DOI: https://doi.org/10.63056/jllsa.2.10.2026.418

Journal of Language, Literature & Social Affairs

journal homepage: https://scholarclub.org/index.php/jllsa

The Unspoken Curriculum: How Students Learn to Hide Confusion in English-Medium Classrooms — A Qualitative Study of Academic Silence and Classroom Belonging

Syeda Sabira*[a], Warisha Riaz[b], Samra Azam[c]

a. Department of Languages and Cultural Studies, University of Baltistan, Skardu.
b. Capital University of Science and Technology, Islamabad.
c. M.Phil. (Education), University of the Punjab

ARTICLE INFO

Received:
September 10, 2026
Revision Received:
October 03, 2026
Accepted:
October 14, 2026
Available Online:
October 25, 2026

Keywords:
English-medium instruction, academic silence, classroom belonging, linguistic insecurity, student participation, hidden curriculum, qualitative research and educational inclusion.

ABSTRACT

English classroom settings are viewed as language and social environments that discourage student uncertainty, as well as learning environments. Students may not have knowledge of the course contents and/or lack proficiency in English and therefore keep their confusion to themselves to maintain their conceptual self-esteem and social status. The themes that emerge from this study include how students learn to negotiate confusion in their English medium classroom and how academic silence relates to classroom belongingness, language vulnerability, and taken-for-granted understandings of participation. A qualitative research design that takes an interpretivist, exploratory, and documentary approach is employed, relying on relevant scholarly literature and qualitative research studies, academic reviews and credible institutional publications to interpret the educational, emotional, and social aspects of classroom silence. Academic silence is interpreted as a potential indicator of engagement, capability and readiness to learn in classroom. It looks at the interplay that may take place between the topics of English language proficiency, pronunciation, grammatical accuracy, peer judgement, teacher expectations, class power dynamics and students' efforts to appear competent and competent to belong. The concept of an unsaid curriculum, that is, messages that may be learned from how the classroom is conducted and what kinds of speech are tolerated and encouraged while others are not, and what is acceptable (or not) to say when one doesn't know the answer, is given special attention. With the conceptualization of the relationship between linguistic insecurity and social evaluation and belonging, a conceptual understanding of how silence may be a learned classroom practice is possible. It highlights the importance of inclusive teaching in the language, of teacher-student relationship, the opportunity to clarify the language without judgement, of uncertainty being part of learning, and how to deal with that in the classroom. The study places the social and emotional learning (SEL) of participation at the centre of conversations on inclusive English-medium education and focuses on the need to create environments that value asking questions, feeling confused and being unsure as academic practices.

* Correspondence to: Department of Languages and Cultural Studies, University of Baltistan, Skardu
E-*mail address:* biintealihussaini@gmail.com (S. Sabira)

3105-4919 & 3105-4927/© 2026 The Authors. Published by Scholar Club. This is an open access article.

1. Introduction

The use of English medium instruction (EMI) has been on the rise in higher education, as it provides students with the chance to learn academic content in English, while also dealing with the linguistic and communicative challenges of academic content in the disciplines. It's not just about knowledge of the subject that's being learned when it comes to learning English. Students need to be able to use specific terms and make decisions and arguments, respond to questions and demonstrate academic skills in a language other than their native tongue. This can result in students taking in only part of a lesson but not wanting to admit if they have any questions or are unsure. Therefore, classroom involvement cannot be understood as being related only to the students' knowledge, motivation or willingness to learn. Also, it is important to remember the linguistic, emotional and social contexts in which students communicate. In the university context and within the context of English-medium education, Maher and King (2022) demonstrate that anxiety around speaking and silence in the classroom are not separate entities, and that it is crucial to pay attention to the experiences that may contribute to low verbal participation.

Academic silence is an important issue here since it could hide issues that are not evident in the classroom. Pupils might not ask questions, may not join in with discussions or may refuse to ask for clarification when they are confused. This can lead them to seem to be not understanding content, not engaged, or under-prepared when in fact they are not. However, there are numerous definitions of silence. It may be a reflection, a language, a personal taste, cultural norms, or a conscious decision. The problem that needs to be distinguished in the analysis is whether silence is a neutral silence or deliberate silence or silence that hides academic problems. Students' silence can be correlated with anxiety and fears of the judgment of others on their classroom performance as stated by Maher and King (2022). This is an interesting relationship because if the teacher doesn't understand what he/she is dealing with, he/she may not know when the student needs clarification or additional help.

Students may not want to express uncertainty for a variety of possible reasons, including language related vulnerability. The grammatical, pronunciation, vocabulary and presentation of complex ideas can be social risks for participation in class. Students will feel uneasy if they give the wrong answer or have a good idea which they cannot put into words in English. Concerns may be heightened if fluent responses in class are encouraged, if responses are required in class, or if students are expected to speak with confidence in class. Milligan, Desai and Benson (2022) explored students' experience of learning in an unfamiliar language of instruction in the context of English-medium secondary classrooms in Tanzania, and how fear and shame were present in their experiences. Their analysis points to the need to take into account the socio-emotional context as well as language concerns. But this is not the only reason for academic silence. Also, students' comfort with admitting confusion may be influenced by other factors such as teacher responses, peer relationships, class structure or how to build a response. Academic silence should thus be considered a context-specific event that is produced by the combination of concerns and classroom context.

These are issues that are related closely to belonging in the classroom and academic identity. Belonging relates to students' feeling of being accepted, recognised and included into an educational environment. Students may add their own meaning to the academic content, as well as to the meaning of competence and legitimacy as part of their class in the English-medium classroom. The silence might be more appealing than expressing doubt if it is perceived as a risk to this identity to speak out publicly. Conversely, positive interactions can lead to students being made aware that there are issues, but not that it is their issue. These options should be taken with a grain of salt, because while silent may mean left out, it also may mean that they feel differently about belonging in various classroom settings. In this case, the emphasis is on analysing the interactions between perceived social acceptance, anticipated competence and opportunities for participation in students' decisions to speak or not.

