competent but also with avoiding an action that places a teacher or peer in an awkward position. Cortazzi and Jin (1996) observed that questions may be delayed until after class because public questioning can consume collective time or carry interpersonal implications. Holmes's (2006) study of Chinese students in New Zealand likewise showed that participation involved negotiating face, classroom roles and harmonious relations rather than simply overcoming a personal reluctance to speak. Bai and Wang (2022) found that Chinese international students often avoided whole-class exchanges with teachers while seeking interaction after class, in small groups or through more private channels. Such movement across channels is important: it indicates that the absence of a public question does not necessarily imply the absence of a question, interest or agency.

Face should nevertheless not be treated as an invariant cultural trait. Its relevance depends on the audience, the learner's relationship to that audience and the anticipated consequence of a contribution. A familiar peer may help repair an incomplete utterance, while an unfamiliar group may be imagined as continuing to evaluate it after the event. A teacher's question may be experienced as a test with a

preferred answer, whereas a peer's question can invite joint inquiry. The same learner may therefore protect face in one configuration and speak readily in another. Devos and Yokoyama's (2014) experimental work is instructive here: classroom imagery activated a more reserved implicit self-concept among Asian American participants, while leisure imagery did not. Although the study was not conducted with international students, it demonstrates that apparently group-linked dispositions can be context-sensitive rather than globally stable.

### 2.1.3 Cultural and Educational Socialisation

A second major explanation locates silence in cultures of learning. Cortazzi and Jin (1996) define a culture of learning as the often taken-for-granted expectations, values and beliefs through which participants understand good teaching, good learning, appropriate questions and legitimate classroom conduct. Their analysis helps explain why teachers and students can interpret the same behaviour differently. In settings where visible verbal activity is treated as the primary sign of engagement, attentive listening and extended reflection may be read as passivity. Chinese learners, by contrast, may understand activity more broadly to include mental work, observation and preparation, and may regard a question asked after reflection or after class as more responsible than an immediate intervention. Flowerdew and Miller (1995) similarly showed that differing assumptions about lectures, authority and participation shape how learners experience second-language classrooms.

This literature is often reduced to a contrast between a silent, teacher-centred "Confucian" classroom and a vocal, student-centred "Western" classroom. Such a binary is not supported by the more careful accounts. Cortazzi and Jin (1996) explicitly caution that cultures of learning are internally diverse, changing and sometimes contradictory; they also report that Chinese students value independent thought and may disagree with teachers, even when disagreement is expressed through different times or channels. Hodkinson and Poropat (2014) likewise note that questioning has an established place in Confucian learning, but that a worthwhile question may be expected to follow substantial knowledge and reflection. Culture can therefore shape the criteria by which speaking becomes appropriate without directly prescribing silence.

Chinese-language scholarship further complicates the idea of a single cultural tendency. Lei et al. (2017) use interviews with Chinese undergraduates to analyse barriers to classroom speaking, treating silence as a phenomenon that requires access to students' own accounts rather than inference from visible behaviour alone. Lv (2018) distinguishes silent students who remain cognitively engaged from those whose silence accompanies disengagement, showing that identical outward behaviour can arise from different learning orientations. Tang et al.'s (2020) study of Chinese primary pupils similarly traces silence to experiences such as norms of correct answering, negative teacher or peer responses, classroom relationships and resistance. Importantly, pupils with comparable educational backgrounds did not develop identical intentions to participate. Socialisation supplies expectations and habits, but learners interpret and enact them differently.

The explanatory value of culture is therefore strongest when it specifies a learned expectation and shows how that expectation becomes relevant in a setting. It is weaker when nationality is used as a proxy for behaviour. Cheng (2000) argued that "Asian reticence" should be revisited because reticence is situational and cannot be inferred from ethnicity alone. Ha and Li (2014) make the same point through the diversity and fluidity of Chinese "Me Generation" students' accounts: silence could be a right, a preferred choice, resistance or a strategy, rather than the straightforward persistence of deference. A literature review must consequently retain educational history without turning it into cultural destiny.

### 2.1.4 Pedagogical, Interactional and Relational Conditions

A third body of research shifts the explanatory focus from attributes students bring with them to the organisation of participation in the classroom. Interactional formats distribute turns, audiences and preparation time differently. Whole-class volunteering requires learners to recognise an opening and publicly claim it; teacher nomination removes the decision to volunteer but increases the visibility and obligation of the response; pair work limits the audience and can permit collaborative repair. In Liu and Jackson's (2011) case study, students reported greatest activity in pair work, especially with familiar partners of similar English proficiency, and least activity when responding individually before the whole class. Cao and Philp (2006) likewise found that learners' reported and observed willingness to communicate

differed across whole-class, group and dyadic interaction. These patterns do not mean that smaller is always better. Group composition, familiarity, status relations and the purpose of the task alter what a given group size affords.

Time and task design are equally consequential. Tobin's (1987) review showed that extending wait time after questions can improve the quality of responses, which suggests that rapid silence may reflect the tempo of instruction rather than the absence of ideas. Cao's (2011) classroom case study found that situational willingness to communicate emerged through the joint influence of topic, task, interlocutor, teacher, group size, self-confidence and emotion. More recent EAP research reaches a comparable conclusion. Using classroom video, teacher interviews and stimulated-recall interviews, Wei and Cao (2024) distinguished willing, silent and forced participation and linked them to classroom atmosphere, teacher support, peer participation, topic, task and interaction pattern, together with confidence and perceived competence. Silence in these studies is not adequately predicted by a single learner characteristic because the conditions that make speech possible or worthwhile change from episode to episode.

The willingness-to-communicate (WTC) literature supplies particularly strong evidence for within-person variability. MacIntyre (2007) describes the decision to speak as volitional and capable of changing quickly. Zhang et al. (2022), using repeated measurements across a semester in a Chinese college English classroom, found systematic within-person fluctuation in state WTC related to changes in teacher and peer support, task interest and task importance. Peng's (2020) four learner cases connect this dynamic perspective directly to silence, identifying states that ranged from unwilling and silent to desirous but silent and willing to break silence. WTC is not identical to classroom silence: it is concerned primarily with readiness or desire to initiate L2 communication, whereas silence may also perform cognitive or relational functions after a learner has decided not to speak. Even so, this literature demonstrates that communicative behaviour should be studied at the level of person-in-situation rather than inferred from a stable average.

Participation is also structured by power and recognition. Morita's (2004) longitudinal study of Japanese graduate students showed that speaking in academic communities involved negotiating competence, identity and legitimate membership; learners' positions differed across courses and could change over time. Norton's work

similarly argues that the opportunity to speak does not by itself establish a socially recognised right to be heard (Norton, 2000; Norton & Toohey, 2011). A learner may possess the language and motivation to contribute yet judge that the topic, prevailing perspective or distribution of expertise offers no legitimate position from which their experience can enter the discussion. Y. R. Zhou et al. (2005) show how Chinese students' indigenous knowledge could be marginalised in Canadian classrooms even where diversity was ostensibly welcomed. The analytical question is therefore not only whether a turn is technically available, but what kind of speaker the student can become by taking it.

These relational issues are relevant to Finnish English-medium higher education, but the setting should not simply be classified as another version of an Anglophone classroom. English frequently functions as a lingua franca, so teachers and many students are working in an additional language (Hahl, 2016; Suviniitty, 2012). Tuomainen's (2022) study of lecturers at a Finnish university found that many initially treated students' English as unproblematic because admissions criteria had already been met; pedagogical training increased their attention to speaking rate, clarity, pauses and support for multilingual learners. Mendoza et al. (2022) further show, from lecturers' accounts in Finnish higher education, that opportunities for international students' participation and integration are shaped institutionally and that lecturers can operate as gatekeepers. Neither study directly examines Chinese students' silence, but together they indicate that the Finnish context combines dialogic aspirations, lingua-franca communication and institutional conditions that cannot be reduced to a simple East–West contrast.

## 2.2 Reframing Silence as Situated Participation

### 2.2.1 From an Absence of Talk to a Differentiated Phenomenon

The explanatory traditions above have generated substantial evidence about barriers to speaking. A separate literature asks what is lost when all non-speaking is treated as the same deficit. King's (2013) classroom observations in Japan show that silence can occupy a substantial and organised part of classroom interaction rather than appearing only as a breakdown between turns. Bao (2014) distinguishes silence from reticence: silence can serve communicative, cognitive and participatory functions, whereas reticence more specifically suggests reserve or apprehension that impedes

expression. The boundary is not absolute. Both can accompany anxiety, avoidance or communicative difficulty, and the interpretation must therefore rest on evidence about the episode rather than on the visible behaviour alone.

Bao's (2014) synthesis also differentiates psycholinguistic, interactive and sociocultural dimensions of silence. At the psycholinguistic level, a pause can enable inner speech, comprehension and formulation. At the interactive level, it can mark turn management, disagreement, uncertainty or a request for space. At the sociocultural level, it can index relationships, roles and norms about when talk is appropriate. Nakane's (2007) comparative work shows how these functions are vulnerable to intercultural misinterpretation: participants can attribute silence to personality or incompetence when it follows a different interactional convention. Tatar (2005) similarly argues, from non-native-speaking graduate students' experiences in the United States, that silence is a communicative act whose meaning cannot be exhausted by language deficiency or national culture.

### 2.2.2 Cognitive, Relational and Strategic Functions

Several empirical studies document cognitive participation without simultaneous speech. Remedios et al. (2008) followed four locally and internationally educated students who were silent in collaborative learning groups and found that their participation was shaped by multiple personal, contextual and cultural constraints; silence could coexist with learning rather than demonstrate its absence. Bernales (2016) similarly found that learners' mental participation in a second language could diverge from their oral production. Bao (2014) conceptualises such cases as productive silence when learners use non-speaking time to attend, rehearse, compare or reflect. These accounts challenge the use of speech frequency as a complete measure of engagement, while stopping short of claiming that every silent learner is cognitively active.

Silence can also organise relationships. A learner may withhold disagreement to preserve group cooperation, delay a question until a more private moment, or avoid occupying a turn when the anticipated informational value is low. Ha and Li (2014) describe silence as right, choice, resistance and strategy, formulations that direct attention to what learners accomplish by not speaking. Bai and Wang's (2022) finding that interaction may be relocated outside whole-class time similarly shows

that silence in one channel can accompany agency in another. Such practices are not necessarily benign. When students remain silent because disagreement is unsafe, their silence is purposeful but constrained; when their knowledge is not recognised as relevant, silence may protect them while also reproducing exclusion. A functional account therefore asks both what silence does for the learner and what conditions made that function necessary.

This qualification guards against romanticising silence. Calling silence "participation" is warranted only when there is evidence of cognitive, relational or strategic activity. Silence may equally involve confusion, anxiety, exclusion, resignation or withdrawal from learning (Bao, 2014; King & Harumi, 2020; Lv, 2018). The point is not to replace a negative stereotype with a positive one, but to separate behaviour from inferred meaning. Observable non-speaking is the starting point; its function must be reconstructed from the learner's account, the interactional conditions and, where possible, the unfolding episode.

### 2.2.3 From Stable Disposition to Situated State

Once silence is differentiated by function, variation becomes central. A learner may use silence to formulate an answer in one class, to avoid negative evaluation in another, to preserve a relationship in a third and to disengage in a fourth. Dynamic WTC studies make such movement empirically plausible: Cao (2011) and Zhang et al. (2022) show that the same person's readiness to speak varies with interlocutors, tasks, support and perceived value. Peng's (2020) analysis goes further by showing that outward silence can coexist with different degrees of desire and perceived capacity to communicate. These studies provide a process-oriented alternative to accounts in which nationality, personality or proficiency predicts a uniform response.

