Studying in Silence: An Autoethnography Study of a Chinese Student in English-Medium University Classrooms

Danying Zhao

A dissertation submitted to Auckland University of Technology in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Education (MEd)

2026

School of Education

Attestation of authorship

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), nor used artificial intelligence tools or generative artificial intelligence tools (unless it is clearly stated, and referenced, along with the purpose of use), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.

Signature: Danying Zhao Date:09/02/2026

Acknowledgements

Completing this dissertation has been one of the most challenging yet rewarding journeys of my academic career. Looking back on this path, I am profoundly aware that my personal growth would not have been possible without the wisdom, courage, and warmth offered by those who supported me through countless difficulties.

First and foremost, I extend my deepest gratitude to my supervisor, Megan Lourie. You have been not only my academic mentor but also my guide through this journey of intercultural exploration. Thank you for encouraging me to embrace the autoethnography research method. Your unwavering support and profound professional insights have taught me not only how to construct a rigorous academic framework but also inspired me to critically examine the meanings underlying intercultural dynamics. Despite your demanding schedule, you consistently responded to my emails promptly and patiently, offering insightful feedback. Moreover, during moments of profound self-doubt, it was your trust in me that sustained my resolve to persevere—a debt of gratitude I shall forever bear.

To my family, who bore the weight of life from afar to support my academic aspirations. Throughout my studies in New Zealand, you remained my most steadfast pillar, offering unconditional trust and care without a single complaint. This support, spanning geographical distance, was my greatest source of strength in a foreign land. This dissertation is not merely my personal achievement, but a testament to our collective endeavours and sacrifices. I am eternally grateful for your steadfast guardianship of my dreams.

To my friends in China, when I wrestled with linguistic anxieties and academic pressures, your encouragement reminded me I was not alone and that the finish line lay ahead. Your friendship remains the most precious treasure of my scholarly journey.

Finally, I extend my gratitude to the colleagues, friends, and inclusive academic community I encountered in New Zealand (Aotearoa). The kindness and diversity here broadened my horizons, lending deeper meaning to this challenging journey.

I dedicate this work to all international students courageously pursuing their dreams in foreign lands. May this dissertation serve as solace: silence does not equate to weakness; resilience and self-awareness will ultimately prevail over adversity. Even in moments of uncertainty and solitude, as

long as we continue our quest for knowledge, we shall find our own voice.

Abstract

This study employs an autoethnographic approach to explore why, as a Chinese international student in English-taught university classrooms in Australia, I predominantly chose to remain silent. Although the phenomenon of Chinese students' silence in intercultural learning contexts has been extensively discussed in existing research, detailed presentations of the subjective experience, immediate feelings, and meaning-making associated with silence from the individual student's perspective remain relatively scarce. Addressing this research gap, this study explored how my silence emerged within authentic interactions and revealed how underlying factors—such as emotional pressure, identity concerns, and classroom interaction rhythms—intertwined to influence my participation as a second language learner.

The findings of this study show that silence can be understood as a contextualised and strategic classroom coping mechanism, rather than a deficiency in ability or lack of willingness to participate. Silence may serve as a way for students to observe classroom norms and understand interaction rules, function as a temporary pause and self-protection strategy during intercultural adaptation, or act as a safeguard for academic identity and self-image when uncertain about the quality of linguistic output. Through this lens, the research demonstrates that silence does not necessarily signify passive withdrawal; it may also constitute a process of self-positioning and identity negotiation within intercultural classrooms.

The study aimed to provide higher education teachers and educators with some insights into the phenomenon of silence from a student's perspective. The findings challenge the tendency to view silence among international students who have English as an additional language as problematic or deficient, and instead encourage attention to its relationship with classroom interaction arrangements, waiting times, feedback methods, and students' language processing needs. By revealing the multifaceted significance of silence in intercultural classrooms, it is hoped that the findings of this study might inform improvements in participation environments within English-taught settings, potentially fostering greater engagement and more positive learning experiences for international students.

Keywords: autobiographical ethnography; classroom silence; intercultural classroom; Chinese international students; identity negotiation; English-taught environment; inclusive teaching

Table of Contents

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Background of the Research

Within the contemporary context of internationalisation in higher education, classroom participation is widely regarded as a key indicator of academic success. In Western educational systems, active verbal expression serves not only as a means of knowledge exchange but also as a vital pathway for students to establish their academic identity and integrate into the scholarly community (Harumi & King, 2020). However, for many Chinese international students from Confucian-heritage cultures, maintaining 'silence' in entirely English-taught classrooms appears to have become a pervasive phenomenon (Morita, 2004; Nakane, 2007; Wang et al., 2022).

For a considerable period, academia harboured a certain 'deficit view' misconception regarding this silence, simplistically attributing it to insufficient language proficiency, introverted personalities, or inadequate preparation (Morita, 2004). Yet, as research deepened, scholars began to recognise the complex cultural negotiations, emotional fluctuations, and identity-protective logic underlying this silence (Nakane, 2007). It is against this backdrop that this study was undertaken, seeking to challenge stereotypes about silence and explore the deeper, embodied motivations driving this phenomenon.

1.2 Personal Motivation and Rationale

My selection of this topic is not coincidental, but stems from my own authentic struggles as a Chinese postgraduate student in Australia. In Australian classrooms, I have repeatedly experienced those moments of 'wanting to speak but being unable to voice my thoughts'. I discovered that even with thorough preparation and insights into the discussion topics, a potent barrier would arise within my body and mind at that precise moment.

This agony of 'loss of voice' prompted me to reflect: why did my voice vanish? Was my silence merely due to insufficient English proficiency? Through writing these diaries and recollections, I realised my experience was not isolated. It represented the shared journey of thousands of international students. Through the method of autoethnography, I aim to give voice to this 'silence,' revealing to educators the intense psychological struggles beneath

international students' quiet exteriors. This is not merely a personal redemption but also a means to assist universities in creating a more inclusive and empathetic teaching environment.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Problem Statement and Context

In international higher education today, classroom speaking is widely seen as an important part of academic learning. It helps students share ideas, participate in discussions, and develop their academic identity (Harumi & King, 2020). Western universities often encourage open talk in seminars, but many studies show that Chinese postgraduate students tend to remain quiet even when they have chances to speak (Wang et al., 2022). This repeated pattern has led teachers and researchers to pay more attention to the reasons behind it (Harumi & King, 2020).

Earlier research tended to explain classroom silence as a simple problem, such as limited English ability, a lack of preparation, or low motivation (Morita, 2004). However, recent studies suggest that silence can have deeper cultural and social meanings. For instance, in Confucian-influenced contexts, silence is sometimes viewed as a sign of respect or careful listening (Nakane, 2007; Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2005). While earlier interpretations of classroom silence often treated silence as a deficiency, assuming that students were quiet because they lacked language ability or confidence (Maher, 2021), more recent studies point out that silence can be shaped by cultural habits, identity negotiation, and classroom expectations (Macher, 2021; Sung, 2017). In other words, silence may carry meaning rather than simply showing the absence of speech.

Another important theme in the literature is the role of language norms. Research shows that non-native English speakers are often compared with an idealised “Standard English” model (Kubota, 2020). This comparison can make students feel their English is not good enough, even if their ideas are strong (Wong, 2016). As a result, silence may reflect how students position themselves in an English-dominant environment. With these developments, more studies now treat silence as a complex behaviour influenced by multiple factors, instead of seeing it as a simple learning problem.

This literature review examines studies about Chinese postgraduate students’ silence in Western classrooms. The review is organised as follows. Firstly, studies that focus on how silence can be understood as a communicative strategy (Yang & Lin, 2024). Then, a discussion of the main reasons behind silence, including cultural, linguistic, and classroom-

related factors. This is followed by a discussion of the connection between silence and students' identity and feelings. The final section summarises the tendency in existing research to interpret silence as disengagement, lack of competence, or cultural passivity, without sufficient attention to interactional context and students' own meanings.

2.2 Understanding Silence in the Classroom

2.2.1 Silence as a Meaningful Behaviour

Since around 2015, research on classroom behaviour has shifted from viewing student silence is a sign of weakness to understanding it as a meaningful and sometimes strategic action (Maher, 2021; Sung, 2017). This shift is important for studies on international students because it moves the focus away from language problems and toward the social and cultural factors behind silence. Harumi and King (2020) point out that silence is a complex behaviour shaped by context, not simply the absence of speech. Their review shows that silence can carry meaning, and it often reflects how students respond to expectations in intercultural classrooms.

Earlier studies tended to assume that silence meant students lacked English skills or confidence, but newer work suggests that silence can also be intentional. For example, Rachel Zhou et al. (2005) argue that silence should be understood through its purpose rather than only its surface form. Herrera (2024) also highlights that silence can be a way of participating without speaking out loud. This means silence can still show engagement.

Reframing silence this way helps researchers avoid a narrow deficiency model. This traditional view often led teachers to focus only on language correction, ignoring cultural norms or identity issues that may influence participation. By treating silence as a communicative choice, researchers can better understand why a student may have the ability to speak but still choose not to. This redefinition opens space to consider different types of classroom decisions and the reasons behind them.

2.2.2 Silence as a Thinking Strategy

Following this redefinition, recent studies try to distinguish between intentional silence (a purposeful choice) and unintentional silence (a response caused by pressure or difficulty) (Wilson, 2023; Yang & Lin, 2024).

Several studies show that intentional silence can be part of a learning strategy. Wilson (2023), using immediate post-observation interviews, found that students often pause intentionally to think, translate ideas, or choose appropriate vocabulary. This pause helps them produce clearer and more accurate responses in their second language. In this way, silence supports metacognition and allows learners to control the quality of their speech.

However, silence is not only about internal thinking. Wang, Moskal and Schweisfurth (2022) found that silence can also be used to manage social risks. Their study shows that many Chinese students choose to stay silent to avoid the embarrassment of making a mistake or interrupting someone they see as authoritative. This type of silence is linked to face-saving practices common in East Asian cultures.

When taken together, these findings show that strategic silence has more than one function. It can help students organise their thoughts and also protect their social image in the classroom. In stressful learning environments—such as graded discussions—students may prioritise social safety over speaking. This combination of cognitive processing and social consideration makes silence more complex than a simple "lack of confidence".

2.2.3 Silence as Personal Choice and Self-Management

Another important perspective in the literature is that silence can be a way for students to protect their identity and show agency. King (2013) argues that silence helps learners maintain a positive academic self-image, especially when they feel uncertain about their language ability. When speaking feels risky, silence becomes a way to avoid negative judgement. Yang (2024) supports this view, noting that silence can help students manage emotional insecurity in unfamiliar academic environments.

Silence can also give students control over when and how they participate. Research by Wang et al. (2015) shows that students sometimes use silence to manage the classroom interaction at their own pace. For example, they may stay silent to avoid responding too quickly, to manage stress, or to avoid open disagreement. In these cases, silence helps students maintain personal boundaries and express themselves indirectly.

Together, these studies show that silence is not simply a passive behaviour. Instead, it can be an active decision made to protect one's identity, manage risk, or regulate thinking.

Understanding silence this way requires researchers to pay attention not only to what students say but also to why they choose not to speak at certain moments.

2.3 Language and Cultural Dimensions of Silence

2.3.1 Language-Related Reasons for Silence

Recent research no longer explains silence mainly through L2 proficiency. Instead, it shows that while language skills provide the ability to speak, emotional pressure and wider language power structures strongly influence whether students want to speak.

Several studies highlight that language anxiety plays a major role in classroom silence. Maher and King (2023) explain that anxiety can create a strong avoidance response, where students stay silent not because they lack ideas, but because they worry about making mistakes or being judged. This fear often appears suddenly and blocks their ability to speak. Yang and Lin (2024) further show that willingness to communicate is closely linked to how students see their "L2 self". Their study showed that when learners feel their English is far below their ideal level, their willingness to speak decreases sharply, leading to more silence.