The above processes are well served by an analytical framework, the unspoken curriculum. While formal learning expectations and explicit rules in the classroom may be the only ones that are not clear, they might also be a number of implicit expectations in everyday interactions. Feedback to errors, teacher attention, peer attention and how hesitant errors are handled can give clues as to whether uncertainty is accepted or rejected. Students might form assumptions that only certain people are recognized for their work, at which times questions are acceptable, and that it's not OK to be confused. These "unspoken" lessons can result in some students hiding the uncertainty even if it could help them learn. This unspoken curriculum is thus not seen as a set of empirical data, but rather a conceptual framework. It draws attention to the potential for unspoken norms in the classroom to affect participation and identity and belonging.

The emotional effects of learning in a non-native classroom language, being silent in class, and the anxiety with language acquisition are topics that were discussed in earlier studies, but deserve to be discussed in an integrated conceptual analysis. Specifically, attention needs to be paid to how miscommunication can be disguised, socially assessed, culturally predicted and felt as a student's sense of belonging in a classroom, which may be interrelated. In this study, the conceptual need is presented by examining these dimensions rather than the issue of silence as a problem of language learning and/or a problem of non-participation.

This study aims to gain insight into the learning of students who are trying to cover up confusion in English-medium classrooms and the potential to describe the concealment in terms of academic silence and classroom belonging. The objectives are to examine the language and social context of hidden confusion, talk about normalization of the hidden uncertainty and establish a literature-based awareness of the unspoken assumptions that may be found to be underlying the normalization of the hidden uncertainty. The research design used is a qualitative and interpretivist exploratory research, which uses a literature search, and only those materials that are relevant and credible are institutional publications. It is used to heighten awareness of "unspoken confusion", "academic silence", and "belonging together" in a connected manner and to uncover implications of linguistically inclusive teaching, supportive teacher–student relationships, and nonjudgemental opportunities to seek clarification. Educators' responses to uncertainty might include helping to establish the classroom as one in which it is OK to be uncertain, which could support the development of English-medium classrooms in which students do not feel the need to "hide" their struggles to learn English.

2. Literature Review

2.1. English-Medium Instruction and Linguistic Vulnerability

The use of English-medium instruction (EMI) has now grown in higher education and now involves contexts where learners are required to acquire content knowledge in English but are also required to meet extra linguistic challenges. The research shows that the factors that influence the results of EMI are: language skills, vocabulary, academic self-concept, and institutional support (Lei & He, 2023; Rose et al., 2026). The results belied the idea that EMI is disadvantageous to students as well as the idea that EMI guarantees better educational outcomes.

There is a need to be aware of this when a student is linguistically vulnerable and understands concepts of a discipline, but cannot articulate his/her understanding in English. Students might also suffer from difficulties in pronunciation, grammar, technical language and spontaneous speech that affect their skills in oral communication in public without necessarily affecting comprehension of the content. Ismailov et al. (2021) point out the linguistic, instructional, sociocultural, affective, and institutional problems of EMI pedagogy in which the students are the subject of the learning process. The difficulties and problems associated with the language must be seen from the point of view of their synthesis, so that language difficulties are not only classroom and school oriented, but are also affected by classroom interaction and institutional support. However, students' language vulnerability can differ in terms of their previous education, language background, disciplinary background, and classroom practices (Lei & He, 2023). The question is not whether or not students are always silent when they are learning in EMI, but how students' language need impacts students' willingness to express uncertainty.A case to be heard for academic silence, and hiding behind confusion.

Academic silence consists of the following behaviors: to avoid asking questions, to restrict the number of words being used by others to speak, to not ask for clarification, and not to bring up misunderstandings. The evidence that is relevant here comes primarily from Maher and King (2022) in their research on silence and speaking anxiety in the Japanese university English-medium classroom. Results indicate that silence could be associated with language skill anxiety, social performance anxiety and fear of negative appraisal. They also found that silence does not always indicate anxiety; that silence can be a cause of anxiety; and that the silences do not necessarily reflect "no language ability" as is commonly believed.

The lack of confusion should not be taken as an indication that there is no confusion. Students are allowed to take breaks to think, to process, to think about a question, to wait for turn taking, etc., or they can choose not to speak. Some may be able to comprehend the material but want to take part in other ways. It is, therefore, crucial to recognize silence as a communicative option as opposed to silence that denotes hiding confusion. If pupils deliberately not ask questions for fear of embarrassment or criticism, it may be that they are not showing off their learning needs in public. Maher and King (2022) remind us of the need to consider the cognition and social context of nonverbal engagement rather than just focus on verbal engagement.

This means that there is a conceptual dilemma in the literature; classrooms may be used to manage and foreground one's vulnerability yet at the same time de-center a difficult class experience. Although the language anxiety study can explain why students do not like to speak, it cannot account for the problem of how students learn that they should feel ashamed because of their confusion and solve it "under the table". This calls for consideration of: Classroom relationships, implicit expectations, and student-defined definitions of public participation.

2.2. Social Evaluation, Classroom Norms and Power Relations

Classroom communication is also shaped by language proficiency and by inter-personal relationships as well as expectations of appropriate student academic behavior. Peer evaluation is a source of anxiety when going through classroom silence as shown by Maher and King (2022). They argue that choice of participation should be related to students' sense of how their contribution

may be defined by others. When fluency is related to academic performance, fear of making grammatical mistakes, of providing incorrect answers and of speaking hesitantly can be particularly important in situations.

