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A Phenomenological Exploration of Silence and Mental Blankness in English Speaking Assessments and Classroom Presentations

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ABSTRACT

The most cognitively and affectively demanding task a learner can face is speaking English as a second language under evaluative pressure. Silence and mental blankness are the underexplored dimensions of this experience. This study is grounded in Eysenck et al.'s (2007) Attentional Control Theory (ACT) and Krashen's (1982) Affective Filter Hypothesis to explore how and why ESL learners in the Pakistani higher education context experience silence in speaking assessments and classroom presentations. A qualitative phenomenological design was used with semi- structured interviews as a tool to collect data from fifteen learners studying at a private university in Karachi, Pakistan. Thematic analysis of the interview data revealed that a failure to retrieve lexical items, heightened physiological arousal, fear of negative evaluation, self-monitoring, past traumatic experiences, and over-reliance on technology caused the learners to go silent. This study foregrounds silence not as a passive absence of speech but as an active cognitive event where attention, affective, and linguistic systems interact with each other. Findings suggest that educators should introduce strategic intervention during speaking assessments to reduce cognitive load and affective barriers.

Keywords: *Silence, English Speaking assessments, Attention Control Theory, Affective Filter Hypothesis, lexical retrieval, and cognitive load.*

INTRODUCTION

The spoken dimension, as observed in ESL settings in Pakistani higher education, demonstrates a paradoxical position. It is considered a marker of communicative competence that further provides access to professional opportunities, social mobility, and academic advancement. On the other hand, this skill is difficult to produce psycholinguistically. English serves as the medium of instruction and also enjoys a privileged position at the majority of public and private sector universities in Pakistan (Rahman, 2002). However, the English performance of Pakistani undergraduates is considered a National concern despite getting central attention. HEC (2020) states that the English communication skills of undergraduates are underdeveloped though it has been given enough focus and attention. Moreover, employers across multiple

job sectors have also shown dissatisfaction with the spoken skills possessed by undergraduates.

On contrary to the demands of reading and writing, spoken skills require on-the-spot construction of sentences, retrieval of lexical items, rhythmic planning, and accuracy in terms of pronunciation. Learners usually perform all these tasks under the scrutiny of peers, teachers, experts, and assessment settings (Levelt, 1989; De Bot, 1992). The accuracy and fluency ,in terms of speaking break down when learners are asked to fulfil these demands. This malfunction of speech can be seen in the observed silence. Learners struggle with speech production under this state, although they have a good command of the presentation content and linguistic knowledge.

Generally, studies observing language anxiety have also accounted for the observed phenomenon of silence and mental blankness. Horwitz et al. (1986), in their foundational work on Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety (FLCA), found that anxious learners often reported an inability to speak in front of an audience or when called upon to speak. MacIntyre and Gardner (1991) and Young (1991) also reported blocked recall and communicative inhibition while documenting learners' experiences. Ali et al. (2015) in their study on undergraduates of the public university of Pakistan found that speaking anxiety was the most frequently reported obstacle to academic oral performance. Moreover, Khan (2016) identified two major factors, fear of negative evaluation and lack of confidence, behind this silent behavior. Wan Osman et al. (2025), in their recent work in a comparable ESL context, confirmed that cognitive anxiety manifests as blank minds and stuck voices during high-stakes English speaking tests, with 42.6% of participants reporting that their minds went blank during assessments. However, these factors have been studied; their psycholinguistic mechanisms, such as cognitive architecture and language processing, are still insufficiently researched in Pakistan.

Research Objectives

a) To explore the cognitive and affective processes that Pakistani ESL learners experience during episodes of silence and mental blankness in English-speaking tests and presentations.

b) To understand how Pakistani ESL learners respond to and make meaning of episodes of silence during English speaking performances.

Research Questions

a) What cognitive and affective processes do Pakistani ESL learners experience during episodes of silence and mental blankness in English-speaking tests and presentations?

b) How do Pakistani ESL learners respond to and make meaning of episodes of silence during English speaking performances?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Psycholinguistic Models of Speech Production

Silence and blankness in second language speaking are always grounded in a model of how speech is produced. Levelt's (1989) Speaking model is the most influential psycholinguistics model, which conceptualizes production of speech as a series of sequential but partially overlapping stages: conceptualization (constructing the preverbal message), formulation (lexical retrieval and grammatical/phonological encoding), and articulation (the motor execution of speech). Specific cognitive

resources are required at each stage, and disruption at any stage can result in speech breakdown. De Bot (1992) extended Levelt's model for L2 production, emphasizing that L2 speakers must additionally balance the competing demands of two linguistic systems, increasing cognitive burden at every stage of processing. In the Pakistani context, multilingual learners often face this cognitive overload as they need to create a balance between English, Urdu, and any local language (Mansoor, 2004).

