



Culturally Responsive Solutions for Classroom Silence in Thai EFL Education

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Received: 11 February 2025; Revised: 26 May 2025; Accepted: 11 June 2025; Available Online: 20 June 2025

Abstract

Classroom silence is a persistent phenomenon in Thai English as a Foreign Language (EFL) settings. While silence can reflect respect, contemplation, or attentiveness, it often inhibits active participation, communicative competence, and formative assessment. This conceptual paper examines the roots of obstructive classroom silence in Thai EFL education, identifying contributing factors such as cultural norms (e.g., *kreng jai*), hierarchical teacher–student dynamics, exam-oriented instruction, and teacher preparedness. Rather than viewing silence as learner deficiency, the paper draws on two complementary frameworks—Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (CRP) and Global Englishes Language Teaching (GELT)—to reframe the issue through a sociocultural and linguistic lens. CRP emphasizes the importance of integrating students’ cultural identities into instruction, while GELT challenges native-speaker norms and promotes inclusive, intelligibility-based communication. By synthesizing current research and pedagogical theory, the paper proposes localized, participatory strategies to reduce obstructive silence and foster student engagement. The article concludes by recommending systemic reforms in assessment, teacher training, and material development, and calls for further empirical research into CRP’s long-term effects in Thai EFL classrooms.

Keywords: Classroom Silence, Thai EFL, Culturally Responsive Pedagogy, Global Englishes, Student Engagement

Introduction

Classroom silence presents a persistent and multifaceted challenge in Thai English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education. In Western educational models, verbal participation is often treated as a key indicator of engagement and comprehension. In contrast, Thai learners may exhibit silence as a culturally appropriate response to classroom dynamics shaped by hierarchical relationships, social pressure, and fear of public error (Hongboontri et al., 2021). Cultural norms such as *kreng jai* (deference to authority), the value placed on social harmony, and the desire to avoid embarrassment contribute to a classroom atmosphere where students often refrain from speaking (Pattapong, 2015). While these norms serve important functions in Thai society, they can conflict with the pedagogical demands of language learning, where interaction and communicative practice are essential.

This challenge is compounded by structural and institutional factors. Traditional Thai education emphasizes rote memorization, teacher-centered instruction, and high-stakes testing—practices that can inhibit student agency and reduce opportunities for spontaneous language use. Many EFL instructors, often trained in grammar-translation methods, may also lack the intercultural awareness and instructional flexibility required to promote active participation (Charoensilp, 2024). As a result, students may complete formal coursework with limited ability to use English in real-world contexts.

The implications of this disconnect are growing more urgent. As Thailand deepens its integration into the ASEAN Economic Community and expands its international sectors, spoken English proficiency has become a crucial skill for employability and upward mobility (Huttayavilaiphan, 2024). Yet current EFL models often fall short of preparing learners for these demands, leaving Thai students at a disadvantage relative to their



regional peers (Montakantiwong, 2024). Without strategic pedagogical reform, classroom silence will continue to undermine both language outcomes and broader socioeconomic opportunities.

This paper proposes a dual framework grounded in Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (CRP) and Global Englishes Language Teaching (GELT) to address the roots of classroom silence and develop inclusive, locally relevant strategies for engagement. Rather than viewing silence as student deficiency, the approach emphasizes cultural recognition, communicative flexibility, and systemic alignment. Drawing on current research, this paper presents practical solutions—such as localized materials, revised assessment practices, and teacher training models—to create participatory and culturally informed Thai EFL classrooms (Charoensilp, 2024; Hongboontri et al., 2021).

Theoretical Framework

This paper is informed by two complementary frameworks: Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (CRP) and Global Englishes Language Teaching (GELT). Both offer critical insights for interpreting and addressing classroom silence in Thai English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts. Culturally Responsive Pedagogy, as articulated by Gay (2010), emphasizes the deliberate inclusion of students' cultural identities, languages, experiences, and values in all dimensions of teaching and learning. Ladson-Billings (1995) further argues that culturally relevant pedagogy not only affirms student identity but also fosters academic success and critical consciousness. These frameworks challenge deficit perspectives on marginalized learners and instead promote instruction that draws upon students' cultural capital. In the Thai context, this approach is particularly relevant given that classroom silence often reflects socio-cultural norms such as *kreng jai* (deference to authority), conflict avoidance, and hierarchical communication. Rather than interpreting silence as disengagement, CRP reframes it as a culturally shaped behavior that requires pedagogical sensitivity and strategic inclusion.

