



The Resilience of 'Silent' Students: Re-evaluating Introversion as a Strategic Competence in EFL Learning

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Abstract

EFL classrooms have long treated verbal participation as the primary evidence of language learning, a conflation that places introverted students at a structural disadvantage before any instruction begins. This study examines what those students are actually doing during the silences teachers routinely read as disengagement. Twelve introverted tertiary EFL students in South Sumatra, Indonesia, participated in in-depth phenomenological interviews and Stimulated Recall Interviews (SRI) conducted against video footage of their own EFL classes. Inductive thematic analysis of the resulting data identified three superordinate themes: internal language processing, metacognitive monitoring, and learner resilience. Students were engaging in silent rehearsal, mental grammar mapping, self-monitoring, and hypothesis testing, cognitive work that left no audible trace in the classroom. Their resilience took the form of compensatory strategies and self-directed learning routines that were deliberately constructed outside class hours. These findings reposition silence as a metacognitive choice rather than an affective deficit, and introversion as a form of strategic competence that standard oral assessment rubrics cannot detect. EFL teachers need assessment and participation structures that register the range of ways learners actually engage with a language.

Keywords: introversion; strategic competence; silence; EFL pedagogy; hermeneutic phenomenology; learner resilience

INTRODUCTION

The communicative language teaching (CLT) paradigm, which has shaped EFL pedagogy for over four decades, rests on a premise that verbal participation is the primary channel through which language learning becomes visible (Hymes, 1972; Canale & Swain, 1980). Teachers reward talkative students. Silence reads as evidence of anxiety, ignorance, or disengagement. Introverted learners, who account for an estimated 30–50% of any given student cohort (Cain, 2012), bear the institutional cost of that premise.

The problem runs deeper than unequal reward distribution. When teachers treat output quantity as a proxy for learning depth, they apply an extrovert-normative metric to a heterogeneous group. Krashen's (1982) affective filter hypothesis offered a

partial corrective by acknowledging that anxiety inhibits acquisition, but it left the deficit framing intact: silence remained a symptom to overcome rather than a phenomenon to understand.

Cain (2012) argues that introversion carries distinct cognitive advantages, among them depth of processing, sensitivity to environmental stimuli, and a preference for preparation over improvisation. Dewaele and Petrides (2011) show that extroversion does not predict foreign language achievement in any stable way, which complicates the widespread assumption that verbal fluency signals linguistic competence. Research on learner autonomy (Benson, 2011) and self-regulated learning (Zimmerman, 2000) has begun to map the internal strategies quieter learners deploy, but phenomenological accounts of what

actually happens inside those moments of classroom silence remain scarce.

Most studies treat introversion as an independent variable and measure its effect on test scores or oral production frequency. The experiential dimension, what introverted learners are cognitively doing during silence, has not been examined in any sustained way. This study addresses that gap through hermeneutic phenomenological inquiry.

Silence in Language Learning: From Deficit to Strategy

Early SLA scholarship treated silence as a diagnostic marker. Krashen's (1982) monitor model positioned the silent period as a transitional phase, necessary but preliminary to real acquisition. Tsui (1996) challenged that reading by identifying teacher-fronted interaction structures as the primary driver of learner reticence, a finding that shifted blame from the learner's psychology to the classroom's design. Liu and Jackson (2008), working with 547 Chinese EFL students, found that reticence correlated more strongly with fear of negative evaluation and lack of preparation than with introversion, which further complicates any direct personality-to-silence mapping.

Nakane (2007) showed that silence in East Asian educational settings carries specific communicative functions, agreement, deference, sustained reflection, that Western pedagogical frameworks misread as absence of engagement. King's (2013) discourse analysis of Japanese EFL classrooms reached a similar conclusion: silence there often signals interactional competence, not its absence.

Taken together, these studies establish that silence is not a unitary phenomenon. The productive research question is not why certain students are silent but what cognitive and social work silence accomplishes.

