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มนุษยศาสตร์และสังคมศาสตร์ มหาวิทยาลัยราชภัฏอุตรดิตถ์

Learner Silence and Strategic Pausing in Thai EFL Classrooms:
A Conversation Analysis-Informed Study

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Waraporn Mingkwan^{1*} and Phanintra Teeranon¹

¹School of Liberal Arts, University of Phayao

*Corresponding author e-mail: 64113252@up.ac.th

Abstract

The objective of this research was to investigate interactional challenges in Thai EFL classrooms, particularly learner silence and anxiety during interactions with foreign instructors, through the integration of Conversation Analysis (CA) and Classroom Interactional Competence (CIC). This study adopted a qualitative, Conversation Analysis (CA)-based approach, analyzing classroom interaction data from 28 English major students categorized into high, intermediate, and low proficiency levels. The findings revealed a significant disparity in interactional patterns; low-proficiency learners exhibited a silence-to-turn ratio nearly three times higher than their high-proficiency counterparts, with average pauses exceeding 2.0 seconds. While silence among high-proficiency learners functioned as cognitive processing for self-repair, it often resulted in interactional breakdowns among lower-proficiency learners. Based on these empirical findings, the study developed a Conversation Analysis-informed pedagogical framework centered on “Strategic Pausing.” The framework includes four key guidelines: differentiating wait-time based on proficiency levels, utilizing interactional fillers to support turn-holding, employing face-sensitive repair strategies, and balancing teacher-student talk time. This framework reconceptualizes classroom silence as an interactional resource and provides a data-driven foundation for enhancing Classroom Interactional Competence (CIC) in Thai EFL contexts.

Keywords: Conversation analysis (CA), Classroom interactional competence (CIC), Proficiency-based comparison, Learner silence, Strategic pausing



Introduction

Classroom interaction is widely recognized not merely as a medium for instruction but as the central engine of Second Language Acquisition (SLA). According to the sociocultural perspective, learning is a socially situated activity where knowledge is co-constructed through dialogue (Walsh, 2011). In the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), where exposure to the target language is often limited to the classroom setting, the quality of interaction becomes even more critical. Effective interactional practices allow learners to test hypotheses, negotiate meaning, and receive immediate feedback, thereby transforming the classroom into a dynamic space for learning rather than a static venue for information transmission (Long, 1996; Sert, 2019). Consequently, understanding the micro-mechanisms of this interaction is essential for fostering what Walsh (2012) terms “Classroom Interactional Competence” (CIC), which maximizes learning opportunities.

Despite the theoretical importance of interaction, EFL classrooms in Thailand frequently face significant challenges, particularly when led by foreign teachers. A recurring issue documented in the literature is the prevalence of learner silence and reticence (Teng & Sinwongsuwat, 2015). Unlike Western educational norms that prioritize active verbal engagement, Thai learners are often influenced by cultural values such as “face-saving” and a high reverence for hierarchy, which can manifest as an unwillingness to communicate (WTC) or anxiety about making errors in front of native speakers (Somsai & Intaraprasert, 2011; Teng & Sinwongsuwat, 2015). Furthermore, recent studies highlight a significant “disconnect” in interactional expectations between Thai students and foreign instructors (Teng & Sinwongsuwat, 2015). This disconnect often stems from a fundamental conflict between Western educational norms and the Eastern ‘respect-based’ learning approach, where silence is frequently utilized as a cognitive strategy and a mark of respect (Kang & Chang, 2016). Consequently, these cultural disparities often lead to sequences of silence that may be misinterpreted by instructors as a lack of knowledge or motivation, rather than a culturally conditioned response. These interactional challenges highlight the need for a more nuanced understanding of how silence functions within classroom discourse and how it can be pedagogically managed rather than simply avoided.

To address these challenges, Conversation Analysis (CA) has emerged as a powerful methodological tool for uncovering the minute details of classroom talk, such as turn-taking, repair, and sequence organization (Schegloff et al., 1977; Seedhouse, 2004). However, a critical gap remains in the application of CA within the Thai EFL context. While existing research has successfully described the interactional patterns and identified problems found in EFL classrooms (analytical orientation), relatively few studies have operationalized these interactional insights into pedagogically actionable frameworks. As a result, CA remains underutilized as a “developmental tool” that can directly inform instructional strategies and enhance teachers’ Classroom Interactional Competence (CIC), particularly in



contexts characterized by learner silence and intercultural communication challenges. (Han, 2024; Moorhouse et al., 2023).