Global Englishes Language Teaching (GELT), as developed by Galloway and Rose (2015), offers a complementary perspective that repositions English as a dynamic, global lingua franca. GELT critiques the privileging of native-speaker norms and instead promotes linguistic diversity, mutual intelligibility, and identity validation in English language education. This paradigm is especially meaningful in Southeast Asian settings, where local varieties of English coexist with international models and where students may experience anxiety or self-doubt when evaluated against “standard” English benchmarks. For Thai learners, GELT reduces pressure related to accent, fluency, and correctness—factors that often exacerbate classroom silence—and encourages communicative competence over perfectionism. It also legitimizes students' own linguistic repertoires and encourages teachers to incorporate diverse, regionally relevant Englishes into instruction.

When integrated, CRP and GELT offer a powerful framework for addressing Thai classroom silence as both a cultural and linguistic issue. CRP centers the learner's identity, emotional safety, and cultural relevance, while GELT provides the linguistic flexibility and inclusivity necessary to reduce participation anxiety. Together, they support instructional strategies that are not only inclusive and localized but also dialogic and empowering. This paper applies this dual framework to conceptualize classroom silence as a product of broader socio-institutional dynamics rather than individual student resistance, and to propose actionable strategies for cultivating a participatory EFL environment. By doing so, it contributes to an emerging body of research advocating for contextualized, culturally grounded approaches in global English language teaching.



A Culturally Responsive Framework for Thai EFL Classrooms

Practical Strategies for Encouraging Participation

Integrating culturally relevant content into EFL instruction can help bridge the gap between students' lived experiences and classroom learning. Huttayavilaiphan (2024) argues that incorporating local cultural references in lessons reduces the cognitive load associated with foreign contexts, making learning more accessible and engaging. Similarly, Reskyani et al. (2024) highlights that culturally responsive teaching fosters greater student motivation by validating their experiences in the learning process.

Moreover, textbooks and classroom materials should be adapted to feature English use within Thai contexts, such as bilingual business settings, tourism interactions, and digital communication (Huttayavilaiphan, 2024). By demonstrating English as a functional tool within students' cultural reality, educators can foster greater motivation and confidence in language use (Montakantiwong, 2024). Encouraging students to contribute their own cultural knowledge to class discussions can promote active learning and strengthen their sense of belonging (Charoensilp, 2024).

One of the most effective ways to counteract classroom silence is through structured participation strategies that lower students' anxiety while encouraging verbal engagement. Teachers can implement scaffolded speaking tasks, which gradually increase in complexity, allowing students to build confidence before participating in open discussions.

For example, a three-step speaking activity can be introduced:

1. **Think-Pair-Share:** Students first write their thoughts privately, then discuss them with a partner before sharing with the class.
2. **Role-playing Scenarios:** Assign students culturally familiar scenarios where they practice speaking in structured dialogues, such as ordering food at a Thai restaurant or presenting a travel itinerary.
3. **Low-stakes Group Discussions:** Small group conversations where students reflect on daily experiences or personal opinions in English before engaging in whole-class discussions.

Additionally, the use of technology-assisted engagement can help students participate in ways that feel less intimidating. Digital platforms like Padlet, Kahoot, or Flipgrid allow students to record responses or share written thoughts before verbalizing them in class discussions. This approach helps bridge the gap between passive participation and verbal engagement by gradually acclimating students to self-expression in English.

Localized Teaching Materials

One critical aspect of culturally responsive pedagogy is integrating localized teaching materials that reflect students' cultural contexts. Studies have shown that when students engage with familiar topics and cultural references, they experience lower anxiety and greater motivation to participate in discussions (Huttayavilaiphan, 2024). However, most EFL textbooks in Thailand continue to rely on Western narratives, which may feel disconnected from students' lived experiences. This misalignment can lead to disengagement and reluctance to speak in class, as students struggle to find relevance in the content.

To address this, educators should adapt textbooks, lesson plans, and assessments to include Thai traditions, local historical figures, and real-life social interactions that reflect their lived cultural experiences (Charoensilp, 2024). For example, instead of teaching hypothetical conversations about Western holidays, students could engage in dialogues about Songkran or Loy Krathong, reinforcing both linguistic and cultural knowledge. Additionally, using local news articles, Thai-English bilingual texts, and real-world scenarios can make English feel more applicable to students' lives, fostering engagement and confidence in communication.