To understand silence, one must initially understand the process of lexical retrieval. L2 lexical items are difficult to recall in comparison to L1 lexical items because L2 is less automatized and requires additional effort to retrieve the words (Meara, 1984; Nation, 2001). When learners feel anxious, their attentional resources are reduced, and the retrieval process slows down. According to Levelt (1989), conceptualization, creation, and production of speech have to operate simultaneously to produce fluent speech. When a learner's attention is diverted towards other tasks, such as effortful processing due to anxiety, the fluency slows down, resulting in buffering, hesitations, and finally silence.

Silence as a Psycholinguistic Phenomenon

Historically, applied linguistics defined silence as a planned activity observed in communicative or interactional acts. It was considered a sociolinguistic phenomenon instead of a cognitive failure (Nakane, 2007; Tannen & Saville-Troike, 1985). Contrary to this approach, the silence observed by ESL learners during presentations and speeches is different from a planned communicative act. Rather, it is an involuntary blockage to the production of speech or an inability to access words or language.

Segalowitz (2010) defines silence as a condition in which the production of fluent and automatic speech through the process of lexical retrieval and encoding of phonemes slows down. It is also categorized by the effortful and controlled processing of words that lead to speech malfunctions. Fluent speech requires attentional resources. When these resources are consumed by self-monitoring and self-repair, the positive feedback loop falls apart (Kormos, 2006). When a learner becomes aware of this difficulty, it further generates more difficulty. This blankness and silence prolongs if the learner becomes overly anxious and conscious of their failure. This study aims to explore this psycholinguistic phenomenon experienced by the learners due to a reduction in attentional resources and an increase in self-monitoring of their own speech.

Attentional Control Theory and Language Performance

Eysenck et al.'s (2007) Attentional Control Theory (ACT) provides a thorough account of cognitive disruption produced due to anxiety. It argues that any cognitive performance can be disrupted if anxiety disturbs the alignment between inhibition and shifting functions. In L2 speaking context, the inhibition function is in charge of suppressing intrusive cognitions that compete with the demands of speech production for attentional resources with the demands of speech production such as evaluative concerns, self-deprecating ruminations, and anxieties of negative judgment. When inhibition is compromised by anxiety, these intrusive cognitions consume the attentional capacity that lexical retrieval and phonological encoding require.

Meanwhile, the shifting function is responsible for the speaker's ability to switch between organizing the next utterance, monitoring current output, and controlling social engagement. Anxious impairment of shifting produces the disorganised, stuck quality of speech that learners describe as being frozen or unable to think. Importantly, ACT does not predict that anxiety always reduces overall cognitive efficiency; instead, it predicts that anxious learners compensate by increasing processing effort, with the consequence that performance may appear adequate but has a high underlying cognitive cost (Eysenck et al., 2007).

Several studies have provided empirical support for ACT in L2 contexts. Derakshan and Eysenck (2009) stated that the general efficiency of the cognitive system cannot be reduced by anxiety, but rather it impairs shifting and inhibition selectively. Further, MacIntyre (2017), while working on language learning, applied the ACT model and found that anxiety led to slower recall of words and ultimately affected speech production. Arif and Hashim (2021) observed a similar trend consistent with the ACT model, which claims attentional divergence under test settings disrupts lexical retrieval. They reported that Pakistani ESL students at the tertiary level who experienced anxiety during speaking activities found it difficult to recall known words.

The Affective Filter Hypothesis

The cognitive-attentional explanation provided by ACT is supplemented with Krashen's (1982) Affective Filter Hypothesis. This hypothesis claims that affective variables, namely anxiety, self-confidence, and motivation, act as a filter that controls how much input a learner can access and deploy it effectively when needed. The affective filter rises to form an invisible wall of anxiety or low confidence that blocks learners from accessing their full range of functioning language, even though theoretical knowledge is in place.

English-speaking assessments in Pakistani classrooms provide a familiar issue that can be explored through the lens of the affective filter hypothesis. Under informal and low-stakes settings, learners may demonstrate full competence. However, the same learners, when asked to demonstrate their spoken skills in front of an audience, experience anxiety. The situational elements, such as the presence of peers and teachers, the social settings, and the prestige attached to English, contribute to the raised anxiety (Khan, 2016; Siddiqui, 2007). This increase in the level of anxiety raises the affective filter, which in turn reduces access to lexical items and linguistic knowledge, ultimately leading to mental blankness.