These circumstances in which teachers react and engage with students may also influence whether students are able to be uncertain. If mistakes are dealt with constructively, questions can be a proper integral part of learning. On the other hand, if interactions are seen as judgmental, it may deter students from asking questions. The possibilities should not be seen as "every student will" as students might have different experiences and expectations in their previous classrooms. However, they point out that the participation is partially relational but not wholly.

Power issues are significant because teachers often determine the nature of the discussion, give weight to the contributions made by others and have clear standards about what is acceptable and unacceptable for the other person to contribute. The reaction or response of the peer group can be confirming or challenging the expectations. The student can thus concentrate on being successful, instead of on communicating the learning disability. The teacher/learner and learner/learner interaction, and the pedagogical approach of learner-centredness are important components of the EMI experience as pointed out by Ismailov et al., (2021). This may, however, result in students concealing the confusion, thus requiring additional conceptual integration.There will be a focus on Classroom Belonging, Academic Identity and Psychological Safety.

The class room and why students might be confused and hide their confusion can also be understood from a classroom belonging perspective. It's about the students' sense of belonging, being recognised and being included in an education community. When the student feels respected, he/she may be more likely to say that he/she doesn't know. However, the anxiety of being ridiculed for being “not smart enough” and/or “not fluent enough” in the language can make participation feel risky. These possibilities are academic identity-related, as students aren't only studying the content of a discipline; they are also interacting with how they're being seen as they are (or are not) competent in that discipline.

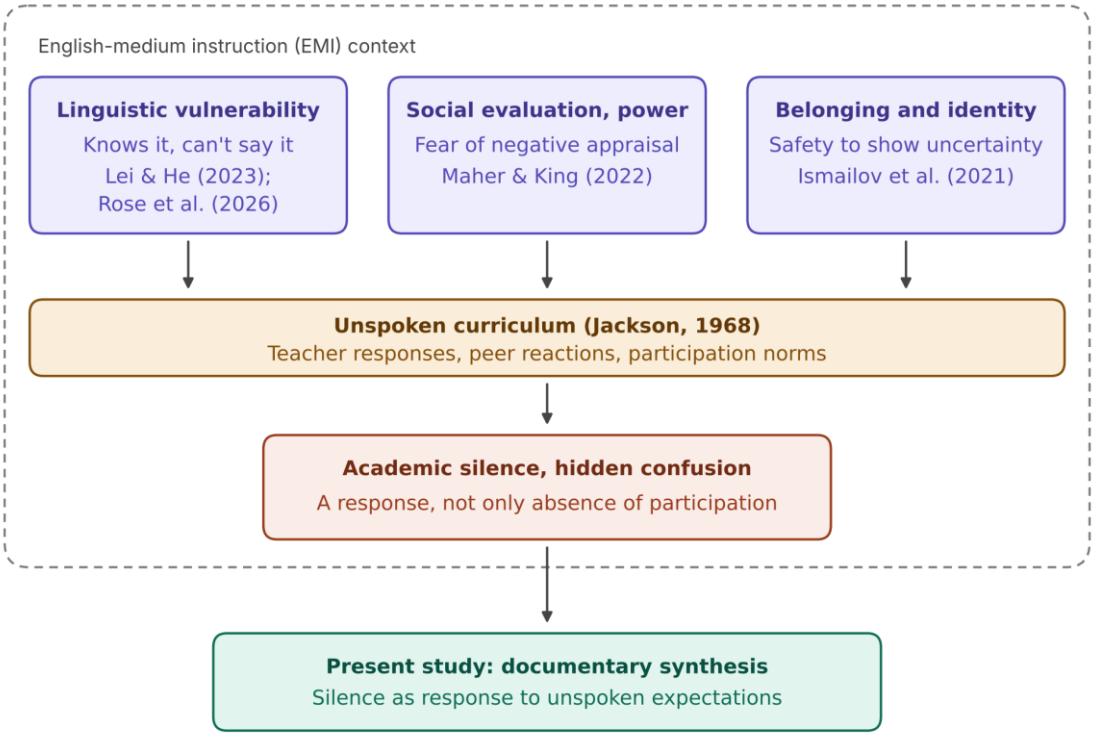
But there is a caveat with the relationship between "belonging" and "silence": Not having a student's voice doesn't mean a student is excluded, and a student might feel a sense of belonging even if he or she contributes little or infrequently. Psychological safety is not to be mistaken for belonging, which is the perception of belonging of an individual. A student may be admitted to the class but may not want to speak out against a teacher. In addition to the linguistic problems, Ismailov et al. (2021) demonstrate that EMI problems are affective, sociocultural, instructional and institutional. They can be synthesized to analyze classroom conditions along with any language-related problems. This relationship, belonging, psychological safety and hidden confusion though, has to be understood in more nuanced ways and not assumed in a blanket fashion because of context.Essential Information: The Unspoken Curriculum and the Research Gap is the first of two books.Essential Information: The Unspoken Curriculum and the Research Gap is the first book in two books.

The unspoken curriculum is an integrated collection of these strands seen in the literature and found in the unexplicit, unstated lessons that students are likely to be able to take from their day-to-day interactions. Jackson (1968) made it evident that it is important to consider lessons that are not explicit and formally stated in education. In the context of EMI, the idea proposes that teacher responses, peer reactions and participation expectations could convey to students the extent to which they are allowed to be uncertain and the type of academic work that is recognized. Students may think when the student is speaking fluently and confidently, he or she is legitimate and anything that the student hesitates and requests clarification may be interpreted as a threat to the student's image in the public eye. These interpretations are not guaranteed for all classrooms, but they are a concept that might be possible.

There are important connections that have been identified in literature pertaining to EMI-related challenges, speaking anxiety, and classroom interaction and students' learning experiences (Ismailov et al., 2021; Maher & King, 2022; Lei & He, 2023). They can be studied from various angles, however. Rose et al. (2026) offer a new systematic review on EMI in higher education, Maher and King (2022) shed light on the relationship between silence and anxiety and Ismailov et al. (2021) show the multidimensionality of EMI difficulties. The overall picture of these studies suggests that there is a need to take a more nuanced approach to the potential overlap between linguistic vulnerability, anticipated social judgment, undercurrent confusion and classroom belonging.

