Silence of Japanese students in a Thai EFL context

Jeffrey Dawala Wilang
King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi

Abstract

This study explored silence demonstrated by a group of visiting Japanese students in a 3 day, 12-hour English presentation class in a Thai university. Confronted with long periods of silence during in-class interactions, the teacher conducted a classroom action research during the final three-hour session of the course using a *Wh*-questioning lesson review, a word-order activity, and individual presentations. Video recordings and open-ended questionnaires were used to collect data. Topic segmentation of video-recorded data indicated longer silence during teacher initiations than during student initiations. Initial coding of reasons listed common themes across situations such as culture, lack of self-confidence, language processing, negative attitude, positive outlook, and somatic factors. However, other themes were found as situation-specific including attention-getting, face-saving strategy, lack of English proficiency, and language anxiety. Interestingly, the length of silence, language anxiety and the use of face-saving strategy gradually reduced over the three hours. This paper suggests pedagogical implications for teaching English to Japanese students.

1. Background of the study

Many studies have been published on the passiveness of Japanese students in English language learning at home and abroad (Harumi, 2001; Kosaka, 2010; Lebra, 1987, Ling, 2003). For example, Harumi (2001) found stable frequency of silence among 469 first-year undergraduate students in the years 1996, 2000, and 2001 indicating the use of silence as *always* - 30 percent, *frequently* – 25-36 percent, and *sometimes* - 30-42 percent. To understand this classroom phenomenon, various approaches have been used. Kurzon's (1998) framework of intentionality explained psychological attributes of silence, for instances truthfulness, social discretion, embarrassment, and defiance (Lebra, 1987). Harumi (2001) coded four themes such as linguistic problems related to vocabulary, understanding, translation, etc.; problem of time has focused on lack of time to process information; psychological problems have been linked to confidence, anxiety and ability; and, problems with turn-taking, explained as lack of opportunities to speak and missed timing. Other researchers considered it as a communicative act (Agyekum, 2002). This is evident when one agrees with the opinion of the group, shows interest in someone's idea and accepts other ideas. It is also associated with anger, objection, and differing opinions with the rest of the group (Nakane, 2007). Using politeness theory, Ling (2003) attributed forty-three percent of silence to face-saving in formal situations.

In a learning context where English is used and learnt as a native language, Japanese students have shown lack of participation in Australian universities (Nakane, 2003). This is represented by low participation rate of Japanese students in class, very minimal turns in class discussions, and very short utterances or comments. In in-class or out-of-class settings, silence can affect intercultural communication among interlocutors. In the UK, Harumi (2001) provided mismatch on how silence is interpreted by Japanese and English informants in given example below.

Example 1 *Japanese informants – She is waiting for teacher's* ***help***
English informants – She is ***uninterested*** *and hopes that if she does not answer, the teacher will leave her alone*
Harumi (2001, p. 3)

This classroom action research was conducted in an attempt to better understand the functions of silence in a naturally occurring situation. As English language learning in Thailand is becoming popular among Japanese students, there is a need to effectively construe their silence in a Thai EFL context. Their increasing number could be attributed to *very close and good relations* between the two countries in terms of trade and investment, cultural exchanges, among others (Komachi, 2016). In addition, Thai universities are gaining recognition internationally (see Times Higher Education World University Rankings 2017), of which Thailand, among other Asian countries, is predicted to become a leading higher education hub in the coming years (Bothwell, 2017).

2. The study

Faced with long-silence during in-class interactions, the teacher sought an explanation by initiating a classroom action research in a class of Japanese EFL students, *n-11,* who attended a 12-hour English presentation course in a top university in Thailand. Although the data gathered is generated from a limited time, in which only three classroom activities (herein referred to as **situations**) are included, the paper highlights the practicality of doing research in the teacher's own language classroom. In addition, the results of the study hope to provide an understanding as to why Japanese students are silent abroad where the status of English is similar to that of Japan – English as a foreign language (EFL). In the teacher's mind, only one question is sought: *What causes silence among Japanese learners of English in a Thai EFL context?*

Extracts from the video recordings were transcribed to provide cues of silence in the three situations identified: (1) *Wh*-questioning lesson review coded as *Lesson Review*, (2) a word-game activity coded as *Word Game*, and (3) individual presentations coded as *Individual Presentations*. During the *Lesson Review*, the teacher asked students questions about key concepts learned in previous lessons. In *Word Game*, students played word-game activities – a list of letters or jumbled words containing key words or phrases from previous lessons, for instance, *iinotrudtonc* or **introduction.** In *Individual Presentations*, students were asked to individually present a topic, applying key concepts of effective presentations learnt in the course.