Nevertheless, the dynamic WTC literature does not resolve the problem of silence by itself. WTC usually treats speaking as the target behaviour and asks why readiness to perform it rises or falls. Silence research must also ask what non-speaking achieves and how learners interpret it. Conversely, functional typologies of silence often enumerate possible meanings without showing how several meanings are distributed within the same learner across controlled comparisons. Bringing the two traditions together suggests a more precise question: not "Why are Chinese students silent?"

but “How does a particular student’s silence change when the interactional situation changes, and what process links the situation to that form of silence?”

### 2.3 Gaps in the Existing Research

Four gaps follow from this review. The first concerns the unit of analysis. Much research compares national or cultural groups, or aggregates students to estimate relationships among proficiency, anxiety and participation. Such designs can identify average tendencies, but they cannot determine whether a learner’s silence is stable across settings. Dynamic WTC research has established systematic within-person variability (Cao, 2011; Zhang et al., 2022), yet comparable work on the changing functions of silence remains limited. The distinction is consequential: two students with the same total amount of silence may have reached it through entirely different situation-specific patterns.

The second gap concerns elicitation. Classroom observation records when silence occurs but cannot by itself establish whether the learner is confused, reflecting, protecting a relationship or withdrawing. General questionnaires and retrospective self-descriptions provide access to interpretation but ask respondents to average across many episodes. Stimulated recall and episode-centred qualitative work demonstrate a productive alternative (Tang et al., 2020; Wei & Cao, 2024), although few studies place the same learner in a standard set of contrasting situations so that their explanations can be compared within the case. A design anchored in specified scenarios can make differences in audience, turn allocation, group composition and communicative purpose discussable without asking participants for a single essentialised account of “their” silence.

The third gap is explanatory integration. Studies frequently list language, anxiety, face, culture, teaching method and peer relations as coexisting factors. Factor catalogues establish breadth but often leave the process between condition and behaviour unspecified. The literature reviewed here suggests that situations are appraised: learners estimate whether they understand, whether they can formulate a response in time, how they may be evaluated, whether their experience is relevant, and whether speaking is worth its interpersonal and cognitive cost. That appraisal can yield different functions of silence even when the observable outcome is identical.

Existing typologies name many of those functions, but less often explain how a learner moves among them.

The fourth gap concerns setting. Research on Chinese international students' classroom participation has concentrated on Anglophone destinations such as the United Kingdom, the United States, Australia, Canada and New Zealand. Finnish higher education presents a different configuration: English often operates as a lingua franca, dialogic participation is encouraged, and silence may have locally distinctive communicative meanings (Hahl, 2016; Suviniitty, 2012). Existing Finnish studies illuminate internationalisation, EMI pedagogy and institutional participation (Mendoza et al., 2022; Tuomainen, 2022), but do not directly examine how Chinese students interpret their own silence across classroom situations.

The present study addresses these gaps through a within-person, situation-anchored qualitative design. Seven Chinese master's students in Finland responded to four specified classroom scenarios, permitting each participant's account in one situation to be compared with their own accounts in the other three. The aim is not to estimate how often each type of silence occurs in the wider population, but to identify variation that aggregate descriptions conceal and to reconstruct how participants connect features of a situation to the meaning and function of their response.

### 2.4 Conceptual Orientation

The analysis was inductive and no comprehensive theoretical model was imposed during coding, as explained in Section 4.5. At the interpretive stage, Archer's account of reflexivity provides the organising explanation of how circumstances are mediated through agents' concerns and deliberations (Archer, 2003). Horwitz and Pekrun clarify linguistic and emotional appraisals; Goffman and Norton clarify situation definition, self-presentation and the right to speak; and Ahearn connects agency to sociocultural mediation. These are sensitising concepts rather than coding categories. Dynamic WTC establishes the importance of within-person variation, but does not capture all cognitive, relational or strategic functions of silence.

Archer (2003) treats the internal conversation as the process through which structural and cultural circumstances are related to what an agent cares about. Circumstances do not mechanically determine action: they become constraints or

enablements in relation to concerns and projects. This study uses reflexivity in that limited processual sense. The interviews provide retrospective and scenario-based accounts of participants' deliberations, not direct access to an inner mental record, but they allow the conditions participants noticed, the concerns they protected and the courses of action they considered workable to be examined together.

Horwitz et al.'s (1986) account of foreign-language classroom anxiety keeps emotional inhibition analytically distinct from linguistic proficiency. Pekrun's (2006) control-value theory then helps explain why the same instructional arrangement may produce divergent emotions: achievement emotions depend on appraisals of control and value. Nomination, for example, may reduce one learner's burden by removing the decision about volunteering while increasing another's anxiety by removing control over whether and when to speak. These concepts are used to interpret reported appraisals, not to infer an emotion from silence alone.

Goffman's (1959) account of situation definition and self-presentation directs attention to what a contribution may communicate about the speaker in a particular audience. Norton's concepts of investment and the right to speak locate that interactional positioning within identity and power (Norton, 2000; Norton & Toohey, 2011). Investment differs from a stable quantity of motivation because commitment changes with the expected return, while the right to speak asks whether a learner can occupy a position from which a contribution will be heard as legitimate. These concepts are particularly relevant when a participant can formulate an idea but doubts that their knowledge, topic or identity belongs within the exchange.

Finally, Ahearn (2001) defines agency as a socioculturally mediated capacity to act. This permits silence to be analysed as delaying, protecting, resisting or reallocating attention without assuming unrestricted choice. Language, relationships, pedagogical rules and response channels expand or narrow what action is possible. Together, these concepts frame silence as situated reflexive action rather than a transparent sign of fixed disposition.

# 3 Research task and research questions

This study sets out to describe and interpret how Chinese master's students in Finnish English-medium classrooms respond to situations in which speaking is possible, and how they account for those responses. The literature reviewed in Chapter 2 establishes that silence among Chinese students admits of several explanations and that the same outward silence can carry different meanings. What that literature leaves open is how those meanings are distributed within a single learner. Research comparing Chinese students with other groups can show that they speak less on average, but it cannot separate a consistent disposition from a response that shifts with the situation, and research asking students to describe their participation in general terms tends to elicit one self-characterisation rather than a set of situated ones. The task taken up here is therefore to hold the person constant and let the situation vary.

The main research question is:

> How do Chinese master's students in Finnish English-medium classrooms experience and account for their own silence across different classroom situations?

Three sub-questions specify this task:

1. What forms does silence take in participants' accounts, and what do participants report doing when they do not speak?
2. How do features of a classroom situation shape which form of silence a participant reports, and what part does language play among those features?
3. How do participants explain their own silence, and how do those explanations relate to the situational variation in their accounts?

The first sub-question treats silence as a set of actions rather than as a single behaviour and asks what those actions are. The second holds each participant constant and compares their responses across situations, so that the conditions under which one form gives way to another become visible; language is singled out within it because the literature reviewed in Section 2.1.1 treats language as a barrier to speaking, whereas the situational comparison makes it possible to ask how it

operates. The third turns to the explanatory accounts participants offer, cultural accounts included, and asks whether those accounts fit the variation the participants themselves describe.

Answers are sought through semi-structured interviews conducted in Mandarin with seven Chinese postgraduate students. Each participant responded to four described classroom situations and used a visual self-positioning chart to indicate their perceived ease of speaking and willingness to speak before turning to open questions about their classroom experience. The material was analysed using reflexive thematic analysis. Chapter 4 sets out this procedure in detail.

# 4 Research method

This chapter describes the methodological approach, participants, data collection procedure, and analytical strategy employed in this study.

## 4.1 Research design

This study employs a qualitative research design to investigate Chinese international students' classroom silence as a situated and reflexive phenomenon. A qualitative approach is appropriate for this inquiry because the research questions concern how students develop subjective meanings of their classroom experiences. Creswell (2013) argues that individuals seek to understand the world in which they live and work, and that they develop subjective meanings of their experiences through interaction with others and through the historical and cultural norms operating in their lives. Merriam and Tisdell (2015) similarly emphasise that qualitative research centres on understanding how people interpret their experiences, construct their worlds, and make sense of what happens to them within particular contexts. This study's focus on the internal reasoning and emotional texture of students' participation decisions aligns with this interpretive orientation.

Semi-structured interviews were chosen as the primary method of data collection for two interrelated reasons. First, the study seeks to access participants' internal deliberation about whether and how to participate in classroom interaction. Archer (2003) theorises this deliberation as an internal conversation through which individuals weigh structural conditions against personal concerns before deciding on a course of action. Because such deliberation is, by definition, internal and often unarticulated, it requires a method that can draw it outward. Semi-structured interviews create the conditions for participants to reconstruct and verbalise their thought processes, emotional responses, and strategic considerations in ways that survey instruments or observational methods alone cannot capture. Second, previous research on Chinese students' classroom silence has relied heavily on questionnaires and classroom observation (e.g., Liu & Jackson, 2008; Zhou & Zhang, 2024), methods that tend to document patterns of silence without fully reaching the subjective reasoning behind them. Interview-based inquiry, by contrast, allows the

researcher to follow up on participants' responses, probe for elaboration, and attend to the emotional and relational texture of their accounts. Dat Bao (2014) similarly advocates for in-depth interviews as a means of making the experiential dimensions of silence visible.

The interview design incorporated four classroom scenarios and a visual self-positioning chart based on two dimensions: perceived ease of speaking and willingness to speak. This scenario-based approach was adapted from mental imagery techniques developed by Blair et al. (2001) and later applied by Devos and Yokoyama (2014). Rather than asking participants to discuss silence only in abstract terms, the scenarios invited them to situate themselves within recognisable classroom moments and reflect on what they might think, feel and do. The activity was designed to support situation-specific reflection and reveal possible variation across classroom conditions.

### 4.2 Participants

Seven Chinese international students participated in this study. All were enrolled in English-medium master's programmes at the University of Helsinki at the time of data collection, and all spoke Mandarin Chinese as their first language. Participants came from a range of disciplinary backgrounds, including computer science (four participants), engineering (one), education (one), and linguistics (one). To protect participants' identities, they are referred to as P1 through P7 throughout the study.

The inclusion criteria required that participants (a) held Chinese nationality and spoke Mandarin as their first language, (b) were currently enrolled in an English-medium master's programme at the University of Helsinki, and (c) had completed at least one year of study in Finland. These criteria ensured that all participants had sustained experience with English-medium classroom instruction in the Finnish higher education context and were able to reflect on their participation patterns with sufficient depth.

The sample size of seven is consistent with qualitative research conventions for in-depth interview studies, where the emphasis falls on richness and depth of individual accounts rather than statistical representativeness (Creswell, 2013; Merriam &

Tisdell, 2015). The goal was not to produce generalisable findings across all Chinese international students, but to generate detailed, contextualised insight into the deliberative processes underlying classroom silence.

## 4.3 Data Collection

Data were collected through individual semi-structured interviews conducted online. Each interview lasted approximately 40 to 50 minutes and was conducted entirely in Mandarin Chinese. The decision to conduct interviews in the participants' first language was deliberate: it aimed to reduce the linguistic burden that English-medium interviewing would have introduced and to allow participants to articulate emotionally complex and nuanced reflections with greater comfort and precision. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' informed consent.

The interview followed a three-part structure, designed to move from concrete situational responses to broader reflective accounts.

### 4.3.1 Scenario Presentation and Self-Positioning

In the first part of the interview, participants were presented with four written classroom scenarios, each depicting a distinct participation format commonly found in international higher education settings. The four scenarios were: (1) open classroom discussion, in which the instructor poses an open question and invites voluntary responses; (2) random selection, in which the instructor calls on students without prior warning; (3) small group peer interaction, in which students discuss a topic in a small group; and (4) giving feedback to a peer, in which participants consider whether to comment after a classmate's presentation.

These scenarios were designed to represent a range of interactional structures that differ in terms of voluntariness, audience size, and power dynamics. Each scenario was presented in both English and Chinese to ensure full comprehension.

