

# Listening to Student Silence in Transnational Education

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**Abstract.** The purpose of this study was to investigate the influences of culture, gender, pedagogy, pragmatism and province of origin on student silent behaviour (SSB) in transnational education (TNE) in China. Data was collected from a survey of over eight hundred undergraduate business students and interviews of their EAP teachers. Findings indicate that SSB is influenced by pragmatism, pedagogy, culture, student province of origin, and to some extent, student gender. This original empirical study extends the understanding of SSB in the classroom, and contributes toward improved teaching practices in TNE. Further research might investigate the effects of student province of origin.

**摘要.** 本研究旨在探究在中国跨国教育（TNE）中，文化、性别、教学法、实用目的及生源地对学生沉默行为（SSB）的影响。这些数据来自对八百多名商学院的本科生的调查，以及对其学术用途英语（EAP）教师访谈。研究表明，学生沉默行为（SSB）主要受实用目的、教学法、文化和生源地的影响，也在一定程度上与学生相关。此原创性实证研究扩展了对课堂上学生沉默行为（SSB）的理解，有助于改善跨国教育（TNE）中的教学实践。然而，关于生源地的影响还有待深入。

## Introduction

Recent years have seen a growth in the higher education (HE) exported from English speaking countries, known as transnational education (TNE), particularly in China (Zhuang, 2009). However, cultural differences and educational traditions mean that the reality for educators and learners alike may continue to be challenging (Zhuang & Tang, 2012). The Chinese educational system is said to be teacher-centred, emphasizing knowledge accumulation (Nield, 2004 cited in Zhuang & Tang, 2012), whereas critical thinking, group discussion and independent learning are more valued in the UK (Zhuang, 2009; Leon, 2000 cited in Zhuang & Tang, 2012, p. 227). Chinese students are not well prepared for a communicative approach, and may be dissatisfied with TNE as a result (Zhuang & Tang, 2012, p. 227). It has been argued that we should seek to understand their behaviour as a reaction to the western higher education environment, and not be tempted by cultural stereotyping (Grimshaw, 2007, p. 308). With this preliminary study, we attempt to see beyond culture by investigating further causes of student silent behaviour (SSB) in TNE, with the aim of enhancing student learning experiences.

King (2013) proposed a taxonomy of the reasons for silent behaviours in class,

suggesting: the ‘silence of disengagement’; ‘silence of teacher-centred methods’; ‘silence of non-verbal activities’; ‘silence of confusion’; and ‘the silence of hypersensitivity to others’ (p. 338). Dörnyei and Ushioda (2011) describe the silent classroom as a ‘sociocultural maze’ of contextual issues, within which the student is a ‘pawn’ to the larger forces (p. 7). This study contributes to the understanding of SSB in HE by investigating these forces on the classroom ‘system’ (de Bot, Lowie, & Verspoor, 2007); it also explores the mediating effects of province of origin and gender.

## Theory and hypotheses

### Culture

The Chinese can be silent to avoid criticism, ridicule, rejection or punishment, simply for having different opinions, to win approval, acceptance or appreciation (Yang, 1993 cited in Hwang, Ang, & Francesco, 2002, p. 73). Before speaking, they may need to make sure their opinions are “safely the same as those of others” (Yang, 1993 cited in Hwang, Ang, & Francesco, 2002, p. 73) and will seek to establish interpersonal harmony by protecting each other’s “face” (Hu, 1944 cited in Saville-Troike, 2003, p. 171; Yu, 2011; Fang, 2003, p. 363). Chinese students may also be silent due

to a combination of fears: not having the correct answers (Hu & Fell-Eisenkraft, 2003, p. 60); making mistakes or supplying incorrect answers; fear of others' conceptions about their competence (Goffman, 1967; Hu & Fell-Eisenkraft, 2003, p. 60); and the adverse judgement of others (Zhou, Knoke, & Sakamoto, 2005, p. 296). Chinese students will evaluate their answers before speaking, self-censor any incorrect answers and strive to conform to socially expected norms (Qi, 2011, p. 291; Yu, 2003). However, these characteristics may not be consistent across Chinese society, and to group one nation together as a single culture would be to assume cultural values respect national boundaries; findings indicate they do not (Tung & Verbeke, 2010; Kwon, 2012). As the majority of students in the cohort sample were Chinese, the effects of Chinese culture must be considered to be a factor in their behaviour.