In addition, affective barriers do not only come from students. Wang et al. (2015) found that teacher anxiety, unclear expectations, or lack of recognition for student effort can increase students' hesitation. This means silence is shaped by interactions in the classroom, not only by individual emotions. Overall, the literature shows that silence is part of a dynamic emotional cycle. Anxiety reduces willingness to speak, and the classroom environment can either ease or intensify that anxiety.

Beyond emotions, researchers also emphasise that silence is affected by structural power differences in language use. Rosa and Flores (2021) argue that academic environments often value a "Standard English" norm. This makes non-native speakers feel their English is being judged or compared with an ideal model. Kubota (2020) further points out that this comparison can reduce learners' confidence even when their ideas are strong.

Wong (2016) found similar patterns in student – teacher interactions: learners from less dominant linguistic backgrounds may self-censor because they expect their contributions to be interpreted as less authoritative. Together, these studies show that silence cannot be understood only from a psychological view. It is influenced both by personal anxiety (Maher

& King, 2023) and by broad language power structures (Rosa & Flores, 2021). These two factors work together and make verbal participation more difficult for international students.

2.3.2 Cultural Influences on Classroom Silence

Culture continues to shape student behaviour, but recent research cautions against attributing silence solely to culture (Holliday, 2018). Instead, students adapt their behaviour based on both cultural background and classroom context.

In this review, the term "Confucian-heritage educational background" refers to learning values that may shape how some Chinese students understand classroom participation. These values can include careful listening, respect for teachers, avoiding interruption, and speaking only after sufficient preparation (Nakane, 2007; Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2005; Harumi & King, 2020). From this perspective, silence may be understood as attentiveness or caution rather than passivity. However, this does not mean that all Chinese students behave in the same way. Rather, these cultural learning habits need to be understood together with classroom expectations, language pressure, identity concerns, and interactional norms.

Several studies show that cultural norms valuing modesty, respect, and careful listening influence how East Asian students participate (Wang et al., 2022; King, 2013; Sung, 2017). For example, Wang et al. (2022) found that students may use silence deliberately in situations where speaking too quickly feels disrespectful or too bold. King (2015) explains that in some learning traditions, knowledge is expected to be delivered by the expert, so students may wait rather than speak spontaneously.

Rachel Zhou et al. (2005) also note that silence can be interpreted positively within these norms—as a sign of attention and respect. This means silence can be a strategic choice, not just a sign of low confidence. Yang (2021) adds that students are not following culture blindly. Instead, they are adjusting their behaviour as Chinese L2 speakers in a Western classroom. They move between two sets of expectations, and silence often becomes a practical way to reduce conflict between these norms. Holliday (2018) strongly cautions against essentialism—the idea that all Chinese students behave the same way because of culture. He argues that this view ignores individual differences and oversimplifies learner behaviour.

King (2013) also states that students do not simply copy cultural traditions. Instead, they

actively negotiate between their familiar communication style and the new classroom expectations. Wang et al. (2015) support this through ethnographic evidence showing that learners understand Western expectations for active speaking, but sometimes still choose silence deliberately. This suggests that silence is part of students' identity work. It is not a failure to adapt but a thoughtful strategy based on personal judgement and cultural understanding.

2.4 How Classroom Practices Shape Silence

2.4.1 When Silence Is Misread by Teachers

The pedagogy of the Western classroom and its teaching norms play an important role in shaping how silence is interpreted. Many universities, including those in Australia, use seminar-style teaching that places strong emphasis on spontaneous speaking as a key form of participation (King, 2013; Harumi & King, 2020). Under this model, students are expected to contribute verbally and respond quickly during discussions. Because of this expectation, silence often becomes highly noticeable and is sometimes treated as a problem.

As King (2013) and Yuan (2016) argue, silence is often interpreted as a lack of interest, lack of preparation, or even poor ability. This reading is very different from the meaning silence carries in many East Asian educational contexts, where staying quiet can express respect, careful listening, or a desire not to interrupt. The mismatch between these two interpretations creates pressure for students who come from cultures where silence is normal and positive.

2.4.2 The Role of Teacher Questions and Wait Time

Teacher practices greatly influence whether students feel comfortable speaking. The way teachers ask questions, how long they wait for answers, and how they define "participation" can all affect students' behaviour.

Research shows that "wait time"— the pause after a teacher asks a question— is especially important for second language learners. Maher (2016) and Wong (2016) both found that when teachers move on too quickly, students lose the chance to process the question and prepare an answer. For L2 learners, producing a spoken response requires several steps: understanding the question, translating ideas, choosing vocabulary, forming a grammatically correct sentence, and mentally rehearsing it. This process takes time. When teachers do not provide enough wait time, students may give up before answering, reinforcing silence. In contrast, when teachers consciously increase wait time, students' responses become longer

and more detailed. This suggests that silence in these moments is not a sign of refusal but a natural part of L2 thinking and planning.

Another barrier comes from the narrow definition of "active participation" commonly used in Western classrooms. Many instructors equate participation mainly with frequent speaking. However, scholars such as King (2013) and Herrera (2024) point out that this definition overlooks other meaningful forms of engagement, such as attentive listening, note-taking, or reflecting on ideas. Herrera (2024) argues that these quieter forms of engagement should be recognized as intentional participation, not as signs of passivity. When teachers fail to acknowledge them, silent students may feel that their efforts are invisible. Guo (2017) found that in group work, non-verbal contributions are often ignored by peers and teachers, making students feel excluded even when they are actively thinking.

2.4.3 Classroom Power Dynamics

In addition to teaching style, the structure of classroom discourse influences who feels able to speak. Subtle rules about who speaks first, whose comments are taken seriously, and whose language is treated as "correct" create an invisible hierarchy (Rosa & Flores, 2021; Wong, 2016).

Wong (2016) describes how these hidden rules can lead to "epistemic injustice." This occurs when a student's contribution is taken less seriously because of their identity—for example, because they speak with an accent or take longer to express an idea. The problem is not the content of what they say but the way others perceive them.

2.5 Silence, Identity, and Personal Experience

2.5.1 Silence as Identity Protection

Silence is closely related to how students build and protect their identity in an intercultural classroom. The choice to speak or not to speak is rarely a simple behaviour. Instead, it reflects how learners see themselves, how they position their identity, and how they respond to the cultural and linguistic demands of Western academic settings.

King's (2013) research shows that silence can act as a form of identity protection. For many international students, studying in a new academic environment requires them to constantly adjust how they see themselves, especially when their English ability does not fully match their academic goals. In this situation, silence becomes a way to protect their academic face

and avoid potential embarrassment. When students feel unsure about their pronunciation, grammar, or cultural understanding, they may decide that speaking carries a high risk. A single mistake may lead to judgement or misunderstanding. Therefore, staying quiet becomes a strategy to avoid negative evaluation. Instead of being passive, this decision shows that learners are actively thinking about how to maintain a positive self-image. Silence helps them manage their vulnerability in an unfamiliar learning environment.

Silence is also a way for students to control their participation. Wang et al. (2015) found that students often choose silence deliberately to manage when and how they join a discussion. For example, they may stay silent to think, to maintain personal boundaries, or to express disagreement in a more indirect way. In this case, silence becomes a communicative choice rather than a lack of confidence.

This quieter form of participation allows learners to protect their emotional comfort while still staying engaged. Yang and Lin (2024) also point out that silence can be a protective response to avoid being misunderstood or judged in a new academic environment. Rather than being passive, the decision to stay silent shows agency. Students are choosing the safest and most comfortable way to participate in the classroom.

Recent studies have expanded the discussion of identity by highlighting the emotional cost behind classroom participation. These studies help explain why silence is not only a behaviour but also a sign of emotional work happening internally.

Maher (2021) argues that emotional tension plays a central role in the decision to speak or stay silent. Students often experience competing pressures: they want to participate academically, but they also fear making mistakes due to language limitations. Managing this internal conflict requires emotional effort.

Silence becomes a practical response to reduce emotional strain. By staying quiet, students avoid situations that may cause embarrassment or anxiety. This idea connects earlier findings on language anxiety (Maher & King, 2023) with broader structural pressures such as language hierarchy (Rosa & Flores, 2021). Silence, therefore, is not simply a reaction to fear—it is a way to manage emotional tension created by linguistic and cultural expectations.

Sung (2017) further explains that international students also experience what he calls

"transposed identity negotiation." This means that the identity they formed in their home educational environment must be adjusted again in a Western classroom. As students move across these contexts, they often find that the rules about communication and competence have changed.

This shift creates moments where silence becomes a way to maintain stability. Students may choose to follow familiar norms from their home culture, such as reflective listening, when the expectations in the new environment feel unfamiliar or stressful. Silence in these situations helps them protect their sense of self during the transition. In other words, students are constantly moving between different cultural expectations. The home culture may value careful listening, while the Western classroom expects spontaneous speaking. Choosing silence allows students to reduce this cultural conflict and maintain emotional balance. Viewed this way, silence becomes a survival strategy during a period of personal and academic adjustment.

2.6 Rethinking Silence: Common Misunderstanding

2.6.1 Why Silence Is Often Misunderstood

Although recent studies have shown that silence is complex and meaningful, many misunderstandings still exist in everyday teaching practice. Many teachers, particularly those in communicative-oriented classrooms, often interpret silence as lack of interest, weak preparation, or low academic ability (Maher, 2021). These assumptions keep the older "deficiency model" alive, even though research has clearly shown that this model oversimplifies student behaviour (Harumi & King, 2020).

A key reason for this misunderstanding is the continued influence of what Harumi and King (2020) call the "voice-centered standard." This standard assumes that verbal participation is the only clear evidence of thinking and learning. Because of this, students who speak quickly and fluently are often viewed as more engaged, while those who process information quietly may be seen as inactive.

Herrera (2024) points out that this standard reflects Western learning traditions that value individual expression and direct verbal contribution. As a result, the quiet student is often misunderstood, even if they are deeply engaged. The literature challenges this narrow view, suggesting that silence is often a form of "internal participation" that includes listening, thinking, connecting ideas, and taking notes (Rachel Zhou et al., 2005; Herrera, 2024).

Herrera (2024) argues that silence should be treated as an intentional part of intellectual work, not as a lack of participation.

Empirical studies reinforce the idea that silence often represents active cognitive effort. Rachel Zhou et al. (2005) found that what appears as passive behaviour is often the learner's attempt to decode complex academic language, process new information, and integrate it into their existing knowledge. This process is especially demanding for L2 learners. Because these internal cognitive tasks require attention and time, learners may pause their verbal output. When instructors misinterpret this silence as disengagement, they overlook the student's most intense moment of cognitive work. This gap in understanding reflects a broader challenge in intercultural classrooms, particularly those involving L2 learners from diverise backgrounds, where teachers may not be aware of the demands placed on L2 learners.

2.6.2 Silence as a Form of Resistance

Beyond misunderstandings, some studies suggest that silence can also be used in a more active and critical way. Silence can become a form of resistance or a way for students to respond to classroom inequalities or expectations they find problematic (Yang & Lin, 2024; Sung, 2017).

Yang and Lin's (2024) research shows that students sometimes choose silence deliberately when they feel the classroom environment does not value their perspective. When learners believe that their ideas may be dismissed because of their accent, cultural background, or perceived English level, silence becomes a protective choice. In these cases, silence is not simply avoidance. It is a way of withdrawing from a conversation where the learner feels structurally disadvantaged. Silence helps students preserve their self-esteem and conserve emotional energy, especially when arguing or competing for speaking space feels too costly.

