

Silence as a Discursive Strategy in Educational English Conversations: A Pragmatic Perspective

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates silence as a discursive strategy in educational English conversations from a pragmatic, Conversation Analysis (CA) perspective. Drawing on 15 hours of naturally occurring classroom interaction from fourth-year undergraduate English as a foreign language (EFL) seminars at the University of Al-Qadisiyah (27 students, ages 21–22), we examine how silence is positioned and oriented toward within three key sequential environments: post-question gaps, pre-dispreferred responses, and repair spaces. Video and audio recordings were transcribed using Ten Have's (2007) conventions with fine-grained timing and multimodal notes (e.g., gaze, gesture). Analyses show that post-question gaps, when coupled with withheld evaluation or minimal continuers, are treated as invitations to elaborate, redistributing epistemic work to learners. Brief delays before disagreement operate as face-management buffers, licensing hedging and reason-giving that render stance shifts pedagogically productive. Silences surrounding trouble in hearing or understanding function as repair slots and search spaces, supporting concise teacher repetitions and learner recognition/uptake that secure intersubjectivity with minimal disruption. Across environments, the pragmatic import of silence is evidenced through next-turn proof in participants' subsequent actions. We argue that silence in these classrooms is not an absence but a recipient-designed resource that coordinates knowledge, face, and progressivity. Implications include micro-pedagogical practices and CA-informed materials that normalize repair and elaboration.

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Introduction

Silence is a recurrent and interactionally consequential feature of classroom talk, yet it is often treated as if it were simply the absence of speech. Silence is frequently regarded as the absence of talk (Hanh, 2020), but in classroom discourse, silence is seldom empty. In educational English conversations, silence may be used by teachers and students to manage participation, display epistemic stance, signal delicacy, and organize transitions between activities (Medina, 2023; Nabi et al., 2026). From a pragmatic point of view, silence can also be a resource through which students and teachers perform actions such as making a request for additional information, delaying evaluation, resisting alignment, or showing a lack of preference (Sedova & Navrátilová, 2020). When viewed sequentially, these quiet moments become available for analysis as part of the designed interactional structure of classroom discourse, rather than simply as manifestations of missing knowledge or uncertainty.

Many previous studies of classroom discourse either assume silence equates to reluctance or anxiety, or treat it merely as “wait-time” since it can be a cognitive variable associated with processing and success (Bao, 2023). These approaches are important and useful, but they can constrain the understanding of the complexity of the roles silence plays in actual lessons. Conversation Analysis (CA) offers a more fine-grained account, as it examines the sequential environments in which silences occur, how participants orient to silence in the next turn, and the social action that silence shapes in situ (Clayman & Gill, 2023; Harumi, 2023). A CA-pragmatic approach also extends this perspective by attending to multimodal conduct, such as gaze withdrawal, posture shifts, and material engagement, which co-constructs the meaning of silence in the moment (Mohammad Hosseinpour & Mousavi, 2025; Wilkinson, 2024).

From a pragmatic viewpoint, silence is a meaning-bearing interactional resource whose interpretation depends on its placement, timing, and uptake within institutional talk (Klieber, 2021). Silence may operate through classic pragmatic processes, including implicature, facework/politeness, preference organization, epistemic stance, and recipient design (Gutiérrez & Paniagua, 2024). From this perspective, silence is not a psychological deficit; it is a discursive resource whose placement in a sequence of discourse (Schweiger & Tomiak, 2022) and next-turn uptake makes its pragmatic import publicly available: the withholding of evaluation can activate a student’s self-repair, a sustained gap following a question can project an expectation for elaborated reasoning, and a silence at a sequence boundary may signal closure or transition (Schweiger & Tomiak, 2022).

Nonetheless, as this work continues to build, silence remains a poorly understood and researched aspect of English as a foreign language (EFL) higher-education classroom discourse in the Middle East, particularly in Iraq. The majority of current research on Iraqi EFL contexts has addressed issues of language proficiency, motivation, or teaching and educational issues, rather than on issues of how classroom talk is organized (Barzinji, 2024). This creates a significant gap in understanding how silence is created, interpreted, and responded in normal conversations involving English teaching, where classroom participation, examination, and teacher–student relations have consequences for classroom interactions in specific contexts. Filling this gap is valuable for both EFL classroom discourse research and teacher education, because teachers routinely interpret silence in real time when deciding whether to wait, reformulate, evaluate, or initiate repair.

The current research analyzes the role of silence within naturally occurring interactions between teachers and EFL students in an Iraqi university. The primary goal is to understand how silence is conceptualized and oriented to in recurring sequential contexts. Silence will be viewed as a purposeful and systematic aspect of classroom interaction and not necessarily indicative of an interruption in the participant's ability to contribute. The study is guided by the following research question:

How is silence positioned and oriented to within key sequential environments of educational English conversations (e.g., post-question gaps, pre-dispreferred responses, repair spaces)?

Based on fine-grained transcription and next-turn proof, the analysis connects the pragmatic function of each sequence with the order in which it occurred and each participant's orientation to others. The analysis concludes with a discussion of classroom pragmatics and its implications for teacher education.