The affective filter hypothesis is criticized for its imprecise operationalization. However, in evaluative settings, the explanation it provides to relate affect and language access and processing remains significant (McLaughlin, 1987). Together, ACT and the Affective Filter Hypothesis offer a complementary explanatory system: ACT outlines the cognitive processes through which anxiety results in processing failure, while the Affective Filter explains the affective conditions that trigger these processes.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design, specifically a phenomenological approach, which is appropriate for investigating the lived experience of a psychological phenomenon as it is understood and described by those who have undergone it (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The choice of qualitative methodology is motivated by the psycholinguistic focus of the research: understanding the internal cognitive and affective processes that constitute silence requires rich, detailed, first- person accounts.

Participants

Participants were selected through purposive sampling from a private university in Karachi, Pakistan. The inclusion criteria required that participants (a) were enrolled in a programme in which English was used as a medium of instruction, (b) had direct experience of formal speaking assessments or classroom presentations in English, and (c) were able and willing to describe their experience of silence or mental blankness during such assessments. Fifteen participants were recruited, consistent with the sample sizes recommended for phenomenological qualitative research at which thematic saturation is typically achieved

(Guest et al., 2006).

Tool

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews. They allow us the flexibility in terms of adding questions, intervening through probes, and noting emerging themes while making sure that topics are covered systematically (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

Data collection and analysis

Interviews were conducted individually, face-to-face in a quiet room on campus. Each interview lasted between 20 and 25 minutes. Interviews were audio-recorded with participant consent. All interviews were conducted in English, with participants invited to use Urdu if they encountered difficulty expressing a particular concept or experience in English. Interviews were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis following the framework established by Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2019) six-phase process: familiarization with data, generation of initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Thematic analysis of the interviews yielded six themes that illuminate how Pakistani EFL learners experience silence and mental blankness during English speeches and presentations on stage. Given the recurrence of responses across participants, representative quotes reflecting the most prominent patterns are presented in the findings rather than individual responses from each participant. All six themes are interpreted through the dual theoretical framework of Attentional Control Theory (ACT; Eysenck et al., 2007) and the Affective Filter Hypothesis (Krashen, 1982). ACT holds that anxiety impairs two executive functions: inhibition, which suppresses task- irrelevant intrusive thoughts, and shifting, which enables flexible redirection of attention between task demands. The Affective Filter Hypothesis proposes that anxiety raises a psychological barrier that blocks learners from accessing their acquired linguistic competence, even when that competence is demonstrably present in lower-stakes contexts.

Theme 1: Attentional Collapse and Lexical Retrieval Failure

A sudden inability to retrieve words or ideas at the moment of going blank was the most consistently reported experience across participants. Irrespective of how well they had prepared, a collapse in speech production occurred. When asked whether ideas or English words disappeared first, participants described a range of breakdown patterns that together reveal failure at multiple stages of speech production.

Both disappear at the same time.

English words disappear, but I remember the ideas; I just cannot find the words I knew.

Ideas disappear as I start translating Urdu into English.

The account of knowing the idea but losing the English word is the clearest illustration of ACT's inhibition failure (Eysenck et al., 2007). When the resources required for lexical retrieval are consumed by other irrelevant thoughts, such as fear of being judged or watched by people, this results in elevated anxiety. The known content becomes inaccessible for the time being due to the extra load on working memory. This does not necessarily mean that the knowledge has been erased (Eysenck et al., 2007). Students who reported total

loss of content and language simultaneously depict a very severe issue. Failure to inhibit results in loss of subject and lexical knowledge. Students who claimed that translation from Urdu to English makes them less fluent add another dimension of cognitive load. Translation requires manual cognitive efforts that further compound inhibition failure, making the conceptualization phase more complicated. This also creates a delay in the formulation stage (Mansoor, 2004).

Students named different triggers that resulted in silence. This proves that silence is not a planned act but an internal phenomenon.

Silence starts with words, especially jargon that is difficult to pronounce.

Usually, my blankness starts with a word. Once I forget a word, I ultimately forget the whole speech.

Mostly a pause. If I pause, I cannot continue.

Just the opening. Once I am through that, I usually find my flow.