Using topic segmentation, each of the above situations was coded into *segmented units* such as *Lesson Review_S1, Lesson Review_S2*, or *Individual Presentations_S1* by considering distinctive boundary features such as discourse markers (Grosz and Sidner, 1986; Watson Todd, 2016). Deliberately, silence was only counted within the segmented units but excluding off-task activities (King, 2013), for instance, silence occurring during the questionnaire data collection periods and class breaks. In addition, codes and sub-codes were included to be more accurate in the interpretation of patterns found within the segmented units.

At the end of each situation identified above, open-ended questionnaires *(Why are you silent?*) were distributed to the students individually. In the analysis, open coding was primarily used. In summation, emerging themes, specific codes and patterns within the segmented units and open-ended questionnaires were all considered for promoting a better understanding and interpretation of the silence phenomenon.

3. Results

This section presents the results and discusses salient findings of the research. The first part presents the results of specific codes found in common themes deduced from open-ended questionnaires. Second, sample extracts transcribed from the video recordings are presented. Lastly, graphs showing the segmented units with lengths of time spent in seconds are shown, including specific codes within themes.

3.1 Themes and specific codes common across situations

Themes were derived from *Lesson Review*, *Word Game*, and *Individual Presentations*. Common themes across situations included (1) cultural character, (2) environmental factor, (3) lack of self-confidence, (4) language processing, (5) negative attitude, and (6) somatic factor. Themes specific to *Lesson Review* are face-saving strategy, lack of English proficiency, and language anxiety. Meanwhile, attention-getting technique and winning technique are specific to *Word Game*. There is no specific theme deduced from *Individual Presentations.*

Similar codes found in common themes deduced across situations are the following: cultural character, for example, *Japanese character*; environmental factor such as *hot* (classroom) and *Thais are around*; lack of self-confidence, for instances, *not confident* and *shy*; lack of English language proficiency like *accented speech, lack of listening skill, lack of speaking skill, lack of vocabulary*, and *cannot understand some words*; negative attitude due to a *boring presentation*, and somatic factor, for examples, being *sleepy* and *hungry*. Codes that were found to be specific to a particular situation have been presented in the subsequent sections of the paper – *3.3, 3.4* and *3.5*.

3.2 Coding of video recordings

Using topic segmentation, six segmented units were coded in *Lesson Review*, nine in *Word Game*, and eleven in *Individual Presentations* (see Figures 1, 2 and 3). In the coding process, codes included *tr-initiation* – teacher's verbal or non-verbal acts including asking questions, presenting information, among others; *tr-response* – teacher's verbal or non-verbal in response to student's queries; *st-initiation* – student's verbal or non-verbal including asking questions, presenting information, among others; *st-response* – student's verbal or non-verbal response to prompts by either student or teacher; and, *multiple response* – students' pair or group verbal or non-verbal response to prompts by either student or teacher.

Coded video recordings showed patterns of turn-taking across situations: *Lesson Review*, *Word Game*, and *Individual Presentations*. The teacher-initiated interactions predominated during *Lesson Review* and *Word Game* situations (see sample extracts 1 and 2). Whereas, student initiations predominated in *Individual Presentations* (see sample extract 3). The turn-taking patterns observed from video recordings indicated longer silence during teacher initiations than during student initiations.

The extracts below are sample transcriptions of the video recordings. Extracts were taken from *Lesson Review_S1, Word Game_S1* and *Individual Presentations_S1*. The letter *T* refers to teacher, and *S* for student; *SS* refers to students, and *P1* refers to first student presenter. The sample transcriptions are provided to illustrate how patterns of silence were coded and extracted from the video recordings.