After reading each scenario, participants were invited to mark a position on a two-dimensional chart. The horizontal axis represented perceived ease of speaking,

ranging from −5 (very difficult) to +5 (very easy), while the vertical axis represented willingness to speak, ranging from −5 (not willing to speak) to +5 (very willing to speak). Participants were then asked to explain the reasons for their placement. Where one position could not represent all possible responses, additional positions and the participant's explanation were retained. For example, P5 selected three possible positions in the small-group scenario to represent responses under different conditions.

The self-positioning activity served as both a visual elicitation prompt and a descriptive record of participants' anticipated responses. It helped participants compare classroom situations and identify differences that might have remained unclear in a general discussion of silence. The positions were not treated as standardised scores or as direct records of actual classroom behaviour. Their main value lay in supporting verbal reflection and making within-participant and between-participant variation visible.

### 4.3.2 Semi-Structured Interviews

Following the scenario-based self-positioning activity, the interview moved into a second part consisting of open-ended questions about participants' broader classroom participation experiences. These questions were designed to move beyond responses to the specific scenarios and to elicit participants' own ways of understanding speaking, silence, and non-participation in the classroom.

The questions focused on participants' comparisons between their classroom experiences in Finland and China, their observations of other students' participation, memorable classroom moments, and their perceptions of their own roles in classroom interaction. Representative questions included: "Do you feel that your classroom participation in Finland differs from your experience in China, either in how often you speak or in how you feel internally?" and "How would you describe the role you usually play in the classroom?" Participants were also invited to explain whether their participation changed across different courses, teachers, peer groups, or interactional settings.

The semi-structured format allowed the researcher to follow unexpected lines of reflection and to probe further when participants referred to personal feelings and subjective judgements. It also enabled the researcher to revisit participants' earlier self-positioning and their explanations of the four scenarios when later accounts revealed tensions, qualifications or apparent contradictions.

Throughout the interviews, the researcher maintained an open and minimally directive conversational stance. Participants were encouraged to explain their experiences in their own words, revise earlier responses, and raise issues that had not been anticipated in the interview guide. The full interview guide is provided in Appendix 1.

### 4.3.3 Factors Checklist

In the third and final part of the interview, participants were given a checklist of factors that might influence their willingness to speak in class. The checklist included: (a) familiarity with the discussion topic, (b) sense of being respected and welcomed, (c) classroom size, (d) familiarity with the instructor, (e) familiarity with classmates, (f) language ability and confidence in self-expression, (g) fear of being judged by others, (h) uncertainty about how to begin speaking, (i) perceived influence of cultural background on classroom interaction, and (j) clarity of classroom structure. Participants could select multiple items and add additional factors of their own. This component served primarily as a closing reflective exercise, helping participants consolidate their thinking and occasionally surfacing considerations that had not emerged during the earlier conversation.

### 4.3.4 Transcription

All interviews were transcribed in Mandarin Chinese using iFlytek, an automated speech recognition tool developed for Mandarin. Each transcript was subsequently reviewed and corrected manually by the researcher to ensure accuracy, particularly for colloquial expressions, moments of hesitation, and self-corrections that automated tools tend to miss. The decision to keep transcripts in Mandarin rather

than translating them into English at the transcription stage was made to preserve the original phrasing and emotional register of participants' accounts. Translation into English was performed selectively during the analysis and writing stages, only for excerpts included in the final text.

### 4.4 Thematic Analysis

The interview data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). This approach was selected because it offers a systematic yet flexible method for identifying patterns of meaning across qualitative data, while remaining compatible with the study's interest in participants' subjective interpretations and reflexive processes. The analysis followed six phases, though in practice these phases were recursive rather than strictly sequential.

The plotted positions were also organised by participant and scenario and compared descriptively. This comparison was used to identify movement across situations, differences between participants, and cases in which perceived ease and willingness did not align. No averages, statistical tests or numerical classifications were used. The thematic analysis relied primarily on participants' verbal explanations, which were used to interpret why similar classroom arrangements produced different anticipated responses.

In the first phase, the researcher familiarised herself with the data by reading each transcript multiple times, noting initial impressions and recurring patterns. This process involved attending not only to the explicit content of participants' statements but also to the emotional undertones, self-corrections, and moments of hesitation that signalled areas of tension or ambivalence.

In the second phase, initial codes were generated systematically across the entire dataset. Coding was conducted using MaxQDA, a qualitative data analysis software that allowed for systematic organisation, retrieval, and comparison of coded segments. Codes were developed inductively from the data rather than derived from a predetermined coding framework. For instance, when a participant described worrying about how classmates would perceive a comment, this was coded as "fear of

negative evaluation by peers" rather than assigned to a pre-existing theoretical category.

In the third phase, codes were sorted into potential themes by grouping related codes that appeared to capture broader patterns of meaning. For example, codes such as "fear of negative evaluation by peers," "concern about idea quality," and "language expression anxiety" were brought together under a provisional theme related to readiness assessment. Visual mapping and comparison across participants' accounts were used to test whether emerging groupings held across different individuals' experiences.

In the fourth phase, potential themes were reviewed against the coded data extracts and the full dataset. Some themes were refined, merged, or discarded at this stage. The researcher checked whether each theme was supported by sufficient data, whether the boundaries between themes were coherent, and whether the thematic structure as a whole offered a convincing account of the data.

In the fifth phase, patterns were reviewed, defined and named. The analysis produced 55 initial codes, which were brought together into 16 intermediate patterns across emotional, identity-related, relational and reflexive dimensions. Four final themes were then developed around the appraisals through which participants navigated classroom participation. Extracts were selected to show both the central pattern and variation around it, including accounts that complicated a theme rather than merely confirming it.

In the sixth phase, the analysis was written up, with data extracts selected to illustrate each theme and its internal variation. Extracts included in the findings were translated from Mandarin into English by the researcher. Where participants used English words within otherwise Mandarin utterances, those words were retained in the translation and set in italics, since the code-switching carries meaning that a full rendering into English would lose.

Throughout the analysis, codes clustered into four broad dimensions: emotional responses (e.g., language anxiety, pressure from sympathy toward the teacher), identity perceptions (e.g., role perception as leader or commentator, self-positioning as active participant), power relations (e.g., teacher-student hierarchy suppressing participation, peer equality promoting participation), and reflective observations

(e.g., adjusting participation strategy based on situational difficulty, questioning the one-dimensionality of participation). These dimensions emerged from the data and were subsequently brought into dialogue with the theoretical framework during interpretation.

### 4.5 Validity and Trustworthiness

Prior to each interview, participants were informed of the purpose of the study and provided informed consent to participate and to have the interview recorded. They were assured that only the researcher would have access to the audio recordings and transcripts. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time and to decline to answer any question. All identifying information was removed during transcription, and pseudonyms (P1 through P7) are used throughout the study.

Several measures were taken to enhance the trustworthiness of the findings. Regarding credibility, the interview design itself contributed to data quality by grounding participants' reflections in concrete scenarios rather than relying on abstract self-reports. The visual self-positioning activity provided a concrete point of comparison across scenarios and helped participants articulate differences between perceived ease, willingness and anticipated participation. Conducting interviews in Mandarin further supported credibility by addressing what Mabry (2008) identifies as a common source of inaccuracy in qualitative research: the risk of misunderstanding and data loss when interviews are conducted in a language that is not the mother tongue of either the researcher or the participants. This language choice allowed participants to express emotionally complex experiences with greater fluency and precision. After the interviews, transcripts were sent to participants for review, giving them the opportunity to correct errors, clarify their statements, or add further reflections. This member checking process helped ensure that the data accurately represented participants' intended meanings. The findings also report accounts that complicate the thematic structure rather than confirming it, including participants whose responses ran against the dominant pattern within a theme.

Retaining these accounts shows that the structure was tested against evidence that resisted it, rather than being built solely from confirmatory examples.

Regarding dependability, the analytical process was documented through an audit trail in MaxQDA, which recorded all coding decisions, revisions, and thematic reorganisations. This trail allows the logic of the analysis to be traced from raw data to final themes.

Regarding transferability, the study does not claim that its findings are generalisable to all Chinese international students. The sample is small, drawn from a specific educational context, and shaped by particular institutional and cultural conditions. What the study does offer is sufficiently detailed accounts of participants' experiences, the research context, and the analytical procedure to allow readers to judge for themselves whether and how the findings might apply to comparable settings.

### 4.5.1 Researcher Positionality

As Mabry (2008) observes, validity in interpretivist research is complicated by the pervasiveness of subjectivity, to the extent that the researcher can be considered the method itself. This observation is particularly relevant to the present study. As a Chinese international student enrolled in a master's programme at the University of Helsinki, the researcher shares several characteristics with the participants: nationality, first language, and the experience of navigating classroom participation in a Finnish international university. This shared positionality carries both advantages and risks.

It facilitated rapport and trust during the interviews. Participants appeared comfortable discussing sensitive topics such as anxiety, self-doubt, and feelings of exclusion, likely in part because they recognised the researcher as someone who inhabited a similar position. The shared cultural and linguistic background also meant that certain implicit references, such as to Chinese educational norms or the social weight of "face," did not need to be explained, which allowed conversations to reach a level of depth and specificity that might have been harder to achieve with an outsider researcher.

At the same time, this proximity carries the risk of over-identification, where the researcher may project her own experiences onto participants' accounts or fail to notice patterns precisely because they feel too familiar. To mitigate this risk, the researcher maintained reflexive awareness throughout the analysis, regularly revisiting whether emerging interpretations were grounded in what participants actually said or were instead shaped by the researcher's own assumptions.

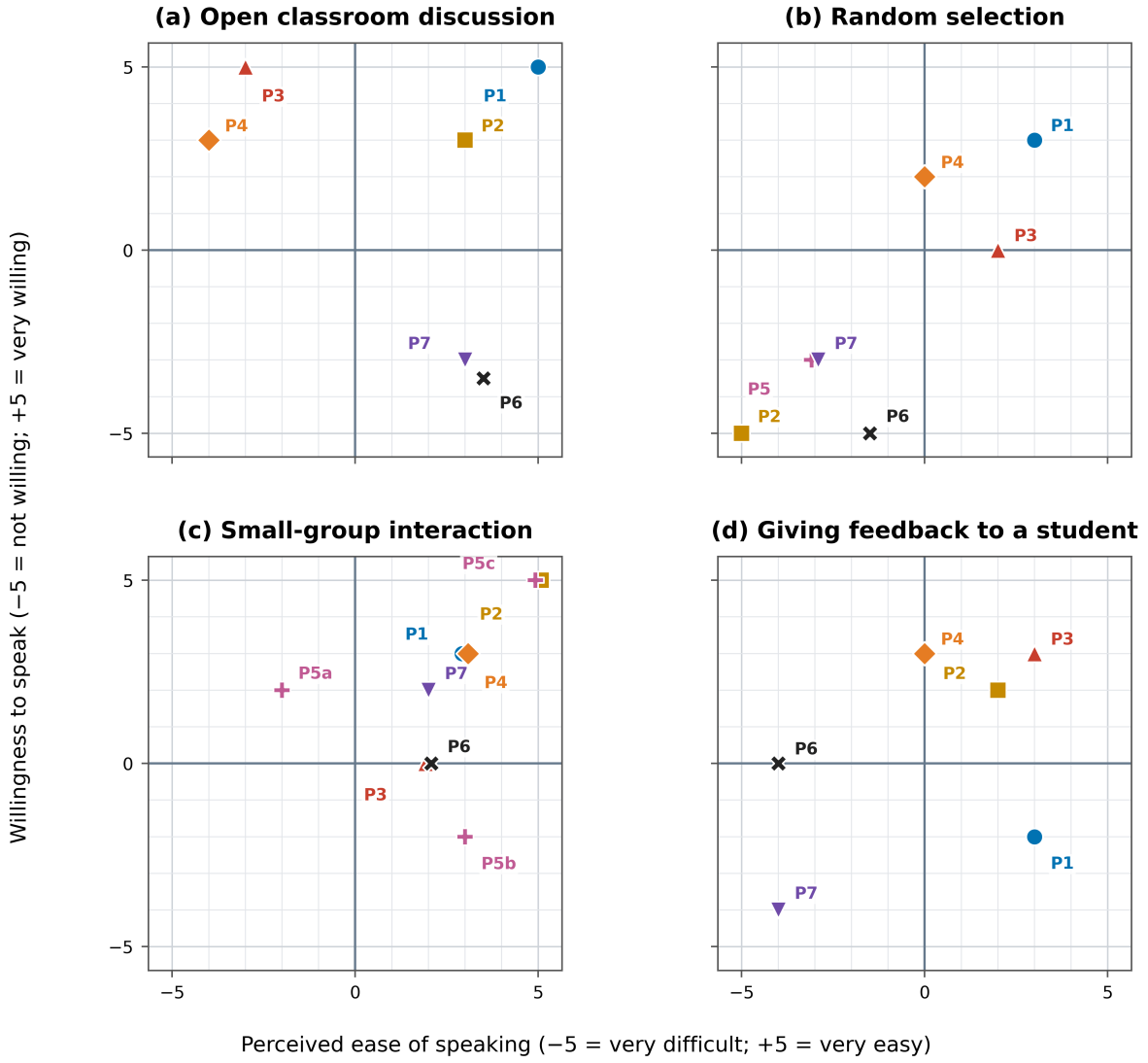
# 5 Research results and their interpretation