**Hypothesis 1** Culture is positively related to SSB in TNE in China.

### **Gender**

Hoare and Butcher (2008) found the effects of "face" to be much stronger for male Chinese consumers; for example, they do not wish to be criticized in public (p. 167). Chinese men are said to be expected to moderate their emotions at all times (Davis et al., 2012, p. 237) affecting their communication. It is likely that female students will also adapt their behaviour according to cultural norms and interactional styles (Talbot, 2010). Chinese women will be affected by the "cultural landscape" within which they live, which determines access to education (Wang, 2010) and family orientation (Huang, 2013). Confucian traditions may accentuate unequal gender relationships in China, and despite the levelling effects of Marxism on gender equality, increasing inequalities have returned (Sung & Pascall, 2014, p. 187).

**Hypothesis 2** Student gender moderates the effects of Chinese culture on SSB in TNE in China.

### **Pedagogy**

Teachers in Chinese schools are said to be authoritarian, and students "quiet and obedient", rarely challenging their teachers since they are assumed to have "deep

knowledge" and to be able to answer all the students' questions (Sit, 2013, p. 37). Chinese students are also said to be passive learners, anxious to cover the entire syllabus – so as to not miss anything – and to be sure of the correct answers (Sit, 2013, p. 38). This may be misperceived as non-participation, but it is more likely that Chinese learners are employing a deep approach to learning and will ask well-considered questions after a long reflection; for example, after class (Sit, 2013, p. 38).

**Hypothesis 3** Pedagogic history affects SSB in TNE in China.

### **Pragmatism**

Silence can indicate a student's right to conceal thoughts, choose words carefully, avoid embarrassment, or a "preservation of privacy" (Bruneau, 1973, pp. 18 & 29). It is not a "void" (Tannen, 1985), but one of the "great arts of conversation" (Cicero cited in Ephratt, 2008). Silence can be a chance for personal exploration or a desire for independence or isolation (Kurzon, 2007), mirroring the Chinese saying: "One should speak only if the quality of what one has to say is greater than the quality of the silence that one interrupts" (Bilmes, 1994; Ephratt, 2008, p. 1924). Silences may contain more meaning than speech (Ephratt, 2008), or may simply be a choice not to act, since action is deemed unnecessary (Fitzpatrick, Davey, & Dai, 2012).

**Hypothesis 4** Pragmatism is positively related to SSB in TNE in China.

### **Province of origin**

Great social and regional inequalities exist in the Chinese education system due to rural migration and rural poverty (Zhiyong, 2010). Chinese minorities will also suffer from difficulties with language of tuition, and this will affect their access to higher education (Zhiyong, 2010). Also, since there are likely to be varieties of cultural effects within the national boundaries of China (Tung & Verbeke, 2010), a student's province of origin might be expected to have a moderating effect on their behaviour.

**Hypothesis 5** Province of origin affects SSB in TNE in China.

## Method

### Sample and procedures

This single case study took place at a Sino-UK joint venture TNE university in Suzhou, China. Participants were taking part in a four-year undergraduate business programme. Business students were selected since theirs is the largest cohort and they are generally more articulate. A total of 605 students participated in this study, aged from 18 to 22 years old, including 428 Females (70.7%) and 177 Males (29.3%). 586 questionnaires were completed from a sample of 681 (response rate: 86.0%).

An initial pilot study was carried out to test the questionnaire, and amendments were made based on students' focus group discussions. The questionnaires were distributed and collected by the students' English for Academic Purposes (EAP) tutors; students were told the questionnaires were anonymous and their names would not be associated with their responses.

Four native Chinese EAP tutors of the business student sample were selected for interview. These tutors were chosen for their insider knowledge of Chinese culture and the Chinese education system. Chinese students were purposely selected from the sample for the test of student 'province of origin'.