In this regard, the present research will try to fill this conceptual need through a descriptive, interpretative, exploratory and documentary analysis of secondary information. It is to reflect on academic silence not only as the absence of participation; it is to consider silence as a means to respond to unspoken expectations in the classroom; it is to recognize that there may be many reasons for silence. This perspective can help to foster a more inclusive classroom communication, supportive teacher–pupil relationships and support for pupils. It's also a chance to discuss how this uncertainty might become normal in the classroom and how students might seek to make sense of their thinking but then not feel they need to pretend not to have a problem.

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework of Academic Silence in English-Medium Instruction (EMI) Classrooms



Note. The relationships shown are contextual and interpretive, not causal. Source: Author's synthesis of the reviewed literature.

3. Research Methodology

3.1. This is a research level course on Philosophy and Design in Research

The study is of a qualitative nature because it aims at understanding the ways that students might learn to mask their uncertainty in the English-medium classroom and why. It is interpretivist since the subject matter of the research is interpreted in the study. It is exploratory because it uses exploratory methods of data collection to gain an understanding of the research topic. It is documentary research because the researcher uses documentation to collect data to get an understanding of the research object of study. An interpretivist approach is suitable because there is no universal meaning of silence and class participation, but rather it will depend on social relationships, educational contexts and how they interpret specific actions. The study does not necessarily conclude that there is disengagement when silence happens, but rather it considers the academic environment and the different possibilities of silence. The research does not include the collection of new data from students or teachers, it uses only secondary evidence.

The critical analysis of materials from published research, theoretical resources and institutional resources related to the research problem is permitted in the documentary design. According to Bowen (2009) document analysis is the systematic overview and interpretation of documents, with the aim of developing understanding and empirical knowledge. In this research study, the documentary analysis is employed in order to make comparison of the scholarly interpretations, discovering conceptual connections, and investigating the questions of hidden confusion and belonging in the classroom. This is not confirmatory but exploratory approach because it is intended to construct a coherent interpretation of the phenomenon without making any a priori assumptions. Not systematically reviewed or metanalyzed as there is no systematic review protocol or statistical synthesis claimed.

3.2. Sources of Evidence and Selection Criteria

The study is based on empirical studies with quantitative research methods, qualitative studies, scholarly review of literature, theoretical publication, academic books, and credible institutional reports that are peer-reviewed and published within the past two decades and that are relevant to the topic of EFL, classroom silence, language related anxiety, question-asking, academic identity, psychological safety and student belonging. Publications from 2020 – 2026 are given priority to show the current

scholarship, and publications published prior to 2020 that are foundational to the understanding of interpretivism, documentary analysis and thematic analysis are included where appropriate.

Sources are relevant if they answer the research questions, are scholarly, or provide a meaningful conceptual and/or contextual explanation of the phenomenon. Empirical studies are also drawn upon in terms of the methodological transparency and relevance of the educational context. The sources that are not verified, do not have a clear connection with the research problem or have unsupported assertions are not appropriate for the analytical discussion. The study is not exhaustive of all material available and reporting out specific databases, search dates, numbers screened and numbers selected would only be done if there are documented records of search and review.

3.3. Analytical Procedure

Qualitative thematic analysis based on Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework is used to analyse the documentary evidence. This approach helps identify and understand patterns of recurrent information in qualitative data and allows attention to be given to the differences in context and meaning. It is an analytical process which can be broken down into a number of ordered steps.

The publications are read and the key ideas, research context, and perspectives on the involvement in class are extracted. Second, concepts of linguistic vulnerability, hidden confusion, academic silence, social assessment, class norms and belonging are recognized. Thirdly, related concepts are clustered in provisional themes, based on the focus of the study in the process of research. Fourth, these themes are discussed again, in light of the source text; and there are contradictory understandings and differences in context pointed out. Finally, the themes are brought together into a conceptual understanding of how linguistic issues, anticipated social judgment and perceived belonging might come together. The unstated expectations of the classroom create a context for analysis of what is not said that can influence what students choose to do - say or not say - in the classroom.

This process eliminates what was discovered by previous studies and what interpretations have been gleaned from current documentary analysis. It does not imply that all sources are meaningful, or that a concept reiterated creates general relationships. The assumption of the coding frequencies in a statistical context, the application of coding procedures with software, coding procedures without any software support or formal saturation claims is assumed.

3.4. The text is accurate and the research is well-done

The methodological rigour is enhanced by explicit reference to sources, appropriate source attributions, consistency between research question and analytical themes and working through alternate interpretations. Lincoln and Guba (1985) list four criteria that they believe are significant for the assessment of qualitative inquiry: credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability. In this documentary study, credible sources will be identified by using relevant and verifiable scholarly evidence. Clear and consistent in interpretation of source materials that supports dependability. Confirmability requires that you be able to distinguish between what is expressed in the argument and your own thinking and that you don't make conclusions that are not supported by the argument's evidence. To think about transferability rather than assume it is transferable to all English-medium classrooms, the educational context and conceptual limits of the literature were taken into account.

Both comparison of what appears on one side and what appears on the other of such publications and the recognition of evidence that conflicts adds to the analysis. Such practices suggest caution and sensitivity in drawing conclusions, but are not an indication of formal audits or member checking or independent verification procedures.

3.5. The ethical issues and restrictions

Proper credit, fair interpretation, respect for intellectual property and plagiarism are main ethical issues in the study, since the study is not directly involving human subjects. All citations and bibliographic data must be checked with the original publications and any argument by the author must not be twisted to support the concept of the study. Here, ethics approval and/or exemption is not requested; if there is an institutional and/or journal requirement for ethics approval, this is requested separately.