This chapter presents the results of the reflexive thematic analysis. Following Braun and Clarke (2006), themes were developed as patterns of shared meaning rather than as containers for every coded extract. Repeated engagement with the seven transcripts produced 55 initial codes. These were brought together into 16 intermediate patterns across emotional, identity-related, relational and reflexive dimensions. Four final themes were then developed around the appraisals participants repeatedly made when deciding whether, when and how to participate: assessing readiness, evaluating the value of speaking, interpreting the participation situation, and managing self-presentation and external evaluation. The intermediate patterns informed these themes but did not form a rigid one-to-one hierarchy; several patterns contributed to more than one final theme.

The chapter is organised to answer the three sub-questions in sequence. Section 5.1 first describes the forms that silence took and what participants reported doing while not speaking. Section 5.2 then presents the four appraisal themes that shaped movement between these forms. Section 5.3 examines the explanations participants offered for their own silence and the tensions between their general self-descriptions and their situation-specific accounts. Section 5.4 draws the themes together into the overarching pattern of strategically adjusting participation within constraints.

The interviews were organised around four described classroom situations: a whole-class open question, random nomination, small-group discussion and feedback after a presentation. The same participant could therefore be compared across situations. The situations were imagined rather than observed, so the findings concern participants' reported and anticipated responses, not direct records of classroom behaviour. All interviews were conducted in Mandarin. The extracts below are the researcher's translations. English words used within otherwise Mandarin utterances are retained in italics because the code-switching formed part of the original account.

Figure 1. Participants' self-positioning across four classroom scenarios




*Note.* The horizontal axis represents perceived ease of speaking, ranging from −5 (very difficult) to +5 (very easy), and the vertical axis represents willingness to speak, ranging from −5 (not willing) to +5 (very willing). In Scenario 3, P5 selected three possible positions to represent responses under different situational conditions; these positions are retained separately as P5a–P5c. No position was recorded for P5 in Scenarios 1 and 4, and no value was imputed. Overlapping positions are slightly offset for visibility. The figure is used descriptively and should not be interpreted as a standardised measurement of willingness or actual classroom behaviour.

Figure 1 provides a descriptive overview of how participants positioned themselves across the four classroom scenarios. The distributions varied both between participants and across situations. Participants did not occupy one stable position, and perceived ease of speaking did not always correspond with willingness to speak. The positions were therefore interpreted together with participants' verbal explanations rather than as numerical measurements.

In the open-discussion scenario, the recorded positions formed two contrasting patterns. P1 and P2 combined relatively high willingness with relative ease, whereas

P3 and P4 reported high willingness despite finding speaking more difficult. P6 and P7 occupied the opposite combination: speaking was perceived as relatively easy, but willingness to volunteer was low. An open opportunity to contribute therefore did not produce a uniform response. Being able to speak did not necessarily mean wanting to enter the discussion, while wanting to contribute did not necessarily make public expression easy.

Random nomination produced a more divided distribution. P2, P5, P6 and P7 were located in the lower half of the chart, with P2 and P6 also reporting very low ease. However, the response was not uniformly negative. P1 remained positive on both dimensions; P4 showed willingness despite neutral ease; and P3 perceived speaking as relatively easy while reporting neutral willingness. The same participation arrangement could therefore be manageable for one participant and strongly restrictive for another.

Small-group interaction produced the greatest concentration in the upper half of the chart, suggesting that this format often supported willingness. Even here, however, the pattern was conditional. P3 and P6 perceived speaking as relatively easy but reported neutral willingness. More importantly, P5 selected three possible positions: one combined difficulty with willingness, another ease with low willingness, and a third combined high ease with high willingness. This variation within one participant shows that ‘small-group interaction’ was not experienced as one fixed condition; its meaning changed with the specific situation being imagined.

The feedback scenario again separated ease from willingness. P1 considered speaking relatively easy but reported low willingness to offer feedback. P2, P3 and P4 were positioned in the upper half of the chart, while P6 found speaking difficult without reporting either strong willingness or unwillingness, and P7 reported both difficulty and low willingness. The distribution indicates that the ability to formulate a comment was distinct from seeing a sufficient reason or an appropriate role for making it publicly.

Taken together, the self-positioning patterns do not divide participants into stable ‘speaking’ and ‘silent’ types. Instead, they show movement between different combinations of willingness and perceived ease, as well as conditional variation within a single scenario. The figure provides a descriptive starting point for the

analysis, while participants' verbal explanations show how these movements were shaped by readiness, perceived value, interpretations of the classroom situation and concerns about public evaluation. The following sections examine these processes in greater depth.

Table 1. Development of the four final themes

| Final theme | Central organising question | Principal intermediate patterns |
|---|---|---|
| Assessing readiness to participate | Can I formulate a contribution here and now? | Pressure inhibiting cognition; situational language anxiety; emotional release; changing participation states |
| Evaluating the value of speaking | Would speaking add enough value to justify its cost? | Perceived value of one's voice; empathy-driven participation; silence as active choice; conditional evaluation of participation |
| Interpreting the participation situation | What kind of participation does this setting invite or require? | Teacher–student power relations; active responses to power; classroom-role positioning; external environmental factors |
| Managing self-presentation and external evaluation | What might speaking expose, and how might it position me? | Evaluation anxiety; cross-cultural identity mismatch; handling ethnic and cultural labels; reflexive deconstruction of participation |

Note. The intermediate patterns are shown under the theme to which they contributed most directly. Their analytic boundaries were permeable rather than mutually exclusive.

### 5.1 Silence as a repertoire of non-speaking responses

Participants did not describe every occasion of non-speaking in the same way. Their accounts contained different forms of attention, withholding, redirection and withdrawal. This supports the view that silence should not be treated as a transparent absence of participation (Bao, 2014; King & Harumi, 2020). At the same time, the material did not support a uniformly positive account of silence. Some responses involved active cognitive or relational work, while others reflected uncertainty, pressure or a narrowing of the actions available. Five forms could be distinguished in the data.

Table 2. Repertoire of responses reported when participants did not speak

| Form | What the participant reported doing | Illustrative cases | Analytic boundary |
|---|---|---|---|
| Internal engagement | Listening, thinking, comparing views or answering internally | P1, P4 and P5 listened before deciding whether they had something to add | May precede later speech, but may also remain entirely internal |
| Delayed or redirected expression | Moving a contribution to writing, after class or a private exchange | P6 used written submission and private questions | The contribution is retained but its timing or channel changes |
| Minimal acknowledgement | Nodding or giving a formulaic response | P1 nodded when he could not follow; P7 said *good good* when asked for feedback | Interaction continues, but uncertainty or disagreement may remain hidden |
| Protective withholding | Keeping an idea private to reduce evaluative or relational risk | P2, P4 and P5 withheld contributions under different forms of evaluation | The participant may have content to contribute but judges public expression too costly |
| Withdrawal | Reducing attention, leaving an activity or not attending | P6 left a turn-taking segment; P5 redirected time from lectures to self-study | The participant moves partly or fully out of the participation occasion |

Internal engagement was the clearest example of silence that remained connected to later speech. P4 described a sequence of listening, comparing and then deciding whether to add something:

> "I would listen first to what everyone thinks. I want to hear how they put it, and then I would see whether there is anything I can add. But I would not be the one who speaks first." (P4-S1)

P1 and P5 described a similar pause before speaking. In these accounts, silence was temporally located before a possible contribution. It created time to establish what had already been said and whether a further contribution was warranted. However, listening did not always lead to speech or fuller understanding. When P1 could not follow a group member, he said that he would not ask the speaker to repeat the point because "that is not my character"; he would infer the general meaning and nod. The nod kept the interaction moving, but it also concealed the unresolved gap in

comprehension. This instance therefore differed from reflective listening even though both appeared outwardly as silence.

Participants also preserved contributions by changing their channel. P6 reported that she might ask a genuine question privately rather than in front of the class. In other situations, she preferred submitting an answer in writing. Such responses did not remove the question or idea. They reduced its public exposure. Formulaic responses formed a thinner version of the same adjustment. P7 said that if somebody requested feedback, he could simply say *good good*. He complied with the turn while withholding substantive evaluation.

Withdrawal marked the outer edge of the repertoire. P6 recalled leaving the classroom during an activity in which students spoke in turn and returning after the activity ended. P5 described discontinuing attendance at lectures that she found difficult to follow and using the time to review materials and organise notes independently. These accounts should not be combined with reflective listening under a general label of 'active silence'. They involved different levels of access to the classroom event. P5 redirected effort towards learning elsewhere, whereas P6's immediate response reflected the limited options she perceived within the activity. The repertoire therefore ranged from engaged non-speaking to constrained disengagement.

## 5.2 Four appraisals shaping participation

The five forms were not tied permanently to particular participants. Participants described moving among them as the situation changed. The four themes below capture the main appraisals through which they accounted for that movement. They are presented separately for analytic clarity, but participants often made several at once. A student could, for example, judge that she had enough knowledge to answer, doubt whether the answer would be heard, interpret the teacher's question as a test, and anticipate looking out of place. The themes therefore describe interrelated aspects of a situated decision rather than four independent causes.

### 5.2.1 Assessing readiness to participate

The first theme concerned whether participants felt able to produce a contribution at a particular moment. Readiness was not equivalent to general English proficiency. It

was assembled from understanding the question, organising content, converting it into English, having relevant knowledge, and doing this within the time and pressure of the setting. P3 and P6 both described language as important, but mainly when immediate public production made these processes compete for limited attention.

> "If I turn my thought into another language and express it, much of my attention is no longer on my learning. It is purely on practising spoken language." (P6-S1)

P6 did not say that she lacked an idea or the linguistic capacity to express it. She judged that translation displaced attention from the content she wanted to learn. P3 described a related process: "I think about how to express it in my mind, and the more I think, the less I want to say it" (P3-S1). Additional processing time did not automatically create readiness. As formulation continued, the prospective contribution lost momentum.

Pressure could disrupt readiness even before an answer was required. In the random-nomination situation, P2 said, "all I would think about is whether I will be called, and what I would do if I am" (P2-S2). Anticipating selection occupied the same attention needed to engage with the question. P5 likewise described nomination as sudden and difficult when she had not prepared, whereas preparation and strong interest in the topic moved her towards speaking. Readiness was therefore sensitive to time and predictability as well as to knowledge.