### Measures

Participants were asked to think of a recent situation when they were expected to speak, but remained silent. This approach could be criticized since, without a stimulus, students might fabricate an event (Gass, 2001, p. 227).  
Recollection of a recent event without a

stimulus for recall could also be objected to, since accurate recall cannot be guaranteed, especially where emotions are concerned and furthermore, reliability decreases over time (Bloom, 1954 cited in Gass, 2001; Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011). However, producing video stimuli would have been impractical for a survey of this scale, and it was felt that students could recall a recent event reliably.

Students rated the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with a list of 24 statements provided in Chinese using a four point Likert scale. Following the pilot study, adaptations were made to the questionnaire. Questions were derived from a literature review (Hwang et al., 2002; King, 2013; Hu & Fell-Eisenkraft, 2003) to investigate the hypothesized "attractors" (de Bot et al., 2007; King, 2011). Open-ended responses were invited using a space for "additional comments".

Following the pilot study, the middle item "neither agree nor disagree" was removed. It was felt this omission would be appropriate for Chinese students' culture, despite criticisms of this approach (Adelson & McCoach, 2010; Leung, 2011). A Likert 4 point scale was used to record responses from 1 "strongly agree" to 4 "strongly disagree". Sample questionnaire items include "I was avoiding criticism by being silent" and "I didn't want to invite ridicule" (Yang, 1992 cited in Hwang et al., 2002). A Cronbach's alpha score of 0.849 indicates a sufficiently high level of internal consistency (Cohen et al., 2011). The results were analysed using ANOVA and t-tests.

## Results

M	SD	Survey statement/ (source)	Category
2.80	.73	"I was thinking of what to say, which took a long time" (King, 2013).	Pragmatic
2.77	.79	"I am used to a different teaching method at school" (King, 2013).	Pedagogic
2.72	.78	"I was afraid of embarrassing myself in front of other people" (Yang, 1993 cited in Hwang et al., 2002).	Culture
2.64	.69	"I hoped somebody else would answer the question" (King, 2013).	Pragmatic

N=545. Scored such that 1=strongly disagree, 2=disagree, 3=agree, 4=strongly agree

**Table 1.** Mean responses indicating student agreement

**Culture**

Mean responses to the survey revealed that students agreed they were silent because they were “afraid of embarrassing [themselves] in front of other people” (Mean = 2.72, SD = .78), a cultural factor (Hwang et al., 2002), see Table 1. Students’ written responses also reflected the influence of cultural norms, including one of many similar examples: “I don’t want to be high-key or conspicuous”. Interviews with Chinese cultural insiders also cited strong cultural influences in the classroom as leading to SSB in Chinese students, supporting Hypothesis 1.

**Student gender and culture**

A significant correlation was found between student gender and the cultural statement: “I wanted to make sure my opinions were the same as other people’s before disclosing them” ( $F(1,602) = 5.26, p = 0.02$ ) – female students were more likely to agree. Not all cultural questions correlated with gender

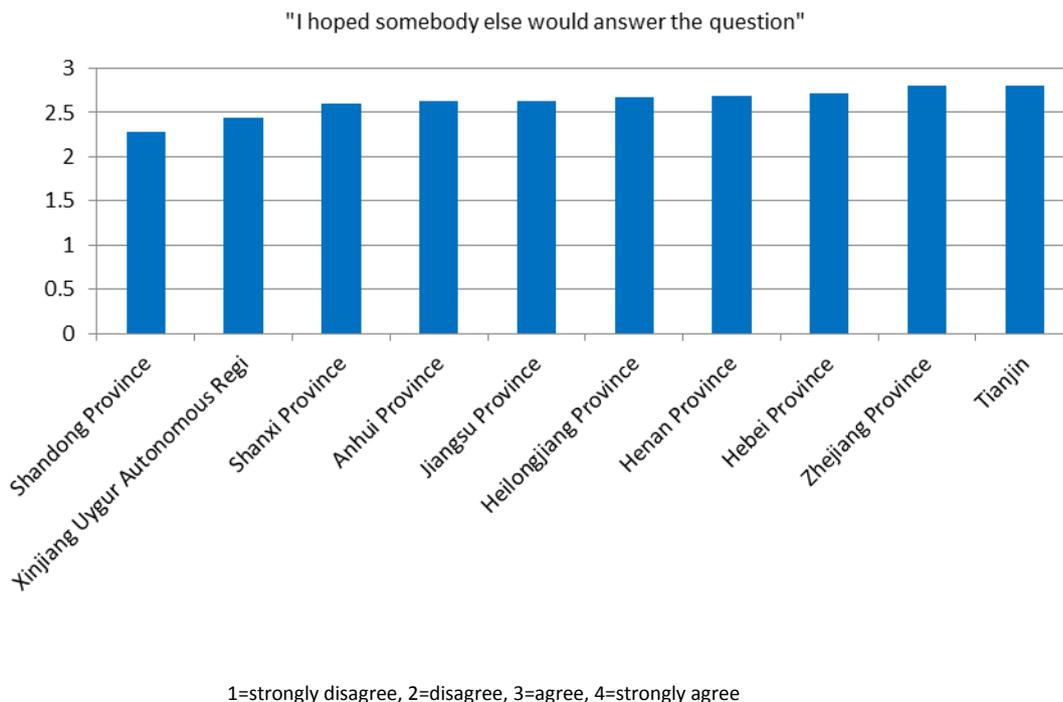
however, and there was no significant correlation between gender and cultural questions grouped together as one category. Therefore Hypothesis 2 was only partially supported, with one cultural statement.