Another key strategy is code-switching, where teachers strategically incorporate Thai alongside English to bridge linguistic gaps. Research suggests that allowing students to express initial thoughts in their native language before transitioning to English improves both comprehension and retention (Pattapong, 2015). Rather than viewing Thai as an obstacle, teachers can leverage it as a scaffold for deeper learning, gradually encouraging full English use in communicative activities.

Technology Integration for Increased Engagement

With the rise of digital learning, technology offers innovative solutions for reducing classroom silence and encouraging participation. Many Thai EFL students feel hesitant to speak in large group settings due to cultural norms of deference and fear of making mistakes. However, research indicates that students who are reluctant to speak in face-to-face discussions feel more comfortable engaging through digital platforms, as these provide a sense of psychological safety (Phetsut & Waemusa, 2022).

Educators can integrate interactive digital tools that allow for low-pressure participation before oral discussions. For example, students can use Google Docs, Padlet, or collaborative discussion boards to write initial responses before verbalizing their thoughts in class (Kacatl & Klímová, 2019). This process lowers anxiety, allowing students to rehearse their ideas in writing first. Similarly, asynchronous video tools like Flipgrid enable students to record responses at their own pace, helping them develop speaking confidence without immediate peer pressure (Boonmoh & Kulavichian, 2023).

Beyond fostering participation, technology also personalizes learning by allowing students to engage with English in ways that align with their digital habits. Huttayavilaiphan (2024) discusses digital engagement and the role of media in Thai EFL classrooms, and given the popularity of social media in Thailand, teachers can incorporate English-language social media challenges, where students create and share short videos, captions, or discussions on trending topics. This not only promotes language practice in a real-world context but also empowers students to use English as a tool for self-expression rather than just an academic requirement.

Fostering Student Autonomy Through Project-Based Learning

Another essential component of a culturally responsive classroom is fostering student autonomy through Project-Based Learning (PBL). Traditional rote memorization and teacher-centered instruction often reinforce passivity in Thai classrooms, making it difficult for students to develop critical thinking and speaking confidence. However, PBL shifts the focus from passive learning to active problem-solving, encouraging students to take ownership of their learning process through culturally grounded participation (Charoensilp, 2024).

Rather than relying solely on scripted dialogues, teachers can assign real-world projects where students research, collaborate, and present findings in English. For example, students might:

- Conduct interviews with bilingual professionals to understand how English is used in Thai workplaces.
- Create video presentations on Thai cultural traditions for an international audience.
- Develop English-language travel guides showcasing local tourist destinations.

These activities not only enhance linguistic skills but also boost engagement by demonstrating English as a practical tool beyond the classroom such as those discussed by Montakantiwong (2024). Additionally, PBL encourages peer collaboration, reducing individual pressure and creating a supportive, interactive learning environment.

Another strategy is student-led discussions, where learners take turns moderating classroom conversations on familiar topics. This reverses the traditional classroom dynamic, placing students in leadership roles while



fostering confidence in their spoken English. Research indicates that when students have more control over their learning process, they are more likely to engage actively and meaningfully in classroom discussions, particularly when institutional and interpersonal dynamics are acknowledged (Hongboontri et al., 2021).

Encouraging Multimodal Learning Strategies

To complement project-based learning, educators should incorporate multimodal learning approaches, which blend visual, auditory, and kinesthetic elements to enhance engagement. Research indicates that students who experience varied instructional methods develop stronger retention and comprehension skills (Kacetyl & Klímová, 2019). For example, instructors can integrate:

Video-based storytelling, such as mobile based learning as discussed in Boonmoh and Kulavichian (2023), where students create digital narratives about cultural traditions, fostering both linguistic and creative expression. Kacetyl and Klímová (2019) also expressed support for gamification and digital learning in language acquisition.

Collaborative podcasts, where groups discuss relevant social issues in English, encouraging natural speech development.

Gamification strategies, such as Kahoot quizzes or interactive simulations, to make language practice more immersive and low-pressure.

These blended learning techniques provide alternative participation channels, allowing students to engage in English communication beyond direct speaking tasks, which can be intimidating.