A further distinction concerned not knowing an answer and not knowing whether the question had been understood. P3 could accept the first as a boundary of her current experience without negative emotion. The second was interpreted as something she had failed to do well. In the feedback situation, she explained that she sometimes could not tell whether a point was genuinely absent from the presentation or whether she had simply missed it. This uncertainty made a public question difficult because she could not determine what it would reveal.

The contrasting cases prevent language from becoming a universal explanation. P1 said that language was "not that critical", and P5 stated that English did not constitute her main difficulty in Finland. P2's relative ease in peer discussion also showed that linguistic resources could remain constant while readiness changed. The data are consistent with Horwitz et al.'s (1986) distinction between proficiency and foreign-language anxiety: what a participant could express and what she felt ready to

risk expressing under observation were not identical. They also show why readiness must be treated as a person-in-situation judgement rather than a stable capacity.

### 5.2.2 Evaluating the value of speaking

The second theme concerned whether speaking seemed worthwhile. Participants evaluated value in at least three registers: its contribution to learning, whether their voice would be received, and its effect on other people. These evaluations could lead to either speech or silence. They therefore cannot be reduced to motivation in the sense of simply wanting to participate more.

P6 questioned compulsory speaking because it moved her attention away from learning. P7 reached a different version of the same judgement in the feedback situation. He said, “I don’t care”, yet immediately explained that he could learn from weaknesses in another student’s work and avoid the same mistakes himself. He rejected public commentary as the useful form, not learning from the presentation. P5’s decision to replace some lecture attendance with independent study also followed an evaluation of learning return. In each case, non-speaking or absence was linked to a judgement that another mode of engagement would be more productive.

The perceived value of one’s voice varied sharply across participants. P5 said that when a contribution received no visible response, “part of the information is wasted”, and the absence of feedback reduced her desire to speak again. P2 did not require the same public recognition. When his internal answer proved correct, he was satisfied that his thinking had been sound even if nobody else heard it. P6 sometimes concluded that the class did not ‘lack’ her contribution. These contrasts show that having an answer did not settle whether voicing it carried enough return.

Relational value produced one of the clearest paired contrasts. P1 withheld feedback because he valued maintaining relationships more than pointing out one or two weaknesses:

> “I think keeping the relationship with classmates matters more than pointing out one or two things. Nobody else comments, so if you comment it looks out of place, right? Commenting is something better left to the teacher.” (P1-S4)

P5 responded to the same feedback situation in the opposite direction. When nobody asked a question, she imagined how the presenter might interpret the silence and felt pressure to speak:

> "If nobody asks anything and nobody speaks, I feel I should say something. If I were the person standing there and there was not a single question after my presentation, I would wonder whether my presentation was not very good." (P5-S4)

P1 and P5 both considered the other person's feelings. The difference lay in which action appeared more protective. For P1, unsolicited criticism threatened goodwill; for P5, continued silence threatened the presenter's confidence. Empathy did not predict one behaviour. It entered an appraisal of the likely consequence of speaking and of remaining silent.

### 5.2.3 Interpreting the participation situation

The third theme concerned how participants defined the event in which speaking was possible. They distinguished answering from discussing, volunteering from fulfilling an assigned turn, and offering a view from performing under evaluation. These definitions shaped the perceived rules of participation before the content of an answer was considered.

P2 contrasted teacher questions with peer questions in epistemic terms:

> "When the teacher asks, he asks with the answer already in hand. If your answer differs from his, he may correct your mistake. If a classmate asks, he probably really does not know, and in that case we can actually discuss it." (P2-S3)

For P2, the first situation was a test or performance, while the second was an exchange between people who did not occupy fixed positions of knowing and not knowing. P4 drew the same distinction when she said that teachers often knew the standard answer and that this made her want to perform well and avoid mistakes. The identity of the questioner thus changed what speaking meant, not simply how difficult it felt.

Turn allocation exposed particularly strong variation. P2 experienced random nomination as anticipatory pressure, and P6 experienced obligatory turn-taking as a reason to withdraw. P4, by contrast, found nomination easier because it removed the decision about volunteering:

> “Normally, if you ask me to speak on my own, I would not. But if you call on me, that is fine. It actually feels easier because I do not have to think about whether to raise my hand.” (P4-S2)

P7 also found the arrangement acceptable because everybody was speaking. In these two cases, externally allocating a turn reduced the exposure attached to choosing to enter the discussion. The same arrangement placed P2 and P6 under greater pressure because their difficulty did not lie in deciding whether to volunteer. It lay in producing or justifying a contribution once public attention became unavoidable. The contrast suggests that nomination does not have a single effect. Its effect depends on which part of participation the student experiences as costly.

Group size also acquired meaning through composition and familiarity. P4 connected a smaller class with knowing the other students and being able to predict their responses. P6 refused to give one position for the small-group situation. She described herself as highly vocal in a Mandarin-speaking Chinese group, less pressured when at least one familiar person could help complete her meaning, and more restrained among strangers. P7 reported that group size made little difference because classmates would pay attention only briefly and then forget. Size therefore mattered through different interpretations of the audience rather than as a direct numerical cause.

These accounts align with research treating willingness to communicate as volatile within the same learner (MacIntyre, 2007; Zhang et al., 2022), while extending the issue beyond willingness alone. Participants also interpreted the social rules of the event: who held an answer, who was entitled or obliged to speak, and what counted as an appropriate contribution. The situational appraisal could change even when the participant’s knowledge and language remained constant.

### 5.2.4 Managing self-presentation and external evaluation

The fourth theme concerned what speaking might reveal about the participant and how it might position them in relation to others. It included fear of being judged, internal standards, uncertainty about occupying a legitimate speaking position, and efforts to reduce exposure through silence or alternative channels. This theme differed from readiness. A participant could be able to formulate a contribution and still decide that saying it would produce an unwanted version of the self.

P4 feared saying “something very stupid” in front of many people, and P5 repeatedly asked whether others might *judge* what she said. Their concern located evaluation in an audience. P2 located it internally:

> “The feeling of being judged comes from inside me. Nobody is actually judging my answer. Getting it wrong does not matter; nobody will care and nobody will remember. But once I have said it and it turns out to be wrong, I will start to doubt myself.” (P2)

This distinction helped explain why the same supportive environment did not remove evaluation for everyone. Familiarity reduced P4’s uncertainty about how others might respond, but it could not remove the standard through which P2 judged himself. Public silence protected both participants from exposure, though the source of that exposure differed.

Self-presentation also involved the right to make a topic relevant. P3 recalled a discussion that remained focused on Finnish and European multilingualism. She had relevant Asian experience and wanted to contribute, but did not want to become “the person who interrupts the current topic and forcibly turns it towards Asia”. Her silence did not follow from lack of preparation or a hostile atmosphere. She anticipated occupying an interactionally awkward identity. The knowledge she held was available, but the discussion did not clearly authorise its relevance.

P6 described a related concern in terms of resonance. In Mandarin-speaking settings, she knew which references listeners would ‘get’. In international groups, she could not be sure that her point would retain its meaning. These cases are close to Norton’s (2000) account of investment and the right to speak: participation depends not only on possessing language but on being recognised as someone whose knowledge belongs in the exchange (Norton & Toohey, 2011). The participants responded by withholding, waiting, moving a question to a private channel, or reducing its content. These were ways of managing public positioning, but they could also leave useful knowledge outside the shared discussion.

### 5.3 Participants’ explanations and tensions in their accounts

When participants were asked to explain their classroom behaviour in general terms, they most often referred to language, personality, prior education and culture. These explanations were meaningful parts of their self-understanding. However, their

concrete accounts frequently introduced conditions that made the general explanation unstable. The analytic point is not that participants' explanations were incorrect. It is that a stable label and a situated account operated at different levels.

### 5.3.1 Stable self-descriptions and situated variation

Language was the most common general explanation. P6 called it an important 'threshold', and P7 explained the silence of students newly arrived from China through their English proficiency. Yet P6 also described major changes across groups while remaining the same English user, and P2's anxiety largely disappeared in peer discussion. P1 and P5 explicitly rejected language as their main difficulty. Language therefore had substantial explanatory force for some participants, but it did not travel unchanged across their situations.

Personality provided another stable vocabulary. P3 described her classroom behaviour as a continuation of her personality, and P7 called himself a passive type. At the same time, both reported circumstances in which their participation changed. P3 spoke when a topic fell clearly within her disciplinary knowledge or when silence created an obligation to support the group. P7 accepted assigned turns and short questions while rejecting presentation feedback. Their self-descriptions captured a recognised tendency, but not a rule that predicted every situation.

Prior education was invoked through teacher-centred roles and predetermined answers. P1 said that the educational model was the main difference, while P2 described teachers in China as transmitters of knowledge. P6 complicated a national comparison with a remembered seminar in China where her participation had been high because speaking turns were built into the format. She also attributed change to life stage and purpose: by the time she entered the Finnish master's programme, she had understood why she wanted to study. Classroom organisation, personal purpose and national setting were therefore intertwined rather than interchangeable.

### 5.3.2 Cultural labels and gaps in shared knowledge

Three participants explicitly resisted using ethnicity or nationality as a direct explanation of their own silence. P2 said, "I have never thought that because I am Asian I will behave in a certain way, because that might be limiting myself." P3 similarly argued that the main obstacle was not 'national character', and P7 placed

the explanation in the person and their language rather than nationality. Participants' observations of others also challenged a stable ethnic pattern. P5 saw Finnish students becoming quieter when their studies moved into English, while P1 and P4 observed highly vocal Asian classmates.

Culture nevertheless remained present in two more specific ways. First, P3 was unsure whether a practice that felt natural in a Chinese classroom would be appropriate in the Finnish international classroom:

> "I am not sure whether a behaviour that comes naturally in a Chinese classroom is a good method or a good way of expressing things in the current classroom. I think it mainly comes from uncertainty and not knowing." (P3)

Here culture did not prohibit speech. It made the interactional consequences harder to predict. Second, P3 and P6 both described missing shared background. P3's Asian examples sat outside the established European topic, while P6 was unsure whether international classmates would recognise the references needed to understand her point. In these accounts, culture operated as a gap in interactional knowledge and common ground. This is consistent with careful accounts of cultures of learning, which treat expectations as diverse and negotiable rather than as a fixed opposition between silent Chinese and vocal Western classrooms (Cortazzi & Jin, 1996; Hodkinson & Poropat, 2014).

P2's account retained an unresolved tension. He rejected ethnic attribution for himself but used Confucian culture and Asian colonial history to explain group tendencies. The two positions coexisted. Cultural narratives remained available at the collective level even when they were resisted as definitions of the individual. The findings therefore limit the reach of a cultural-inheritance explanation without removing culture from analysis.

### 5.4 Overarching pattern: strategically adjusting participation within constraints

Across the four themes, the central pattern was not a stable preference for silence or speech. Participants adjusted the timing, channel, content and intensity of participation after appraising their readiness, the likely value of speaking, the rules of the situation and the consequences of being publicly positioned. The same participant

could think without speaking, wait and add later, use writing, ask privately, offer a minimal response, speak because another person needed support, or withdraw from the event.

P6 articulated this conditionality while comparing two situations: “I realised that the desire to share only develops in a relatively free environment.” She could have an answer in mind and still lose the reason to express it when speaking became compulsory. P4 showed the reverse movement. Removing choice reduced the burden of deciding whether to volunteer and made speaking easier. These paired cases demonstrate why participation cannot be placed on one scale from silent to talkative. Willingness, ease, perceived obligation and expected value could move in different directions.