Literature Review

Theoretical Framework

This research is based on CA as an approach to the organization of talk-in-interaction, supported by an account of action formation and interpretation drawn from a pragmatic perspective (Campbell, 2022). CA considers interaction to be organized sequentially. The meaning of any element of behavior, whether speech or silence, emerges from its placement and participants' next-turn orientation (Waring & Tadic, 2024). Four CA foundations frame our analysis: turn-taking (how speakers establish entry/exit

from turns and what counts as a transition-relevance place), sequence organization (how actions such as question–answer or assessment unfold over turns), repair (procedures for managing trouble in speaking, hearing, or understanding), and preference organization (systematic asymmetries in how agreement or disagreement and acceptance or refusals are designed) (Krüger et al., 2025). Within this architecture, silence is not an absence of response but a positioned resource that may project or accomplish actions (Filipi et al., 2023). For example, silence may invite an elaboration that follows a display question; create space for self-repair; or serve as a preface before delivering a dispreferred response.

The pragmatic aspect indicates how silence can imply meaning through usage (Ephratt, 2022). We have reframed silence through the social actions that people do. Silence is intended for the recipient in accordance with several pragmatic mechanisms that include implicature (using the absence of talk to make relevant inferences), facework/politeness (introducing temporal delay before dispreferred activities in order to downplay a threat), epistemics (aligning the scope of the right to know, assess, or evaluate), and accountability (co-participants treating unaccounted silence as notable or accountable) (Yuldasheva et al., 2021). In institutional talk, in this case, teacher–student and peer interactions, these mechanisms interact through understandings of participation frameworks, task demands, and assessment trajectories, where a teacher’s delayed assessment might shift epistemic rights from the teacher to learners, while a learner who prefaces a turn with silence might treat an upcoming disagreement and/or admission of non-knowledge as delicate (Blanco et al., 2022). The claims we make about how silence operates are warranted through what participants do in the next turn: what they produce is the proof.

In the same vein, this paper does not assume that categories from previous CA research apply to the Iraqi EFL context without being contextualized. The authors therefore adopt a participant-oriented analytic perspective by examining how meaning becomes publicly available through sequential organization in interaction. Analytic resources such as preference organization, epistemic rights, and repair are treated as sensitizing concepts for describing how participants display locally produced meaning through their observable orientations to the unfolding talk. Silence may also index culturally or institutionally shaped meanings in the EFL classroom; however, rather than assuming fixed cultural definitions, we treat context as essential and support interpretations through sequential evidence and next-turn proof.

As classroom interaction represents a particular form of institutional talk, we also draw upon CA for institutional settings as a way to link micro-

organization to pedagogic activities (Lehtinen, 2021). Common sequences, including Initiation-Response-Feedback (IRF)/Initiation-Response-Evaluation (IRE), create shared understandings of environments where the significance of silence changes (Kartini et al., 2022): (i) a gap after initiation allows for extended argument; (ii) a gap after the response delays feedback to prompt self-repair; and (iii) a lapse after a turn termination signals closure and a move forward. We also treat these environments as recurrent contexts of practice and do not view these micro-organizational features as psychological properties. In this manner, this framework favors evidence from publicly available resources, timing, overlap, and embodied conduct (gaze, posture, material handling), rather than psychological states as the basis for understanding classroom interaction. Multimodality plays a critical role here; where applicable, we focus on how gaze withdrawal, writing, pointing, or screen use work together to co-produce the action accomplished by silence (Windeatt, 2021).

In practice, the framework shapes our analytic approach and data representations. We form sets of cases from naturally occurring lessons that instantiate three focal environments: post-question gaps, pre-dispreferred responses, and repair spaces. Each segment is explicated turn-by-turn to show how placement, orientation, and outcome together reveal the pragmatic work of silence. Descriptive summaries (e.g., distributions of post-question gaps by activity type) are included to map the landscape of practices, but inference is based on sequential evidence rather than on variation in duration alone.

Finally, the framework is contextually attuned to fourth-year EFL classrooms at the University of Al-Qadisiyah. We regard, for example, that local norms about participation, assessment, and teacher authority are likely co-constructing how silences are produced and responded to; however, we abstain from *a priori* cultural explanations. This includes remaining open to silence as a possible display of deference, respect, or face management, where such meanings are made relevant by participants themselves. Instead, we let the participants' own displays—what they treat as relevant in the next turn grounds the analysis.

Empirical Studies

The emerging body of literature related to classroom discourse and English education indicates a common belief that silence is not just a lack of verbal communication, but it is instead a valuable social resource and an important pedagogical asset. However, these studies differ in focus, with some degree of concentrating on identity and critical discourse, others on teachers'

interpretations of what is appropriate for their students, and others still looking at affective ecologies or interactional repair. It is this diversity that highlights the need for a more explicitly sequential CA-pragmatic approach to understanding silence in classroom interaction. This section synthesizes the existing literature according to overarching themes in order to clarify existing knowledge, the limits of current knowledge, and the relationship between the current study and what has already been established.