Sample Extract 1

01	T:	so first question	***tr-initiation***
02		what are the things that you can remember	
03		in our lesson yesterday	
04		(.10.)	***silence***
05	T:	yes	***tr-initiation***
06	S:	personality	***st-response***
07	T:	anything else	***tr-initiation***
08		(.13.)	***silence***
09	S:	knowledge	***st-response***
10	T:	((writing))	***tr-response***
11		(...)	***silence***
12	S:	eye-contact	***st-response***
13	T:	((writing))	***tr-response***
14		(.4.)	***silence***
15	S:	smile	***st-response***
16	T:	((writing))	***tr-response***
17		(.5.)	***silence***
18	S:	effective delivery	***st-response***
19	T:	((writing))	***tr-response***
20		(...)	***silence***
21	S:	questions	***st-response***
23	T:	((writing))	***tr-response***
24		(.8.)	***silence***
25	T:	any other keywords	***tr-initiation***
26		(.7.)	***silence***
27	S:	(xxx)	***unable to transcribe***
28	S:	body language	***st-response***
29	T:	okay	***tr-response***
30		((writing))	***tr-response***
31		(.7.)	***silence***
32	S:	memorize	***st-response***
33	T:	((writing))	***tr-response***
34		okay we got a lot	***tr-initiation***

In sample extract 1, taken from *Lesson Review_S1*, there are five teacher initiations, six teacher responses, nine student responses, and ten instances of silence. Longer silence, 3-13 seconds, occurred during teacher initiations with the students.

In sample extract 2, taken from *Word Game_S1*, there are two teacher initiations, four student responses, two teacher responses, and four instances of silence. The longest silence occurred after the second teacher initiation – when the teacher gave the students the first set of jumbled letters to re-arrange into a phrase.

Sample Extract 2

01	T:	so we gonna start	***tr-initiation***
02		(.5.)	***silence***
03	SS:	((representatives walk to the front to take the paper))	***st-response***
04		(.4.)	***silence***
05	T:	ready go	***tr-initiation***
06		(.104.)	***silence***

07	SS:	((audible sounds))	***st-response***
08		(.32.)	***silence***
09	SS:	((group 3 writing their answer on the overhead projector))	***st-response***
10	T:	is the spelling correct	***tr-response***
11	SS:	((another student from group 3 runs to the front))	***st-response***
12		(...)	***silence***
13	SS:	((audible sound))	
14	T:	all right the correct answer is transitions and signposting	***tr-response***
15		okay	

Meanwhile, extract 3 from *Individual Presentations_S1*, shows shorter silence (see also Figure 3). There are eight instances of student initiations, three student responses, and two multiple responses.

Sample Extract 3

01	P1:	hello everyone	***st-initiation***
02		and like (xxx), she (xxx), and (xxx)	***unable to transcribe***
03		our team talks about	
04		what's your gender	
05		and today we will show	
06		wonderful presentation to you	
07		and do you know gender	
08		((points at someone))	***st-initiation***
09		(..)	***silence***
10	S1:	yeah	***st-response***
11	S2:	no	***st-response***
12	P1:	you	***st-initiation***
13	S3:	yes	***st-response***
14	P1:	what is ((show picture))	***st-initiation***
15	SS:	((audible laugh))	***multiple response***
16	P1:	and uh	***st-initiation***
17		((points at someone))	***st-initiation***
18		do you like female	***st-initiation***
19	SS:	((audible laugh))	***multiple response***
20	P1:	and next	***st-initiation***

3.3 Lesson Review (coded as LR in Figure 1)

Six segmented units were identified in the coding process by looking at discourse markers such as *okay, next, all right,* among others. Figure 1 shows the total spoken time in seconds, *n=533*; total silence in seconds, *n=217*; and, percentage of silence, which is 41 percent. The figure further highlights a decrease in silence over time, from *Lesson Review (LR_S1* to *LR_S6)*. *Lesson Review_S3* illustrates the highest percentage of silence, while *Lesson Review_S5* and *Lesson Review_S6* reveal short silence. *Lesson Review_S5* denotes the biggest chunk of spoken time, and the shortest silence. This is attributed to the teacher's initiation seeking an explanation about '**effective delivery**'. The high percentages of silence in *Lesson Review_S1* to *Lesson Review_S3* are associated to the specific codes of *not want to say something wrong, incorrect pronunciation,* among others.