Table 3. Illustrative adjustments produced by different appraisals

| **Dominant appraisal** | **Reported adjustment** | **Illustrative case** |
|---|---|---|
| Readiness is incomplete but may improve | Listen, formulate and speak later | P4 waited to hear others before deciding what she could add |
| Public value is low but the contribution remains useful | Move to writing or a private exchange | P6 submitted ideas in writing or asked the presenter privately |
| The situation assigns responsibility | Accept the turn or provide a minimal response | P4 spoke when nominated; P7 said *good good* when feedback was required |
| Speaking threatens self-presentation or relationships | Withhold, soften or delay | P2 avoided self-doubt; P1 avoided unsolicited criticism |
| The activity is judged to obstruct learning | Withdraw and redirect attention | P6 left a compulsory turn-taking segment; P5 shifted time to self-study |

The term strategic does not mean that every silence was freely chosen, fully deliberate or beneficial. Ahearn (2001) defines agency as a socioculturally mediated capacity to act. This formulation fits the data because participants acted within unequal access to language, varying classroom rules, public evaluation and limited response channels. Some adjustments expanded their control, as when a question was moved to a private setting. Others were low-cost responses to constraint, as when a participant nodded despite incomplete understanding or left an activity that allowed no acceptable way to pass. Strategic adjustment therefore describes the patterned relation between appraisal and action, not unrestricted choice.

This overarching pattern answers the main research question. The students experienced their own silence as several forms of activity and non-activity rather than as one state. Situational features shaped which form appeared by changing readiness, value, the meaning of the participation event and the risks of public positioning. Participants explained these responses through language, personality, education and culture, but their situation-specific accounts showed that none of these explanations operated independently of the classroom moment.

### 5.5 Summary of findings

Three findings follow. First, non-speaking formed a repertoire that ranged from internal engagement and delayed expression to minimal acknowledgement, protective withholding and withdrawal. These forms should not be collapsed into either passive absence or positive participation. Second, movement across the repertoire was shaped by four interconnected appraisals: readiness, value, situational meaning and self-presentation. The same instructional arrangement could therefore produce opposite responses. Third, participants' general explanations captured important tendencies but did not fully account for the variation in their own examples. Language, personality, prior education and culture mattered through the situations in which they were activated and interpreted. The discussion chapter relates these findings more fully to previous research and considers their implications for English-medium teaching.

# 6 Discussion

## 6.1 The results in relation to previous research

The central finding of this study is that silence was neither a single behaviour nor the expression of a single disposition. Participants described several forms of non-speaking, moved among them as classroom situations changed, and explained those movements through judgements about readiness, value, the meaning of the participation event and the consequences of public exposure. Their general explanations in terms of language, personality, prior education and culture captured parts of this experience, but did not fully account for the variation within their own accounts. The contribution of the study therefore lies less in adding another item to a list of causes than in showing a process through which circumstances were interpreted and converted into different forms of participation.

The self-positioning patterns provide a visual summary of this process. Participants moved between different combinations of willingness and perceived ease as the classroom situation changed, and these two dimensions did not always move together. P5's use of several positions within one scenario further shows that even the same general interaction format could produce different responses when its specific conditions changed. Figure 1 therefore supports a situated process account, while participants' verbal explanations remain necessary for understanding why these changes occurred.

### 6.1.1 Silence as a repertoire rather than a deficit

The five reported forms of non-speaking—internal engagement, delayed or redirected expression, minimal acknowledgement, protective withholding and withdrawal—support the argument that silence cannot be inferred from its outward appearance alone. Bao (2014), King (2013), and King and Harumi (2020) have shown that silence can perform psycholinguistic, interactional and sociocultural functions, while Ha and Li (2014) describe it as right, choice, resistance and strategy. The present findings are consistent with this differentiated view. Listening before speaking could create time for comparison and formulation; a question moved to a private or written channel could preserve its substance while reducing exposure; withholding criticism could

protect a relationship. These were not empty intervals between meaningful acts. They were themselves part of how participants managed learning and interaction.

At the same time, the findings qualify any uniformly positive interpretation of silence. Minimal acknowledgement could conceal incomplete understanding, and withdrawal could reduce or remove access to the classroom event. This distinction matters because the same language of “active silence” can otherwise be applied to both reflective listening and an inability to find an acceptable way of remaining in an activity. Previous studies have similarly shown that mental participation may diverge from oral production (Bernales, 2016; Remedios et al., 2008), but they also caution that cognition cannot be assumed simply because a learner is quiet. In the present study, whether silence counted as participation depended on what the participant reported doing, what options remained available, and what the response made possible afterwards.

This repertoire also adds a temporal and channel-based dimension to functional accounts of silence. Participants did not only choose between speaking and remaining silent at one moment. They delayed contributions, changed audience, reduced content, shifted to writing, or redirected learning outside the class. Silence in one channel could therefore coexist with participation in another. Bai and Wang’s (2022) finding that international students may move interaction from whole-class time to small-group, after-class or private settings is particularly relevant. What appears to the teacher as non-participation may be one stage in a longer participation trajectory that remains partly invisible from the front of the classroom.

The answer to the first sub-question is consequently not a new typology intended to classify students. The five forms identify possible relations between non-speaking and participation within the accounts. A single participant could move across several of them, and the same form could have different consequences in different circumstances. The analytically important distinction is therefore not between “silent students” and “speaking students”, but between what particular instances of non-speaking enable, protect, conceal or foreclose.

### 6.1.2 Appraisal and reflexivity: how situations became action

The second sub-question asked how classroom features shaped the form of silence reported and what part language played. The findings show that situational

conditions did not operate as direct causes. Random nomination, small-group work and teacher questioning each produced different, sometimes opposite, responses. Archer's (2003) account of reflexivity helps explain this pattern. Structural and cultural conditions confront people with constraints and enablements, but their effects are mediated through internal conversations in which agents consider circumstances in relation to what they care about and the projects they are pursuing. The four appraisals developed in this study can be read as the empirical content of such mediation: participants considered whether they could formulate a contribution, whether speaking was worth its cost, what kind of event they were entering, and what public position the contribution might create.

This interpretation does not mean that the interviews provided direct recordings of internal conversation. They elicited retrospective and scenario-based accounts through which participants reconstructed their likely deliberations. Nevertheless, the recurrent conditional form of those accounts—speaking if prepared, withholding if the comment seemed relationally damaging, participating when the group shared enough background, or withdrawing when an activity obstructed learning—shows that participants related circumstances to concerns rather than responding automatically. Their concerns were also multiple. They included learning disciplinary content, maintaining relationships, supporting a presenter, preserving self-confidence, being understood and using time well. Because the same classroom arrangement could advance one concern while threatening another, no arrangement had a uniform behavioural effect.

### 6.1.3 Readiness, language and emotional control

Readiness was the appraisal in which language was most visible, but the findings do not support a simple proficiency-to-silence pathway. For P3 and P6, English increased the processing required for immediate public production: attention moved from disciplinary content to translation and formulation, and the conversational opportunity could lose momentum before a contribution was ready. For P1 and P5, by contrast, language was not the principal difficulty. P6 also changed markedly across interlocutor configurations without becoming a different English user. Language therefore mattered as a situated demand on attention, timing and certainty, not as a fixed amount of competence that predicted behaviour across settings.

This interpretation is compatible with research linking foreign-language anxiety, perceived competence and unwillingness to communicate (Horwitz et al., 1986; Liu & Jackson, 2008), while explaining why those associations do not determine an individual episode. Horwitz et al.'s distinction between linguistic capacity and situation-specific anxiety was visible when participants believed they could express an idea but did not feel able to risk doing so under observation. Dynamic willingness-to-communicate research reaches a similar conclusion from a different starting point: readiness can fluctuate within the same learner as topic, interlocutor, task and support change (Cao, 2011; MacIntyre, 2007; Zhang et al., 2022). The present study extends this account by showing that reduced readiness did not always end in simple non-participation. It could lead to waiting, writing, a private question, minimal acknowledgement or withdrawal.

Pekrun's (2006) control-value theory clarifies the emotional side of this process. Anticipation of random nomination reduced P2's control over attention because concern about being selected competed with engagement in the question. For P4, the same arrangement increased practical control by removing the burden of deciding whether to volunteer. The contrast shows that an instructional feature does not contain a fixed emotional meaning. Its effect depends on the aspect of participation over which the learner seeks control. If the main difficulty lies in choosing whether to enter, nomination can be enabling; if it lies in producing a contribution under unavoidable scrutiny, nomination can remove the only protective option.

The findings also suggest that control appraisals concern interpretation as well as performance. P3 distinguished not knowing an answer from not knowing whether she had understood the question correctly. The first located a boundary in her present knowledge; the second made it possible to attribute the failure to herself. The emotional consequence of language thus arose partly from uncertainty about where a problem lay. Language support alone may increase expressive resources without resolving uncertainty about comprehension, evaluation or the legitimacy of asking for clarification.

### 6.1.4 Value, situation definition and public positioning

Participants also asked, implicitly or explicitly, whether speaking was worth doing. The value at stake was broader than achievement value in a narrow sense. It included

learning return, whether a contribution would be received, and its likely effect on another person. P1 and P5 demonstrated this relational dimension particularly clearly: both considered the presenter's feelings, yet one treated silence as protection from unsolicited criticism and the other treated speech as protection from an apparently unresponsive audience. Empathy therefore did not directly produce speaking or silence. It supplied a concern whose implications depended on how the participant interpreted the social situation.

Goffman's (1959) concept of the definition of the situation helps explain why formally similar opportunities were not experienced as the same event. A teacher's question could be defined as a test asked by someone who already possessed the answer, whereas a peer's question could be defined as genuine inquiry. Volunteering could be experienced as publicly claiming the floor, while an allocated turn could be treated as merely fulfilling a shared requirement. These definitions shaped what action would communicate about the speaker. The participant was not responding only to the wording of a question, but also to an interpretation of who knew, who evaluated, what role was being offered, and what others might infer from accepting it.

The appraisal of self-presentation connects these interactional definitions to identity and power. Goffman (1959) emphasises that conduct in the presence of others both gives information and gives off impressions that may exceed the actor's intended message. This was evident when participants worried that speaking might display ignorance, make them appear out of place, or turn them into the person who redirected a European discussion towards Asia. Silence could reduce this exposure, but it could also keep relevant knowledge outside the collective exchange.

Norton's concepts of investment and the right to speak provide a further explanation (Norton, 2000; Norton & Toohey, 2011). An available turn does not ensure that a learner can occupy a recognised position from which their knowledge will count. P3 had relevant experience but doubted whether introducing it would be treated as a legitimate extension of the topic. P6 was uncertain whether listeners without shared references would grasp what she meant. These accounts resemble Morita's (2004) finding that participation in academic communities involves negotiating competence, identity and membership rather than merely possessing language. They also support Zhou et al.'s (2005) argument that international students' knowledge can remain marginal even in classrooms nominally open to diverse perspectives.

Together, the four appraisals explain why participation changed without requiring the learner to acquire a new personality or cultural identity between situations. Readiness concerned what could be produced here and now; value concerned what the contribution might achieve; situation definition concerned the rules and roles attached to the occasion; self-presentation concerned what speaking might expose or make the learner become in the eyes of others. These appraisals were analytically separable but intertwined in practice. The study therefore adds a process account to research that has often presented language, anxiety, task, peers, culture and teaching method as parallel factors. Circumstances became consequential through the meanings participants gave them in relation to their concerns.

### 6.1.5 Strategically adjusting participation within constraints

The overarching pattern of strategically adjusting participation can be understood as situated reflexive agency. Archer (2003) argues that people deliberate about objective circumstances in relation to their concerns and develop courses of action that they consider workable. In the present study, participants adjusted not only whether they spoke but also when, where, how much and to whom. These adjustments ranged from waiting for more information and moving a question to a private channel to giving a minimal response or leaving an activity. They were strategic in the limited sense that the response was intelligible in relation to an appraisal; the term does not imply that every response was planned in advance, equally effective or freely chosen.