However, there are some limitations of the study. The analysis it makes is based on the amount of published evidence, its quality, and its accessibility, which could be more easily available in some educational settings than in others. Comparisons between studies may be difficult because of varying conceptualization of academic silence, language anxiety, participants' sense of belonging, and participation. Literature may also also be biased towards published perspectives, referred to as publication bias. Furthermore, secondary evidence does not provide direct evidence of what the experiences and intentions of the individual students in a particular classroom were in a particular case, so this evidence is required to substantiate this. In this sense, this study's purpose will not be to make general causal statements, but rather, to interpret the possible linkages between linguistic vulnerability, academic silence, and belonging in the person's context. The restrictions present both the focus of the contribution and provide a methodological foundation for the analysis of the implicit curriculum in the teaching of English.



4. Findings and Discussion

Your section below must meet the requirements of the prompt: 1,100 words, exactly 5 analytical themes, an integrated finding/discussion/format and a qualitative documentary approach. The claims are not in the form of conclusions from interviews, observations or new data. The final themes should still be reviewed with the sources that you analyzed in your methodology.

4.1. Theme 1: While some of these are more subtle, others are more obvious

One theme that has been seen repeatedly in the literature on English-medium instruction (EMI) is that students' opportunities to show what they know and can do in a subject can become complicated by the language requirements of their knowledge and communication of the subject. The most important factors are English proficiency, vocabulary knowledge, academic self-concept and self-efficacy (Lei et al., 2023). The results presented here indicate that academic involvement can not be interpreted solely on the basis of student's content knowledge but that they must also be able to represent their content knowledge in the language of instruction.

But there is a fundamental difference between knowing the academic content and communicating in English. A student might be able to understand a concept, but not know what to ask, find the right words to describe the idea, or talk about something they don't know when they start. Those problems can make it seem like it's harder to reveal confusion than to not say anything.

The relevance of speaking-related anxiety for silence is shown by Maher and King (2022) who demonstrate how linguistic and interpersonal pressures can intersect in the classroom context of the university in the English medium.

Linguistic vulnerability, however, should not be taken for granted to be a universal characteristic of multilingual learners. Pupils' English is varied in terms of its use in different situations, across the individual subject areas, and across students, and pupils can also have a wide range of and depth of knowledge in other languages, alongside their good knowledge of English. The question to be discussed is not simply whether students are learning English, but whether or not they have opportunities to develop their increasing understandings in the face of their limited command of the language. An interpretivist viewpoint would suggest that students might be trying to cover up confusion by hiding it in order to keep a sense of balance between what they understand and what they think they are able to communicate. The evidence reviewed suggests that there is a need to examine this and not presume silence means lack of knowledge.

4.2. Theme 2: Fobia de Avaliação Negativa e Silêncio Social

Furthermore, the literature suggests that the interpretations of social consequences of speaking in a classroom could be linked to the academic silence. In English-medium secondary classrooms in Tanzania, students' experiences in class are seen as important dimensions of fear and shame by Adamson (2024). The study highlights that at times, students' English-speaking experiences are more threatening than others because of the informal rules of the classroom or expectations. This view goes beyond the explanations for silence arising from the individual language barrier to the interpersonal context in which participation takes place.

Similar interest is shown in the connection between speaking-related anxiety and silent behaviour in the Japanese university English-medium classroom by Maher and King (2022). These studies suggest that students' decisions to speak may involve thinking about what might happen if they were embarrassed, how others would react, or what they might look like if they were to speak. With a socially risky perception of public participation, it is possible for a person to remain silent and get some short-term protection from unwanted attention.

But, don't assume that silence means fear or avoidance. Students will be able to listen and think about complex information without speaking or will not be expected to speak in some of the classroom guidelines. He cautions us against assigning a single explanation to a behaviour that we observe, as is provided by these other explanations. Silence may have different meanings, depending on the situation, if there is a need to speak, and what the students may be thinking about when they do speak. The broader message is that not asking questions in the classroom may be a hiding of classroom identity; students may attempt to appear competent by avoiding questions that potentially could expose an ignorance or lack of knowledge. This is a context-dependent perspective, however, and is not something to be adopted by all silent students or all EMI classrooms.

4.3. Theme 3: Classroom Norms, Teacher Responses and the Unspoken Curriculum

Although these expectations may not be verbally expressed, they may be conveyed in the classroom through student interactions. Appreciation of how students learn from the tacit norms, rituals and social structures of schooling can draw inspiration from Jackson's (1968) seminal work on classroom life. The unspoken curriculum was adapted and applied with EMI to emphasize the more subtle aspects of the lessons learned by students regarding fluency, correctness, participation and the acceptability of errors.

If the hesitation seems to be linked to a fast response, to fluent English or to the ability to deliver a public speech with confidence, a student may think that hesitation equates with lack. Criticising, persistently urging or intervening in ways that are not welcome to correct a mistake is apparently incompatible with the norm of a competent learner to say that he or she doesn't understand. The analysis conducted by Adamson (2024) is also applicable because of the correlation between students' experiences of fear and shame, and informal classroom expectations that should be considered, as well as the consideration of language proficiency.

The lack of choice does not imply that the student is not participating in the EMI classroom. In their review of qualitative studies on Learner-Centred EMI Pedagogy, Ismailov et al. (2021) analyze the obstacles in the way of the implementation of approaches that are teacher student-centred and address learners' needs. Their work provides for attention to instructional practices and classroom organization, but instead of EMI being experienced as a uniform experience. You can convey that uncertainty is part of studying by making requests for information, being corrected with respect and providing feedback that has an understanding focus.