Introversion, Personality, and Language Learning

Jung (1923) theorised the introversion-extroversion dimension; subsequent operationalisation in instruments such as the Eysenck Personality Questionnaire (EPQ) and the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator

(MBTI) generated decades of SLA research with inconsistent findings. Rossier (1976) claimed extroversion advantages in oral fluency; Dewaele and Furnham (1999) and Dewaele and Petrides (2011) later showed those advantages to be context-dependent, task-specific, and often non-significant once anxiety is controlled for.

Cain (2012) reframes introversion as a distinct cognitive orientation rather than a personality deficit. Introverts process stimuli more deeply, prefer thorough preparation, and perform better on complex problem-solving tasks when given adequate reflection time. Those characteristics align with depth-of-processing accounts of memory (Craik & Lockhart, 1972) and with the elaborate rehearsal strategies that O'Malley and Chamot (1990) associate with durable language retention.

Learner Resilience and Strategic Competence

Educational resilience research has broadened from its clinical origins, focused on trauma and recovery, toward a model of positive adaptation in the face of institutional adversity (Luthar, 2006; Masten, 2014). In SLA, resilience has been examined in study abroad (Yashima et al., 2018) and heritage language contexts (Kagan & Dillon, 2012), but personality-based classroom adversity has received little attention.

Bachman's (1990) strategic competence offers the conceptual foothold this study requires. Understood broadly, strategic competence is the capacity to orchestrate whatever resources are available, including internal ones, to accomplish communicative or learning goals. Introverted learners' repertoire of internal processing strategies constitutes exactly this kind of competence. Current assessment frameworks do not recognise it because they cannot see it.

Research Objectives

1. To explore and deconstruct the meaning behind introverted EFL students' silent behaviour during classroom language learning.
2. To identify the internal cognitive and metacognitive strategies

introverted learners use during passive language processing.

3. To analyse forms of resilience introverted students deploy when facing extrovert-normative classroom pressures.
4. To formulate pedagogical recommendations for inclusive EFL classroom design.

Theoretical Framework

Three theoretical constructs orient the analysis. Bachman's (1990) strategic competence, the capacity to deploy cognitive resources to compensate for gaps in linguistic knowledge, is extended here to include internal, non-verbal processing. Dörnyei and Ryan's (2015) dynamic system theory of motivation provides a framework for tracing how introverted learners sustain language investment despite receiving almost no institutional recognition for their internal effort. Luthar's (2006) account of resilience as positive adaptation within contexts of adversity is applied to the specific adversity of extrovert-normative pedagogy.

METHOD

Research Design

The study uses a hermeneutic phenomenological design, following van Manen (1990). The choice of design reflects the study's aim: not to count or correlate introversion-related behaviours but to interpret the layers of meaning those behaviours carry within lived classroom experience. The hermeneutic dimension requires the researcher to hold the interpretive pre-understanding (Vorverständnis) they bring to the data in explicit critical tension with participants' own accounts, a demand that shaped both interview protocols and analytic procedures.

Participants and Sampling

Twelve participants were recruited through purposive sampling across two private universities in South Sumatra, Indonesia. Screening combined an adapted Eysenck Personality Questionnaire, Revised Short Form (EPQ-RS) with structured teacher nominations, selecting students who met three criteria simultaneously:

consistent identification as introverted by both validated instrument and classroom observation; minimal verbal participation in EFL classes; and demonstrated proficiency in written English with adequate academic performance. This triangulation was designed to isolate introversion-related silence from silence produced by low proficiency or situational anxiety, a distinction that earlier studies rarely made.

Participants were aged 19 to 23; eight identified as female and four as male. Institutional placement data placed their English proficiency at B1–B2 on the CEFR scale.