**Pedagogy and pragmatism**

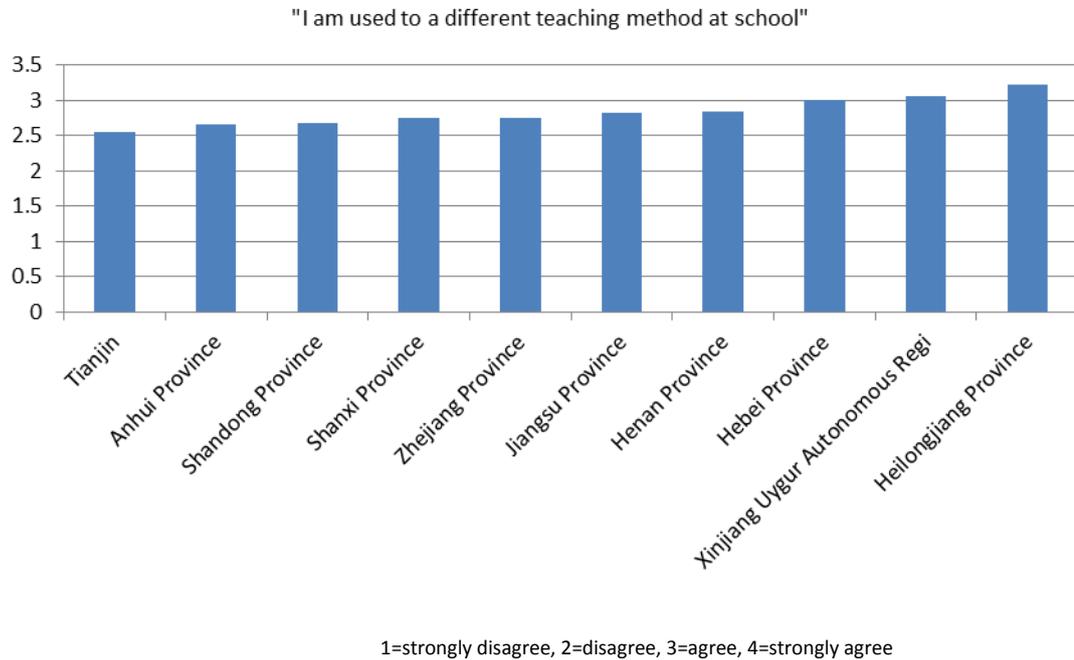
Students generally agreed they were silent for pedagogic reasons, being “used to a different teaching method at school” (Mean = 2.77, SD = .79). Students’ written responses cited pedagogic influences, for example “maybe we need [to] get used to the new teaching style” and “I don’t know what kind of answers that the teacher wants,” supporting Hypothesis 3. Students generally agreed with the pragmatic statement “I hoped somebody else would answer the question” (Mean = 2.64, SD = .69), and their written responses indicated SSB due to pragmatism, for example: “Silence just means [I am] preparing my best answer”, supporting Hypothesis 4.