Sung (2017) provides further evidence that silence can be used to resist epistemic exclusion. In classrooms where certain viewpoints or ways of speaking are privileged, staying silent can signal disagreement without directly confronting the teacher. This indirect form of dissent is especially meaningful in cultures where openly challenging authority is discouraged. This interpretation also aligns with Harumi and King's (2020) distinction between being "silenced" by structural inequality and choosing to engage in "silent practice." The latter is an active, meaningful decision, not a passive absence. When silence is used intentionally, it becomes a way for students to protect their intellectual position and resist norms they find

limiting.

2.7 The research gap

2.7.1 Methodological Gaps

Although recent research has made progress in explaining the external and pedagogical influences behind classroom silence, a methodological limitation remains. Maher and King (2023) describe this as the "experience gap." This gap appears because most studies use methods that observe silence from the outside rather than capturing the internal experience of the learner.

Much of the existing work relies on classroom observations (Guo, 2017), large-scale surveys (Wang et al., 2022), or interviews done long after the classroom event. These methods are useful for detecting general patterns—for example, linking low willingness to communicate with low participation— but they cannot access the student's "in-the-moment" thoughts or emotions. This creates a distance between what the researcher sees and what the student experiences. Studies such as Wang et al. (2015), which summarize student experiences into numerical patterns, risk overlooking the detailed and personal decision-making processes behind silence. As a result, the rich complexity of identity negotiation, emotional pressure, and momentary hesitation becomes flattened into broad categories.

The biggest limitation of these external methods is that they cannot capture the exact moment when the student decides whether to speak. Retrospective interviews depend on memory, which is often incomplete or rationalized after the event. Small but meaningful details—the quick feeling of insecurity when a native-speaking peer answers fluently, the disappointment when a teacher interrupts too early, or the second-guessing that causes a raised hand to lower—are usually lost (Maher & King, 2023).

Guo (2017) acknowledges these limitations, noting that observation alone can show who stayed silent but cannot explain why. Because of this methodological gap, current research understands the conditions that influence silence but has difficulty describing the learner's lived experience of silence. This makes it hard to connect structural influences with individual agency. The most important part—the internal negotiation that drives silence—remains underexplored.

2.7.2 Theoretical Gaps

Although recent theories have moved beyond the old deficiency model, two key theoretical

limitations continue to appear in current literature. These limitations reflect the ongoing challenge of connecting theory with real classroom practice.

One major risk is cultural essentialism. Holliday (2018) warns that although cultural influences are important, researchers must avoid treating culture as a fixed explanation for student behaviour. While traits such as modesty or reflective listening are commonly observed, relying on them alone can oversimplify the complexity of individual decisions.

Cultural essentialism can unintentionally reinforce stereotypes by ignoring students who do not follow expected cultural patterns or those who remain silent for reasons unrelated to culture. Holliday (2018) urges researchers to approach culture as a flexible and changing resource that interacts with personal goals and context, not as an absolute determinant. Achieving this level of nuance is difficult without first-person accounts that reveal how students interpret culture in real time.

Another limitation involves the incomplete integration of affective theories with structural frameworks. Maher (2021) shows that emotional pressure plays a major role in silence, while Rosa and Flores (2021) highlight structural inequalities such as language hierarchy. Sung (2017) adds a detailed view of identity negotiation intercultural contexts. However, these theories often remain separate in empirical studies because the data needed to connect them is not easy to collect.

Affective Tension: Maher's (2021) framework shows how students carry emotional and cognitive stress in classroom interaction, but traditional methods do not capture the internal emotional moment that theory describes.

Transposed Identity: Sung' s (2017) concept of "Transposed Identity Negotiation" explains how students re-adjust their identities, but empirical work cannot directly observe this internal transition.

Thus, scholars understand the theory behind emotional pressure and structural inequality, but they lack the personal, experiential data needed to connect the two. This missing link limits how fully these theories can be applied and validated.

2.7.3 Addressing the 'experience gap'

Existing research offers valuable insights into the phenomenon of silence among Chinese postgraduate students in Western higher education classrooms. Through interviews and surveys, recurring patterns among participants have been identified (e.g., Guo, 2017; Maher, 2021). However, these approaches typically rely on retrospective accounts. While they can describe what students report after the fact, they struggle to capture what students were thinking, perceiving, and feeling in the moment when silence occurred. Consequently, the literature remains deficient in fully describing the intrinsic, fleeting experience of silence.

To address this research gap, this study employs an autoethnography methodology. Autoethnography in education is one way researchers can systematically examine and present authentic classroom experiences, focusing on emotional, cognitive, and sociocultural dimensions that external methods struggle to access (Ellis et al., 2011; Chang, 2016). In this study, I utilise my own classroom memories from my time as a student in an Australian university as data to explore how silence emerges within university settings where English is the language of instruction, and how students like myself may navigate expectations regarding classroom participation.

This study is guided by the following research question and its sub-questions.

Research Question:
How might classroom silence be reinterpreted as an intercultural learning strategy rather than an indicator of inadequate communicative competence?

Sub-questions:
1. In which classroom situations did I choose to remain silent? How do these experiences reflect my intercultural adaptation and learning process?
2. How did these moments of silence influence my understanding of classroom participation, and what insights do they offer for intercultural teaching practice?

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1 Introduction

This study employed a qualitative autoethnographic approach to explore my experience of silence as a Chinese postgraduate student in English-medium lectures and tutorials at an Australian university. Unlike quantitative methods that seek to measure or predict, qualitative research is concerned with the nuanced understanding of human experience and meaning making (Adams et al., 2022). In the context of this study, silence is not interpreted merely as a lack of

language ability, but rather as a multifaceted social and cultural practice（Harumi & King, 2020). It intersects with issues of identity, cultural background, educational traditions, and feelings. For these reasons, qualitative inquiry offers an appropriate framework for uncovering the complexities of this phenomenon (Tisdell et al., 2025).

Among qualitative methods, approaches such as case studies, interviews, and focus groups often depend on collecting narratives from external participants, positioning the researcher primarily as an observer. While these methods yield important insights, they tend to neglect the role of the researcher as an embodied participant within the research context. Autoethnography, by contrast, places the researcher's lived experience at the centre of analysis. It allows for deep engagement with emotional and cultural layers of experience and encouraged ongoing reflexivity, thereby offering a more authentic representation of meaning (Chang, 2016). In the case of this study, it reveals the meanings behind classroom silence.

In adopting an autoethnographic approach, I embraced my dual role as both researcher and research participant. As a Chinese student who has navigated periods of silence in intercultural classrooms, I was positioned to offer an insider perspective. By documenting and reflecting on specific instances where I chose to speak or remain silent, during discussions, group tasks, and presentations, I was able to connect personal experience with broader patterns which have been observed among Chinese students (Reed-Danahay, 2021). This approach enabled me to reflect upon my own experiences of silence, while also connecting them to how lecturers and peers typically interpret silence within classroom interactions, and to broader educational discourse.

3.2 Autoethnography

Autoethnography is a qualitative research method that combines autobiographical narrative with ethnographic analysis. The core idea is that an individual's life experience is not only

their own story, but also reflects the operational logic of society and culture. Unlike traditional ethnographic researchers who maintain distance and interpreted culture from an "external observer" perspective, autoethnography emphasises the researcher's subjective experiences and cultural stance, and considers these experiences themselves effective research materials (Ellis, 2004; Chang, 2016). Therefore, it provides a way to understand culture from an internal perspective.

A central characteristic of autoethnography is that it values the researcher's thoughts, emotions, and experiences, and regards these subjective experiences as important ways to understand society and culture (Chang 2016). Researchers do not only document the events themselves but also convey their feelings and thoughts, enabling readers to grasp their complete experience within the research context. This is different from other empirical research methods that mainly rely on theoretical frameworks and hypothesis testing. Autoethnography emphasises the close connection between personal experience and culture. In autoethnography, researchers need to possess two core qualities: vulnerability and reflexivity. Vulnerability refers to the researcher's willingness to candidly expose their genuine feelings within the text, including moments of embarrassment, anxiety, or frustration (Attard, 2017). In this study, I did not merely document the fact of my silence, but also dissected the inner turmoil and unease I experienced at the time. Reflexivity, meanwhile, entailed moving beyond mere storytelling to scrutinise these narratives as an observer. Through this scrutiny, I was able to discern how personal experiences were shaped by deeper factors, such as power dynamics within classrooms or behavioural norms across cultural contexts (Chang, 2016).

Although Brown's (2008) ethnographic research has already indicated that international postgraduate students frequently adopt strategies of silence or avoidance in the classroom due to language anxiety, such external observation often merely records the occurrence of behaviour without penetrating the complex inner world of students at that moment. This study has employed autobiographical ethnography to transcend this “bystander” perspective. Through a careful analysis of my personal experience, it has sought to reveal the emotional fluctuations and psychological dynamics that remain incompletely understood through external observation. However, this type of research mainly relies on external observations

and student interviews, making it difficult to capture the true inner experiences of the students who remain silent in classroom interactions. Through the method of autoethnography, I could delve into the emotional fluctuations and identity struggles behind silence. For example, in class, I may choose to keep quiet due to initial concerns about my pronunciation not being standard. However, autoethnography involved the consideration of culture as well, so my analysis did not only include personal anxiety, but also other dimensions such as language hierarchies and cultural expectations.

Edwards (2021) reminds us that autobiographical ethnography also presents ethical challenges. While expressing themselves, researchers have to consider how to avoid overexposing or misrepresenting others. Therefore, maintaining reflection and transparency throughout my research process, alongside implementing necessary anonymisation measures, was crucial. Specifically, I employed pseudonyms for all teachers and classmates appearing in my narrative and obscured any background details that might identify them, such as specific course titles or physical characteristics. By balancing personal narrative with cultural critique, I aimed for my writing to present authentic voices while offering constructive reflections on intercultural education.

3.3 Data Collection

This study employed narrative autoethnography, with personal experiences as the core, to present the phenomenon of silence among Chinese graduate students in intercultural classrooms through storytelling and reflection. A narrative approach emphasises the transmission of meaning through stories, enabling researchers to record events from a first-person perspective and gradually reveal the cultural and educational factors behind them through analysis (Adams et al., 2022). This approach presents the facts of an experience, and also conveys emotions and psychological experiences, making the research comprehensive.

The approach for generating and collecting data taken in this study included the following (Chang, 2016):

The first step was the recollection and recording of relevant experiences. I selected specific memories closely related to the phenomenon of silence based on my actual experience in graduate school classrooms, such as group discussions, classroom presentations, and teacher-student interactions. Through the recollection and writing of these memories, they were transformed into "memory texts" and become the core data source of this study.

Secondly, I organised and refined the narratives. After jotting down initial fragments of recollection, I revisited these entries to supplement them with omitted sensory details, such as classroom scenes I observed, the voices of classmates nearby, or even my own physical reactions at that moment. This step was not about keeping a diary, but rather polishing these scattered notes into a cohesive, coherent story that authentically recreated the immediacy of the scene. Only through such in-depth description could I subsequently discern in my analysis how these personal experiences intertwined with their underlying cultural context.
Finally, it must be emphasised that self-reflection and its written articulation were not isolated steps within the research process, but rather permeated the entire endeavour. From the initial recording of memories to the final analysis, I continually scrutinised my dual identity as both researcher and participant.

To ensure I was interpreting culture responsibly, rather than succumbing to personal subjectivity, I persistently contrasted my experiences with existing academic literature. By situating my personal narrative within broader sociocultural contexts, such as theories concerning the silence and identity negotiation of Chinese international students, I was able to more objectively analyse the cultural implications underlying these experiences. This approach embodied the crucial "reflexivity" inherent in autobiographical ethnography: acknowledging the researcher's voice as integral to the study. As Edwards (2021) observed, ensuring the author has clearly articulated their own voice constitutes an ethical imperative in itself.