A first strand of research conceptualizes silence as a discursive and semiotic resource rather than a deficit in participation. Vetter et al. (2018), although not focused exclusively on silence, demonstrated that classroom discourse can be analyzed in terms of strategic interactional moves that shape participation and critical engagement in English education. Their work is important for the present study because it shifts analytic attention from what participants say to how interaction is organized, thereby opening space for silence to be treated as a methodic resource. Sulzer (2022) develops this insight more directly by showing how teachers' accounts of classroom silences mobilize two competing yet coexisting discourses: (1) silence as absence and (2) silence as presence. These findings reinforce our argument that silence should not simply be viewed as a lack of participation. Rather, silence can provide evidence of meaning-making in interaction and reflect institutional expectations and pedagogical values that become visible through participants' local orientations to silence in context.

A second strand highlights silence as bound up with institutional positioning, identity, and affective consequences. Vetter et al. (2022), in their reflexive analysis of a teacher inquiry group, showed that silence may be privileged, veiled, or indirect, and that some forms of silence can interrupt dominant (e.g., race-evasive) discourses rather than merely signal withdrawal. This extends the literature beyond a deficit model by showing that silence may function as resistance, protection, or strategic non-alignment in institutionally charged discussions. In a different but complementary register, Smith and King (2018) examined the emotional ecology of learner silence, demonstrating how silence may intensify teachers' emotional labor, shape classroom atmosphere, and unsettle teacher identity. The findings described here are significant analytically for the current study because they suggest that one should not assume that silence is necessarily a pathological condition and also remind us that one must consider the impact of silence with regard to face, accountability, and the role of institutions. Therefore, we believe that silence should be analyzed not only as a chronological gap between actions, but also as a socially interpretable behavior whose meaning

is determined by the convergence of interactional organization and classroom institutionalization.

A third strand, most directly aligned with the present study, comes from CA-informed work on silence and repair in L2 classroom interaction. Harumi (2023) links silence to learner-initiated repair, showing that silence often functions as an interactional cue that precedes repair and that CA-informed task design can help learners develop more effective interactional repertoires. This research demonstrates how silence becomes pedagogically functional through examining it in relation to sequential surroundings, as well as the next actions to which it refers. Harumi's (2023) intervention-oriented approach also leaves room to address the present study's focus: how silence is positioned and oriented to by participants in naturally occurring interactions before pedagogical redesign is put into place.

According to this literature, silence is an important idea with social significance and can fulfill multiple functions. However, the literature does not sufficiently integrate silence at the level of providing a logical explanation for how silence operates in EFL higher education classes, especially in contexts with underrepresented students, such as those found in Iraq. We provide an example of the use of silence as a discursive strategy in the context of naturally occurring EFL classroom activities in Iraqi universities by focusing on specific instances of silence in EFL contexts. We build upon what has been previously accomplished while providing more detailed, sequentially based explanations for how silence functions as a discursive tool in these educational contexts.

Method

Design

We used a qualitative CA design to investigate silence as a discursive device in naturally occurring educational English interactions. Analytic attention focused on how participants produced, oriented to, and used silence within sequence organization, turn-taking, repair, and preference organization, while also considering multimodal resources (gaze, posture, gesture, and materials handling).

Participants

The individuals involved were fourth-year EFL majors in the Department of English at the University of Al-Qadisiyah. The University of Al-Qadisiyah is a public university in Al-Diwaniyah, a provincial city in Iraq, and the

recorded classes were part of the students' regular undergraduate English program. Their ages ranged from 21 to 22 years. A total of 27 students participated through a series of regular class meetings that were both video-recorded and audio-recorded as part of their regular class activities. The participant group included both male and female students (14 female and 13 male). Participation in the research was voluntary, and the students provided informed consent and were free to decline or request to be seated elsewhere to avoid being recorded by the camera. Background data indicated that all participants reported Arabic as their first language. All of the names used in the transcripts are pseudonyms, and any other information that could be used to identify the students has been omitted to protect confidentiality.

Instruments

Video Recording

Video recordings were taken using two fixed 1080p cameras on tripods. Camera A was focused on the teacher, whiteboard, and projected learning material at an angle of 30–45. Camera B was focused on the students' area, in order to better capture gaze and participation frameworks. The cameras recorded at 25 frames per second (fps), had a fixed focal length, and utilized a fixed white balance. This was done to ensure comparability of frames across recordings. Before each lesson, we had a ten-second slate (a hand clap plus a verbal timestamp) to help synchronizing the audio with the video later. To decrease reactivity, both cameras were located outside the main paths of travel in the classroom, and these placements did not change across recordings. The total length of the class recordings was 15 hours. CA practice asserts that the existing corpus's choices regarding adequacy of duration were determined not only by overall duration for which a video was recorded but also by the analytic sufficiency of that same video in relation to the study's "natural focal environments" (ten Have, 2007). Therefore, recordings of the same session/class involved video recordings until both repeated reviews/collection-building yielded recurrent patterns of "silence positioning" and participant "orientation", and no substantially different sequential configurations were identified within those same focal environments.