Enhancing Teacher Training for Culturally Responsive Pedagogy

While adapting classroom strategies is crucial, teacher preparedness is equally vital. Reskyani et al. (2024) found that many Thai EFL instructors are trained in traditional, grammar-focused methodologies, which often do not emphasize communicative competence. They emphasize that teacher training programs must include workshops that build intercultural sensitivity and culturally responsive teaching practices, which Charoensilp (2024) found to be significantly correlated in Thai teachers. Additionally, Huttayavilaiphan (2024) advocate for continuous professional development programs that train teachers to balance global English perspectives with local cultural needs. To address this, teacher training programs should incorporate culturally responsive pedagogy workshops, where educators learn how to:

- Identify and acknowledge cultural barriers to student participation.
- Design inclusive, culturally relevant lesson plans that align with students' lived experiences.
- Apply Global Englishes perspectives to de-emphasize native-speaker norms and encourage fluency over accuracy.
- Implement reflective teaching practices, where educators analyze classroom interactions and adjust their approach to foster engagement.

Furthermore, peer mentorship programs can be introduced, where experienced teachers who have successfully implemented participatory strategies mentor newer educators. Charoensilp (2024) emphasizes the role of intercultural competence in shaping teacher receptivity to culturally responsive mentorship models. This kind of support network allows for ongoing professional development and adaptation of best practices.

Institutional Support and Policy Recommendations

For meaningful and sustainable change, institutions must provide structured support for culturally responsive teaching. Huttayavilaiphan (2024) stresses that resource banks of culturally relevant materials should be developed to give teachers access to localized textbooks, media, and assessments. Furthermore, institutions should conduct



regular professional development seminars that address intercultural classroom contexts and promote CRP best practices (Charoensilp, 2024). Research also suggests that implementing student feedback mechanisms can enhance instructional effectiveness by allowing educators to adjust strategies based on learners' classroom experiences, identities, and participation barriers (Hongboontri et al., 2021).

For meaningful and sustainable change, institutions must provide structured support for culturally responsive teaching. Schools and universities should:

- Develop resource banks of culturally relevant materials, ensuring that teachers have access to localized textbooks, media, and assessments.
- Integrate participatory learning expectations into language curricula, ensuring that student engagement is prioritized alongside grammatical competence.
- Conduct regular professional development seminars that train educators in modern, interactive teaching methods.
- Establish feedback systems, where students can express their preferences for instructional styles, allowing for continuous adaptation of EFL pedagogy.

By creating institutional frameworks that prioritize cultural responsiveness, educational institutions can ensure that teachers are well-equipped to implement strategies that enhance student participation and linguistic confidence.

Challenges and Recommendations

Challenges in Implementing Culturally Responsive Pedagogy

Despite the benefits of culturally responsive teaching, several structural and institutional barriers hinder its implementation in Thai EFL classrooms. One of the most significant challenges is institutional resistance to pedagogical change. Many Thai schools and universities continue to rely on traditional, teacher-centered instruction, prioritizing grammatical accuracy and standardized assessments over communicative competence (Pattapong, 2015). This outdated model discourages teachers from experimenting with interactive, student-led learning approaches, reinforcing classroom silence and passive participation.

Another major obstacle is the dominance of standardized assessments in Thailand's education system. High-stakes exams such as the Ordinary National Educational Test (O-NET) and General Aptitude Test (GAT) heavily emphasize reading comprehension and writing proficiency, while listening and speaking skills are often marginalized due to test-driven instructional culture (Hongboontri et al., 2021). As a result, teachers feel pressure to focus on test-oriented instruction rather than fostering verbal communication. This test-driven culture discourages risk-taking and spontaneous speaking, as students are conditioned to prioritize correctness over fluency.

Furthermore, the lack of culturally relevant teaching materials creates an additional barrier. Many Thai EFL textbooks are imported from Western publishers, featuring content that may feel unfamiliar or irrelevant to students (Huttayavilaiphan, 2024). Without exposure to English in Thai-specific contexts, students may struggle to see the practical value of language learning, leading to disengagement. Teachers often lack institutional support and funding to develop their own materials, further limiting their ability to implement culturally responsive instruction.

Lastly, teacher preparedness is a critical issue. Many Thai EFL instructors have limited training in communicative methodologies and may lack the confidence to implement student-centered, discussion-based activities that reflect students' cultural identities and promote engagement (Charoensilp, 2024). Without adequate

professional development, teachers may default to rote instruction, reinforcing passive classroom behaviors and failing to address students' speaking anxiety.