The data for this study mainly came from my classroom experience recollection and reflective writing during my graduate studies in an Australian university. I selected events directly related to classroom silence, such as missing speaking opportunities in group discussions, relying on lecture notes during class presentations, or remaining silent when peers asked questions. These fragments not only contained the events that occurred during the process of documentation, but also incorporated the psychological and physical experiences of the time, such as tension, panic, or urgent self-comfort. Chang (2016) pointed out that the data of autoethnography are often generated through memory and writing, and they are both individual narrative texts and core material for research. Therefore, my memory was not unprocessed 'raw data' but was gradually reconstructed and endowed with research value in the process of reflection.

More specifically, the data set consisted of five memory narratives based on five classroom

episodes from my postgraduate study at an Australian university. These episodes took place in English-medium lectures and tutorials, including group discussions, classroom presentations, teacher-student interactions, and peer discussions. The experiences were recorded as written reflective notes rather than digital audio or video recordings. No classroom interactions were digitally recorded, as the focus of the study was my own lived experience of silence rather than the direct recording of other participants.

The initial memories were first written as reflective notes during and after my postgraduate study, and were later collated and developed into five fuller memory narratives during the dissertation writing process in 2025. During this process, I revisited the notes several times to add sensory details, emotional responses, and classroom background information. I also checked these narratives against available classroom notes, lecture materials, and study materials to clarify details such as the classroom activity, teacher questions, peer responses, and the sequence of interaction. These supplementary materials were not treated as separate data, but as contextual references that helped me reconstruct the memory narratives more carefully

3.4 Data Analysis

I employed Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis method to examine the narrative texts. This approach enabled me to identify recurring patterns within the memory narratives, organising fragmented experiences into a coherent logical framework.

Initially, I familiarised myself with the narrative texts' details and emotional undertones through repeated readings. During this process, I focused not only on specific behaviours but also paid particular attention to underlying emotional fluctuations and identity anxieties.

Subsequently, I undertook initial coding of the texts. These codes originated from two sources: some were pre-existing concepts derived from my prior literature review (such as anticipations of ‘language anxiety’ and ‘participation avoidance’), while others emerged during my repeated readings of my own narrative texts, generated from newly observed details. For instance, I marked codes such as ‘fear of accent ridicule’, ‘overreliance on scripts’, and ‘deliberate avoidance of eye contact in class’. These specific labels directly corresponded to my actual moments of silence in the classroom.

Following this, I categorised similar codes, gradually forming more interpretive themes. For example, ‘language anxiety’ encompassed concerns about accent, grammar, and fluency;

‘Identity uncertainty’ reflected the ambiguity and fragility of self-positioning within an intercultural classroom; while ‘silence as a protective strategy’ indicated that silence sometimes served to avoid embarrassment and error. Through repeated comparison and revision, I ensured these themes both reflected my personal experience and held broader cultural and educational significance.

Throughout the analysis, I maintained a reflective stance, acknowledging my dual role as both researcher and subject. I acknowledged my perspective was subjective, yet this very subjectivity constituted the study's value. As Adams et al. (2022) noted, autobiographical ethnography does not pursue ‘neutrality’ but rather presents complex cultural experiences through first-person narratives. Concurrently, I heeded Edwards' (2021) ethical guidance by minimising specific details concerning others in my writing, ensuring the research focus remained squarely on my personal experiences.

Ultimately, I identified patterns of silence across three levels. At the individual level, silence stemmed from a lack of oral confidence, language anxiety, or insufficient classroom experience. At the cultural level, silence was influenced by values within Chinese educational traditions, such as ‘prudence in speech and action’ and ‘listening being more important than speaking’. At the institutional level, teaching methodologies, teacher-student dynamics, and linguistic power structures within intercultural classrooms constrained students' opportunities for expression. Identifying these patterns helped demonstrate that silence is not merely an absence, but a practice shaped by both cultural and institutional influences. By integrating personal narratives with thematic analysis, my aim was to consider the multifaceted reasons that may exist behind Chinese international students' silence in intercultural classrooms. With this method I aimed to gain a deeper understanding of similar situations faced by other Chinese international students in intercultural classrooms, in order to provide more targeted teaching guidance for educators.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

Ethical issues are unavoidable in autoethnography. Due to my narratives involving classroom scenes and group interactions, it was inevitable that I would refer to other classmates or teachers. To maintain their privacy, I deliberately avoided using specific names and places. As recommended by Tolich (2010), I also used ambiguity in my writing, downplaying specific descriptions of others and only retaining background details related to the research topic to avoid others being identified. This practice helped preserve narrative authenticity

while minimising impact on others.

Edwards (2021) noted that one of the greatest ethical challenges in autobiographical ethnography lay in striking a balance between “self-expression” and “protecting others”. In the actual writing process, I, as the researcher, inevitably made my own choices. I decided which details to include or omit, and these choices influenced the conclusions readers would ultimately encounter. I selected five key moments (as described in Chapter 4) because they most vividly captured the struggles and pressures I faced at the time. Yet this did not imply my experience represented a sole definitive answer or the collective voice of all Chinese international students. Therefore, throughout my analysis, I explicitly state that these narratives reflect solely my personal perspective and feelings, and I do not speak for the entire group.

In summary, ethical considerations in my study extended beyond mere privacy protection; they constituted an ongoing process of self-reflection. This necessitated constant vigilance in striking a balance between “documenting authentic experiences” and “maintaining responsibility towards others” throughout the writing process. It entailed conveying personal narratives while minimising potential harm to others. As Tolich (2010) emphasised, this ethical awareness constitutes an indispensable core component of autobiographical ethnographic methodology.

Chapter 4: Findings

4.1 Introduction

This chapter begins with five brief memories which document my experiences of classroom participation as a Chinese postgraduate student studying in an English-medium university. They focus on moments when I chose not to speak, despite having ideas to contribute.

In the analysis of these memories which follow, silence is not considered to be an absence of participation but an experience that is emotionally felt, physically embodied, and shaped by interactional conditions. Through thematic analysis, patterns are identified across the five narratives that reveal how silence emerged, how it was experienced, and how it was sustained over time.

The findings are organised into three themes: Affective Overload, Identity Protection, and Pedagogical Disconnection. Each theme is illustrated with extracts from the memory narratives, followed by commentary that explains how the extract reflects the theme. The purpose of this chapter is to present what was found in the data and how these themes were derived, rather than to interpret them through external theory. Broader interpretations and engagement with the literature are introduced in the following Discussion chapter.

4.2 Memory narratives

4.2.1 Memory 1

I still remember a particular tutorial on Literacy and Language. We had an assignment at that time to create a digital story based on our own learning experience. I put a lot of effort into completing it. For me, it was not just a task, it was more like an opportunity for self-expression. In my story, I choose to share my first experience as a volunteer at an academic event in Australia. During that event, I was supported by a professor form the International Education program. She helped me understand my responsibilities, such as welcoming guests, managing the sign-in process, and assisting with the slideshow in the conference room. That experience made me feel for the first time that I could also participate in a real academic environment.

For the assignment I used cartoon style images and animations representing myself in the video, trying to recreate the emotions of that experience through voice-over. During the production process, I recorded the narration multiple times, analysed the tone, and edited it

repeatedly, just to present the most authentic and natural voice I could find within myself. This was a project I felt proud of, and I really enjoyed the entire process.

In the tutorial class, the lecturer asked us to share a video in a small group, and then invited anyone who wanted to share their video with the whole class. When I shared my video in the small group, the members' reactions exceeded my expectations. They said my video was very creative and innovative in form and suggested that I share it with everyone. I smiled and nodded, but my heart began to feel panic. When the lecturer asked, 'Who would like to share their videos with us?', I instinctively lowered my head and remained silent. At that moment, my courage, which had been slowly building up, suddenly disappeared.

I was worried that once I spoke up, everyone would notice the Chinese accent in my voice, and perhaps someone would secretly mock my pronunciation or feel that it was not authentic enough. I was also afraid that if the lecturer asked me about the details in the video and I could not understand or quickly organize my language to answer, the situation would become awkward. I began to imagine these possible scenarios in my mind, and the more I thought about them, the more uneasy I became. Moreover, many students in the class were experienced English teachers or IELTS lecturer in China, who could confidently speak and express themselves clearly in class. I unconsciously compared myself with them and increasingly felt that I was not good enough or qualified to speak up.

So I chose to sit silently, watching other classmates play their videos one after another. Some videos were well-produced and had well-developed content. But I was very clear in my heart that I thought my work was not inferior, and even in terms of creativity and content, it was an authentic expression of myself. When I finally gathered the courage to try raising my hand, the class ended. At that moment, I felt lost, not because others didn't give me a chance, but because I didn't seize the opportunity myself.

The experience that day left a deep impression on me. I could have spoken out, but I backed down because I was afraid of being judged or misunderstood. The regret of wanting to say it but not saying it out loud has always stayed in my heart. My finished work lay in the folder like an unopened window. Perhaps for others, it would have been just an ordinary classroom moment that they have long forgotten. But for me, that was the lesson I longed to be seen but ultimately

chose to keep invisible. A long time later, I still wonder, what would have happened if I had been braver?

4.2.2 Memory 2

This event occurred in a teaching methodology class at the beginning of the semester. The lecturer asked us to apply the practical knowledge we learned in class about the appropriate use of language in different contexts and prepare a five-minute demonstration class. We should practice in pairs first, and then she invited some students to give presentations in front of the whole class. The lecturer clearly explained the task and gave us a few minutes of preparation time before the presentation began.

I was partnering with a classmate who used to be an IELTS teacher in China. As soon as the lecturer finished speaking, she opened her notebook and began to outline her presentation content. She spoke calmly, as if she knew exactly what she wanted to say. When I was still thinking about how to arrange the demo, she had already started practising her explanations. She explained in English quickly and fluently with a clear and confident tone. I watched her switch naturally and smoothly between explanations and examples, as if she had done it many times before.

I admired her ability, but at the same time, I was starting to feel nervous. My thoughts were in chaos. I kept asking myself, what should I do if the lecturer asked me to give a speech in front of everyone. I did not know where to start, and I felt like I couldn’t think and express myself in English at the same time under such pressure. My partner prepared without hesitation, while I was still pondering how to say the first sentence.

Five minutes passed quickly. I did not practise at all, I just listened to my partner's demonstration from beginning to end. I occasionally nodded and followed her plan, but I did not say anything myself. I held my pen in my hand until I realised that I was holding it too tightly and my fingers were sore.

When the lecturer walked up to the front of the classroom and looked around, I silently told myself, please don't call me. My partner was sitting next to me, holding her notes in her hand. The lecturer's gaze swept across the entire classroom and stopped at us. We briefly exchanged a glance, and I quickly lowered my head to look at my notebook. The lecturer asked my partner

to start the demonstration. She stood up and gave a fluent lecture, with a confident tone that was consistent with her practice.

I smiled and applauded with others, but I still felt nervous inside. My heart rate accelerated, and a slight blush appeared on my face. I reflect on how unprepared I was and how much I needed to improve my spontaneous speaking performance That brief activity made me realize clearly how easily I could lose confidence in situations where I need to speak and think quickly in English.

4.2.3 Memory 3

When it was my turn to give a presentation in class, I walked up to the front with a few pages of notes in my hand. I had made sufficient preparation and wrote down detailed sentences in advance, because I was worried that I might forget what to say. I thought this would make me feel safe, but once it started, I could not manage without notes. My gaze was fixed on the text, and I simply read out my notes line by line.