Audio Recording

To capture an audio record of the room, a boundary condenser microphone was placed at the center of the learning space to record whole-class talk, while clip-on lapel microphones were attached to the instructor to facilitate a higher signal-to-noise ratio for low-volume turns and overlapping talk. All audio

channels were recorded with a sample rate of 44.1 kilohertz (kHz)/24-bit on dual media to ensure redundancy (camera inputs and a dedicated recorder). Each visit was initiated with a clap to synchronize the audio and video data, and minor drift was adjusted later in post-production. Audio files used the same naming conventions as the video data and were stored on encrypted institutional storage. Audio recordings allowed researchers to listen to recordings multiple times while building their collection and checking for deviant cases, which played an important role in confirming that the identified silence practices had adequate representation across the entire corpus of data before analysis could be completed.

Data Collection Procedure

Initially, we obtained the required permissions from the department and received ethics approval, provided an information sheet and consent form to all students, and informed them that participation was voluntary and would have no bearing on their coursework. Students were also given the option to choose a camera-free space. We then conducted a short visit to familiarize the class with the recording equipment prior to data collection.

At the outset of the data collection period, we ran a pilot session to evaluate camera distance and positioning, audio quality, and file naming and storage conventions. After that, for each recorded class session, we arrived 15–20 minutes early to set up two static cameras and a boundary microphone placed centrally, and the teacher wore a lapel microphone. At the beginning of each session, we used a brief slate (a hand clap followed by a spoken timestamp) so that we could align the audio with the video later.

During the data collection procedure, we did not interfere with or change lesson plans or task sequencing. Data were collected throughout recurring, naturally occurring sessions, and we noted regular pedagogic phases to produce a multi-session corpus. A field log was used to note the relevant metadata: the date and focus of each session, the type of activity engaged in, the seating arrangement, and any particular event or moment that stood out. After each session, the video files were saved in an encrypted cloud storage using an organized structure (YYYYMMDD_ClassID_Phase_CamA/B), and an extra copy was saved as a backup. This ensured that we had data to use in the event of unexpected loss.

Once the data were collected, we viewed the videos, pinpointing portions where silence was interactionally consequential. For example, this included silences following teacher questions, within repair sequences, and before pre-dispreferred responses. We selectively transcribed segments of the video

using ten Have's (2007) conventions, with precise timing of pauses (micro-pauses (.)) and timed silences in seconds, e.g., (0.7)), overlap, cut-offs, lengthening, and other relevant non-lexical items. During the transcription process, all identifiable information was anonymized, pseudonyms were assigned, and where visuals were used in sharing the material, faces were obscured or identifying details were removed from the edited video material.

Results

Prior to presenting the analyses based on extract methodology, a descriptive summary of each of the three focal sequential environments addressed in this study is provided in Table 1. Consistent with the CA design, however, the table is used only as descriptive support, and all analytic claims are based on sequential analysis and next-turn proof.

Table 1.

Descriptive summary of focal silence environments and silence duration across the corpus

Sequential environment	Number of identified cases (n)	Total duration of silences (sec)	Mean duration (sec)	Duration range (min–max, sec)	Typical participant orientation (brief descriptive note)
Post-question gaps	46	40.48	0.88	0.30–2.40	Teacher withholding evaluation / reformulating prompt; student elaboration
Pre-dispreferred responses	28	18.76	0.67	0.20–1.60	Hedged disagreement, delay before account, teacher request for justification
Repair spaces	39	21.06	0.54	0.10–1.30	Trouble-source handling, search pauses, repair uptake/confirmation
Total	113	80.30	0.71*	0.10–2.40	

The three major sequentially designed contexts examined in this study are summarized in Table 1. As the table demonstrates, post-question gaps occur most frequently and are also the longest on average, supporting the idea that these gaps serve to prompt the elaboration of thoughts and provide learners with sufficient time to consider their response to the question. The duration of pre-dispreferred responses is moderate, with the majority occurring prior to a hedged disagreement, which is subsequently justified, and the lengths of the repair spaces are noticeably shorter on average than either the pre- or the post-question gaps, reflecting their purpose of resolving trouble sources and confirming understanding through the uptake of the trouble source. The

interactional functions of silence will be determined in the next section through the sequential analysis of participants' turn-by-turn orientations.

The subsequent analyses will deal with how silence functions in the interaction as a form of discourse strategy. While the paper corpus also contained non-productive silences, these were not included in this paper because this section focuses on prototypical cases that most clearly instantiate the three focal environments. Within the wider body of data, however, there are also instances of silence being used non-productively. The instances of non-productive silence and their divergent nature will be covered in the discussion to demonstrate the conditions surrounding the assertions made in the present investigation.

Excerpt 1 begins with a post-question gap. In this excerpt, the teacher (T) asks a referential question that requests rule clarification, not a one-word response. The students are seated in a horseshoe, with notebooks open.