The Role of Institutional Incentives and Teacher Autonomy

Beyond curriculum constraints, institutional policies rarely incentivize educators to adopt culturally responsive pedagogy. Many teachers face rigid lesson structures, time limitations, and administrative expectations that prioritize exam performance over interactive learning, reinforcing classroom passivity (Hongboontri et al., 2021). Additionally, teacher evaluations in Thai schools often emphasize students' standardized test results, discouraging instructors from experimenting with student-centered, discussion-based methods designed to bridge cultural norms and classroom interaction (Charoensilp, 2024).

Without institutional flexibility, educators may feel disempowered to modify their teaching approaches, even if they recognize the benefits of culturally responsive instruction. A top-down reform in policy and professional development is necessary to grant teachers the autonomy and support needed to implement participatory teaching models successfully.

Recommendations for Overcoming Barriers

Assessment Reform to Prioritize Speaking Skills

One of the most effective ways to increase student participation is to reform assessment methods so that verbal communication is recognized as a key component of language proficiency. Standardized exams should include speaking components, rewarding fluency and communicative effectiveness rather than just grammatical accuracy (Phetsut & Waemusa, 2022). Additionally, teachers can implement alternative assessment methods, such as:

- Portfolio-based speaking assessments, where students submit audio recordings over time.
- Peer and self-assessments, allowing students to evaluate their own speaking progress.
- Task-based oral presentations, ensuring real-world application of English.

Reforming Assessment Methods

To encourage more participatory learning environments, institutions must reconsider how student success is measured. Current standardized assessments, which prioritize written skills, should be restructured to include oral proficiency components that reward communicative competence. Studies have shown that when speaking and listening skills are formally assessed, students are more likely to engage in verbal classroom activities (Phetsut & Waemusa, 2022). This shift would not only promote greater classroom participation but also align EFL instruction with real-world communication demands.

Enhancing Teacher Training and Support Networks

Equipping teachers with the knowledge and skills needed to implement culturally responsive teaching is critical. Institutions should:

- Develop mandatory professional development workshops focused on cultural inclusivity and student-centered learning approaches rooted in intercultural sensitivity (Charoensilp, 2024).
- Establish mentorship programs where experienced educators can guide newer teachers in implementing participatory teaching methods.
- Integrate culturally responsive teaching strategies into teacher education programs, ensuring future instructors have both pedagogical and intercultural training (Boonmoh & Kulavichian, 2023; Charoensilp, 2024).



Institutional Support and Policy Recommendations

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Bridging the Gap Between Policy and Classroom Practice

Effective policy implementation requires direct collaboration between educational policymakers, teacher trainers, and classroom practitioners. Schools should:

- Establish teacher-led focus groups to assess the impact of curriculum modifications on classroom engagement.
- Develop adaptive assessment policies that include verbal proficiency and spoken interaction as core components of language competence (Hongboontri et al., 2021).
- Provide financial support for schools to develop Thai-specific teaching resources, reducing dependence on Western-published textbooks (Huttayavilaiphan, 2024).

These reforms must be reinforced by ongoing evaluation, ensuring that teachers receive adequate guidance and students benefit from improved participation opportunities.

Conclusion

Classroom silence in Thai EFL education is not merely a matter of pedagogy—it reflects a complex intersection of cultural values, institutional expectations, and assessment structures that shape student behavior. While culturally responsive pedagogy offers a promising framework for bridging these divides, meaningful change requires more than classroom innovation. It calls for systemic investment in teacher training, assessment reform, and policy alignment.

Drawing on Global Englishes and CRP, this paper has argued that engagement strategies must be culturally grounded, linguistically inclusive, and institutionally supported. Localized materials, scaffolded participation models, and reflective professional development are key components of this approach.

Importantly, Thailand does not face this challenge alone. Across ASEAN, countries like Malaysia and Vietnam have begun revising curricula to prioritize communicative competence over rote memorization—offering valuable models for regional adaptation. Comparative research could deepen our understanding of how Southeast Asian learners navigate silence, hierarchy, and second language acquisition.

Future studies should investigate the long-term impacts of CRP-based interventions in Thai EFL classrooms, particularly how they affect students' confidence, participation, and real-world English use. By building culturally inclusive, student-centered classrooms, Thailand can cultivate not only language proficiency but also empowered communicators prepared for a globalized world.



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