Addressing this gap, the present study adopts an empirical, Conversation Analysis (CA)-based approach to investigate interactional dynamics in Thai EFL classrooms. Specifically, the study aims to:

1. analyze classroom interactional patterns, particularly turn-taking and silence, across learners with different proficiency levels;
2. identify interactional challenges, including prolonged silence and breakdowns in adjacency pairs; and
3. develop a Conversation Analysis-informed methodological and pedagogical framework to enhance classroom interaction and support the development of Classroom Interactional Competence (CIC).

By linking micro-analytic findings with pedagogical applications, this research seeks to demonstrate how CA can be transformed from a purely analytical instrument into a practical resource for identifying interactional breakdowns and fostering more active student participation.

Literature Review

1. Classroom Interaction in EFL and Classroom Interactional Competence (CIC)

In the field of Second Language Acquisition (SLA), classroom interaction is no longer viewed solely as a mechanism for practicing language forms, but as the very site where learning is co-constructed. Central to this perspective is the concept of Classroom Interactional Competence (CIC), defined by Walsh (2011) as “teachers’ and learners’ ability to use interaction as a tool for mediating and assisting learning”. Unlike general communicative competence, CIC emphasizes the specific interplay between pedagogical goals and language use in the moment-by-moment unfolding of a lesson.

Recent longitudinal studies extend this view, suggesting that CIC is not static but develops over time through repeated participation in discursive practices. For instance, Balaman (2025) highlights that as learners gain experience with classroom routines, they develop more sophisticated interactional repertoires, moving from passive recipients to active negotiators of meaning. Furthermore, effective interaction requires a delicate balance; Moorhouse et al (2023) argue that when teachers possess high CIC, they create “space for learning”, allowing students to take extended turns and engage in higher order thinking, whereas poor interactional management can inadvertently shut down communication.

While these studies establish the importance of Classroom Interactional Competence (CIC) in facilitating learning, they often focus primarily on general interactional practices and teacher strategies. However, they pay limited attention to how specific sociocultural factors—particularly in non-Western contexts such as Thailand—shape learners’ participation in real-time interaction. As a result, the role of



culturally embedded behaviors, such as learner silence influenced by “*Kreng-jai*,” remains insufficiently explored within the CIC framework.

2. Conversation Analysis (CA) in Educational Settings

Conversation Analysis (CA) provides a robust methodological framework for examining the “interactional architecture” (Walsh, 2006) of the language classroom. Originating from the work of Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson (1974), CA treats social interaction as structurally organized and orderly. In educational settings, CA moves beyond coding schemes to reveal how participants orient to the institutional goal of “doing teaching and learning”.

While CA has traditionally been used for descriptive analysis, recent scholarship advocates for its application as a pedagogical intervention. Han (2024) proposes a shift from purely analyzing conversation to fostering interaction, arguing that when teachers understand CA concepts—such as *turn-taking*, *sequence organization*, and *repair*—they can diagnose interactional breakdowns more effectively. For example, analyzing “wait-time” through a CA lens reveals that silence is not merely an absence of speech but a complex interactional space that teachers can manage to facilitate learner self-repair and cognitive processing.

Although recent studies have highlighted the pedagogical potential of Conversation Analysis (CA), much of the existing research remains analytically oriented, focusing on describing interactional structures rather than translating these insights into practical teaching strategies. Consequently, there is a need for research that bridges micro-analytic findings with pedagogical applications, particularly in EFL contexts where interactional challenges are shaped by both linguistic and cultural factors.

3. Interactional Challenges for Thai Learners: Silence, Face, and Power

Despite the benefits of active interaction, Thai EFL classrooms are frequently characterized by learner reticence, a phenomenon deeply rooted in sociocultural norms. While research consistently identifies “silence” as a major barrier when Thai students interact with foreign teachers, recent studies challenge the view that this silence merely indicates a lack of engagement. Kang & Chang (2016) argues that for students from Confucius-heritage cultures, including Thailand, silence often serves as a cognitive strategy for reflective thinking and a mark of respect for the teacher’s authority. Therefore, reticence in Thai EFL classrooms should be re-evaluated not as a deficit, but as a culturally conditioned behavior aimed at maintaining group harmony and saving face.