Table 2.
Comparative overview of the three focal silence environments in educational English classroom interaction

01	T:	why do we say "did you go" (.) and not "went you"?
02		(0.9) → post-question gap at TRP
03	T:	↓ so (.) what changes when we bring in "did"?
04		(0.5)
05	S1:	uhm ((gaze down, flips pages)) (.) the verb (.) stays base form
06	T:	mm-hm (.) can you show it with "do"?
07		(0.6)
08	S1:	like (.) "did you do the homework" not "did you did"
09	T:	good (.) why is that important for the tense?
10		(1.1) → extended gap; withholding evaluation
11	S2:	because "did" already carries the past (.) so "go" is base
12	T:	exactly (.) so "did" is the past marker (.) verb stays base
13		(.) anything to add?
14		(0.4)
15	S3:	also in negatives (.) "didn't go" not "didn't went"
16	T:	yes (.) nice extension (.) negatives too

The first notable silence occurs at line 02, immediately after T's referential question (01). The gap sits at a transition-relevance place (TRP) and is therefore available for next-speaker selection or self-selection. A second, longer gap appears at line 10 after T's follow-up "why is that important...?", which is produced without an assessment of S1's prior turn, as T withholds evaluation to keep the floor open.

Following the initial (0.9) after T's referential question (1.02), the teacher reformulates and narrows the prompt (1.03), displaying that the gap is heard

as a need for task calibration rather than trouble with hearing. By shifting to “what changes,” T reduces scope and makes the grammatical target relevant; a shorter gap (0.5) ensues and S1 produces a candidate explanation (1.05). Later, at 1.10, T withholds evaluation and issues a why-question, creating an extended gap (1.1) that functions as wait-time for expanded reasoning rather than a lapse. S2 orients to that projection by offering a rule-level account (1.11) instead of a minimal token, providing evidence that the silence made explanation the relevant next action. Finally, T’s micro-pause and open solicitation (“anything to add?”) at 1.13 yields a brief gap (0.4) followed by S3’s extension to negatives (1.15), showing the gap’s role as a slot for additional contributions.

The first gap mobilizes clarification, as T treats the silence as an opportunity to re-design the question (recipient design), not as a failure. The second, longer gap reallocates epistemic work to students; by delaying assessment and sustaining silence, T invites inferential talk rather than closing the sequence. The final brief gap coordinates add-on turns, signaling that the floor remains open for peers to expand the domain (from affirmatives to negatives).

Across the sequence, silences are positioned at TRPs and oriented to as resources for eliciting elaboration and distributing epistemic rights. The participants’ next actions, including question reformulation, rule explanation, and domain extension, provide next-turn proof that the gaps are heard not as non-participation but as interactional invitations: to think, to formulate, and to extend.

In the next extract, T asks for agreement with what has already been read about a metaphor. S2 is selected next but is about to disagree.

Table 3.

Sequential functions of silence in repair environments during classroom interaction

01	T:	so we said the “door” image (.) shows hope, right?
02		(0.3)
03	T:	Ali? (.) do you agree?
04	S2:	(0.6) → pre-dispreferred gap
05		well (.) I mean (.) not exactly
06	T:	mm?
07	S2:	(.) maybe it’s more like (.) separation (.) not hope
08	T:	okay (.) can you say why?
09	S2:	(0.5) → further delay before account
10		because (.) the door is closed (.) and they can’t go through
11	T:	right (.) closed not open (.) so separation (.) got it
12	S3:	(.) also the key is missing (.) so they are stuck
13	T:	nice addition (.) missing key supports Ali’s view

The (0.6) at line 04 occurs after T explicitly seeks alignment (“do you agree?”, 1.03). This gap sits before S2’s disagreement and is followed by mitigation, “well (.) I mean (.) not exactly” (1.05). A second silence (0.5) at line 09 precedes S2’s account (1.10), marking further delicacy before giving reasons. These placements pre-turn delays and pre-account delays are canonical sites for pre-dispreferred work in preference organization.

T orients to the first delay as potential delicacy, responding with a soft “mm?” (1.06) rather than pressing or re-asking, which keeps the floor open and licenses S2’s forthcoming disagreement (1.07). After S2’s “not exactly,” T requests an account (“can you say why?”, 1.08), displaying that a reason is now conditionally relevant; S2 treats the subsequent (0.5) as time to compose a face-saving explanation (1.10). The class then aligns with the alternative reading, T accepts (“okay... right”, 1.11) and S3 extends it (1.12), providing next-turn proof that S2’s prior silence and hedging successfully allowed a dispreferred move into an acceptable contribution.

The pre-answer gap (1.04) formats the forthcoming disagreement as delicate, affording S2 time to deploy hedges (“well... I mean... not exactly”) that soften the face threat to T’s prior stance. The subsequent pre-account gap (1.09) prefigures justification, projecting that reasons, rather than mere contradiction, are now the relevant next action, which S2 duly provides. Taken together, these silences recalibrate epistemic footing: T’s minimal continuer and explicit request for reasons authorize the alternative reading without adversarial framing, and S3’s affiliative extension ratifies the shift, showing that the disagreement has been socially accepted within the classroom interaction.

Here, silence functions as a discursive buffer that manages the preference for agreement and mitigates the face-threat inherent in disagreement. Positioned before the dispreferred action and before the account, the gaps enable hedging, invite reasoning, and facilitate a smooth stance shift in the classroom. The participants’ orientations, T’s gentle continuer, S2’s hedged formulation and reasoned account, and S3’s affiliative extension demonstrate that these silences are not non-participation but interactional tools for doing disagreement delicately.