The account that a pause causes irreversible silence is particularly consistent with ACT's shifting impairment (Eysenck et al., 2007). A pause chosen for thinking becomes a sustained blank because the moment the speaker becomes aware of the silence, the metacognitive recognition of that failure generates a new wave of intrusive cognitions that why have I stopped, what will they think which further depletes the shifting function needed to redirect attention back to speech production. The identification of the opening as the most vulnerable moment is consistent with the Affective Filter Hypothesis: at the start of a performance, before any communicative momentum has been established, the filter is at its most elevated because evaluative threat is at its most immediate and the learner's sense of self-efficacy is at its most fragile (Krashen, 1982). The account of finding a flow once past the opening suggests that as performance proceeds and self- efficacy stabilises, the filter begins to lower and attentional functions recover sufficiently to support fluent production.

Theme 2: Pre-Onset Physiological Arousal that Precedes and Compounds Cognitive Failure

All participants reported physiological symptoms of anxiety that began before they mounted the stage. The experiences shared by students show that the cognitive failure started later; it was physical stress and anxiety that started first. This establishes the fact that the affective filter was elevated even before the speech began, and the inhibition function had already fallen apart.

Breathing is heavier than usual. Heartbeat increases deeply. All of this starts from the beginning.

Before I even say anything, my hands shake, and my heartbeat increases. Hands shiver, and the heart beat increases before moving to the stage.

These answers depict that stress and anxiety do not cause speech difficulty, rather it is there before the speech even starts (Krashen, 1982). Variables such as peers and teachers as the audience, the fear of being assessed raises the filter and restricts the language access. This also suggests that inhibition failure had already started when the student went up to the stage. According to the ACT model, the physiological symptoms had activated the goal-irrelevant information that occupies major thoughts, resulting in poor processing of speech (Eysenck et al., 2007).

The physical signs made the students monitor their own performance through a critical lens. It created a

loop of negative self-perception, inducing anxiety.

Not voice. When everyone notices me, I become nervous. My limbs tremble. I notice this.

I have a perfectionist mindset. It makes me go silent.

Being noticed by others increases anxiety and adds a new layer of cognition. It induces the affective filter to rise not only because the student feels nervous but because others can see the nervousness (Krashen, 1982). Having a perfectionist mindset raises the filter directly. Any deviation from a standard flawless production of speech would increase the fear of being inadequate.

Theme 3: Evaluative Threat and Fear of Negative Evaluation

One of the recurring themes across multiple participants for going blank and being silent was the presence of an audience and being negatively judged by them. This response is backed by the Affective Filter Hypothesis, which claims that an evaluative setting is the most threatening situation for any student who lacks confidence. It significantly boosts the filter to go up (Krashen, 1982).

Peers. They may think how dumb I am.

Not friends. Teachers and peers make me nervous. I will be judged by the people. I have this fear.

I am just imagining that I am speaking to the walls.

A student calling himself ‘dumb’ just because he cannot speak fluent English in front of other students connects social identity with English performance. English is considered a symbol of prestige and intelligence in Pakistani society. This fear of using incorrect English increases anxiety, leading to silence (Krashen, 1982). The account of the student assuming there is no audience is consistent with ACT’s inhibition function. This student redirected his attention to his speech only, so that the cognitive load remains balanced and attentional resources are used for speech production only (Eysenck et al., 2007).

Past traumatic experiences observed during public speaking still had an impact on the present performance of a few students.

I remember the time I forgot my entire well-memorised script while giving a speech at school, and my classmates laughed.

What generally comes to mind is a childhood incident where I was publicly humiliated and laughed at by both the teacher and the students.

I have had a lack of confidence since childhood. If I make a mistake, people would think ill of me.

I have started crying a couple of times on stage, so it is more of a trauma.

From the perspective of the Affective Filter Hypothesis, past traumatic experiences of public humiliation function as chronic filter-raising conditions (Krashen, 1982). Prior shameful experiences also influenced the current evaluative setting, resulting in increased anxiety. Students were not feeling safe and comfortable with any of the audience, be it the teacher or peers. For such students, being called upon on stage and assessing them poses a threat. This is related to the ACT model, where past experiences consume cognitive

resources, leaving no space for present speech production (Eysenck et al., 2007).

When students were asked if English mistakes made them ashamed, their response highlighted the sociolinguistic side of filter elevation in Pakistan.

People expect me to speak good English because I am educated. I may lose trust if I make mistakes.

It is assumed that someone who is a topper will be good at English too. It is not just English mistakes. All public mistakes are shameful.