The unspoken curriculum is not always negative and not the same in all educational settings. The significance of this is in the student's grasp of the repeated interactions. Questions can be formally encouraged and only those that are quick and fluent are rewarded in an informal manner. It's crucial to understand this difference, because it's important to realise that it is not that everyone is silent, but that it is accepted. The analytical contribution is to become attuned to the fact that students may learn

in the classroom what it means to say some things, to be silent about some things, and to find some uncertainties acceptable in the context of the everyday events in the classroom.

4.4. Theme 4: Academic silence, identity and classroom belonging

In addition, by remaining silent in the classroom, students also raise some concerns regarding their roles in the classroom community. Belonging is about the sense of being accepted, recognised and legitimate in the educational context. Language self-confidence can be a factor that influences the participation of the person; however, lack of participation does not automatically imply lack of inclusion or exclusion. The shy student may feel like he or she is accepted in so far as the social aspect is concerned, and the expressive student may feel insecure in their language skills and/or academic ability.

The literature on EMI suggests the potential for language-related and psychosocial aspects being intermingled. Academic self-concept and academic self-efficacy are identified by Lei et al. (2023) as factors related to academic success, as are language-related factors. In addition, Maher and King (2022) show how silence can relate to speaking-related anxiety in the classroom. The findings offer some basis for discussing participation as more than just an indicator of knowledge – there may be an element of students' expectations of how well they will communicate, and what others will say to them, in their willingness to talk.

One possible conflict becomes apparent when students are required to go between the need for help and the need to "defend" their "academic identity." When asking questions, one gets to know, but if they think they are displaying their weakness, then it is possible that they are thinking that it is different. This reading can be misleading, causing teachers to overlook some of the learning needs of their students when they do not see them in action if they are unsure in their minds but are certain in their bodies.

The relationship of silence to belonging, however, is not a causal sequence that can be suggested. The current research does suggest that investigation of the relationship between anxiety, classroom relationships and participation is warranted, but does not warrant the assumption that all instances of silence result in a decrease in belonging. It can be either the way: students' experiences in the classroom can impact on how they perceive it; students' perceptions can impact on their future involvement. This view brings up the concept of belonging as a contextual and relational construct, not a personal characteristic that can be automatically assumed from the extent to which students use speech.

4.5. Theme 5: To English Media Classes in 6. Towards LICP

According to the reviewed literature, the surrounding of confusion may be explained as a dynamic process of the language demands, social evaluations that are expected, the expectations of the class and the students' sense of belonging. There cannot be only one reason for the lack of words. Rather, the silent can have a variety of meanings for various students in terms of their communicative ability, interpersonal climate, and organization of participation in teaching.

This version is practically applicable for school or educational institutions. First, teachers can make opportunities for clarification more explicit, and can provide the processing time that needs to be given before asking for public responses. Second, that being uncertain may be OK in the academic enterprise may be assisted by feedback and positive remarks about errors. Third, opportunities to have multiple participation structures, including questions written in the book, opportunities for small group discussion, and opportunities for clarification as an individual, can create multiple opportunities for students to express increasing understanding. The present documentary synthesis can not prove the effectiveness of these approaches, they are plausible answers to the challenges presented in the literature.

Second, the assumption that a well-spoken student knows what he's doing or that a student who is silent is not engaged is wrong. Knowing what multilingual students know and understand in their own languages can reduce the risk of the achievement of English being interpreted as the achievement of overall academic ability. These changes must be tailored to the discipline, needs of the students and classroom environment.

The key feature of this analysis is the recognition of academic silence as a potential major response to language, interpersonal and institutional contexts and not merely as a failed behavior. When expectations are not explicitly communicated, Unspoken Curriculum can be used to help understand the expectations, what is expected to be disclosed and what is not. The present study is however, a secondary study that is interpretive and has its limitations, as does the literature analyzed. Further research in the various EMI contexts would enable a clearer understanding of students' feelings of silence, confusion and sense of belonging in various classroom contexts.

Table 1: Thematic synthesis of documentary findings on academic silence in English-medium instruction (EMI) classrooms

No.	Theme	Central analytical claim	Key sources	Interpretive caution (as stated in your section)	Implication
1	Language demands and the visibility of understanding	Showing subject knowledge depends on being able to express it in English. Proficiency, vocabulary, academic self-concept and self-efficacy shape whether confusion is voiced or hidden.	Lei et al. (2023); Maher & King (2022)	Linguistic vulnerability is not universal. Silence should not be read as lack of knowledge.	Assess understanding beyond spoken English output.
2	Fear of negative evaluation and social silence	Fear, shame and speaking-related anxiety make public participation socially risky, so silence offers short-term protection.	Adamson (2024); Maher & King (2022)	Silence does not always mean fear or avoidance. Students may be listening and thinking.	Treat silence as context-dependent, not as a single behaviour with a single cause.
3	Classroom norms, teacher responses and the unspoken curriculum	Tacit norms about fluency, correctness and acceptable errors teach students when to speak and when to stay silent. Unwelcome correction or reward for fast, fluent answers can make admitting confusion seem incompetent.	Jackson (1968); Adamson (2024); Ismailov et al. (2021)	The unspoken curriculum is not always negative and differs across settings.	Respectful correction and feedback that values understanding signal that uncertainty is part of learning.
4	Silence, identity and belonging	Students balance the need for help against protecting their academic identity. Language-related and psychosocial factors intersect in participation.	Lei et al. (2023); Maher & King (2022)	The link between silence and belonging is not causal. Belonging is contextual and relational.	Teachers may miss learning needs when outward confidence masks inner uncertainty.
5	Integrated synthesis and pedagogical implications	Silence is a dynamic response to language demands, social evaluation, classroom expectations and belonging, with different meanings for different students.	All sources above	The study is a secondary, interpretive documentary synthesis. It cannot prove the effectiveness of the suggested practices.	Make clarification opportunities explicit, allow processing time, normalise uncertainty, and offer varied participation structures (written, small-group, individual). Further research in varied EMI contexts is needed.