In the next extract, T explains the instruction “summarize the article in three points”. S1 mishears “three points” as “free points”, which for starters, becomes a conversational trouble source.

Table 4.

Summary of the analytical representation from silence placement to participant orientation and interactional outcome across the three focal environments

01	T:	okay (.) in pairs (.) summarize the article in three points
02	S1:	in (.) free points?
03		(0.5) → repair space: post-trouble source gap
04	T:	three points (.) three (.) one two three ((holds up 3 fingers))
05	S1:	(.) ah (.) three points (.) got it
06	T:	yes (.) and (.) keep each point short (.) like a headline
07	S1:	(0.4) → search space before self-repair
08		uh (.) like (.) jus- (.) just the main idea?
09	T:	mm-hm
10	S1:	so (.) three headlines (.) main ideas
11	T:	exactly (.) go ahead
12	S2:	(.) wait (.) teacher (.) each pair or (.) groups of four?
13	T:	pairs (.) two people (.) not four
14		(0.6) → post-clarification gap; monitors uptake
15	S2:	pairs (.) okay
16	T:	good (.) start now

Two silences mark repair-relevant spaces. First, the (0.5) at line 03 follows S1's trouble-source turn ("free points?", l.02) and precedes T's other-initiated other-repair (clarificatory repeat with emphasis and gesture, l.04). This gap sits in the canonical repair slot: immediately after a mishearing or candidate understanding. Second, the (0.4) at line 07 occurs just before S1's self-repair while formulating the task understanding ("uh... just the main idea?", l.08), functioning as a search space. A third silence (0.6) at line 14 follows T's clarification to S2 (pairs vs. groups), operating as a post-repair confirmation space where T monitors for uptake before moving the activity along.

After S1's "free points?" (l.02), the (0.5) is treated by T not as lapse but as repair-relevant time; T responds with a targeted repeat ("three points") plus embodied clarification (three fingers) (l.04). S1's immediate "ah (.) three points" (l.05) displays recognition and alignment, confirming the repair's success. Later, S1 uses a brief (0.4) (l.07) to search and then self-repair ("just the main idea?", l.08), to which T provides a minimal continuer "mm-hm" (l.09), licensing S1's reformulation (l.10). Finally, following S2's scope query (l.12) and T's correction (l.13), the (0.6) (l.14) is oriented to as a checking space; S2's "pairs (.) okay" (l.15) supplies the post-repair uptake that allows T to close the sequence (l.16).

The first gap opens a repair slot that enables T to deliver an economical correction (repeat + prosodic stress + gesture) rather than re-issuing full instructions, preserving activity progressivity. The second gap supports self-repair, providing S1 with planning time to formulate an understanding check

that T can ratify with a continuer. The third gap secures intersubjectivity at the task-organization level; by withholding immediate advancement, T monitors comprehension, eliciting an explicit uptake token before launching the activity.

In repair environments, silence is positioned at critical junctures, after the trouble source, before a self-repair attempt, and after a correction, to manage intersubjectivity with minimal disruption. Participants treat these gaps as repair resources: teachers use them to calibrate precision (lexical, prosodic, and gestural), while students use them to search, check, and ratify understandings. The next-turn responses (recognition, continuer-licensed reformulation, and explicit uptake) constitute next-turn proof that these silences are heard not as non-participation but as interactional work that keeps instruction clear and the activity moving.

Discussion

This research investigated the roles of silence in the sequential environments of English classroom interactions among Iraqi university EFL students by analyzing their conversational activities. The study employed CA and identified the use of silence as a communicative strategy when participants demonstrated the value of silence as a participant-produced resource for creating meaningful interactions and making sense of their educational environment. More specifically, the gaps between questions and answers often resulted in greater elaboration and, as a result, provided opportunities for more student-directed epistemic work. Pre-dispreferred silences acted as delicacy management devices that allowed participants to provide reasons to support disagreement. The use of silence in repair contexts helped establish intersubjectivity among participants by supporting clarification, initiating repair, and producing informed responses to previous turns. Therefore, the meaning of silence in classroom interaction is not predetermined, and it emerges through the sequential placement of silence and the conversational orientation of participants.

This study confirms prior research that views silence as an essential part of classroom learning, but it also extends this research through a detailed description of how silence functions in naturally occurring EFL classrooms. In relation to Sulzer (2022), our findings support the argument that silence can function as presence as well as apparent absence: in our data, post-question gaps and repair-related silences were often publicly oriented to as opportunities for reasoning, clarification, and uptake rather than as simple lack of participation. However, whereas Sulzer (2022) analyzes teachers'

descriptions and discourses about silence, the present study focuses on silence in the moment-by-moment organization of classroom interaction itself. This allows us to show how silence becomes meaningful through next-turn actions, not only how it is retrospectively interpreted.