Ahearn's (2001) definition of agency as a socioculturally mediated capacity to act is important here. The options participants could imagine were shaped by turn-allocation rules, linguistic resources, peer relationships, topic frames and the availability of alternative channels. Moving a question to writing expanded control when writing was permitted. Leaving a turn-taking activity reflected agency, but also revealed how narrow the acceptable options had become. Agency and constraint were therefore not opposites. Some silences were ways of acting within a situation; others showed that the situation had made only low-cost or protective action possible.

This distinction prevents two symmetrical errors. The first is to treat silence as passive deficiency and overlook the deliberation and work it may contain. The second is to celebrate every silence as autonomous resistance. The present accounts included reflective, relational and protective uses of silence, but also concealed

misunderstanding and withdrawal. Situated reflexive agency names the relation among circumstances, concerns, appraisal and response; it does not predetermine whether the response benefits learning or equality in the classroom.

### 6.2 Participants' explanations: from stable labels to situated accounts

The third sub-question concerned how participants explained their own silence and how those explanations related to situational variation. Language, personality, prior education and culture were not merely explanations imposed by earlier scholarship. Participants themselves used all four. These accounts should be treated as meaningful forms of self-understanding rather than corrected by the researcher. However, the scenario comparisons showed that a general label and a concrete episode answered different questions. "I am passive" described a recognised tendency; it did not specify why an assigned turn was acceptable while evaluative feedback was not. "Language is a threshold" named a recurring difficulty; it did not explain why the same speaker became highly vocal with particular interlocutors.

The tension is especially important for cultural explanation. The findings support the careful version of cultures-of-learning research, in which educational experience supplies expectations about teachers, worthwhile questions and appropriate participation (Cortazzi & Jin, 1996; Hu, 2002), rather than the binary image of silent Confucian learners entering vocal Western classrooms. P1 and P2 referred to teacher-centred educational roles, but P6 also recalled participating actively in a Chinese seminar where the format assigned speaking turns. Educational history and classroom organisation therefore intersected; neither national location nor prior socialisation alone predicted participation.

Participants also resisted ethnic attribution in ways consistent with critiques of "Asian reticence" (Cheng, 2000; Ha & Li, 2014; Hodkinson & Poropat, 2014). Their observations of vocal Asian classmates and quieter Finnish students in English-medium courses further weakened nationality as a direct behavioural explanation. Yet culture did not disappear. It appeared as uncertainty about interactional conventions, missing common ground and the availability of collective narratives. P3 wondered whether a classroom practice natural in China would be appropriate in Finland. P3 and P6 questioned whether Asian examples or references would fit the

established frame. P2 rejected ethnicity as an explanation of his individual behaviour while invoking Confucian culture and colonial history to explain group tendencies.

These tensions suggest that culture operated less as an internal rule commanding silence than as an interpretive resource. It helped participants explain perceived group patterns, anticipate how an action might be received, and identify knowledge that was or was not shared. This is compatible with Cortazzi and Jin's (1996) insistence that cultures of learning are changing, internally diverse and negotiated in interaction. It also explains why explicit rejection of a cultural label does not settle every level at which culture may operate. Devos and Yokoyama's (2014) finding of context-dependent implicit self-stereotyping addresses a level that interview accounts cannot confirm or disprove. The contribution of the present study is narrower: at the level of participants' articulated experience, culture did not provide a complete or stable account of how they moved across situations.

The more adequate explanation is therefore relational. Past educational experience, language history and self-concepts formed part of the resources through which participants interpreted a present classroom. Classroom rules, audiences and topic frames, in turn, activated some interpretations and made others less relevant. Archer's (2003) framework is useful precisely because it neither dissolves action into structural conditions nor treats the individual as independent of them. Participants' general accounts revealed durable concerns and self-understandings, while their situation-specific accounts showed how these were reconsidered under changing constraints and enablements.

### 6.3 Rethinking participation and voice in English-medium classrooms

The findings also raise a normative question: why is publicly audible speech so often treated as the clearest evidence of participation? Dialogic and active pedagogies have rightly challenged classrooms in which students are positioned only as recipients of knowledge. Freire's (2018) critique of the banking model and his account of dialogue emphasise learners as subjects who participate in making meaning. Yet dialogue should not be reduced to a requirement that every student produce immediate public speech. When the teacher defines the acceptable topic, holds the preferred answer and compels the timing of response, an increase in student talk can leave the underlying distribution of authority unchanged.

This distinction was visible in participants' contrast between genuine peer inquiry and teacher questions asked with an answer already in hand. It was also visible when compulsory turn-taking increased participation for some students but led another to leave the room. From a Freirean perspective, the relevant issue is not the sheer quantity of talk but whether students can enter the production of knowledge as recognised subjects. A classroom may be verbally busy while offering narrow positions from which international students' experience can become relevant; it may also contain periods of silence in which students are actively formulating, evaluating and connecting ideas.

This argument does not make silence the pedagogical ideal. Public discussion enables ideas to be questioned, shared and transformed in ways that private reflection cannot. Some silences in this study concealed misunderstanding or removed knowledge from the group. The implication is instead that voice requires conditions. Learners need time and linguistic resources, but also a reason to invest, a recognisable speaking position and some control over exposure. Treating speech as inherently agentic and silence as inherently deficient overlooks how both can be produced by power.

The Finnish English-medium setting sharpens this issue. English often functions as a shared additional language rather than as the teacher's or every student's first language (Hahl, 2016; Suviniitty, 2012). A common medium therefore does not guarantee common references, equal processing time or equal confidence that one's experience belongs within the topic. Finnish lecturers may initially assume that admitted students' English requires little pedagogical attention, while training can increase awareness of pacing, clarity and multilingual support (Tuomainen, 2022). Mendoza et al. (2022) further show that lecturers can act as institutional gatekeepers to international students' participation and integration. The present findings add the students' side of this relationship: access depends not only on being invited to speak, but on how the invitation is framed and what forms of knowledge it authorises.

### 6.4 Implications for teaching

The pedagogical implication is not that teachers should diagnose the private meaning of every silence. The study shows why such certainty is impossible from behaviour alone. A more realistic aim is to design participation so that fewer meanings have to

be guessed and more than one response remains available. The suggestions below are implications from seven participants' reported experiences, not interventions tested by this study.

First, teachers can separate preparation from public exposure. Advance questions, individual thinking time and brief written formulation before discussion can reduce competition between disciplinary reasoning and English production. Extended wait time has long been associated with fuller responses (Tobin, 1987), but time is most useful when students know what kind of contribution is being invited. Questions about judgement, experience or competing interpretations make the absence of one predetermined answer clearer than rapid checks of recall.

Second, allocated participation should retain a legitimate way to pass. Nomination and turn-taking helped participants whose main difficulty was deciding whether to volunteer, but constrained those whose difficulty lay in composing under observation. An option to pass, respond later, write first or nominate another channel preserves some of the enabling function of structure without making withdrawal the only escape. Pair or small-group discussion can also provide rehearsal and collaborative repair, although group size should not be treated as a universal solution. Familiarity, composition and shared background changed what a small group afforded in these accounts, as in previous research on interactional context (Cao & Philp, 2006; Liu & Jackson, 2011).

Third, participation can be recognised across channels without assuming that all channels are equivalent. Written responses, online tools, after-class questions and private exchanges were already part of participants' repertoires. Recognising these practices can reveal engagement that oral-frequency measures miss and can provide a route towards later public contribution. At the same time, teachers should remain attentive to students who repeatedly rely on minimal acknowledgement or disappear from activities, since these responses may conceal unresolved comprehension or an absence of workable options. A private, non-evaluative check-in is more informative than treating quietness as proof of either disengagement or thoughtful learning.

Fourth, teachers can widen topic ownership. Inviting examples from different regions at the point when a question is framed is different from expecting the only Asian student to redirect a European discussion alone. The former authorises multiple

frames of relevance; the latter can make participation feel like a public identity performance. Teachers can also explain local discussion norms rather than assuming that students will infer them, and can distinguish genuine inquiry from questions intended to test a known answer. These practices address not only language anxiety but the right to speak and be heard as a legitimate knower (Norton, 2000; Norton & Toohey, 2011).

Finally, programmes should be cautious about equating participation with the frequency of whole-class speech. A more inclusive account can consider preparation, listening, written contribution, peer interaction, questioning and the development of ideas across time. This does not remove expectations for oral communication in programmes where it is an important learning outcome. It makes those expectations explicit and creates supported routes towards them, rather than using spontaneous public talk as both the method of learning and the unexamined measure of engagement.

### 6.5 Concluding remarks

This study began by holding the person constant and allowing the classroom situation to vary. That comparison showed that the participants' silence was distributed across a repertoire of responses and that movement within the repertoire was mediated by situated appraisal. Language, personality, educational history and culture mattered, but they acquired force through particular audiences, tasks, topic frames and relations of evaluation. The main theoretical contribution is therefore a process account: classroom conditions become constraints or enablements as learners reflexively relate them to concerns about learning, value, relationships, identity and public exposure, and adjust the timing, channel, content or intensity of participation.

The conclusion is deliberately bounded. The data consist of seven participants' retrospective and scenario-based accounts rather than observations of classroom conduct. They show how these students experienced and explained possible participation, not how frequently each form occurred. Future research could combine repeated classroom observation with stimulated recall, follow the same students across stages of study, and compare international and Finnish domestic students in the same English-medium courses. Such work could test when the repertoire

identified here appears in interaction and how teachers' interpretations of silence shape the next opportunity to participate.

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# Appendices

## Appendix 1. Interview Outline

Dear participant,

Thank you for taking part in this study. Your responses will contribute to a study that explores how Chinese university students experience and deal with classroom participation in international learning environments.
This interview invites you to reflect on various classroom situations and your own feelings, motivations, and strategies in those moments. There are no right or wrong answers — we are interested in **your honest reflections.**
The questionnaire includes four short scenarios, followed by questions about your responses. At the end, you'll be asked to reflect on general factors that influence your participation. Your answers will help us better understand student voices.

**All responses are anonymous and will be used solely for academic research purposes.**

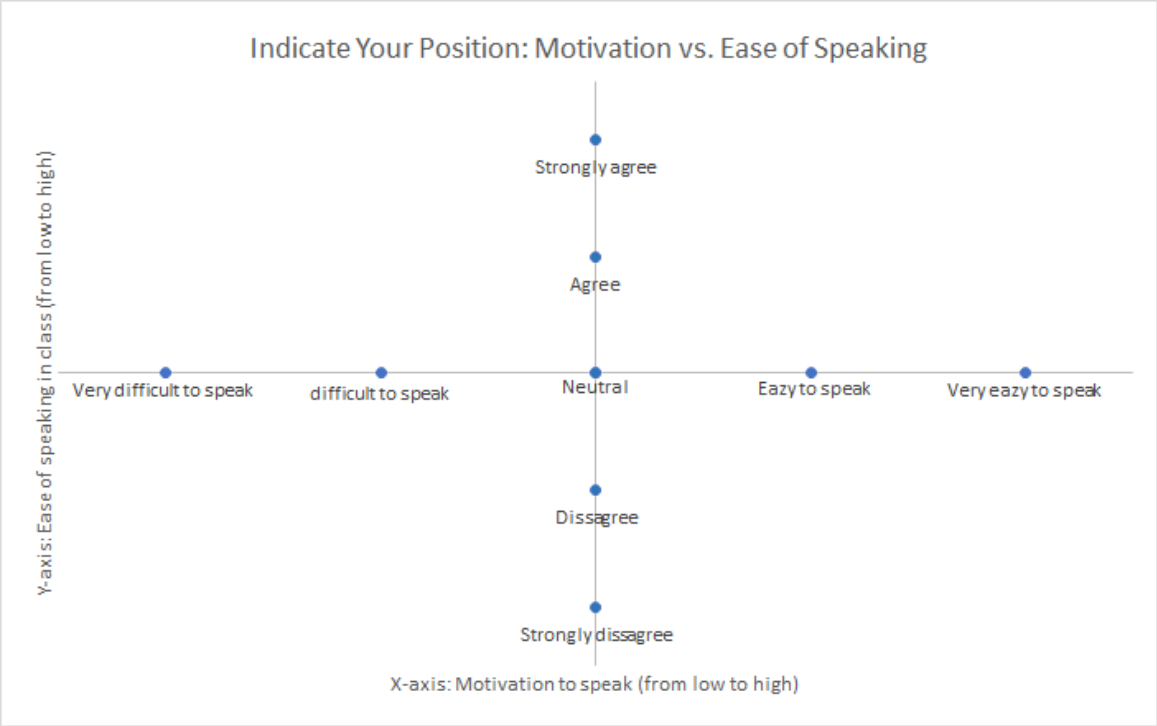
Estimated time: 40-50 minutes.