To fully understand this phenomenon, three specific cultural factors that significantly impact interactional patterns in the Thai context must be considered:

Power Distance and Hierarchy

The Thai educational system is traditionally hierarchical, placing the teacher at a superior status. This creates a dynamic where students are reluctant to initiate turns or question the teacher, fearing it may be perceived as a challenge to authority.

Face-Saving (*Kreng-jai*)

In the Thai sociocultural context, “*Kreng-jai*” refers to a strong sense of consideration and the avoidance of causing discomfort or loss of face to others. This cultural norm leads learners to avoid actions that might embarrass themselves or others, such as giving incorrect answers or openly disagreeing, often resulting in hesitation or prolonged silence during classroom interaction.

Communication Anxiety

The pressure to perform correctly in front of a “native speaker” exacerbates anxiety. When foreign teachers misinterpret Thai silence as a refusal to participate, they often fill the silence themselves, inadvertently reinforcing the students’ passive role and denying them the opportunity to develop interactional competence.

4. Language Proficiency and Interactional Competence

While CIC is essential for all learners, linguistic proficiency significantly shapes the nature of classroom interaction. According to recent studies, high-proficiency learners often possess a wider interactional repertoire, allowing them to engage in ‘online’ self-repair and produce extended turns. Conversely, low-proficiency learners frequently face a higher ‘cognitive load,’ which results in prolonged silence and a reliance on ‘code-switching’ as an interactional strategy (Walsh, 2012). This study builds on these findings by comparing how Thai EFL students at different proficiency levels navigate the interactional architecture of the classroom.

Specifically, prolonged silence in low-proficiency groups often signifies interactional breakdowns and systemic difficulties in turn-management (Lo, 2017), as opposed to a deliberate choice of reticence. Distinguishing between these functions is essential for accurately interpreting the diverse roles of silence across varying levels of linguistic competence.

Taken together, the literature suggests that classroom interaction in Thai EFL contexts is shaped by the interplay of three key dimensions: (1) interactional mechanisms examined through Conversation Analysis (e.g., turn-taking, repair, and sequence organization), (2) sociocultural factors such as face-saving and “*Kreng-jai*,” and (3) learners’ linguistic proficiency levels. However, these dimensions are often examined in isolation. This study seeks to integrate these elements into a unified analytical and pedagogical framework, as illustrated in Figure 1.

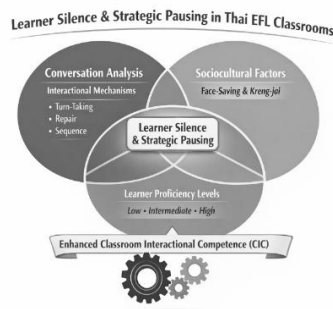


Figure 1 Conceptual Framework of Learner Silence and Strategic Pausing in Thai EFL Classrooms

Source: (ChatGPT, 2026)

Figure 1 illustrates the interaction among three key dimensions influencing classroom interaction in Thai EFL contexts. Conversation Analysis (CA) provides the analytical lens through interactional mechanisms such as turn-taking, repair, and sequence organization. Sociocultural factors, particularly face-saving and “Krong-jai,” shape learners’ participation and interactional behavior. In addition, learners’ linguistic proficiency levels influence cognitive load and the ability to manage interaction. The intersection of these dimensions results in different forms of learner silence, ranging from interactional lapses to strategic pausing. These insights inform the development of pedagogical strategies aimed at enhancing Classroom Interactional Competence (CIC).

Conversation Analysis as an Analytical Framework

To investigate the intricate dynamics of Thai EFL classrooms, this study adopts Conversation Analysis (CA) as its primary methodological lens. Unlike other qualitative approaches that may rely on participants' retrospective accounts (e.g., interviews), CA focuses exclusively on the observable, "here-and-now" details of interaction. By treating classroom talk as a structured social institution, CA allows the researcher to uncover the "interactional architecture" that governs how teaching and learning are accomplished—or hindered—moment by moment.