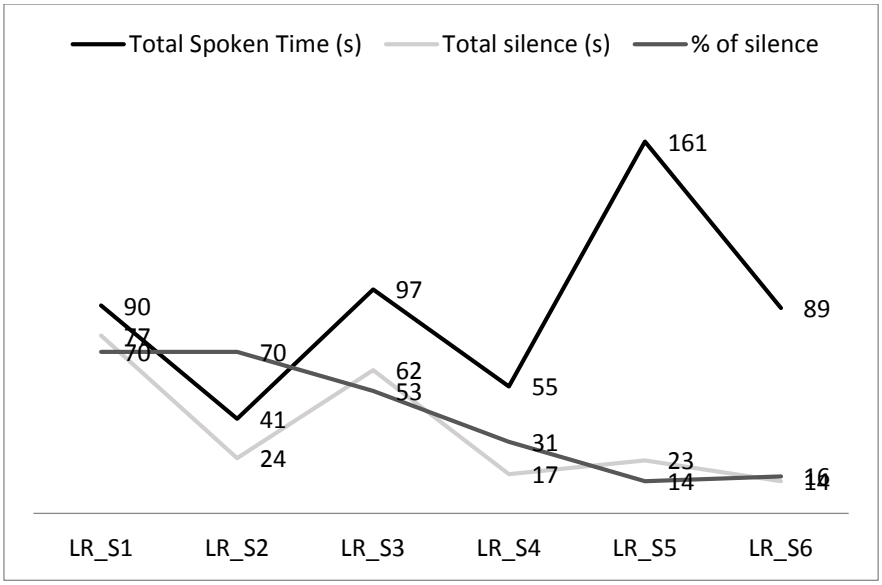

Figure 1. Lesson Review situations

In the initial coding of data, the following specific themes were identified under *Lesson Review*. The most recurrent in this situation are *face-saving strategy* and *language anxiety.* Specific codes are inclusive of the corresponding themes identified.

- *environmental factor* – chair not fit, desk not fit
- *face-saving strategy* – not want to say something wrong
- *lack of self-confidence* – suppress emotion
- *language anxiety* – nervous, worry
- *language processing* – cannot have idea soon, cannot translate idea soon, no opinion yet
- *lack of English language proficiency* – bad pronunciation, incorrect pronunciation, cannot understand the question, cannot make sentence soon, not understand, only know few words, too difficult question, cannot understand content
- *negative attitudes* – not exciting, explain is boring, not move
- *somatic factor* – illness, exhausted

3.4 Word Game (coded as WgA in Figure 2)

Nine segmented units were identified in *Word Game.* Figure 2 shows the total spoken time in seconds, *n=668*; total silence in seconds, *n=544*; and, percentage of silence, which is 81 percent. Also, the percentage of silence in all situations is high, from 61 percent in *Word Game_S7* to 88 percent in *Word Game_S9*. The high prevalence of silence can be credited to the nature of the class activity itself (word-game), which are reflected in the specific codes such as *thinking, to arrange words, losing the game,* etc. The specific theme – *winning technique* also characterizes silence. Both *Word Game_S1* and *Word Game_S9* show the highest percentages of silence. In *Word Game_S1,* it reflects students' lack of familiarization regarding the word-game rules. Meanwhile, *Word Game_S9* is caused by the difficulty of the jumbled phrase.