Data Collection

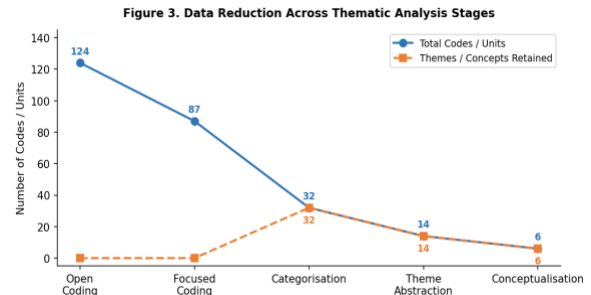
Each participant completed one in-depth semi-structured phenomenological interview lasting 60–90 minutes. Interview questions were designed to avoid deficit framing: rather than asking why participants did not speak, the researcher asked what they were doing or thinking during specific, remembered moments of classroom silence. Participants chose their preferred language (Indonesian, English, or a mix) to minimise the cognitive burden of reflection and to prevent the interview language itself from filtering responses.

Approximately one week after the initial interviews, each participant completed a Stimulated Recall Interview (SRI). Researchers had observed and recorded eight EFL class sessions across both universities, producing roughly 24 hours of footage. Selected excerpts, focusing on moments where participants appeared silent or disengaged, were played back to participants during the SRI. Playback was paused at specific moments and participants were asked to verbalise their retrospective thoughts. The SRI method anchored reflection in concrete interactional moments rather than general recall, generating data with considerably greater specificity than interview alone.

Data Analysis

All interviews were transcribed verbatim. Analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) inductive thematic analysis procedure, adapted for phenomenological data using Moustakas's (1994) guidance on horizontalisation and imaginative variation.

Five stages structured the process: initial open coding of all transcripts; focused coding to consolidate preliminary codes; categorisation into provisional themes; abstraction of higher-order conceptual clusters; and conceptualisation, mapping emergent themes to theoretical constructs. Four participants reviewed preliminary interpretations during a member-checking stage. A researcher reflexivity journal, maintained throughout the analysis, tracked how the analyst's own orientations were shaping interpretive choices.



RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Interview and SRI data produced three superordinate themes, each containing multiple sub-themes. Table 1 presents the themes alongside representative participant excerpts and reference frequencies across the twelve participants.

Table 1. Thematic Overview: Cognitive Strategies and Resilience Mechanisms Reported by Introverted EFL Students

Theme	Sub-theme	Representative Excerpt	Frequency
Internal Processing	Silent Rehearsal	"I repeat the sentence in my head until it feels right before I say it, but by then the moment has passed."	18/12
Internal Processing	Mental Mapping Grammar	"I draw a grammar chart in my mind. I need that before speaking."	15/12
Metacognitive Monitoring	Self-Monitoring	"I notice when I make errors internally. I fix them before they come out."	17/12
Metacognitive Monitoring	Hypothesis Testing	"I test whether my English sentence sounds native, silently."	13/12
Resilience Resistance	& Compensatory Strategy	"When the teacher asks me directly, I write my answer quickly so she can see I know."	11/12
Resilience Resistance	& Autonomous Learning	"After class I re-read everything, look up words, and practise alone. That is when I really learn."	14/12

Internal Language Processing as Strategic Competence

Silent rehearsal, the sub-vocal or mental repetition of target language forms before or instead of production, was the most frequently reported strategy across all twelve participants, appearing in 18 distinct SRI moments. Levelt (1989) identified a preverbal stage in speech production where speakers formulate and evaluate utterances before articulating them. For these students,

that preverbal stage was not preliminary to learning, it was the primary site of it.

Participant 3 (female, 21) made this concrete during SRI. Watching a video of herself sitting silently while a teacher waited for a response to a comprehension question, she recalled mentally drafting three alternative formulations, evaluating each against her grammar knowledge and register judgement, and deciding none cleared her threshold for readiness before a

classmate answered. Her silence lasted perhaps six seconds. The cognitive activity it contained was not.