To operationalize this framework, the analysis focuses on five core interactional mechanisms established in foundational CA literature and applied to educational settings:

1. Turn-Taking

The organization of "who speaks when" is fundamental to classroom order. While ordinary conversation allows for free turn allocation, classroom interaction is often characterized by the teacher’s control over the floor. Analyzing turn-taking mechanisms reveals how participation opportunities are distributed and how Thai learners may struggle to "self-select" or bid for turns due to the cultural norms of hierarchy previously discussed.



This is the fundamental mechanism organizing "who speaks when" (Sacks et al., 1974). In classrooms, this is often characterized by Teacher Nomination (the teacher selects the next speaker) or Self-selection (students bid for a turn). Analyzing turn-taking reveals power dynamics and participation opportunities (Lo, 2017).

2. Adjacency Pairs

Classroom talk is heavily structured around paired actions, such as Greeting-Greeting or, most crucially, Question-Answer sequences. In an EFL context, the failure to complete an adjacency pair—such as a student responding to a teacher's question with prolonged silence—is not merely an absence of speech but an "accountable" action that signals interactional trouble or a lack of comprehension.

These are parallel actions, such as Question-Answer or Greeting-Response, where the first utterance (First Pair Part) creates an expectation for a specific type of second utterance (Second Pair Part) (Schegloff & Sacks, 1973; Yule, 1996). Failures to complete these pairs often signal interactional trouble.

3. Sequence Organization

Beyond simple pairs, CA examines how turns are chained together to form sequences. This includes *pre-sequences* (e.g., checking readiness before asking a question) and *insertion sequences* (e.g., asking for clarification). Understanding sequence organization helps identify how teachers scaffold learning and how students negotiate meaning before committing to a final answer.

This looks at how actions are ordered, including pre-sequences or insertion sequences (e.g., asking for clarification before answering a question) (Stivers, 2021). It reflects how learners manage understanding before committing to an answer.

4. Repair

Repair refers to the mechanisms used to address problems in speaking, hearing, or understanding. In language classrooms, the distinction between "pedagogical correction" (focusing on accuracy) and "conversational repair" (focusing on mutual understanding) is vital. Analyzing whether repair is self-initiated (by the student) or other-initiated (by the teacher) provides insight into the learner's autonomy and the teacher's ability to facilitate "space for learning". This refers to the mechanisms used to address problems in speaking, hearing, or understanding. Repairs can be self-initiated (by the speaker) or other-initiated (by the teacher/peer) (Schegloff, Jefferson, & Sacks, 1977).

In the context of repair, the use of "Interactional Fillers" (e.g., uhm, well, let me see) serves as a crucial mechanism for maintaining the floor. For Thai learners, transitioning from a silent "lapse" to a "strategic pause" using these fillers is a key indicator of developing CIC. This allows the learner to signal that a repair is in progress, thereby preventing the teacher from prematurely completing the turn for them (Other-repair).

5. Preference Organization

CA distinguishes between 'preferred' responses (usually immediate and direct) and

‘dispreferred’ responses (delayed, mitigated, or hesitant). In Thai EFL classrooms, learner silence or the use of delay markers (e.g., “Umm...”) often functions as a dispreferred response. CA enables the researcher to decode these signals not as refusals, but as indicators of cognitive processing or face-saving strategies.

This concept distinguishes between ‘preferred’ responses (usually immediate and direct) and ‘dispreferred’ responses (often delayed, hesitant, or silent) (Tudini & Liddicoat, 2017). In an EFL context, delays often signal anxiety or cognitive processing issues rather than mere refusal.

The Rationale for Conversation Analysis (CA)

The selection of Conversation Analysis (CA) is driven by its unique capacity to bridge the gap between “what happens” in the classroom and “how” it happens through a micro-analytic lens. As a diagnostic tool, CA moves beyond general observations of learner passivity to pinpoint the exact sequential environments where participation breaks down, such as the interplay between question design and wait-time. Furthermore, Han (2024) argues that CA provides “micro-analytic evidence” that makes implicit interactional rules explicit, offering a concrete foundation for teacher development and pedagogical intervention.

Crucially, CA analyzes interaction from the participants’ perspective, which is essential for avoiding cultural bias when interpreting Thai learners’ silence. By validating these behaviors within their specific sociocultural context, CA ensures that subsequent pedagogical interventions are both culturally sensitive and evidence based. This analytical foundation underpins the research design of the present study and supports the development of a Conversation Analysis-informed pedagogical framework, as illustrated in Figure 1.