Vetter et al. (2018) and Vetter et al. (2022) support our findings concerning silence regarding its strategic consequences for participation and stance-taking, especially at delicate or institutionally loaded times. Similar to Vetter et al. (2018), we found that interactional management practices such as withholding, prompting, and delayed uptake can shape opportunities for participation. Likewise, our pre-dispreferred cases resonate with Vetter et al. (2022), who showed that silence may function in relation to protection, disruption, and non-alignment in critical discussions. The study also varies from other studies described above both in terms of analysis and context. Rather than studying teacher inquiry or group-based critical discussions, we examined the typical discursive practices of Iraqi EFL university instructors during instruction. This difference is important because it provides insight into how silence is embedded in everyday instructional conversations, not just in discussions involving important identity issues.

The repair-space findings are especially consistent with Harumi (2023), who links classroom silence to learner-initiated repair and argues for CA-informed pedagogical design. In both Harumi's work and our data, silence frequently appeared before or within repair trajectories, where it functioned as a cue for searching, checking, and reformulating understanding. A key difference, however, is that Harumi (2023) is intervention- and design-oriented, whereas the present study documents how these repair-relevant silences already operate in naturally occurring lessons prior to instructional redesign. This comparison strengthens the pedagogical relevance of our findings by showing that CA-informed interventions may be grounded in interactional practices that are already observable in ordinary classroom talk.

The current findings will also need to be interpreted in consideration of classroom institutional structures and practical approaches to teaching. One explanation for why the post-question gaps were so productive is that teachers treated silence as a useful resource for extending learners' abilities to develop their understandings, particularly when they did not give immediate feedback on students' work, or revised a question rather than finishing the sequence. This interactional management appears to create a temporary space in which students can formulate accountable responses, including rule-level explanations and extensions. In pragmatic terms, these silences worked not simply as time delays but as publicly recognizable invitations to elaborate, supported by teacher turn design and subsequent uptake. This interpretation

is compatible with CA accounts of sequence organization and epistemic management in classroom talk, while also supporting the pedagogic claim that silence can be interactionally designed rather than merely tolerated.

Similarly, the recurrent use of pre-dispreferred silences before disagreement can be interpreted as a locally practical way of managing face and institutional asymmetry. In a teacher-led classroom, immediate contradiction may be interactionally risky. Brief delays, hedges, and delayed accounts allow students to recalibrate stance while preserving alignment with the pedagogic frame. This can clarify how those who were previously hesitant to speak did so due to the necessity of showing reasoned and reduced participation by engaging in facework or being responsible towards others involved in the interaction when power and/or evaluative aspects remained present. As a result, silence in interaction has been interpreted as an example of facework, preference organization, and recipient design being influenced by conditions associated with authority and evaluation of the interaction.

The repair findings can likewise be interpreted as evidence that silence supports intersubjectivity by marking spaces for hearing, understanding, and formulation work. Post-trouble-source gaps allowed teachers to produce economical repairs (often through repeat + emphasis + gesture), while search pauses before student reformulations helped secure candidate understandings that could then be ratified. In this sense, silence contributed to progressivity not by accelerating the interaction, but by enabling minimal-disruption repair that preserved task continuity. This interpretation helps explain why repair-space silences tended to be shorter on average than post-question gaps: they were often treated as focused troubleshooting slots rather than open spaces for elaboration.

One way to refine the results of this study is that not every silence in the data set was productive. The data set has examples of successful silences; however, there are also many examples of unproductive silences or failures to use the silence as intended. For example, when there was a gap after the teacher asked a question, reformulated it, or provided a new formulation without receiving a response or prompt for elaboration, or when gaps occurred during repair sequences, there was often no response or follow-through after the gap ended. In other words, while a pre-dispreferred turn may have involved a delay, some pre-dispreferred turns also ended up being extremely brief (minimal) and did not complete a sequence that they seemed to indicate. These issues make these cases important to analyze because they provide boundaries to the analysis: silence does not serve as a discursive strategy for all situations; however, there needs to be sequential support,

participant orientation and a recognizable action that follows a silence for the silence to be viewed positively as a discursive device.

Another interpretive point relates to how silence is situated culturally and institutionally within Iraqi EFL university classrooms. While the analysis examined CA concepts such as preference organization, epistemics, and repair strategies, not all of the findings were interpreted according to fixed meanings for these categories. In some examples, the way that participants managed their interactions through silence was also consistent with local understandings of how to show respect, how to demonstrate deference to their teachers' authority, or how to save face. This is particularly relevant to EFL contexts in higher education where there are established hierarchies and rules governing participation and where silence can reflect hesitation, respect, caution, or intentional withholding.

This research provides a CA pragmatic understanding of silence that has a foundation in both sequential context and institutional context. It shows through analysis of silence through routine lessons in Iraqi university EFL classrooms how silence was positioned and oriented to linguistically, thereby providing further support for the literature's broader claims regarding the multi-functionality and meaningfulness of silence. The research also provides a clearer understanding of how that meaning was made publicly available through local interactional mechanisms.

Conclusion and Implications

This study reframed classroom silence as a positioned, meaning-bearing resource in educational English conversations. By tracing three recurrent environments, post-question gaps, pre-dispreferred responses, and repair spaces, we showed that the import of silence is made public through sequential placement and next-turn orientations. Post-question gaps were routinely treated as invitations for elaboration when teachers withheld early evaluation; pre-dispreferred delays worked as buffers that licensed hedged disagreement and reason-giving; and silences in repair spaces secured intersubjectivity with minimal disruption. Across cases, what silence did—reallocating epistemic work, managing face, and sustaining progressivity—was evidenced by the next actions participants produced, providing robust next-turn proof of pragmatic function.

