

## Strategy for negotiating engagement: Chinese international students' silence in multicultural group work at a UK university

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### Research Domains

Learning, teaching and assessment (LTA)

### Abstract

Chinese international students' (CISs') prevailing silence in multicultural group work (MGW) in UK higher education has been widely reported, and problematised, as academic deficits hindering intercultural learning. Taking an inclusive stance of silence, this research re-evaluated the dichotomy between talk and silence and acknowledged their potential equal contribution to knowledge generation. Through a semi-structured interview informed by Foucault's work on power, data from 16 CISs revealed their conceptualization of silence as the retention of ideas instead of the absence of speech. Seeking more productive speaking within reasonable bounds, participants employed silence as a strategy for negotiating their engagement in MGW, which prioritised pragmatism, respect and protection, and the pursuit of convincing opinions over sole truths. Embodying the fluid-construct nature of CISs' silence, this research expands beyond the dominant interpretation narrowing in culture and language, emphasizes the need for context-driven investigation, and calls for integrating silence into pedagogical considerations.

### Full paper

Multicultural group work (MGW) in higher education settings can be defined as a collaboration of two or more individuals from different cultural backgrounds who are assigned interdependent tasks and jointly responsible for the final results (Behfar et al., 2006). As the main way to get students from diverse backgrounds to work alongside each other (Wang et al., 2012) and create authentic intercultural encounters (De Vita, 2007), it is perceived as the ideal vehicle to foster intercultural learning (ibid). However, such benefits do not automatically result from students' diverse cultural composition (Yu & Moskal, 2019) and are 'still very much that, an ideal' (De Vita, 2007: 165). The unsatisfactory group working experience between domestic and international students is continually reported in relevant empirical studies (Sawir, 2013), especially the lack of intercultural interaction and the interactions at a very superficial degree (Huang, 2022).

CISs' prevailing silence has frequently been identified as one of the several top obstacles in fostering intercultural learning (Volet & Ang, 2012). Since the Western orientation values talking much more than listening and tightly connects talking to thinking, CISs' silence is often assumed equal to disengagement

(Kim et al., 2016) and CISs are frequently depicted as passive, uncritical, and rote learners, where the Confucian culture and poor English proficiency were the main attributions (Shao & Gao, 2016). However, the interpretation of CISs' silence tends to be more controversial. Some critiqued that there is no guarantee that Confucian value still affects contemporary CISs studying in Western contexts in the same traditional manner and CISs' linguistic proficiency is not always poor or static (Ha & Li, 2014). Some highlight that neither talking nor silence is a proxy of engagement or disengagement (ibid) and CISs' silence can also mean engagement in thought sometimes (Mclean & Ranson, 2005) but more empirical evidence supporting these arguments is required (Bao 2020).

This research aims to better understand CISs' silence in multicultural group work so as to offer suggestions for further pedagogical practice. Following Foucault's (1978: 101) perception that 'silence as a shelter for power' which can be exercised by and forced upon people, this research focused on two research questions:

1. How do Chinese international students make sense of their silence in multicultural group work?
2. How is Chinese international students' silence practised in multicultural group work?

To answer these, qualitative multiple case studies were conducted in two MA course about International Education at a UK university aiming for a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the research phenomenon by a careful comparison of the two cases. Both courses included a summative collaborative group assignment while showing visible differences in task load, group sizes, group formation, and working duration. Qualitative individual semi-structured interviews with 16 CISs were conducted after their submission of the group assignments. Taking individual CISs' silent practice as the unit of analysis, reflexive thematic analysis was adopted for the data analysis.

The study yielded two main findings:

All participants had a critical view of speech and silence. Pursuing mutually beneficial ideas exchanges among group peers, participants desired to make more productive speaking, including the most important academic speaking and a small proportion of appropriate social speaking, where irrelevant statements to group work should be largely reduced. Instead of characterizing their general state of engaging in group work, silence was perceived as a relatively brief behaviour or moment in specific situations during their group work. This could be seen from participants' frequent descriptions of 'I kept silent at that time' and 'I had several silent moments' instead of 'I was silent'.

Based on the critical view, the retention of ideas during group communication was conceptualised as silence by participants, which was employed as a strategy for negotiating their engagement in MGW, more specifically, for pragmatism, for manifesting respect and protection, and for pursuing convincing opinions over sole truths. Notably, English was frequently reported by participants as an obstacle since it

reduced communicative efficiency. Instead of triggering silence, it drew more academic speaking to illustrate.

By shedding light on these findings, the deficit view that CISs' are inherently silent with less engagement in MGW is pushed against. Instead, they are good at adjusting their way of engagement in MGW and desire productive communication for mutually beneficial ideas exchange, where irrelevant, meaningless, and less efficient communication is illegitimate and should be reduced. The implication provides pedagogical consideration for the group task design to motivate collaboration requiring students to jointly engage with the substance of the task. Additionally, the assessment methods should consider both the group work process and the result.

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