At first, I thought this would keep me calm, but the longer I read, the more I realised that I was not really giving a presentation. I was just reading aloud. My tone was flat, my pace was too fast, almost like I was hastily reciting one word after another. I just wanted to end it as soon as possible, and not to communicate and interact with the whole class. Every sentence sounded even more unnatural than the previous one, but I just could not control myself.

When I was reading, I noticed that most of my classmates were not paying attention. Some looked down at their laptops, some whispered to each other, and only a few occasionally looked up. The classroom was quiet but distant, and I felt even more lonely. The only attention I could feel came from my lecturer and a friend, who looked at me with encouraging eyes. However, their support could not eliminate the embarrassment of me standing there, reading to a group of uninterested listeners.

I was becoming increasingly uneasy inside. My hand holding the manuscript trembled slightly. I kept telling myself to slow down, but the pressure made me read faster. I knew I should lift my head, make eye contact with others, and explain my thoughts in my own words, but the fear of forgetting kept me frozen. I read the manuscript in a hurry like a machine, unable to break free at all.

After I finished speaking, the whole class did not really react. I quickly sat down and felt relieved that it was finally over. I just felt like I had finally completed this task, which not only failed to boost my confidence, but also made me even more uneasy. This experience made me realize that my reliance on the script had limited my speaking ability. The more I relied on reading, the less I trained myself to think and speak naturally in English. There was no real progress, just repeating the same habits.

At the end of the speech, I kept asking myself the same question. I knew I was not the only one troubled by this. Many of my Chinese classmates also heavily relied on notes during speeches. We were afraid of making mistakes, so we always followed the script. But this habit reduced our opportunities to practise free speech. As a result, our speeches often appeared stiff and our voices in class became less clear. That day, I realised that silence is not just about us remaining silent; it may also happen when we hide behind the script instead of actually speaking.

4.2.4 Memory 4

Our group had been arranged to demonstrate teaching methods. We were all Chinese students, so preparing together felt very relaxed and natural. After class, we met several times and had fluent discussions in Mandarin. We quickly divided the tasks and supported each other. I was responsible for the final part of the course, checking students' understanding and concluding the course. I felt very confident when practising. Standing in front of the group members, I could explain the teaching instructions, ask questions, and guide the end of the course.

On the day of the demonstration, our performance went smoothly. We took turns playing, and everyone seemed fully prepared. It was my turn, and my voice calmly completed the demonstration. I asked the 'student' a question, checked the answer, and then ended the class. For the first time, I felt not only that I had completed the task, but also that I was truly teaching. I walked back to my seat with a hint of pride.

The next step was the peer review process. Another group raised some questions about our presentation. Some were about the structure of the curriculum, while others were about whether our activities aligned with the learning objectives. When these questions were raised, I really wanted to respond. I had various ideas popping up in my mind, as well as some viewpoints

that I wanted to share. But as soon as I spoke, I froze. My heart rate accelerated, and I didn't speak. I just nodded and softly said 'yes' or' um '.

One of my group members answered all the questions for us. She spoke calmly and confidently, while I sat quietly. At that moment, I felt as if I had never participated in a demonstration before. I wanted to explain my reasons, but I was also afraid. I was worried that my English expression might not be clear, my classmates might ridicule me, or my answers might be irrelevant. The fear of being misunderstood or embarrassed was far greater than the desire to participate. So I remained silent, like an invisible member in the group.

After this group task, we were asked to write a teacher reflection on the demonstration. When I started writing, I was surprised to find that my ideas were so clear when written down. I could describe the advantages and disadvantages of the demonstration, as well as explain how I would improve next time. In my assignment, I had no difficulty expressing myself. However, in the classroom, everyone's gaze was focused on me, but I fell silent.

This comparison shows me how different my written and spoken English feels to me. Writing gives me time to organize my thoughts, but speaking in front of others makes me nervous and hesitant. The more I avoid speaking, the harder it becomes to speak. I know many other Chinese students have had the same experience. We may be well prepared and have a deep understanding, but when it comes to speaking in class, silence often feels safer.

4.2.5 Memory 5

In one of our second language teaching classes, the lecturer divided us into groups and assigned us a task: to select a key concept from second language acquisition and explain how to apply it to teaching practice. My group immediately began a lively discussion. Everyone spoke quickly, sharing ideas, exchanging experiences, and complementing each other's perspectives. I listened attentively and expressed my own thoughts. At the end of the discussion, I had a clear understanding of what we wanted to express. In my mind, I had already summarised our answers and even thought about how to connect them together.

Then, the lecturer asked each group to share their ideas with the whole class. When it was our group's turn, he looked straight at me and asked, 'Can you explain what your group discussed?' For a moment, my mind went blank. I knew what I wanted to say, but I just couldn’t

say it out loud. I tried to speak, but the sentences were intermittent. I only said a few words before stopping.

I could feel the silence around me. My heart beat faster, I looked down at my notes, but I had not written a complete sentence. I knew the content, but at that moment my English disappointed me. The lecturer waited for a while before starting to supplement my answer. He explained our group's ideas more clearly and elaborated on the key points that I did not express clearly. I quickly nodded and said "yes" and "um" to indicate agreement. But deep down, I felt frustrated.

When the lecturer moved on to the next group, I sat there pondering all the content I should be teaching. Afterwards, I could sketch out those sentences in my mind. I could have clearly explained this concept and connected it with teaching examples. However, I missed the opportunity.

Since that class, that moment has always been in my heart. I realise that I often have knowledge and ideas, but when suddenly asked to speak in public, I lose confidence. I am worried about grammar errors, strange pronunciation, or my answers being meaningless. As a result, I speak less and less, and sometimes my silence even makes me feel like I have nothing to say.

This is indeed a problem for me. I am well prepared, actively engaged in group discussions, and have clear ideas in my mind. But when the teacher names us in front of the whole class, the fear of speaking can make me hesitant to speak up. Knowledge is there, but it is concealed by silence.

4.3 Theme 1: When Anxiety Stops Me from Speaking (Emotional Overload)

Across the five memory narratives, silence consistently emerged at moments of intense emotional pressure. These moments were characterised by heightened anxiety and cognitive strain, during which my ability to access and articulate ideas in English temporarily collapsed. The findings suggest that silence occurred not because I lacked knowledge or preparation, but because emotional overload disrupted the coordination between thinking and speaking in high-pressure classroom situations.

4.3.1 Entering the Moment: Emotional Pressure Before Silence

In several classroom situations, the pressure to respond publicly developed before I was explicitly invited to speak. The classroom environment often felt fast paced and intense, with discussions moving quickly from one speaker to another. While I followed the content closely and understood what was being discussed, I was also aware that responding in English would require rapid organisation of ideas, vocabulary, and sentence structure. This awareness often intensified my anxiety even before any verbal contribution was required. These moments created a psychological threshold where speaking felt increasingly difficult, setting the conditions for silence to occur.

4.3.2 Experiencing Cognitive Overload

A recurring pattern across the narratives is the experience of cognitive overload, where thinking and speaking no longer function together.

In one memory, I described the moment clearly "My thoughts are in chaos. I feel like I can't think and express myself in English at the same time under pressure." (Memory 2). In this situation I was in a state during which multiple demands competed for limited cognitive resources. Understanding the content was not the problem. Instead, the pressure of public performance interfered with my ability to organise and deliver speech in real time. My silence emerged at the point where these competing demands became unmanageable. A similar experience occurred when I was called on unexpectedly: "For a moment, my mind went blank. I tried to speak, but the sentences were intermittent." (Memory 5).

Here, silence occurred suddenly and involuntarily. Although I had already formed the answer internally, the transition from private thought to public speech triggered a temporary cognitive block. The disruption happened at the moment of performance rather than during comprehension.

My silence did not imply that I was not thinking or learning; rather, it resembled a delayed cognitive processing. This interpretation was supported by my later reaction: "Afterwards, I could sketch out those sentences in my mind." (Memory 5). Once the immediate pressure was removed, my ability to organise ideas returned. This contrast highlights that silence was situational and temporary, shaped by emotional overload rather than a lack of linguistic or conceptual competence.

4.3.3 Physical Manifestations of Anxiety

The emotional overload described in the narratives was not limited to cognitive processes. I

also experienced emotional overload physically, often before any attempt to speak.

In one memory, I noted: “I held my pen too tightly and my fingers were sore. My heart beat faster.” (Memory 2). This description shows how anxiety manifested through my bodily tension. Physical sensations such as a tightened grip and increased heart rate signalled the onset of stress. A significant amount of my attention was directed toward managing these sensations, reducing my cognitive capacity available for speech production. In this state, silence functioned to prevent further escalation of physical discomfort.

Anxiety was also intensified by constant self-monitoring during interaction: “I worry about grammar errors, strange pronunciation, or my answers being meaningless.” (Memory 5). My focus on potential linguistic flaws shifted my attention away from meaning and toward risk avoidance. As a result, emotional pressure accumulated quickly, increasing the likelihood of silence.

Over time, this emotional pattern became familiar: “The more I avoid speaking, the harder it becomes to speak.” (Memory 4). This reflection indicates that silence was not only a response to immediate anxiety but also part of an emerging pattern. Each experience of emotional overload increased the difficulty of future participation, making silence a more readily available response.

4.3.4 Summary of Theme 1

Theme 1 demonstrates that my silence frequently occurred at moments of emotional and cognitive overload. Across the five narratives, silence emerged when anxiety disrupted the coordination between my thinking, bodily regulation, and speech production. These findings show that my silence was not a sign of disengagement or lack of preparation, but an embodied response to overwhelming emotional pressure in high-stakes classroom interaction.

4.4 Theme 2: Choosing Silence to Protect My Image (Identity Management)

This theme focuses on moments where my silence did not emerge suddenly from emotional overload but developed through conscious evaluation and anticipation. Across the memory narratives, silence often functioned as a protective response, shaped by concerns about how I

would be perceived by lecturers and peers. In these moments, remaining silent felt safer than risking a spoken contribution that might expose linguistic limitations or invite negative judgement.

4.4.1 Withdrawing from attention

Several memories show that silence was preceded by an internal assessment of risk. Before speaking, I often evaluated whether my contribution would be clear, accurate, and appropriate within the academic context. When uncertainty was high, silence became the preferred option.

In one classroom interaction, I described a moment when attention shifted toward me during discussion. Although I had followed the conversation and understood the task, my response was shaped by how visible I felt in that moment. “I smiled and nodded, but my heart began to panic. When the lecturer asked a question, I instinctively lowered my head and remained silent” (Memory 1). Lowering my head marked a withdrawal from interaction. This physical movement reduced visibility and signalled disengagement. The silence that followed was not caused by confusion about the topic, but by the sudden awareness of being evaluated. Speaking at that moment felt risky because it would expose my English to immediate scrutiny.

A similar pattern appeared in group discussions, where the decision to remain silent was described as a comparison between participation and safety. “The fear of being misunderstood or embarrassed is far greater than the desire to participate. So, I remained silent, like an invisible member of the group” (Memory 4).

This extract reflects a clear evaluation process. Participation offered potential academic value, but it also carried the possibility of embarrassment. Silence reduced that risk by allowing me to remain unnoticed. Becoming “invisible” was not accidental but chosen, as it protected me from the discomfort of possible misunderstanding. In these situations, my hesitation was not directed at the content of my ideas, but at the medium through which they would be delivered. “I wanted to explain my reasons, but I was afraid. I worried that my English expression might not be clear, or my answers might be irrelevant” (Memory 4).

Here, the concern lies in expression rather than understanding. Even when ideas were present, the possibility that they might be poorly articulated created hesitation. Silence ensured that

the idea would not be judged through imperfect language.