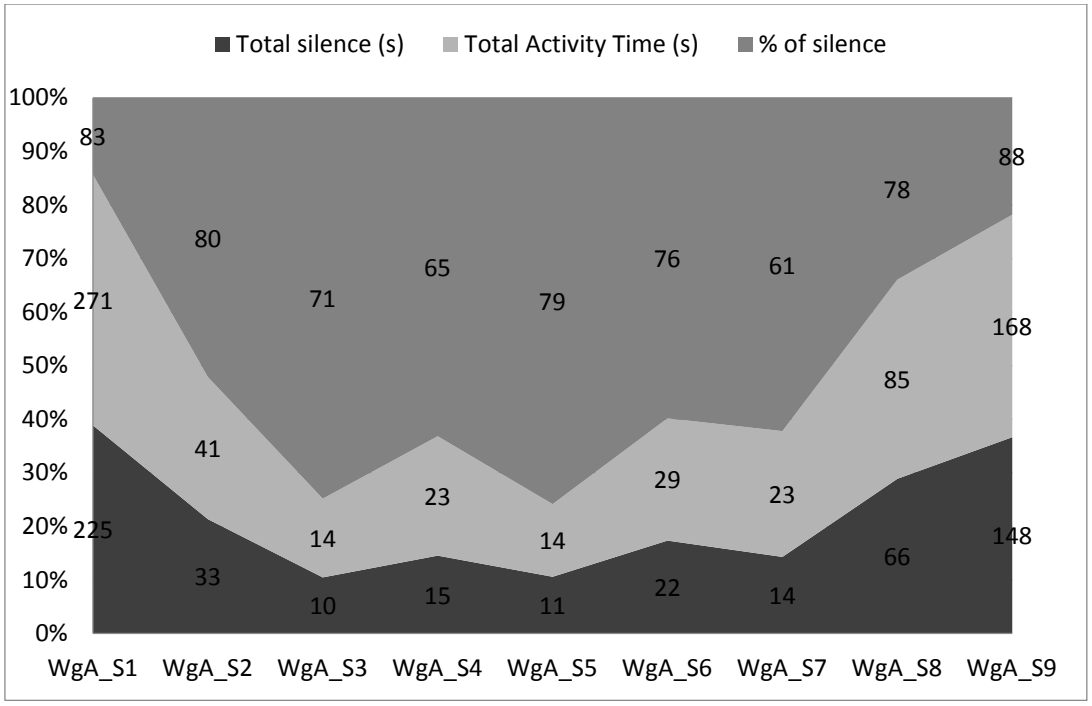

Figure 2. Word-game activity

The following are the specific codes within themes. Themes particularly found in this situation are *attention-getting technique* and *winning techniques.*

- *attention-getting technique* – want to talk to teacher
- *language processing* – don't forget, thinking, to arrange words, to collect information, writing
- *negative attitudes* – losing the game
- *positive outlook* – enjoy the game
- *somatic factor* – thinking other thing, tired
- *winning techniques* – listen to other group, don't want to tell other group, watch other group, want to win

3.5 Individual presentations (coded as InPr in Figure 3)

There were eleven segmented units identified in *Individual Presentations.* Figure 3 shows the total spoken time in seconds, *n=1,992*; total silence in seconds, *n=240*; and percentage of silence, which is 12 percent. Most coded silence, except *Individual Presentations_S4, Individual Presentations_S6,* and *Individual Presentations_S11*, are due to speaker shifting. *Individual Presentations_S4* and *Individual Presentations_S11* are silence as a result of teacher initiations by asking a question. The 3-4 seconds gap shows the preparedness of the students as questions were answered immediately. The highest silence in *Individual Presentations_S6* is a result of a technological problem. All specific codes, except 'forget my presentation', are related to the audience's silence.