Research Design and Analytical Procedures

This study adopts a qualitative, data-driven approach grounded in Conversation Analysis (CA) to examine naturally occurring classroom interaction. Consistent with the principles of CA, the study focuses on the micro-analysis of turn-taking, silence, and repair sequences as they unfold in real-time interaction. This approach enables a detailed comparison of interactional patterns across learners with different proficiency levels, thereby directly addressing the research objectives of the study. In line with CA methodology, the study does not aim for statistical generalization but for analytic generalization through detailed examination of interactional practices.

1. Research Setting

The study was conducted in a higher education context in Northern Thailand. The research site was an undergraduate English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom at a Rajabhat University, specifically a “Listening and Speaking II” course. This course was selected because it prioritizes oral



interaction, making it an ideal setting for observing real-time negotiation of meaning and interactional competence. The classroom operates under a task-based learning approach designed to promote student-centered interaction.

2. Participants

The participants consisted of 28 first-year undergraduate English majors at a Rajabhat University ($N=28$), categorized into high, intermediate, and low proficiency levels based on their mid-term scores. The distribution of the student participants is detailed in Table 1. Additionally, the course was led by a male Irish native English speaker with over five years of experience in higher education, whose classroom practices and interactional management provided an important contextual backdrop for interpreting the interactional data.

Table 1 Distribution of Participants by English Proficiency Levels

Proficiency Level	Number ($N=28$)	Percentage (%)	Mean Score
High	9	32.14%	≥ 25.0
Intermediate	12	42.86%	18.0 – 24.9
Low	7	25%	< 18.0
Total	28	100%	

Table 1 illustrates that the largest segment of the sample is the intermediate group (42.86%), while the high and low proficiency groups comprise 32.14% and 25.00%, respectively. This categorization provides the analytical basis for comparing interactional patterns—particularly silence, turn-taking, and repair—across different proficiency levels.

The sample size of 28 participants is considered appropriate for Conversation Analysis, which prioritizes depth of analysis over statistical generalization. Rather than aiming for representativeness, CA focuses on detailed examination of interactional phenomena within naturally occurring data. The selected participants provide sufficient interactional data to allow for systematic comparison across proficiency levels and to identify recurring patterns of silence, turn-taking, and repair.

3. Data Collection

Consistent with the principles of Conversation Analysis, this study relied on naturally occurring data rather than experimental or elicited production. The primary data set comprised 12 hours of video and audio recordings, supplemented by ethnographic field notes. Two video cameras were positioned to capture both the teacher's front-of-class instruction and the students' multimodal reactions, such as gestures and eye gaze. To ensure the capture of low-volume peer interactions, high-quality audio recorders were placed within student groups (Sert, 2019). Additionally, non-participant observation was conducted to provide ethnographic context, including the physical classroom layout and ambient factors

influencing interaction (Walsh, 2011). This dataset was selected to enable detailed examination of interactional patterns, particularly silence, turn-taking, and repair, across learners with different proficiency levels.

4. Transcription and Analytical Procedures

The raw audio-visual data was transcribed using the Jefferson (2004) standardized system, which captures temporal aspects (e.g., micro-pauses and timed silence), prosodic features, overlapping speech, and non-verbal cues (Hepburn & Bolden, 2012). These transcription conventions are essential for capturing fine-grained interactional details, particularly micro-pauses and timing, which are central to the analysis of wait-time and interactional trouble in this study. Following transcription, the analysis employed an inductive, data-driven approach (Seedhouse, 2004). This process involved "unmotivated looking" to identify emerging patterns, followed by "collection building" of specific phenomena, such as teacher-initiated repair and extended silence. Each instance was subjected to sequential analysis to examine how participants oriented and resolved interactional problems, thereby grounding the analysis in participants' own orientations rather than the researcher's assumptions. To ensure analytic rigor, multiple instances of each interactional phenomenon were examined across the dataset to identify recurrent patterns rather than isolated occurrences.

