

An analysis of Students' Discourse Absence in Traditional English Classes from Face Theory

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Abstract: As curriculum reform progresses, the importance of students' active participation in classroom activities has gained attention. However, students' voices have long been marginalized in the current education system. This study examines three phenomena—silent discourse, monologic discourse, and false endowment—in English classes at LiCheng Second Middle School in Jinan, through the lens of face-threatening acts. It reveals that students often withhold their discourse to protect their self-esteem, and teachers' impatience or personality traits can exacerbate this issue by threatening students' face. This paper advocates for restoring students' discourse to address the problem of their underrepresentation in English teaching.

Keywords: Face theory; Traditional English classes; Students' discourse; Absence

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1.Introduction

With the ongoing educational reform, the importance of students' active involvement in classroom activities is increasingly recognized. In traditional classrooms, teachers, as the primary knowledge disseminators, hold absolute authority and dominate classroom discourse. Students, as passive recipients, simply listen and absorb knowledge, which limits their own discourse. Despite contemporary education scholars' emphasis on student subjectivity, classroom teaching remains teacher-centered rather than focused on student-teacher interaction. The lack of student discourse in classrooms is still prevalent, indicating that achieving true student subjectivity remains a significant challenge.

The key to classroom efficiency lies not only in the teacher's discourse but also in the content that students absorb. If students merely passively receive information without developing their initiative, the teaching effect will fall short of expectations. Therefore, teachers should optimize their teaching methods to fully utilize classroom discourse. Given the current educational landscape, students' discourse is often underutilized because teachers typically dominate the classroom. In summary, the lack of student discourse remains a crucial factor affecting the quality of contemporary teaching.

The restricted discourse of students hinders the development of their learning abilities and consequently affects teaching quality. When unable to answer questions, students often remain silent to avoid losing face before teachers and peers. Over time, this leads to a lack of student discourse. This article analyzes various phenomena related to the absence of student discourse and finds that face-threatening behaviors significantly dampen students' enthusiasm for class participation. Therefore, it is essential to advocate for the return of student discourse based on face theory.

2.Literature Review

As a tool of human communication, discourse has always been a hot topic in domestic and foreign research. In aboard, Bellack et al. (1996) firstly proposed a four-step framework for the description of classroom discourse, including structuring, soliciting, responding and reacting. Then Sinclair and Coulthard (1975) summarized the IRF three-step model of classroom discourse, namely the teacher's initiating move, the learner's responding move, and the feedback of or follow-up move of the teacher.

Chinese researchers have mainly focused on teacher discourse and student discourse. The current situation regarding students' face awareness shows that junior high school students have a high overall face awareness, with a greater emphasis on "wanting face" than on "fearing losing face" (Wu Shan, 2025). Since traditional classrooms are mostly teacher-centered, there are more studies on teacher discourse than on student discourse. For example, He

Senlin (2007) argued that the absence of fairness in students' classroom discourse is mainly manifested in silent discourse, monologic discourse, and teacher-dominated discourse. Chen Yan (2018) found that student discourse in high school English classrooms is relatively weak, characterized by short speaking time, unequal status, imbalanced discourse, and limited expression. Tao Li (2020) pointed out that the primary factors contributing to the absence of student discourse are institutional discourse, traditional teacher concepts, and teacher discourse hegemony.

Based on the above research, it can be seen that most researchers have studied the superficial phenomenon of the absence of students' discourse, but not delved into the causes. Therefore, according to the face theory, this article will explore the main reasons of the absence of students' discourse.

3.Face Theory

As a symbol of personal self-esteem and dignity, face is one of the important influencing factors in interpersonal communication, which has been one of the hot topics for many scholars.

3.1 The proposal of Face Theory

The concept of "mianzi" was first introduced to Western countries by the Chinese anthropologist Hu Xianjin (1944), who used semantic analysis to study the definitions of "face" and "mianzi." According to his analysis, "mianzi" is defined as "an individual's reputation and status that are unanimously recognized by the public," while "face" refers to "a group's respect for individuals who meet the social and internal moral standards of behavior" (Zhou Jiayi, 2019:203). Building on this concept, the American scholar Erving Goffman (1967) detailed interpersonal relationships and provided a wealth of data for sociolinguistic research. He noted that "face work" is ever-present in social interactions, as people constantly engage in "face work" to avoid threatening others' face or to maintain their own. The most representative theory in this area is the "Face-Saving Theory" proposed by Brown and Levinson (1987) after their systematic study of "face." They define "face" as "a personal image in the public that every member of society intends to earn for himself", and this image can be damaged, maintained, or enhanced through communication with others.