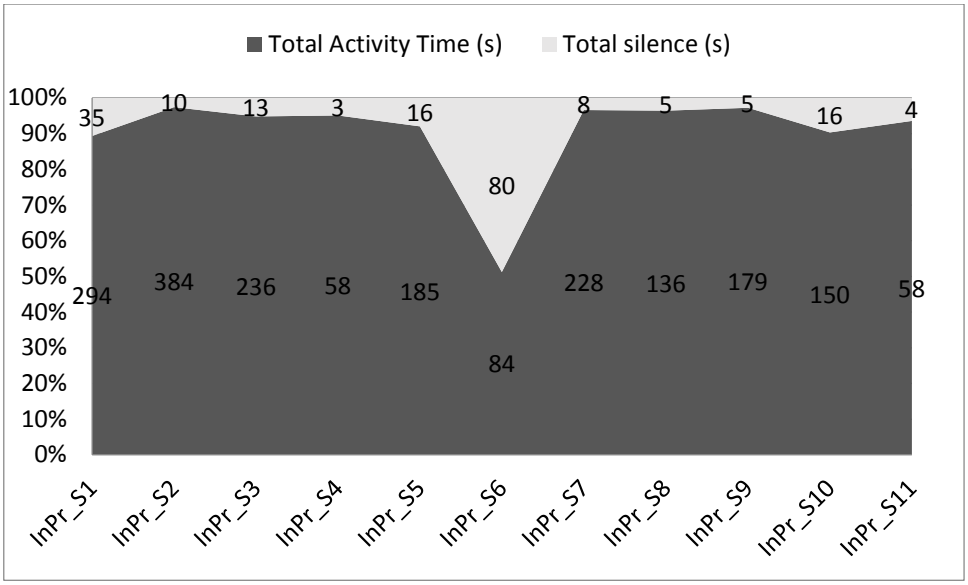

Figure 3. Individual Presentations

The following specific codes are derived from *Individual Presentations.* It can be noted that there are no specific themes deduced for this situation.

- *language processing* – want to understand topic, forgot my presentation
- *positive outlook* – enjoy the presentation, want to hear the presentation, topic is interesting, want to see pictures and videos, focus on presentation

Operationalizing silence yielded three broader interpretations enclosing the eleven emerging themes identified across situations.

- **silence as expression** broadly relates with cultural, physical, and psychological situations such as attention-getting technique, cultural character, environmental factor, somatic factor, negative attitudes, positive outlook, language anxiety, and lack of self-confidence
- **silence as face-saving** pertains to situations in the classroom where students tend to *save face* due to errors or *lack of English language proficiency* in macro and micro-skills
- **silence as cognitive process** specifically relates to language processing strategies and winning techniques

So far the results have shown specific and common codes within themes across situations, and silence in the segmented units. It is interesting to note the following: (1) specific codes that cease to exist across situations, (2) common specific codes and themes across situations, and (3) patterns within the segmented units, for examples, turn-taking patterns in teacher and student initiations as well as lengths of time spent.

4. Discussion

The study suggests both known and unexpected results. Some of the findings above are consistent with extant research. For instance, previous studies argue passivity of Japanese students as face-saving strategy. Students may have used silence as an avoidance of making mistakes in teacher-initiated situations in *Lesson Review*. It is possible the students avoided being corrected for their *different accent, bad pronunciation* or *wrong pronunciation* in teacher-initiated situations. In other words, inhibition of the language learner can be construed as intentional or unintentional (Kurzon, 1998). The literature also proposes a Japanese culture

of collectivity, which supports the findings of the students' positive outlook during the individual presentations such as specific themes deduced from the open-questionnaires, for examples, *enjoy the presentation, want to hear the presentation, focus on presentation, topic is interesting,* and *want to see pictures and videos.* The culture of collectivity could help explain this phenomenon, where students are expected to listen to their peers. This could be attributed to the Japanese culture of *uchi* where students identified themselves as a group (King, 2013). It is quite interesting as Japanese indicate cultural sensitivity even when abroad. Not only studying abroad where English is used as a first and second language (Nakane, 2007) provoking silence among the Japanese students, but also where English is used as a foreign language, for instance, in Thailand. Related to this is the profound effect *when Thais are around* in class (see specific codes under *Lesson Review* and *Word Game*). In fact, a Thai coordinator who works for the students' home university sat in the class most of the time.

By conducting classroom action research, not only the question '*What causes silence among Japanese learners of English in a Thai EFL context?'* was presented but salient findings, for example, silence during turn-takings are uncovered in the segmented units. In the lesson review situation, the most notable observation is the decrease of silence over time. If silence is an indicator of foreign language anxiety, then shorter silence means the decrease of anxiety level in the foreign language classroom. Actually, King (2013) suggested the use of foreign language anxiety framework in understanding silence in a Japanese ESL classroom. Bista (2012) recalled that his silence in the language classroom is caused by low linguistic proficiency, low self-esteem, and self-perceived 'awkward' English. Naturalistic research paradigms like in-depth interview may provide deeper insights about silence in a foreign language classroom.