4.4.2 Managing academic identity through silence

Over time, silence became closely tied to how I viewed my position within the classroom. In several memories, I described evaluating myself in relation to others, particularly peers who appeared more fluent or confident. “I unconsciously compare myself with them and increasingly feel that I am not good enough or qualified to stand up.” (Memory 1). This comparison positioned speaking as a test of legitimacy. To speak was to risk confirming a sense of inadequacy, while silence allowed that doubt to remain unchallenged. Remaining silent helped preserve an image of competence by avoiding visible failure.

Concerns about authority figures intensified this response. In interactions involving lecturers, the potential consequences of speaking felt more serious. “I could have spoken out, but I backed down because I was afraid of being denied.” (Memory 1). Backing down was a deliberate choice. Public correction or rejection by a lecturer was perceived as a threat to my academic identity. Silence offered a way to maintain control over how I was perceived, even at the cost of participation.

Interestingly, even moments of successful task completion did not always reduce this pressure. “I finally completed this task, but instead of feeling more confident, I became even more uneasy.” (Memory 3). Rather than increasing confidence, completing the task reinforced the importance of avoiding mistakes. The relief experienced was linked to having avoided visible failure, not to having expressed ideas. This suggests that silence functioned as a longer-term strategy for managing academic identity, rather than a temporary reaction.

4.4.3 Summary of Theme 2

Theme 2 demonstrates that silence frequently operated as a rational and anticipatory strategy. It allowed me to manage risk, protect my academic identity, and avoid exposure in situations where speaking felt uncertain. Across the narratives, silence was not the absence of engagement, but an active decision shaped by concerns about judgement, legitimacy, and self-presentation within the classroom.

4.5 Theme 3: Pedagogy and Interactional Norms in the Classroom

This theme shifts attention away from my internal reactions and focuses on the pedagogical conditions in which silence occurred. Across the five memory narratives, silence repeatedly

emerged in response to specific teaching practices, classroom norms, and interactional patterns. These pedagogical conditions shaped when participation felt possible and when remaining silent appeared to be the most reasonable response.

4.5.4 Teaching practices and the pressure of immediacy

Several memories reveal that my classroom participation was strongly shaped by expectations around speed and immediacy. Opportunities to speak were often framed as requiring quick, spontaneous responses, leaving little room for hesitation or extended processing.

In one classroom interaction, I described being asked to respond publicly on behalf of my group. Although I had contributed to the discussion and understood the ideas clearly, the moment of speaking was constrained by time pressure. “The lecturer waited for a while before starting to supplement my answer. He explained our group’s ideas more clearly ” (Memory 5). This interaction illustrates how limited waiting time shaped my participation. The lecturer’s intervention was intended to support the discussion, yet it also signalled that my pause was unacceptable. My silence was interpreted as a lack of clarity rather than as a need for processing time. After this moment, continuing to speak felt unnecessary and risky, as my contribution had already been rearticulated by someone with greater authority.

In another memory, the pressure to keep up with the pace of the class influenced how I spoke. “I just wanted to end it as soon as possible. My pace was too fast, almost like I was reciting one word after another.” (Memory 3)

Here, speed became more important than meaning. My focus shifted from communicating ideas to finishing quickly without interruption. Speaking felt like a performance task rather than a communicative act. This experience reinforced the idea that silence could be safer than attempting to speak slowly and risk being judged for hesitation.

Across these moments, teaching practices that prioritised efficiency and fluency shaped my decision-making. Silence was not caused by disengagement, but by an awareness that the pedagogical rhythm of the classroom did not align with my way of processing language.

4.5.5 Classroom norms and limited reciprocity

Beyond teaching practices, peer interaction and classroom norms also played an important role in shaping my silence. Several memories describe situations where speaking felt

unsupported due to a lack of reciprocal engagement from others.

During a classroom reading task, I became acutely aware of my audience. “I noticed that most of my classmates were seemed inattentive. The classroom is quiet but distant, and I feel even more lonely” (Memory 3).

The quietness of the room did not signal attention or encouragement. Instead, it created a sense of distance. Without visible signs of listening such as eye contact or nodding, my contribution felt disconnected from the group. In this environment, speaking became emotionally costly, and silence made me feel less exposed.

Even when support was present, it did not always counteract the broader interactional pattern. “The only attention I could feel came from my lecturer and a friend, but their support could not remove the embarrassment of reading to uninterested listeners.” (Memory 3)

This experience highlights how classroom norms can shape participation beyond individual relationships. Although some support existed, the lack of engagement from the wider group reinforced my sense of isolation. Silence became a way to avoid repeating an uncomfortable experience of speaking without being heard.

These moments show that silence was influenced not only by internal hesitation, but also by how interaction unfolded around me. When the classroom norm did not provide reciprocal attention, speaking felt unnecessary and emotionally risky.

4.5.6 Summary of Theme 3

Theme 3 demonstrates that my silence was closely linked to pedagogical conditions, including teaching practices that emphasised speed and classroom norms that offered limited reciprocal engagement. Across the memory narratives, my silence emerged as a practical response to interactional environments that did not accommodate slower processing or sustained attention. Rather than reflecting a lack of willingness to participate, my silence developed as an adaptation to the pedagogical patterns shaping classroom interaction.

4.6 Intertwined Experiences: How Silence Took Shape Over Time

This section brings together the three themes presented above to show how silence developed across my classroom experiences. Rather than appearing as a single reaction, silence emerged

gradually through repeated moments that shared similar emotional, identity-related, and pedagogical conditions.

Across the five memory narratives, episodes of anxiety, identity concern, and pedagogical pressure often occurred together. For example, moments of emotional overload were frequently accompanied by concerns about being judged, while these internal reactions were triggered within fast-paced or non-responsive classroom interactions.

In several memories, an initial emotional reaction marked the beginning of silence. Feelings such as panic, confusion, or physical tension appeared first, followed by decisions to withdraw from participation. These reactions did not remain isolated events. As similar situations occurred again, silence became a familiar response rather than an exception. At the same time, identity-related concerns became more prominent over time. In later memories, silence was no longer only a reaction to immediate anxiety but was also shaped by anticipation. I often evaluated potential risks before speaking, especially when interacting with lecturers or fluent peers. This pattern suggests that earlier emotional experiences influenced later decisions about participation.

Pedagogical practices and classroom interactional norms were present throughout this process. Teaching practices that prioritised speed, spontaneous responses, and task completion consistently appeared in moments where silence occurred. Limited wait time, rapid transitions between speakers, and low levels of peer engagement created conditions in which silence was repeatedly reinforced.

Taken together, these experiences show that silence was shaped through the interaction of emotional reactions, identity concerns, and classroom practices over time. Rather than being caused by a single factor, silence developed as a patterned response that emerged across different contexts and moments.

4.7 Chapter Summary

This chapter has presented the findings from the thematic analysis of five autoethnographic memory narratives. The analysis identified three key themes that describe how silence was experienced and enacted in my classroom participation: emotional overload, identity protection, and pedagogical norms.

The findings show that silence occurred in moments of heightened emotional pressure, where anxiety and physical tension disrupted my ability to speak. Silence was also shaped by concerns about academic identity, particularly the fear of negative judgement or being seen as inadequate. In addition, teaching practices and classroom interactional norms played an important role, especially expectations around speed, spontaneity, and limited reciprocal engagement.

By bringing these themes together, this chapter demonstrates that silence was not an isolated or accidental behaviour. Instead, it emerged through repeated experiences across different classroom contexts. The findings provide a detailed account of how silence took shape over time through the interaction of internal reactions and external classroom conditions.

The next chapter will move beyond describing these experiences to explore their broader meanings and implications. I will connect these findings to existing literature and consider what they suggest for understanding classroom silence and for supporting more inclusive pedagogical practices.

Chapter 5: Discussion

5.1 Introduction

This chapter explores the broader significance of the research findings in Chapter 4. In the previous chapter, I analysed five memory narratives to describe the classroom silence I experienced in an Australian university. Through analysis, I have identified three interrelated themes: emotional overload, identity protection, and teaching disconnection. From an autoethnographic perspective personal experiences are not isolated events, but rather provide insights into broader social and educational processes (Reed-Danahay, 2021). This chapter considers some of the broader social and educational processes identified in the literature which can be connected to my experiences. In doing so, I challenge the flawed perspective of attributing Chinese students' silence simply to language deficiencies or introverted personalities. On the contrary, this chapter explores how silence is formed under the combined influence of emotional stress, academic identity management, and classroom interaction rhythm.

5.2 Emotional Pressure and Embodied Silence

The core issue of this study is to explore my experience of silence in an English taught university classroom in Australia and its causes. The findings in Chapter 4 suggest that my silence was not a passive nonparticipation, but a regular and meaningful response to specific classroom situations. This chapter will discuss three key dimensions to explain how my silence arose.

Analysis shows that silence often occurs when emotional stress reaches a critical point. Importantly, this pressure is manifested in a physiological way. In Memory 2, I described holding the pen tightly to the point where my fingers began to ache. In Memory 5, I recalled the moment when my brain suddenly went blank. These examples indicate that silence is initially a physiological response rather than a conscious choice.

This finding supports MacIntyre's (2017) view that language anxiety can hinder the acquisition of cognitive resources. Although anxiety is often seen as a psychological state in second language research, my experience suggests that it also has strong physiological dimensions. When the intensity of classroom interaction exceeds my emotional capacity, psychological resources originally used for organizing language and ideas are reallocated to cope with physiological stress responses such as increased heart rate or muscle tension

(MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994). At those moments, silence does not reflect a lack of ideas, but rather a failure to acquire them.

This bodily response also helps explain why silence often accompanies feelings of frustration. I am not unwilling to speak, but temporarily unable to speak. As memory shows, once external pressure disappears, such as when a teacher turns to other students, my thinking quickly returns to normal. This indicates that silence can serve as an automatic protective response for second language learners in situations of extreme anxiety. When emotional pressure is too high, the body will limit language output to cope with sudden exposure in front of others.

5.2.1 Silence and Academic Identity

The second finding of this study suggests that my silence is usually not due to a lack of ideas, but rather because I repeatedly consider my academic image in the classroom before speaking. As presented in Theme 2 of Chapter 4, in multiple classroom situations, I was aware that I had something to say, but before actually speaking, I chose to lower my head and my gaze (Memory 1) or repeatedly weigh up whether it was worth participating in the discussion (Memory 4). These experiences demonstrate that silence is often a choice made before speaking, rather than a temporary response.

In class, I gradually realised that speaking up is not a neutral thing for me. Every speech comes with risks. I am not only worried about making grammar mistakes or expressing myself unclearly, but also about these issues being interpreted by others as a lack of academic ability. As Norton (2013) proposed, whether learners participate in interaction depends on whether they believe this participation helps maintain or enhance their academic position. For me, classroom speaking is not always seen as a "bonus" contribution, but a high-risk move that could expose my linguistic limitations and be interpreted as a lack of academic ability..

Therefore, in some situations, I choose to protect my image as a 'qualified graduate student' through silence. This choice echoes Morita's (2004) study on international student classroom participation, which suggests that students are not passively silent, but constantly judge how to position themselves in the classroom. For me, silence has become a way to avoid negative evaluation. By not speaking, I can at least avoid being immediately corrected, questioned, or misunderstood.

The action of "lowering my head" that I mentioned in Memory 1 may seem insignificant, but it reflects my true psychological state at that time. When I bow my head, it's not because I'm not interested in the discussion, but because I want to temporarily step out of the state of being watched. By recycling my body and reducing my presence, I can hide my hesitation and anxiety in language expression. Silence maintained a quiet, restrained, but seemingly professional classroom image for me.

This strategic silence also reveals the fragility of my academic identity. In a second language environment, my confidence in my academic abilities largely depends on language performance. When I feel that English cannot accurately present my level of thinking, silence becomes a way for me to protect my self-esteem and self-worth. Therefore, my classroom silence does not mean that I lack ideas, but reflects a realistic choice for me to maintain my academic identity in a learning environment where speaking is treated as the main sign of engagement, and where power relations can make speaking feel risky.