3.2 Two aspects of face

Brown and Levinson assumed that people involved in communicative activities were Model Persons (Brown & Levinson, 1978). The "face" of a Model Person is composed of positive face and negative face.

Positive face refers to the desire to be approved, loved, appreciated, and respected by others, emphasizing seeking sameness. Negative face, as the desire for autonomy, means that people want to have the freedom to choose their own actions instead of being imposed or interfered with by others, emphasizing seeking autonomy. Face-threatening behaviors are common in daily communication, so people should save face for themselves and others.

According to the two aspects of face, the speech acts that threaten face can be roughly divided into four categories, threatening the listener's negative face, including the commands, requests, advises, threatens, and warns from the speaker; threatening the listener's positive face like the disagreement of the speaker, and the criticism, contempt, complaint, condemnation, accusation and insult to the listener; threatening the negative face of the speaker, like the speaker expresses gratitude to the listener, accepts criticism, makes unintentional promises or provides unwilling help to the listener's outdated response; and threatening the speaker's positive face, including the speaker apologizes, accepts criticism or compliment, repents, admits guilt or wrong, etc.

4.Analysis of the Absence of Students' Discourse

In this part, three performances of students' discourse absence from face theory will be analyzed, which are the silent discourse, the monologic discourse and the false endowment. All the corpus are collected from the records of classroom discourse on the English class at LiCheng Second Middle School in Jinan.

4.1 The silent discourse

The silence of the students is actually a passive silence, which refers to the mechanical listening, deliberate ignorance or silence as the students facing with the lectures and questions from the teacher (He Senlin, 2007). There are two types of students: high-level students, who are capable participating in teaching activities but choose not to, and low-level students, who often keep silent during the class.

4.1.1 The silent discourse in answering questions

Collective silence is increasingly prevalent in traditional face-to-face classrooms, particularly during questioning. When teachers pose questions to the entire class, both high-level and low-level students tend to remain silent. Questioning is perceived as a command from the teacher, which can be seen as a speech act that threatens the passive face of the students.

Discourse 4.1

T: Yeah! We knew about Wenchuan earthquake. And when did it happen? Do you remember?

S: (silence)

High-level students don't want to be the leader for "a nail that sticks up mostly gets hammered down", having no intention of answering. Low-level students are afraid to answer questions for fear of making mistake in pronunciation or grammar, which would hurt their face. Over time, students are used to responding to class with silence.

When teachers pose questions to individual students, silence is also evident. High-level students can usually answer the question, but low-level students, who struggle with expression, often choose silence to protect their dignity. However, when faced with the teacher's compulsory question, they have no choice but to answer, which interferes with their autonomy and threatens their negative face. To save face, these low-level students often retreat into their own world, silently coping with class activities.

4.1.2 The silent discourse in group discussion

Group discussion involves students (more than two) organized by the teacher to communicate on a specific topic, where each member can freely express their opinions and share their results with the class. As a teaching method, it not only enlivens the classroom atmosphere but also enhances students' thinking abilities. However, in group discussions, high-level students actively contribute, while low-level students, fearing to speak, remain silent. Additionally, some students have little interest in group discussions due to a lack of attention and recognition from the teacher. Thus, silence can also occur in panel discussions.

Discourse 4.2

(The teacher asked the students discussing about the damage of earthquake in groups)

S1: Some people will die.

S2: Some buildings will be broken.

S3: (Keep silence)

During the group discussion, silence often occurs among low-level students who have no opinion, like the third student in this group. These students prefer to compromise in class activities as they seldom think independently. After hearing others' speeches like "Some people will die" and "Some buildings will be broken," they never put any opposition forward for fear of harming the positive face of the speaker who has a better grade than them. As we can see, it seems that every student has the opportunity to express themselves in the group discussion, but there is always silence in reality.

Discourse 4.3

T: Ok, how about this group? Do you know any natural disasters?

S2: Yeah, like earthquake, tsunamis and floods.

T: Right, you please, is there anything more?