Source: Author's documentary analysis of the reviewed literature.

5. Recommendations

Based on the findings of this qualitative documentary study it is recommended that the problem of hiding confusion in EMI should be solved in conjunction with other factors, such as language support, classroom communication, participation in the classroom, student belonging, and institutional expectations. The recommendations have been based upon literature search and can be adjusted in different educational, linguistic and cultural contexts.

5.1. Supportive and Language Inclusive teaching (SLL)

The teacher should recognize that students' comprehension of academic content is separate from the way they are able to fluently communicate that comprehension in written English. Any misinterpreted jargon, complicated procedures, and the time necessary to comment on a question should be made easy for students to comprehend. This is in line with the research findings of EMI pedagogy which is based on the fact that the instructional practices should consider students' linguistic competence and their academic needs (Ismailov et al., 2021). Teachers should also be promoting asking questions for clarification and encourage asking for explanation to be in the learning process rather than a lack of ability.

5.2. Create a mindset for a safe communication environment in the classroom

Teachers need to develop positive communication that allows for errors to be discussed in a positive manner and for students to show they don't know something even if they feel embarrassed. The aim of corrective feedback is to further enhance understanding and expression, and not to embarrass the learner and/or challenge his competence. Teachers should consider cues they might provide to students when they hesitate, when making mistakes, and when asking questions as speaking-related anxiety has been found to be correlated with the phenomenon of silence in EMI classrooms (Maher & King, 2022). The practices are logical extensions of the above reviewed literature; but they have to be tested in other situations.

5.3. Inclusive Participation Practices

Multiple opportunities for student communication of understanding and need for help should be provided by the teacher. If it's not easy to speak publicly, individual reflection, written questions, group discussion and anonymous clarification might be alternative ways for students to express doubts. Avoid assuming that the topic is understood and that there is involvement because of the swiftness of the responses or the fluency of the words. Instead, multiple opportunities to assess understanding must be provided and it is incorrect to assume lack of interest when no response is given. They should be adaptable and realize that a student's involvement in the activity might vary from one to another, and that this will not only be because of anxiety or language barriers, but because of other factors.

5.4. The school's sense of belonging and teacher awareness

Instructors must pay attention to the nature of classroom relationships, participation norms, conceptions of academic ability and its potential effect on students' requests for assistance. In inclusive interactions, awareness of and sensitivity to linguistic diversity is important as is not taking linguistic accent, grammar or hesitation as indicators of intellectual capacity. Teachers should also be aware that pupils might be having difficulties without showing it to others. However, silence doesn't mean that they are being excluded – teachers are supposed to hear what a student needs, and communicate with them in a context and respectful way.

5.5. Provide institutional support and professional development.

Educational institutions should provide professional development for inclusive EMI pedagogy, constructive feedback, classroom discourse, linguistic diversity and belonging. Institutional assessments of teaching and learning practices should consider whether there are unanticipated difficulties in the use of language due to expectations with regard to proficiency, speed or correctness. Also, reflective learning and teaching to recognise barriers to participation, but don't assume what will work in all classrooms, is supported by departments.

5.6. Future Research

Context sensitive qualitative research of student and teacher conceptions of academic silence at different levels of education, within different discipline contexts, and within different language contexts is needed in the future. Interviews, classroom observations, and other appropriate primary data techniques may investigate if the interpretations found in the documentary analysis are the same as the experiences in specific contexts. These would also contribute to the recommendations and further the understanding of the link between linguistic vulnerability, expectations in the classroom and sense of belonging.

6. Conclusion

This study examined the potential mechanisms of students' strategies of 'outing' their confusion in the classroom during English language teaching and the classroom belonging phenomenon as an explanation for such a phenomenon. The study was conducted through qualitative documentary analysis and previous scholarly research and was also aimed at silence as a phenomenon that is linked to context, rather than a mere reflection of issues of disengagement or lack of knowledge. Be aware of the fact that there may be unobserved confusion – what students do show with their outward actions may not be what they are understanding, how they are understanding it, or how likely they are to seek academic assistance.

Analysis of these data resulted in five themes that were linked: linguistic vulnerability, negative evaluation, classroom norms and teacher responses, academic identity, belonging, and the importance of linguistically inclusive, psychologically safe learning environments. The analyses of these texts suggest that the decision to speak versus not speak is a potential outcome of a combination of language related factors, social evaluation factors, instructional factors, and cognitive self-efficacy beliefs. Students' uncertainty or mistakes in their ideas in English may have a great impact, if they feel embarrassed to express their ideas because of the uncertainty or mistake. These perceptions are reinforced or refuted in the classroom and could be incorporated into classroom practice or not.

The central scholarly discovery and piece of the literature that it has developed is that of the unspoken curriculum as a useful concept to explore how students may be learning implicit messages regarding appropriate participation, language, and uncertainty with the public. Questions and discussion may be promoted in the formal classroom, but not in the "natural".The messages about the risks of failure and/or confusion may differ in the "natural" environment and in the formal classroom. There is not only one universal definition of silence. It may be due to anxiety, thinking about things, language difficulties, traditional classroom culture, or other situational issues. Therefore, the absence of words should not be taken as a sign of low ability, low motivation or low feeling of belonging. It may be educational or non-educative depending on the situation that it occurs in and its implication.

Hence, this information is applicable for educators and institutions. Teachers can accept that not everything will be known verbally and that it is okay to be wrong, and allow for questions that need to be clarified, even if they are incorrect; answer the questions well even when they are incorrect; allow processing time. Various forms of participation may allow the learner to voice a state of uncertainty within a way that aligns with his or her linguistic skills and preference. Support for professional development on inclusive EMI pedagogy, inclusive classroom communication and student belonging should also be supported in institutions. These recommendations are not based on what has been proven to work in practice through this empirical study, but on the documentary analysis.