## Part 1: Classroom Scenarios

***Scenario 1- Open classroom discussion***

You arrive in the classroom on time. After a short introduction, the teacher poses an open question to the whole class. The teacher does not call on anyone specifically. A few classmates start sharing their opinions.

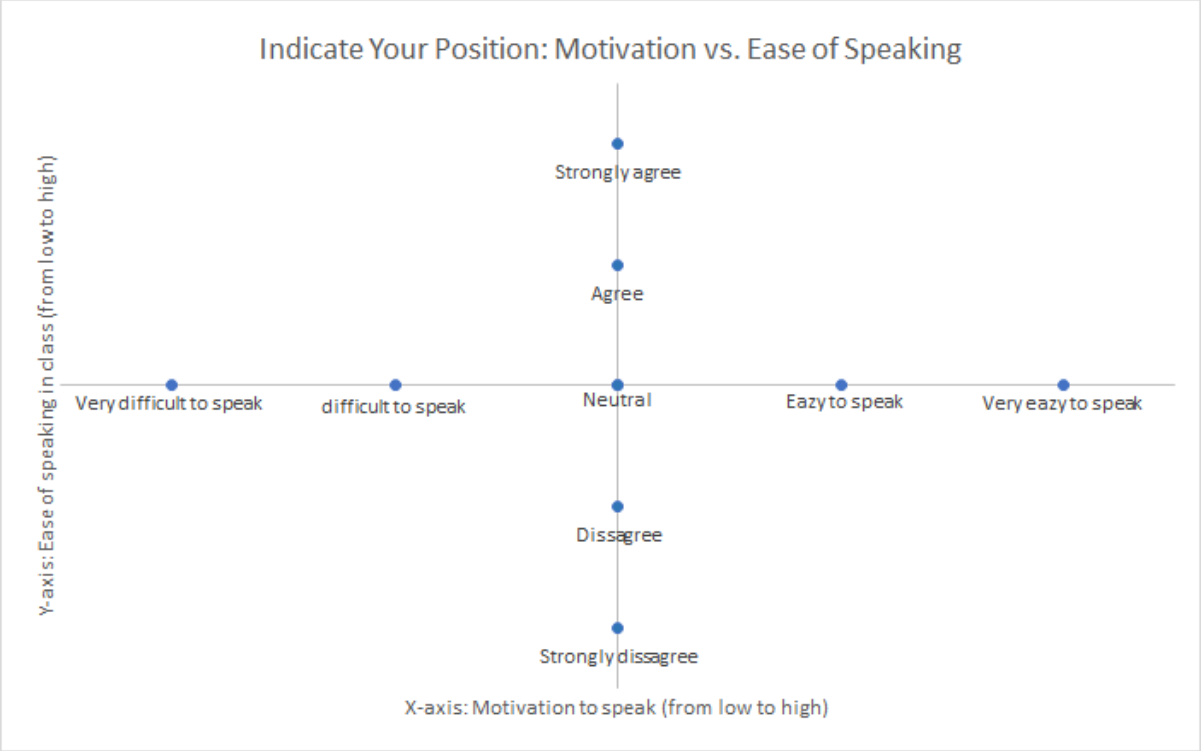
1. Are you likely to speak in this situation?
2. In this situation, where would you place yourself on the chart below? Why? Please mark your position on the chart and write your reasons.



*Scenario 2- Random Selection*

In today's class, the teacher introduces a different approach: instead of asking students to raise their hands, they will randomly call on someone to share their thoughts. After presenting a short open question, the teacher starts selecting students in no particular order. You know you might be called next, but you don't know when.

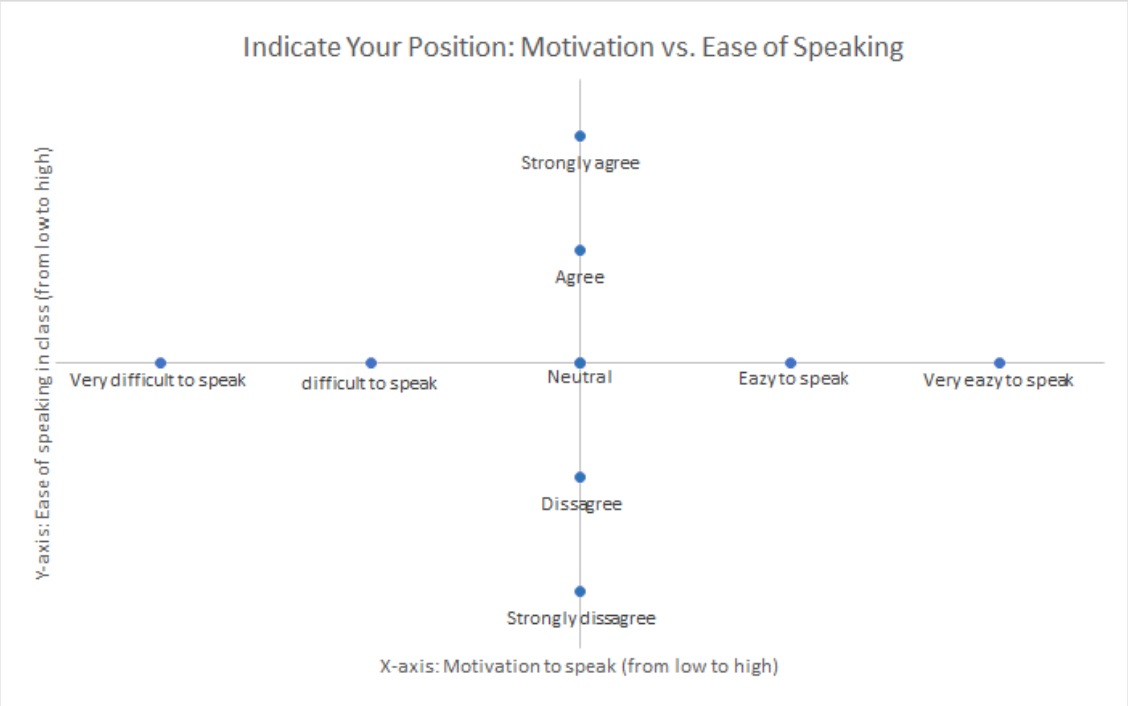
1. How do you feel in this situation? How comfortable are you to speak?
2. In case you don't know the answer, will you try to think about the topic?
3. Where will you place yourself and why? Please mark your position on the chart and write your reasons.



*Scenario 3- Small group peer interaction*

In another class, the instructor asks students to form small groups for a short discussion. Your group gathers around a table. One student starts talking, another adds a few comments, and then it's your turn to respond. The room is filled with the sound of different groups talking at the same time.

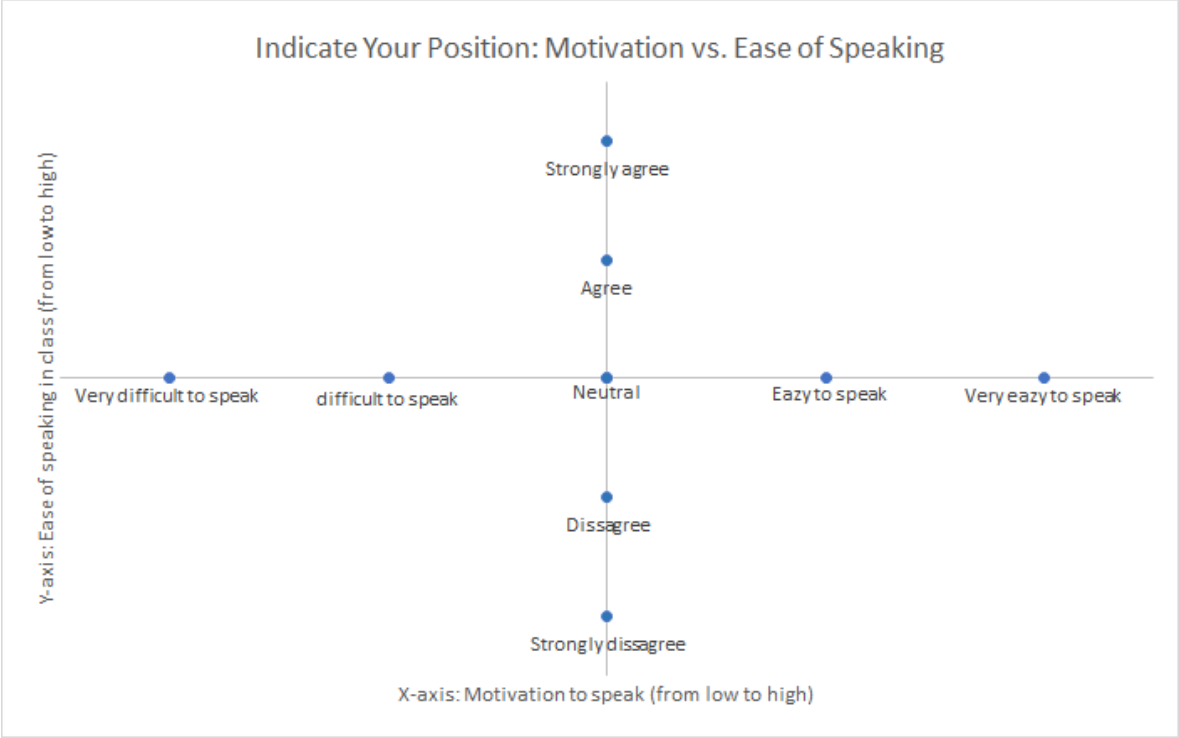
1. Where will you place yourself and why? Please mark your position on the chart and write your reasons.



*Scenario 4- Giving feedback to a student*

After a classmate finishes their presentation, the teacher invites comments or questions. Some students share their thoughts. You consider whether to respond.

1. Where will you place yourself and why? Please mark your position on the chart and write your reasons.



Part 2: Your Classroom Participation Experience

1. How did your state of mind or behavior in class while studying in Finland differ from your experience in China? For example, consider the frequency of your contributions or your internal feelings.

2. Have you observed any differences between your own classroom behavior and that of your peers—whether they are Chinese students or other international students?

3. Please describe a classroom experience that left a deep impression on you.

4. If you had to describe the "role" you played in the classroom using just a few words, what would you say?

## Part 3: Factors That Influence Your Participation

What factors most often affect your willingness to speak in class discussions? (You may select more than one)

□ How familiar I am with the discussion topic
□Whether I feel respected and welcomed
□The physical space or size of the classroom
□How familiar I am with the teacher
□How familiar I am with my classmates
□My language ability or confidence in expressing myself
□Fear of being judged by others
□Not knowing how to begin speaking
□Cultural background and its influence on class interaction
□Whether the class structure is clear
□Other (please describe): _____