Loss of trust caused by a mistake in English clearly shows how English is considered a symbol of power, education, and prestige. This social awareness raises the filter that demands learners to produce accurate English (Krashen, 1982; Rahman, 2002). This equivalence of good English skills with academic excellence makes the learner believe that the inability to produce fluent English is an intellectual inadequacy (Eysenck et al., 2007).

Theme 4: Lack of coping mechanism

Learners were seen as unprepared when they were asked about the strategies they employed when they underwent silence. These strategies were mainly self-created, inconsistent, and mismatched.

I went completely silent and would not look at notes. I ask for a pause from the teacher if possible.

I went completely silent, told the teacher I was done, and left.

I pause and try to remember that word, or work around it with a simpler one.

I fill with buffer words while trying to remember what I am supposed to say. I improvise if I do not remember.

I would look at the presentation slides or my notes to take help.

Complete withdrawal represents the most extreme consequence of a filter raised to a level at which continued access to any linguistic performance became impossible (Krashen, 1982). When the filter is this elevated, the only way to reduce it is to exit the evaluative situation entirely. This case, as seen from the lens of ACT, concludes that inhibition and shifting both became impossible to restore. Internal thoughts became too powerful, such that reducing the load on cognition became impossible. Thus, learner could never restore their speech as the working memory became fully occupied. (Eysenck et al., 2007). On the other hand, another learner who used improvisation techniques and buffer words was seen to have a bit of control over their thoughts. This shows that the affective filter of such a student had not increased to a huge extent that recovery was not possible. According to ACT, such learners can resume their speeches by putting some effort into retrieving linguistic knowledge. Substitution of alternate words reduces the cognitive burden at the formulation stage. Similarly, visual aids such as notes, PowerPoint slides, reduced the burden and helped learners recall the concept or lexical item without going completely silent. External scaffolding helped learners to lower the affective filter and continue their speech Eysenck et al., 2007).

Theme 5: The Personal Meaning of Going Blank

Learners did not find silence as an academic event, but they called it a damage to their linguistic and

professional identity. This theme emerged when students were asked to define what silence during presentations meant to them. The meanings they associate with being silent affect them throughout their life. It acts as a filter for any future speaking event (Krashen, 1982).

I do not have confidence, thus I will never be able to communicate effectively in my professional life.

People will never listen to me because I am not a good speaker. Classes based on public speaking ruin the whole course for me.

Imagine you research a topic, make a script, and memorize it. But the moment you move to the stage, everything is lost. You feel words are stolen from you. You do know the concepts, but do not have the words to explain.

Thinking that being not a good speaker and becoming silent reflects permanent communicative inability is consistent with the Affective filter hypothesis. The filter raises every time the learner is asked to speak because of the negative self-perception (Krashen, 1982). Each speaking event is characterized by an elevated affective filter that increases anxiety, making students go blank. With each blank, recovery becomes difficult. Competence is blocked by the elevated filter and thus cannot be demonstrated fully. Learner may lead to self-blame and call it a moral or motivational failure (Eysenck et al., 2007).

CONCLUSION

Through this study, psycholinguistic experiences of learners behind going silent during speeches and presentations were explored using Eysenck et al.'s (2007) Attentional Control Theory and Krashen's (1982) Affective Filter Hypothesis as the theoretical framework. Findings suggest that going silent is not just a lack of preparation, but it is a cognitive process that is affected when attentional resources undergo depletion due to anxiety and other physical strains. Raised affective filter, fear of negative evaluation, on-the-spot translation, and economic power attributed to English are the major causes that lead learners to self-monitor their performance.

These findings imply several pedagogical recommendations. First, pre-speech anxiety management is best taught and practiced ahead of the speaking event instead of during it. Breathing technique, intentional focusing of attention, and rehearsing the opening few moments ought to be carefully taught as elements of preparation — not discovered individually. Next, we recommend that the unsystematic coping currently practised be replaced by explicit strategy instruction. Trained to keyword prompt cards (to reduce conceptualization load), lexical substitution strategies (to work around inaccessible vocabulary), and structured buffer-word techniques (which give you the same time defence mechanism by making your filter larger only up to the level of awareness through silence). Third, is that you directly address the identity and social stakes of English performance in the Pakistani classroom. And fourth, for learners who are blank in a way that we would consider traumatic, they should be referred on to psychological support services as an academically appropriate and normalised part of the university response, recognising that these conditioned fear responses cannot simply be remedied with pedagogy alone.

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