An additional pattern is the notable absence of *face-saving* theme in *Word Game* and *Individual Presentations* where student initiations are frequent (see extract 2) as compared to teacher initiations in *Lesson Review* (sample extract 1). Silence as face-saving strategy was coded from open-ended questionnaires in teacher-initiated situations where students tended to *save face* due to errors or *lack of English language proficiency* in macro and micro-skills. It suggests the gradual decrease of language anxiety and the use of face-saving strategy.

Another important aspect of the study is the frequent occurrence and the longer length of silence in *Lesson Review.* The teacher's controlled situation was described by the students as *boring, not exciting,* and *explain is boring,* and possibly aggravated by somatic factors mentioned as *sleepy, exhausted* and *tired*. Another plausible explanation is that language anxiety, which is evident in *Lesson Review*, negatively affects the determination of the students to study English (Trang, Mon, & Baldauf, 2012). During teacher initiations, silence seemed to be intensified by specific themes such as *coming up with an idea, translating an idea from native language to English*, and *generating an opinion*, suggesting students are busy with cognitive processing. Longer silences were noted after every teacher initiation (see extract 1). This complements Nakane's (2007) study of Japanese students in Australia, where longer pauses were required in the reception and production of language.

Results also seem to suggest preference for *mov*ing *activity* – a specific code found in *Word Game* where the students *enjoy the game*. Although Figure 2 shows the highest percentages of silence, this can be explained by specific themes under language processing strategies such as *thinking, arrange words, collect information,* and *writing.* The high percentage of silence at the beginning of the word-game activity can be due to the students' unfamiliarity of the game. Meanwhile, the highest percentage of silence indicated at the end of the game is due to the difficulty of the phrase given – *oooiallcrhgnn rroed* **chronological order**.

Lastly, contextual analysis, for example, to explain *somatic factor*, is important for better understanding silence. For example, prior to the last three-hour session in the afternoon,

the object of this analysis, the students had a three-hour morning post-test called Test of English for Thai Engineers and Technologists (TETET). A day before the last session of the 12-hour course, the students had a six-hour intensive English presentation class. And a day earlier, the students had a full-day field trip to a factory in another province, nearby Bangkok. Clearly, contextual analysis could help explain the occurrence of silence in the language classroom, and provide important clues keying specific codes such as *exhausted, illness*, etc., with other themes and codes such as *other Thais present*, *saving face strategy*, performance anxiety, and other issues related to negative self-evaluation, which should not be limited to interpretations based solely on language production and learning objectives.

5. Conclusions and pedagogical implications

A classroom action research has been conducted to understand silence among Japanese students in a Thai EFL context. Accordingly, facets of silence exist in the specific situations in the language classroom. For instances, *Individual Presentations* showed the shortest length of silence during student initiations, *Lesson Review* indicated longer silence during teacher initiations, and *moving activity* like that in *Word Game* showed persistent silence associated with *thinking* or language processing strategies. Also, silence decreases over time while *face-saving* and language anxiety are not coded in *Word Game* and *Individual Presentations.* Specific codes and generalized themes supported findings and interpretations deduced from video recordings.

The following implications can be useful for language teachers dealing with prolonged silence in the classroom.

- Whenever necessary and applicable, a maximized student-centered classroom might be useful to increase student initiations during class interactions.
- If the reluctance of Japanese students to engage in teacher-centered is due to fear of making errors, teacher may use student-centered activities to gradually increase their risk-taking initiatives.
- Teachers may decrease language anxiety in the classroom by adapting *moving* activities in their lesson, for example, using word-related games.
- Teachers may need to recognize silence as a cognitive process. Students, in fact, may have lack of ideas or language to respond to the teacher. By intentionally giving students' sizable time to think, students may gather their thoughts on how a functional language can be used accordingly.

6. Transcriptions

(( )) description of non-verbal act
( ) unable to transcribe
(.) one second silence
(..) two seconds silence
(…) three seconds silence
(.X.) four or more seconds of silence
(xxx) unable to transcribe

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