5.2.2 Pedagogical Practices and Silence

The third finding of this study suggests that my silence is not solely caused by my individual personality or ability, but is closely related to the teaching methods and interactive pace in the classroom. As shown in Theme 3 of Chapter 4, when the classroom activity requires quick response and spontaneous speech, as a second language learner, I often find it more difficult to participate. In this situation, my silence is more of an adaptation to classroom requirements rather than an active choice.

In multiple classroom memories, I notice that the teacher's handling of silence had a direct impact on my speech. In Memory 3 and Memory 5, I describe the situation where the teacher quickly supplemented or completed the answer for me before I had finished expressing myself. From a teaching perspective, this may be done to maintain classroom pace and avoid awkward situations. However, for me, this approach often means that I have lost the opportunity to continue speaking before I have had the chance to organize my language.

As Rowe (1972) pointed out, the lack of sufficient waiting time in the classroom can convey an implicit message to students: only quick responses are recognised. In actual interaction, I need time for translation, thinking, and language organisation, which becomes a disadvantage in fast-paced classrooms. When a speech must be completed within a few seconds, I often find it difficult to keep up with the pace of interaction, and silence becomes an inevitable

result.

As this experience kept being repeated, I gradually realised that it was difficult for me to gain and hold the floor in class. This situation is consistent with King's (2013) concept of 'unequal interaction'. In classrooms dominated by efficiency and rapid alternating speech, the additional processing time required by second language learners is often overlooked. Over time, I began to anticipate that my speech would be interrupted or ignored, and thus chose to retreat early, forming a relatively stable pattern of silence.

In addition, the lack of interaction between peers in the classroom has deepened my sense of withdrawal. In some discussions, speaking is more about completing tasks rather than establishing communication. Few students express their listening and support through eye contact, nodding, or response. This lack of interaction in the environment makes me feel even more isolated and makes speaking riskier.

In summary, my silence is not a personal issue, but a consequence gradually formed under specific teaching practices and interactive modes. Silence was not brought into the classroom by me, but learned through repeated interactions in the classroom. When the teaching environment cannot accommodate different rhythms of thinking and expression, silence often becomes the safest and most realistic choice. This discovery reminds us that it is necessary to re-examine how classroom practice inadvertently contributes to students' silence.

5.3 Rethinking Silence Beyond the Deficit View

This section connects the findings presented in Chapter 4 with the literature reviewed in Chapter 2. Much of the existing research explains international students' silence through a deficit perspective, suggesting that silence reflects limited language ability, low confidence, or weak motivation to participate. However, the findings of this study suggest that such explanations are incomplete. Instead, silence should be understood as a response shaped by emotional pressure, concerns about academic identity, and classroom interactional practices.

5.3.1 Emotional Pressure and Willingness to Communicate

My research findings indicate that in real classroom interactions, silence does not always stem from a lack of willingness to communicate. In multiple memories, especially the one I described in Memory 5 where my brain went blank, and the experience in Memory 2 where I held tightly until my fingers hurt, I hoped to participate in the classroom. But at these moments, I still couldn't speak up. Silence is not because I do not want to speak, but because

emotional pressure has affected my ability to express myself immediately.

This finding is consistent with MacIntyre's (2017) research on language anxiety. He pointed out that intense anxiety can interfere with learners' cognitive processing. In my experience, when my heart beats faster and my body tightens, my attention is heavily consumed in responding to these bodily reactions rather than organising language. As a result, even if I have ideas about the content of the discussion, I am now unable to express them clearly. MacIntyre and Gardner (1994) proposed that anxiety temporarily weakens learners' processing abilities in communication. Therefore, from this perspective, my silence should not be simply understood as ‘unwillingness to communicate’. On the contrary, it is more like an involuntary response that occurs when emotional stress is too high. This indicates that even if learners have motivation to communicate, silence may still occur when the emotional burden exceeds a certain level.

5.3.2 Silence as identity protection

Through the analysis of behaviours such as bowing and avoiding gaze in Memory 1, I found that silence is a conscious choice in certain situations. Norton (2013) pointed out that whether learners participate in classroom interactions depends on whether they believe this participation helps maintain or enhance their academic identity. For me, classroom speaking often means exposing my language deficiencies and may even be interpreted by others as the result of inadequate abilities. Therefore, in certain situations, staying silent makes me feel safer.

Morita's (2004) study suggests that the participation behaviour of international students in the classroom is not passive, but influenced by the process of identity positioning. My silence does not mean that I lack interest in classroom discussions, but is a way to avoid negative evaluation and maintain my academic image as a 'qualified graduate student'. From this perspective, silence is not a negative withdrawal behaviour, but a strategic response to address identity risks. It reflects my cautious judgment of my own position in an unfamiliar academic environment. This understanding helps to break through the traditional notion of equating silence with insufficient ability, and reminds us to pay attention to the situational factors and psychological considerations behind silence.

5.3.3 Chinese Cultural Identity and Classroom Silence

In addition to language anxiety and concerns about academic image, my silence is also related to the cultural identity and educational experience I bring as a Chinese student. In my

learning experience, I am more accustomed to speaking when my viewpoint is relatively complete and my expression is more certain. Classroom participation for me is not only about expressing ideas, but also about listening, recording, and organising viewpoints in my mind. I tend to understand this caution as a respect for classroom order and a self-expectation of speaking quality.

When I entered the classroom in Australia, there was a tension between this habit of participation and the interactive approach that emphasised quick response and instant expression of viewpoints in the classroom. In some discussion situations that require quick conversation, my slower pace of thinking and language conversion makes it more likely for me to be seen and evaluated, thereby increasing the psychological cost of speaking. However, as Holliday (2018) reminds us, silence should not be explained as a fixed cultural trait. In my case, my preference to speak only when I felt ready was shaped by my earlier learning experiences, but it became more noticeable in Australia because the classroom interaction often valued quick responses. Wang et al. (2022) similarly show that silence is often co-constructed through specific classroom interaction rules and expectations of participation.

Based on my memory narrative, the key thing is not that culture itself "causes" silence, but that cultural experience influences how I judge the appropriateness and risk of speaking. When I am worried that my expression may not be accurate enough, my rhythm may not keep up, or I may be corrected on the spot, I am more likely to choose to remain silent first to reduce the possibility of being negatively positioned. In this sense, my silence can be understood as an identity negotiation in an intercultural context. While adapting to new classroom participation norms, I am also striving to maintain my understanding and self-evaluation standards for 'appropriate speaking styles'. It is not equivalent to a deficiency in ability, but rather a defensive choice formed under intercultural tension that made sense in that context.

5.4 Implications for Teaching and Learning

By reviewing my experiences of repeatedly remaining silent in the classroom, this study is not only a personal reflection, but also provides practical insights for understanding teaching practices and international student learning experiences in similar contexts. The emphasis of autoethnography is to extract educational significance from specific experiences. This section will discuss the potential implications of these findings from two perspectives: teacher practice and international students themselves.

5.4.1 Implications for Teaching Practice

The analysis of classroom interaction in Chapter 4 shows that the pace of the classroom greatly affects whether I can participate in discussions. In Memory 3, when I tried to organize the language, the lecturer quickly supplemented and completed my answer. Although this behaviour is for the purpose of support, it also reflects the high emphasis by teachers on efficiency and fluency in the classroom.

This discovery highlights the importance of "waiting time" proposed by Rowe (1972). In multilingual classrooms, waiting time is not just a brief pause, but a necessary space for students to think, switch languages, and maintain emotional stability. For second language learners, a few seconds of waiting often determines whether they can complete a speech.

For students under emotional pressure, if they lack sufficient waiting time, their thinking is easily interrupted, and silence becomes the safest choice. Therefore, teaching improvement should not only focus on language support, but also pay attention to adjusting the pace of classroom interaction. Allowing brief silence helps convey a clear message to students: slower responses are understood and accepted.

In addition, teachers also need to be aware of their guiding role when organizing classroom interactions. When the classroom overly relies on quick responses and impromptu speeches, it often puts international students who need more processing time at a disadvantage. By providing discussion questions in advance, increasing opportunities for group communication, or reducing emphasis on immediate answers, teachers can effectively reduce students' psychological pressure and create possibilities for more students to participate.

5.4.2 Implications for International Students

For international students, the significance of this study lies in a renewed understanding of silence itself. Through reviewing and analysing my own experiences, I gradually realised that silence is not equivalent to a lack of ability or learning failure, but often a way to cope with high-pressure classroom environments.

Through reflecting on my experience in this study, I gradually realised that understanding the reasons behind silence can help international students establish a more stable self-awareness in unfamiliar academic environments. If students can understand that silence is a response to stress rather than personal failure, they can better engage in classroom interactions in a

controllable and safe manner.

5.5 Chapter Summary

This chapter discusses the broader implications of the findings from Chapter 4. By linking personal experiences of classroom silence with language anxiety, identity negotiation, and classroom interaction research, the analysis shows that classroom silence is a highly situational phenomenon rather than a result of a single factor.

This study suggests that my silence was not due to a lack of ability or motivation, but rather a protective response shaped by emotional pressure, academic identity risk, and classroom interaction expectations. From this perspective, this study challenges explanations that attribute Chinese students' silence simply to individual deficits or fixed cultural stereotypes. These discussions offer a more realistic and concrete perspective for understanding the classroom experience of second language learners.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

6.1 Summary of the Research

This research employed an autoethnographic approach to review and analyse my experiences of classroom participation as a Chinese postgraduate student within an English-medium teaching environment, focusing specifically on the contexts and inner experiences of my silence in class. The research aim was not to quantify the frequency of silence, but to understand how it could arise within specific learning environments and what it signified for me,and what it might suggest for other L2 learners in similar contexts.

Through the analysis of my five memories, the research identified three interrelated themes. Firstly, my affective overload indicated that anxiety and tension in high-pressure classroom settings directly impacted cognitive processing. When reactions such as accelerated heartbeat, muscle tension, or mental blankness occurred, my silence often constituted an involuntary physiological response. Secondly, identity protection reflected my desire to maintain a professional academic image in the classroom. To avoid being perceived as ‘unprofessional’ due to linguistic hesitations, I occasionally chose silence to preserve face. Finally, my pedagogical disconnection revealed how the pace of interaction can impact second language learners. When lessons prioritised rapid responses without sufficient waiting time, the time available for my language processing was significantly reduced, which further reinforced my silence.

In addition, this study also revealed the profound role of Chinese cultural identity in the formation of silence. My silence was not only due to a lack of language ability, but also reflected my deep adherence to the cultural virtue of "caution and careful consideration before speaking" when facing Western academic norms. This cultural background placed me under dual identity pressure in the fast-paced Western classroom: I struggled to adapt to new interactive rules while remaining reluctant to violate my long-internalised cultural habits. Consequently, silence became a strategic way for me to negotiate this cultural tension. This preference is consistent with studies showing that silence and cautious speech can be linked to respect, attentive listening, and a serious learning stance in some East Asian educational contexts (Nakane, 2007; Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2005; Harumi & King, 2020).

Collectively, these three findings demonstrated that my classroom silence stemmed not from inadequate preparation or motivation, but from the interplay of emotional pressure, identity

concerns, and instructional context.

6.2 Contributions of the Research

This research has complemented existing scholarship in several respects.