	F	df <sub>1</sub>	df <sub>2</sub>	p
CULTURE	0.72	32	555	0.87
PEDAGOGIC	1.80	32	555	0.01
PRAGMATIC	1.57	32	555	0.03

**Table 2.** ANOVA correlations: student province of origin.



**Figure 1.** SSB due to pragmatism and province of origin.



**Figure 2.** SSB due to pedagogy and province of origin.

### **Student province of origin**

Students were found to have different pragmatic reasons for silent behaviour according to their province of origin, as shown in Table 2 ( $F(32, 555) = 1.57, p = 0.03$ ). Analysis of student province of origin means and their pedagogic and pragmatic SSB revealed significant variation between the Chinese provinces. Students from Tianjin province generally agreed with the *pragmatic* statement "I hoped somebody else would answer the question" (King, 2013), see Figure 1; students from Xinjiang generally agreed with the *pedagogic* statement "I am used to a different teaching method at school" (King, 2013), see Figure 2. Findings support Hypothesis 5 with statistically significant correlations between student province of origin and both pragmatic ( $p=0.03$ ) and pedagogic ( $p=0.01$ ) silent behaviour.

### **Discussion**

Based on student comments and cultural insider interviews, Chinese culture is likely to have a strong effect on SSB in the classroom. Chinese cultural insiders commented that students will remain silent to avoid attracting attention in an attempt to be "modest" and to avoid "negative feedback". Students' comments supported these predictions, writing they "just want to act like other students" and to avoid being "conspicuous".

The Chinese students in our study agreed they fear the social embarrassment normally associated with Chinese culture (Yang, 1993 cited in Hwang et al., 2002). Significant correlations were not found for "face" effects and gender (Hoare & Butcher, 2008), indicating Chinese males are not as afraid of public embarrassment as might have been expected. In contrast, gender effects were identified for Chinese female students, who stated they strive to make sure their opinions were consistent with other people's, supporting the findings of Yang (1993 cited in Hwang et al., 2002). This indicates the moderating effects of Marxism on Chinese society may have reversed, reinstating Confucian traditional gender roles (Sung & Pascall, 2014, p. 187).

A student's pedagogic history and pragmatism will also affect their silent behaviour in the TNE classroom. Findings indicate that students may be used to a "different teaching method" at school (King, 2011; 2013) and that inequalities exist between the Chinese provinces (Zhiyong, 2010). A student's pedagogic history may cause them to ask "what kind of answers the tutor wants", feeling that teachers should "explain the answers in detail or provide the possible answers", depending on their province of origin. Students who were silent for pragmatic reasons "thinking of what to say", hoping "somebody else would answer

the question”, “preparing [their] best answer”, or reporting the “advantages [of] silence” in class, will have a profound influence on classroom communication (King, 2013), and it is suggested that students from selected provinces may require enhanced support. These findings reflect the challenges highlighted by Zhuang & Tang (2012), and perhaps indicate the consequences of regional sociocultural inequalities (Zhiyong, 2010).

As dynamic state theory emphasizes, small movements in the system can effect large changes in behaviour (de Bot et al., 2007). These changes can be brought about by the teacher in the language classroom through an understanding of the sociocultural landscape (King, 2013). As teachers will have a great deal of impact on SSB in the classroom, counteracting (or accentuating) the influences of pragmatism, pedagogy and culture, and teaching practices which counteract these effects should be shared.

## Conclusion

This preliminary study shows how student silent behaviour is influenced by the silent “attractors” (de Bot et al., 2007) of culture, pedagogy and pragmatism, moderated by student province of origin and student gender. Teaching approaches which encourage a communicative classroom are recommended via an understanding of the sociocultural “landscape” (Wang, 2010). This understanding may allow teachers to make effective changes to the classroom “system” (de Bot et al., 2007). Encouraging students to speak without fear of recrimination in a risk-free environment can empower them with the freedom to make mistakes, which has been termed a ‘democratisation’ of the classroom (van Lier, 2004; Whiteside & Barclay, 2013). This study provides a framework for understanding the silent classroom. Future investigations may include classroom observations, student interviews and longitudinal studies. Enhanced support and teaching practices should be developed and shared with the wider HE community.

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