S3: (silence)...sorry

To assess the outcomes of group discussions, teachers often select groups for feedback. When teachers pose questions to the entire group, high-level students readily express their opinions, while low-level students remain silent, voluntarily relinquishing their chance to speak. Moreover, phrases like “sorry” and “I don’t know,” which convey the speaker’s apology, can threaten the positive face of the listener. Consequently, teachers may cease questioning and shift the discourse back to their lecture, thereby reasserting their dominance in the classroom.

4.1.3 The silent discourse in peer feedback

Feedback is a crucial evaluation mechanism where the listener responds to the speaker’s speech act, providing valuable insights for teachers to gauge the direction of their teaching. In classroom activities, feedback primarily comes in two forms: teacher feedback, which is the most common, and peer feedback. Peer feedback is essential for assessing students’ comprehension and offers them an opportunity to express themselves and engage more deeply with the class. However, students often seem reluctant to take advantage of this opportunity.

Discourse 4.4

T: Do you know any tips to protect ourselves when earthquake happening?

S1: Maybe we should run outside as soon as possible.

T: Ok, do you agree with her? Why?

S2: (keep silence)

When asked to give feedback, most students tend to be vague or silent. The initial response often lacks clarity and is not universally applicable. When a teacher asks a second student to comment on the first student’s answer, the second student may remain silent. Even if they recognize that the first student’s performance was not good, they hesitate to directly disagree with phrases like “No” to avoid threatening the first student’s positive face. Silence becomes their only choice in such situations. Conversely, the teacher’s demand for feedback threatens the second student’s negative face. This not only stifles students’ desire to express themselves freely but also hinders the development of classroom discourse, further contributing to its absence.

4.2 The monologic discourse

Monologues are generally produced in isolation, with no applause or cooperation. Under such circumstance, everyone is a lonely individual, and each lonely individual is combined into a static group.

4.2.1 The monologic discourse in answering questions

In addition to silence, monologic discourse is another manifestation of the absence of student discourse. One form of monologue is murmuring, where students speak to themselves in low voices. Unlike silence, murmuring occurs when the teacher’s questions are within the students’ ability to answer. Otherwise, most students will remain silent.

Discourse 4.5

T: And when did Tangshan earthquake happened? When did it happen, do you remember?

S: (murmur something in a low voice)

When the teacher poses a question without specifying a particular student to answer, the class often falls into silence, with only a few students murmuring something to themselves. This is a form of monologic discourse. In this situation, each student has their own opinions but fears that their answers might conflict with the so-called standard answer or the general consensus. Moreover, low-level students, who have weaker verbal expression skills, are apprehensive about making grammatical or pronunciation mistakes. To preserve their positive face and avoid potential criticism from others, they choose to express their thoughts quietly to themselves. As a result, everyone engages in their own monologue.

In general, when the class is in a monologic situation, teachers often proceed by directly providing the answer. Students, despite having personal opinions, have no opportunity to express them. Over time, their desire to present themselves diminishes, leading to the absence of student discourse.

4.2.2 The monologic discourse in group discussion

In group discussions, the collaborative and interactive exchanges among students represent the collective voice of the small group. For instance, in an ideal study group, students actively cooperate with one another. During this process, each student's contributions are acknowledged and appreciated by their peers within the group.

While in currently traditional teaching, study groups are set up for the convenience of management but not in the center of study and discussion. And only the students' discourse is consistent with the teacher or the class headed by the teacher, can they be recognized or applauded, otherwise it will become an isolated discourse.

Discourse 4.6

(After the group discussion)

V: I think high school students can have a phone to study....(the teacher broke her words)

T: But it's not real, don't you think so?

During questioning, not all student answers are accepted by the teacher or their peers. For example, when discussing "Should high school students have a phone?" in groups, a student was interrupted by the teacher before finishing her answer. This kind of rebuttal threatened the student's positive face and discouraged her from actively participating in the class. The student might have wanted to offer a different perspective, but the teacher dismissed her answer outright by saying, "It's not real," without any consideration for her effort. As a result, the student's opinion was ignored by both the teacher and other students, reinforcing the notion that student responses must align with the teacher's expectations. This behavior threatens the students' negative face and undermines their learning autonomy. The discourse, regulated by the teacher, is teacher-centered rather than student-oriented, which is not conducive to fostering students' independent learning.