First, within research on international student classroom participation, this study has offered a more nuanced perspective on understanding the silence exhibited by Chinese international students. By presenting specific bodily reactions and immediate feelings, it has demonstrated that silence did not necessarily signify inadequate ability but was often an outcome within complex interactive processes. This finding has helped to correct interpretations that simplistically attributed international students' silence to language proficiency or cultural disposition. Furthermore, by exploring the role of my Chinese cultural identity, this research has deepened my understanding of how internalised cultural values, such as the virtue of prudence in speech, interact with Western pedagogical expectations. It has highlighted the notion that silence can be a form of active identity negotiation rather than passive withdrawal.

Secondly, at the methodological level, this research demonstrates the value of autobiographical ethnography in higher education research. By reviewing and analysing personal experiences, I captured fleeting classroom moments, such as abrupt mental blocks or physical tension, which can be difficult to elicit directly through questionnaires or observation. This offers a complementary pathway to understanding learners' authentic classroom experiences.

Finally, at the pedagogical level, this research highlights how classroom interaction styles influence international students' participation. Findings suggest that the pacing of teacher-student exchanges and response patterns in higher education might inadvertently constrain second language learners' engagement opportunities. This offers practical guidance for institutions seeking to enhance classroom inclusivity and refine teaching interactions.

6.3 Research Limitations

This research has certain limitations. Firstly, as an autoethnographic study, the analysis was primarily based on my personal learning experiences. While these experiences may reflect patterns that are shared by other international students in similar contexts, they cannot represent the classroom experiences of all international students.

Secondly, this research relied on retrospective memory materials. Although I endeavoured to reflect upon contemporary records during the writing process, memory itself might have been subject to the influence of time and emotional shifts. Consequently, the findings should be understood as an in-depth analysis of specific experiences rather than a generalisation of universal phenomena.

6.4 Recommendations for Future Research

Building upon the findings of this research, future research could explore several directions. Firstly, interdisciplinary comparative studies could investigate whether international students' classroom participation experiences differ across academic disciplines, and how disciplinary discussion practices influence students' opportunities to contribute.

Secondly, future research could incorporate the teacher's perspective for comparative analysis with student narratives. By contrasting teachers' and students' interpretations of identical classroom situations, a more comprehensive understanding of the causes of classroom silence may be achieved.

Furthermore, with the proliferation of digital teaching tools, future research could examine participation patterns among second language learners in online or blended learning environments, exploring whether written interactions provide transitional support for oral expression.

6.5 Final Reflection: From Silence to Understanding

The process of completing this thesis has also been one of re-examining my own experiences of silence in the classroom. Previously, I often perceived silence as a deficiency in learning, even a sign of personal failure. However, through systematic analysis of my personal experiences and engagement with relevant theories, I have gradually come to recognise that silence does not equate to the abandonment of learning.

When I lowered my gaze to avoid eye contact or found myself unable to speak due to nervousness in class, these behaviours were more a coping mechanism within an unfamiliar academic environment than an indication of inadequate ability. Understanding the reasons behind my silence have enabled me to view my learning journey through a more objective lens, reducing unnecessary self-doubt.

More importantly, I have begun to understand that my silence is actually part of my identity negotiation as a Chinese international student. It represents how I strive to find my place in a foreign land while preserving my cultural roots. Now, I no longer see this silence as a 'defect' that must be completely eradicated, but rather as a natural product of intercultural adaptation and a balancing behaviour between self and cultural responsibility. This cognitive shift allows me to face future academic challenges with more self-esteem and cultural confidence.

References

Adams, T. E., Jones, S. H., & Ellis, C. (Eds.). (2016). *Handbook of autoethnography.* Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315427812

Attard, R. (2017). Autoethnography: Understanding Qualitative Research, by Tony E. Adams, Stacy Holman Jones, and Carolyn Ellis, New York, NY, Oxford University Press, 2014, 216 pp,£ 20.99 (paperback), ISBN: 9780199972098.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 3*(2), 77-101. https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa

Brown, L. (2008). Language and anxiety: An ethnographic study of international postgraduate students. *Evaluation & Research in Education, 21*(2), 75 – 95. https://doi.org/10.1080/09500790802152167

Chang, H. (2016). *Autoethnography as method.* Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315433370

Edwards, J. (2021). Ethical autoethnography: Is it possible?. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, *20,* 1609406921995306. https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406921995306

Ellis, C. (2004). *The ethnographic I: A methodological novel about autoethnography* (Vol. 13). Rowman Altamira. https://doi.org/10.5040/9798216409373

Ellis, C., Adams, T. E., & Bochner, A. P. (2011). Autoethnography: an overview. *Historical Social Research/Historische Sozialforschung*, 273-290.

Goffman, E. (2017). *Interaction ritual: Essays in face-to-face behavior*. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203788387

Guo, Y. (2017). More than absence of speech: Chinese international students' silence in

collaborative group work at a UK university. *Equitable Higher Education in Times of Disruption*, 0012. https://doi.org/10.3102/2185953

Hanh, N. T. (2020). Silence Is Gold?: A Study on Students' Silence in EFL Classrooms. *International Journal of Higher Education, 9*(4), 153-160. https://doi.org/10.5430/ijhe.v9n4p153

Harumi, S., & King, J. (2020). East Asian perspectives on silence in English language education: An introduction. In S. Harumi & J. King (Eds.), *East Asian perspectives on silence in English language education* (pp. 1–16). Multilingual Matters. https://doi.org/10.21832/9781788926775-006

Herrera, L. J. P. (2024). Into the void: Re-envisioning silence in foreign language education through a socio-emotional learning lens. *Neofilolog,* (63/2), 293-312. https://doi.org/10.14746/n.2024.63.2.4

Holliday, A. (2018). *Understanding intercultural communication: Negotiating a grammar of culture.* Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351139526

Ingram, J., & Elliott, V. (2016). A critical analysis of the role of wait time in classroom interactions and the effects on student and teacher interactional behaviours. *Cambridge Journal of Education, 46*(1), 37-53. https://doi.org/10.1080/0305764x.2015.1009365

Khan, Z. A., & Zafar, S. (2010). The Effects of Anxiety on Cognitive Processing in English Language Learning. *English Language Teaching, 3*(2), 199-209. https://doi.org/10.5539/elt.v3n2p199

King, J. (2013). Silence in the second language classrooms of Japanese universities. *Applied linguistics, 34*(3), 325-343. https://doi.org/10.1093/applin/ams043

King, J. (2013). *Silence in the second language classroom.* Springer. https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137301482

King, J., & Harumi, S. (Eds.). (2020). *East Asian perspectives on silence in English language*

education (Vol. 6). Multilingual Matters. https://doi.org/10.2307/jj.22730507.8

Kubota, R. (2020). Critical engagement with teaching EFL: Toward a trivalent focus on ideology, political economy, and praxis. In *TESOL teacher education in a transnational world* (pp. 49-64). Routledge.

Lindahl, K. (2019). Teacher language awareness development and its implications for new educators. *The New Educator, 15*(2), 85-100.

MacIntyre, P. D. (2017). An overview of language anxiety research and trends in its development. *New insights into language anxiety: Theory, research and educational implications*, 11-30. https://doi.org/10.2307/jj.22730706.5

MacIntyre, P. D., & Gardner, R. C. (1994). The subtle effects of language anxiety on cognitive processing in the second language. *Language learning, 44*(2), 283-305. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-1770.1994.tb01103.x

MacIntyre, P. D., Clément, R., Dörnyei, Z., & Noels, K. A. (1998). Conceptualizing willingness to communicate in a L2: A situational model of L2 confidence and affiliation. *The modern language journal, 82*(4), 545-562. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4781.1998.tb05543.x

Maher, K. (2021). Reframing silence: Insights into language learners' thoughts about silence and speaking-related anxiety. *Journal of Silence Studies in Education, 1*(1), 32-47. https://doi.org/10.31763/jsse.v1i1.3

Maher, K., & King, J. (2023). Language anxiety and learner silence in the classroom from a cognitive-behavioral perspective. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics, 43*, 105-111. https://doi.org/10.1017/s0267190523000077

Maroni, B. (2011). Pauses, gaps and wait time in classroom interaction in primary schools. *Journal of Pragmatics, 43*(7), 2081-2093. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2010.12.006

Morita, N. (2004). Negotiating participation and identity in second language academic communities. *Tesol Quarterly, 38*(4), 573-603. https://doi.org/10.2307/3588281

Murray, N. (2018). Understanding student participation in the internationalised university: Some issues, challenges, and strategies. *Education Sciences, 8*(3), 96. https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci8030096

Nakane, I. (2007). Silence in intercultural communication. https://doi.org/10.1075/pbns.166

Norton, B. (2013). *Identity and language learning: Extending the conversation*. Multilingual matters. https://doi.org/10.21832/9781783090563

Rachel Zhou, Y., Knoke, D., & Sakamoto, I. (2005). Rethinking silence in the classroom: Chinese students' experiences of sharing indigenous knowledge. *International Journal of Inclusive Education, 9*(3), 287-311. https://doi.org/10.1080/13603110500075180

Reed-Danahay, D. (Ed.). (2021). *Auto/ethnography: Rewriting the self and the social*. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003136118

Rosa, J., & Flores, N. (2021). Decolonization, language, and race in applied linguistics and social justice. *Applied Linguistics, 42*(6), 1162-1167. https://doi.org/10.1093/applin/amab062

Rowe, M. B. (1972). Wait-Time and Rewards as Instructional Variables: Their Influence on Language, Logic, and Fate Control. https://doi.org/10.1002/tea.3660110202

Straker, J. (2016). International student participation in higher education: Changing the focus from "international students" to "participation". *Journal of Studies in International Education, 20*(4), 299-318. https://doi.org/10.1177/1028315316628992

Sung, C. C. M. (2017). Understanding classroom participation and identity negotiation: An undergraduate student's L2 learning experiences in an English-medium university in Hong Kong. *Applied Linguistics Review, 8*(4), 375-399. https://doi.org/10.1515/applirev-2016-1026

Tisdell, E. J., Merriam, S. B., & Stuckey-Peyrot, H. L. (2025). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation*. John Wiley & Sons.

Ting-Toomey, S., & Chung, L. C. (2005). *Understanding intercultural communication* (Vol. 28). New York: Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203805640.ch17

Tolich, M. (2010). A critique of current practice: Ten foundational guidelines for autoethnographers. *Qualitative health research, 20*(12), 1599-1610. https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732310376076

Wang, C. C., Andre, K., & Greenwood, K. M. (2015). Chinese students studying at Australian universities with specific reference to nursing students: A narrative literature review. *Nurse Education Today, 35*(4), 609-619. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.nedt.2014.12.005

Wang, S., Moskal, M., & Schweisfurth, M. (2022). The social practice of silence in intercultural classrooms at a UK university. *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education, 52*(4), 600-617. https://doi.org/10.1080/03057925.2020.1798215

Wilson, H. (2023). *A Narrative Inquiry on the reflections of 10 Chinese pre-sessional students' interaction practices in preparation for study at a British university* (Doctoral dissertation, University of Sheffield).

Wong, M. Y. (2016). Teacher–student power relations as a reflection of multileveled intertwined interactions. *British Journal of Sociology of Education, 37*(2), 248-267. https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2014.916600

Wu, X. (2009). The dynamics of Chinese face mechanisms and classroom behaviour: A case study. *Evaluation & Research in Education, 22*(2-4), 87-105. https://doi.org/10.1080/09500790903487512

Yang, L., & Lin, Y. (2024). To talk or to remain silent? Foreign language enjoyment and perceived classroom climate as drivers of change in Chinese EFL learners' willingness to communicate: a latent growth curve analysis. I*nnovation in Language Learning and Teaching,* 1-18. https://doi.org/10.1080/17501229.2024.2391376

Zhao, W. (2010). An Investigation of Students' Face Wants in Chinese English Teachers'

Classroom Feedback. *Journal of Language Teaching and Research, 1*(1), 29. https://doi.org/10.4304/jltr.1.1.29-34