This study is limited to those results that were obtained from a documentary study. It is based on the quality, quantity and diversity of published evidence that is available. Limited transferability is additionally due to the different levels of education, cultural expectations, disciplinary practices, and institutional conditions. Additionally, secondary evidence will not show that individual students intended to use the product or that individual students had experienced the product. Future qualitative studies need to further investigate the meanings of silence, confusion and belonging in different EMI contexts, which should be gained through interviews, classroom observations and other suitable primary data collection techniques, if possible.

But the discussion of inclusive English-medium education should not only focus on what students say, but also on the conditions of the classroom where they could feel comfortable expressing confusion; and the conditions of the classroom where they could feel confident that they are a competent learner.

References

Allen, K.-A., Slaten, C. D., Hong, S., Lan, M., Craig, H., May, F., & Counted, V. (2024). Belonging in higher education: A twenty year systematic review. Journal of University Teaching and Learning Practice. https://doi.org/10.53761/s2he6n66

Amundrud, T. (2011). On observing student silence. Qualitative Inquiry, 17(4), 334–342. https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800411401190

Apple, M. W. (2004). Ideology and curriculum (3rd ed.). Routledge.

Bowen, G. A. (2009). Document analysis as a qualitative research method. Qualitative Research Journal, 9(2), 27–40. https://doi.org/10.3316/QRJ0902027

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. Qualitative Research in Psychology, 3(2), 77–101. https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp0630a

Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2018). Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches (4th ed.). SAGE Publications.

Dias-Broens, A. S., Meeuwisse, M., & Severiens, S. E. (2024). The definition and measurement of sense of belonging in higher education: A systematic literature review with a special focus on students' ethnicity and generation status in higher education. Educational Research Review, 45, Article 100622. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.edurev.2024.100622

Dörnyei, Z. (2005). The psychology of the language learner: Individual differences in second language acquisition. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Fredricks, J. A., Blumenfeld, P. C., & Paris, A. H. (2004). School engagement: Potential of the concept, state of the evidence. Review of Educational Research, 74(1), 59–109. https://doi.org/10.3102/00346543074001059

Goodenow, C. (1993). The psychological sense of school membership among adolescents: Scale development and educational correlates. Psychology in the Schools, 30(1), 79–90. https://doi.org/10.1002/1520-6807(199301)30:1%3C79::AID-PITS2310300113%3E3.0.CO;2-X

Horwitz, E. K., Horwitz, M. B., & Cope, J. (1986). Foreign language classroom anxiety. The Modern Language Journal, 70(2), 125–132. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4781.1986.tb05256.x

Ismailov, M., Chiu, T. K. F., Dearden, J., Yamamoto, Y., & Djalilova, N. (2021). Challenges to internationalisation of university programmes: A systematic thematic synthesis of qualitative research on learner-centred English medium instruction (EMI) pedagogy. Sustainability, 13(22), Article 12642. https://doi.org/10.3390/su132212642

Jackson, P. W. (1968). Life in classrooms. Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

Kahu, E. R. (2013). Framing student engagement in higher education. Studies in Higher Education, 38(5), 758–773. https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2011.598505

King, J., Yashima, T., Humphries, S., Aubrey, S., & Ikeda, M. (2020). Silence and anxiety in the English-medium classroom of Japanese universities: A longitudinal intervention study. In J. King & S. Harumi (Eds.), East Asian perspectives on silence in English language education (pp. 60–79). Multilingual Matters. https://doi.org/10.21832/9781788926775-009

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

Krashen, S. D. (1982). Principles and practice in second language acquisition. Pergamon Press.

Lei, F., He, L., & Yiganmu, A. (2023). Determinants of students' academic success in English as a medium of instruction (EMI) classes: A systematic review. Heliyon, 9(10), Article e20421. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2023.e20421

Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). Naturalistic inquiry. SAGE Publications.

Macaro, E., Curle, S., Pun, J., An, J., & Dearden, J. (2018). A systematic review of English medium instruction in higher education. Language Teaching, 51(1), 36–76. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261444817000350

MacIntyre, P. D., Clément, R., Dörnyei, Z., & Noels, K. A. (1998). Conceptualizing willingness to communicate in a second language: 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., & King, J. (2022). "The silence kills me": "Silence" as a trigger of speaking-related anxiety in the English-medium classroom. English Teaching & Learning, 46, 213–234. https://doi.org/10.1007/s42321-022-00119-4

Mercer, S., & Dörnyei, Z. (2020). Engaging language learners in contemporary classrooms. Cambridge University Press.

Nyborg, G. (2022). Teachers' strategies for enhancing shy children's oral participation. International Journal of Inclusive Education, 26(5), 471–486. https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2020.1711538

Perkasa, A. B., Savitri, D., & Yogyantoro, Y. (2022). Anxiety-related silence in speaking among Indonesian EFL junior high school students. Ahmad Dahlan Journal of English Studies, 9(2). https://doi.org/10.26555/adjes.v9i2.145

Rose, H., Sahan, K., Wei, M., Aizawa, I., Zhou, S., & Shepard, C. (2026). A systematic review of English medium instruction in higher education: An update of Macaro et al. (2018). System, 136, Article 103892. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.system.2025.103892

Strayhorn, T. L. (2012). College students' sense of belonging: A key to educational success for all students. Routledge.

Tinto, V. (2017). Through the eyes of students. Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice, 19(3), 254–269. https://doi.org/10.1177/1521025115621917

Hongboontri, C., Wittaya, I., & Boonyaprakob, K. (2021). Silence in an EFL classroom: The interplay of Schwab's four commonplaces. Suranaree Journal of Social Science, 15(1). https://doi.org/10.55766/BHCD3404