4.3 The false endowment

False endowment refers to the one-way test of the teaching content by the teacher in the form of questions, which are usually blind and meaningless. Such kind of endowment is quite common in the current class activities, which is mainly manifested in the students' attachment and obedience for the teacher, and the questions in the presupposition.

4.3.1 The false endowment in attachment and obedience

To address the issue of students' lack of discourse, some teachers strive to create opportunities for students to express themselves. However, other teachers may only engage students through questioning, or address them in a commanding tone. This commanding discourse is not truly communicative in an equal sense. Not only does it fail to spark students' interest in learning, but it can also exacerbate the absence of student discourse.

Discourse 4.7

T: How did earthquake happen? ... The movement of the plates (the students catered to the teacher). As high school students, you must know that, ok? How did it happen again?

S: The movement of the plates.

During interactions, the long-term use of instructional discourse directed at students can lead to students' discourse becoming overly reliant on the teacher. For example, when faced with the teacher's mandatory orders, students tend to follow along without questioning the content, regardless of its accuracy. Instructional phrases like "you must..." and "you have to..." are speech acts that can damage students' positive face, leaving them with no opportunity to raise doubts. Moreover, students often do not question the teacher's words because they view teachers as knowledge disseminators and themselves as mere listeners. As a result, they are hesitant to challenge the teacher's

positive face and instead echo the teacher's words. In this scenario, students are unable to actively construct their own discourse, and this passive repetition can be considered a form of absent discourse.

Discourse 4.8

T: I have ordered you guys to preview this chapter in the last class. Have you finished, yes or no?

S: Yes!

T: Can we begin the learning of this chapter? Yes or no?

S: Yes!

Students' uniformly affirmative answers indicate a lack of discourse and reflect their attachment and obedience to the teacher. Some teachers often ask "yes or no" or "right or wrong" questions, which seem to engage students but are essentially meaningless fill-in-the-blank questions. Students respond with a continuous chorus of "yes" without thinking, as their answers are restricted to affirmation. This undermines their negative face. While there appears to be teacher-student interaction, students are actually in a state of "collective unconsciousness," not truly engaging with the content. This can easily foster a herd mentality, encouraging students to follow others blindly.

4.3.2 The false endowment in presupposition

The term "presupposed false endowment" refers to instances where teachers, in an effort to emphasize student-centered teaching, preset various conditions to guide students along their teaching plans and provide them with opportunities to express themselves. Unlike the false endowment that arises from attachment and obedience, students in this case do get a chance to voice their opinions. However, what distinguishes this discourse from monologue is that it neither receives agreement nor objection from the teacher. In reality, these discourses often fail to truly capture the teacher's attention due to various classroom factors.

Discourse 4.9

T: So, everyone has previewed the text in this chapter, and are there any interesting parts or any new words that you guys don't understand?

S:(Everyone said their words at the same time)

T: Ok, everyone asked a lot of novel questions, but limited to the time, in today's class we mainly come to learn....

Due to time constraints and other factors, teachers sometimes neglect student discourse to maintain teaching progress. Even when students raise novel questions, teachers may ignore them, threatening their positive face. In some classes, teachers only superficially allow students to ask questions but do not let them express themselves publicly. Consequently, students choose silence to save face in similar situations, leading to fewer contributions. This superficial interaction does not genuinely stimulate students' interest in learning.

5. Conclusion

The lack of student discourse is a significant factor impacting contemporary teaching quality, manifesting as silent discourse, monologic discourse, and false endowment. Students often refrain from active participation to preserve their dignity. This phenomenon affects both high-level and low-level students. High-level students may actively contribute in group discussions but remain silent during whole-class questioning or peer feedback to maintain their and others' dignity. Low-level students, fearing mistakes and loss of face, avoid answering questions and participating in discussions or feedback sessions. Moreover, students' attachment to the teacher throughout the class further stifles their initiative in knowledge acquisition.

Through the analysis of the absence of the students' discourse from face theory, teachers can make some improvements like using some euphemism in questioning and waiting patiently for the students in answering questions, which not only advances the reasonable distribution of the classroom discourse, but encourages the students to actively participate in the class by protecting their faces. However, there are also some limitations for this

article for only taking the English classes as the research object. So that there must be other kinds of absence of students' discourse and facing threaten acts in the class of other subjects for others to study.

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