Situated in an under-described EFL university context, the findings extend prior work by offering a CA-pragmatic account grounded in naturally occurring talk rather than attitudinal reports or timing averages alone. The analysis demonstrates that silence is not a deficit but a discursive strategy

intertwined with institutional roles and activity designs. As such, it contributes both an empirical description of how silence operates in Iraqi higher education and a transferable analytic template, placement + orientation + outcome, for investigating silence as social action in other classrooms.

In addition, the study supports a shift in classroom discourse research from treating silence as a fixed learner quality to treating it as an interactional achievement whose meaning is shaped by local sequential organization and institutional context. This broader reframing of silence in the classroom context has significant implications for how silence is interpreted as influencing learners' opportunities for participation, teachers' decision making, and the pedagogical value ascribed to waiting, repairing, and disagreeing.

The study was conducted in one Iraqi university and is based on a small corpus that is specific to that context. In addition to using an extract-based presentation style, only a limited number of focal instances of silence in the contexts that were studied were used, and not all possible silence practices across classroom activity types. Also, while the study was context-sensitive, there was no systematic collection of sociolinguistic background data on the individual students that participated. Therefore, it is impossible to derive finer-grained interpretations of any effects of their language background on their silence practices. In addition, the aspect of interactional evidence was prioritized over the retrospective account provided by participants, so claims represent only those orientations that were shown publicly, not private intentions.

There are existing limitations to the current study and these indicate possible avenues for future research. Future comparative CA research may examine silence placement and orientation across several Iraqi universities, classroom disciplines, and student proficiency levels, or compare Iraqi EFL classrooms with other Middle Eastern contexts. Future research may also include a comparison of successful and unsuccessful silences, a more systematic investigation into how silence practices differ across various types of activities, and a combination of CA with either stimulated recall or with teacher interviews in order to explore how participants interpret the same silences and whether their interpretation has changed over time. Finally, intervention research could examine whether CA-informed teacher training in wait-time, disagreement management, and repair management positively impacts participation quality and learner self-repair in tangible ways.

For pedagogy and teacher education, the results reveal designable practices. First, instructors can intentionally withhold the evaluation after referential questions to mobilize extended reasoning, then use minimal

continuers or targeted reformulations to keep the floor open. Second, recognizing brief pre-dispreferred delays as signals of delicacy, teachers can invite accounts (“can you say why?”) rather than foreclose disagreement, turning potential face-threat into instructionally productive stance work. Third, in repair spaces, concise repeat + emphasis + gesture repairs, followed by a brief monitoring gap, preserve clarity without derailing momentum. These micro-moves can be rehearsed in micro-teaching, embedded in observation rubrics, and modeled in feedback. Importantly, these implications do not require teachers to “leave silence alone” in a passive sense; rather, they encourage teachers to manage silence strategically as part of interactional design.

For research and materials design, the study recommends integrating CA-informed tasks that normalize repair and reason-giving (e.g., prompts that explicitly call for “the because”), and building transcription-based reflection into teacher education so that candidates learn to see silence as action rather than absence. Future classroom tools and curricula might include brief “wait-time” protocols aligned with activity type, checklists for handling pre-dispreferred sequences, and simple visual cues for repair. Together, these steps can help practitioners use silence strategically, to invite thinking, scaffold self-repair, and broaden participation, rather than filling the silence reflexively. This research demonstrates to a greater extent that both teacher education programs and classroom observation frameworks should consider silence as an interactive phenomenon rather than simply indicating a student who is not engaged. The implementation of this perspective would allow for more contextualized decisions regarding participation particularly based on how and when students speak in EFL classrooms based on deference, restraint, and face management.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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Appendix: Ten Have's transcription conventions

Sequencing

- [A single left bracket indicates the point of overlap onset.
-] A single right bracket indicates the point at which an utterance or utterance-part terminates vis-à-vis another.
- = Equal signs, one at the end of one line and one at the beginning of a next, indicate no 'gap' between the two lines. This is often called latching.

Timed intervals

- (.) A dot in parentheses indicates a tiny 'gap' within or between utterances.

Characteristics of speech production

- word Underscoring indicates some form of stress, via pitch and/or amplitude; an alternative method is to print the stressed part in italics.
- :: Colons indicate prolongation of the immediately prior sound.
- Multiple colons indicate a more prolonged sound.
- A dash indicates a cut-off or an interruption.
- . A period indicates a stopping fall in tone.
- , A comma indicates a continuing intonation, like when you are reading items from a list.
- ? A question mark indicates a rising intonation.
- ↑↓ Arrows indicate marked shifts into higher or lower pitch in the utterancepart immediately following the arrow.
- WOR Upper case indicates especially loud sounds relative to the surrounding talk.
- D
- < > Right/left carets bracketing an utterance or utterance-part indicate speeding up.

Transcriber's doubts and comments

- (()) Double parentheses contain transcriber's descriptions rather than, or in addition to, transcriptions.