Mental grammar mapping, building internal structural representations, quasi-syntactic schemas and rule chains, without consulting external resources, appeared in 15 instances across all twelve participants. Cognitive interactionist accounts of acquisition (VanPatten & Williams, 2015) emphasise the role of noticing and form-comparison in intake. These learners were noticing, comparing, and storing, without any audible signal of that process reaching the teacher.

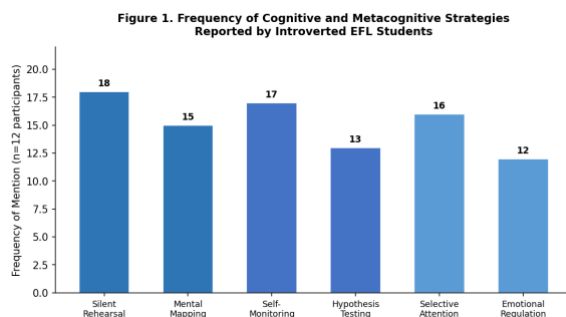


Figure 1 shows the full distribution. Self-monitoring (n=17) and silent rehearsal (n=18) led the group, corroborating Cain's (2012) account of introverted learners as depth processors and pointing toward the metacognitive sophistication that standard classroom observation misses.

Hypothesis testing, constructing novel target-language utterances and evaluating them against an internalised grammar model before any decision to produce, appeared in 13 references. Selinker (1972) positioned this process at the centre of interlanguage development. Long (1996) argued that negotiation of meaning in social interaction drives acquisition. These data complicate that argument: for twelve introverted learners in Indonesian EFL classrooms, the negotiation of meaning was internal, conducted between the learner and their own developing grammar system.

Resilience Manifestations: Adapting Without Surrendering

The second superordinate theme addresses resilience: how participants sustained language development and preserved their sense of competence inside

classrooms that systematically misread their participation style.

Figure 2. Distribution of Resilience Manifestation Categories Among Introverted EFL Students

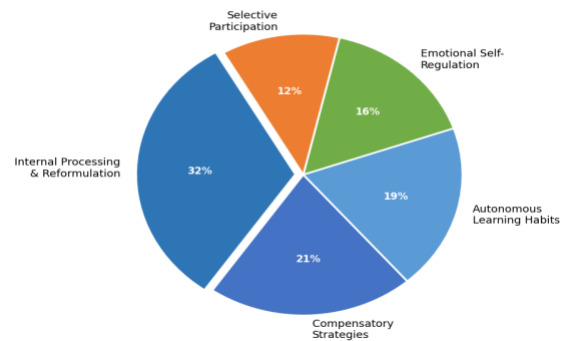


Figure 2 shows that internal processing and reformulation accounts for the largest share of resilience behaviour (32%), followed by compensatory strategies (21%) and autonomous learning habits (19%). Resilience for these participants operated in registers invisible to classroom observation. Standard protocols would record the absence of verbal participation; they would miss the cognitive architecture sustaining language development underneath.

Participant 7 (male, 22) handled oral tasks by submitting written addenda, notes passed to the teacher or recorded in his workbook, as a parallel channel for demonstrating knowledge. Participant 11 (female, 20) identified preparatory tasks, writing on the board, summarising a text before group discussion, as structured opportunities for planned verbal contribution and sought them deliberately. Dörnyei and Ushioda (2011) call this kind of move 'agency-within-constraint': purposive action that works through rather than against institutional structures.

All twelve participants reported systematic out-of-class learning habits and described them with noticeably stronger affect than anything connected to classroom instruction. Participant 5 (female, 23) said she learned English almost entirely outside class and treated the classroom primarily as a space for monitoring her progress. Teachers who view the classroom as the principal site of acquisition will systematically underestimate what this

student, and others like her, are doing with the language.

Emotional Regulation and Identity Negotiation

A third theme, more affectively charged, concerned the tension between institutional expectations of verbal participation and participants' own sense of competent selfhood. Six participants described feeling misread or underestimated by teachers. Four reported instances of direct negative feedback for silence that they experienced as a misattribution of incompetence, a mismatch between how their teachers read them and what they knew themselves to be capable of.

Emotional regulation strategies were consistent across the group. Participants reframed classroom silence through cognitive reappraisal (Gross, 2002), invested selectively in tasks that matched their processing preferences, and built alternative competence narratives grounded in written achievement and autonomous learning progress. Luthar (2006) identifies meaning-

making as a core mechanism of resilience; these students were making meaning of their classroom experience in ways that insulated their language investment from the damage of institutional misreading.

None of the twelve described silence as stemming from low investment in English. Several characterised their commitment to the language as a long-term project extending well beyond course requirements. Dörnyei and Ryan (2015) associate this kind of sustained investment with a strong ideal L2 self, a motivational orientation associated with high long-term attainment. Teachers in these classrooms were not seeing a motivational deficit. They were seeing a participation style they lacked the tools to interpret.

Reconceptualising the Extrovert Norm: A Comparative Synthesis

Table 2 draws together what the findings require of EFL pedagogy by mapping extrovert-centric assumptions against the reconceptualised understanding this study supports.

Table 2. Comparative Analysis: Extrovert-Centric Assumptions vs. Re-evaluated Strategic Competence of Introverted EFL Learners

Dimension	Extrovert-Centric Assumption	Re-evaluated Competence	Strategic
Participation	Silence = disengagement	Silence = deep processing and rehearsal	
Language Output	Oral output = proficiency marker	Internal output precedes external production	
Error Avoidance	Passive learner avoids risk	Metacognitive filtering reduces fossilisation	
Motivation	Low affect = low investment	High investment through autonomous learning	
Classroom Role	Peripheral / marginalised	Alternative but valid epistemic agency	

The third column carries the core empirical claim. If silence indexes internal output rather than absence of processing, if error avoidance reflects metacognitive filtering rather than passivity, and if low verbal participation coexists with high affective investment, then oral participation rubrics calibrated to extrovert-normative performance standards are measuring the wrong thing. They record display of learning, not learning itself.

Pedagogical Implications

Four recommendations follow from the findings. First, teachers should create multiple participation channels, written, digital, pre-prepared oral, alongside spontaneous verbal exchange, so that assessment surfaces cognitive work regardless of the medium through which it is expressed. Second, speaking assessment should separate participation quantity from quality; a written metalinguistic reflection

can be a more informative index of strategic competence than an unsolicited classroom turn. Third, teacher training programmes need observation protocols capable of registering internal engagement, through process journals, think-pair-write tasks, or portfolio-based assessment that captures the learner across time. Fourth, CLT methodology needs to examine the extroversion ideology embedded in its participation norms and recognise it as a culturally and psychologically situated preference, not a universal benchmark of learning readiness.

CONCLUSION

Twelve introverted EFL students in South Sumatra sat through their classes in apparent silence. Inside that silence, they were running mental grammar schemas, rehearsing three versions of a sentence, monitoring their own interlanguage, and testing hypotheses against internalised target norms. After class, they rebuilt what the lesson had touched through systematic autonomous practice. Their teachers read disengagement. The data show something quite different.

Silence in these classrooms was a metacognitive strategy. Introversion was a cognitive orientation that generated depth of processing, not a personality liability that warranted remediation. The institutional failure in these classrooms was perceptual: assessment rubrics and participation norms calibrated to extrovert-normative performance rendered an entire stratum of learning invisible.

EFL pedagogy will continue to disadvantage introverted learners as long as oral participation frequency serves as a proxy for language competence. Redesigning participation structures and assessment instruments to register the range of ways learners actually engage with a language is not an accommodation for a minority; it is a condition of validity for any claim about what students know.

Two limitations bear noting. The study is geographically bounded by two Indonesian universities, and the data rest on retrospective verbal accounts of cognitive

processes that are not directly observable. Future research should examine whether these patterns hold across cultural and institutional settings, and whether longitudinal tracking of introverted learners reveals cumulative effects on long-term attainment.

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