5. Pedagogical Interpretation

Finally, the interactional findings were interpreted through the lens of Walsh's (2011) Classroom Interactional Competence (CIC) framework. This stage involved mapping micro-analytic CA findings onto pedagogical goals to develop a Conversation Analysis-informed pedagogical framework. By bridging the gap between observable interactional behaviors and instructional objectives, the analysis provides a data-driven foundation for enhancing teacher-student talk-time balance and managing strategic pausing across different proficiency levels.

Results

1. Participant Profiles

The study analyzed interactional data from a total of 28 first-year undergraduate English major students. Based on their mid-term examination scores, participants were categorized into three distinct proficiency levels to facilitate a comparative analysis of their interactional patterns. As illustrated in Table 1, the largest group consisted of intermediate learners, representing 42.86% (n=12) of the total sample. High-proficiency learners accounted for 32.14% (n=9), while the low-proficiency group comprised the remaining 25.00% (n=7). This distribution ensures a representative cross-section of the classroom population, allowing for a rigorous examination of how varying linguistic competence influences silence, turn-taking, and overall classroom interactional competence (CIC).



2. Comparative Analysis of Interactional Patterns

The analysis of classroom interaction reveals significant disparities in how learners across different proficiency levels manage silence and turn-taking. The quantitative findings regarding pausing durations and interactional characteristics are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2 Comparison of Interactional Patterns and Silence across Proficiency Levels

Proficiency Level	Prop. (%)	Avg. Silence/Pause	Interactional Characteristics
High	9 (32.14%)	0.5 – 0.7 sec	Extended turns, active self-correction
Intermediate	12 (42.86%)	0.8 – 1.2 sec	Minimal responses, requires prompting
Low	7 (25%)	1.5 – 2.0+ sec	Prolonged silence, frequent code-switching

As shown in Table 2, there is a clear correlation between linguistic competence and the duration of silence. Low-proficiency learners exhibited significantly longer pauses (1.5 - 2.0+ seconds) compared to the high-proficiency group, whose brief pauses (0.5 - 0.7 seconds) were often used for self-correction and turn expansion.

3. Sequential Analysis of Classroom Excerpts

This section provides a micro-analytic examination of classroom excerpts to demonstrate the interactional disparities in turn-management and silence usage across different proficiency levels.

Excerpt 1: Strategic Pausing and Self-Repair (High Proficiency Group)

This excerpt illustrates how high-proficiency learners utilize pauses for cognitive processing and self-initiated repair without losing the floor.

02 T: ...can you tell me about your daily routine.

03 let's go one by one. ((looked at all the students, smiled, and nodded))

04 S01?

05 S01: (0.6) uh:: I wake up around six,

06 then I go to university by: bus.

07 after class (.) I usually do assignments. ((smiled at the teacher))

In line 05, S01 exhibits a brief pause (0.6 seconds) accompanied by the interactional filler "uh::". According to Van Zant et al. (2025), this characterizes "Strategic Pausing," where silence does not signal a breakdown but rather the speaker's confidence in maintaining the floor to formulate complex syntactic structures. This results in an Extended Learner Turn, a key indicator of high Classroom Interactional Competence (CIC).

Excerpt 2: Interactional Lapse and Silence (Low Proficiency Group)

In contrast, this excerpt demonstrates "empty silence," which leads to a fragmented interactional flow.

27 T: S06?

28 S06: (2.0) uh:: (.) wake up.

29 (0.5) sleep, (0.3) more.

30 T: O-kay.

S06 (Low Proficiency) displays a prolonged silence of 2.0 seconds in line 28. This duration is interpreted as an Interactional Lapse, representing a failure to complete the Adjacency Pair (Question-Answer) promptly. The student produces only Minimal Responses (lines 28-29), reflecting a high Cognitive Load and communication anxiety. This sequence appears to close without further expansion, as no extended turn or elaboration is produced. As a result, opportunities for self-repair or interactional development are not taken up within this sequence. This pattern is consistent with low-proficiency learners, for whom prolonged silence may reflect increased cognitive load and difficulty in producing a second pair part.

Excerpt 3: Task-Oriented Interaction vs. Meaning-Making

Teacher reflections from Weeks 3 and 4 provide further empirical evidence of the shift in interactional quality:

Week 3 (Task-Oriented)

The NEST observed "*It felt more like 'I've done my part' than having a real discussion.*" This aligns with the data in Table 2, suggesting that low-proficiency learners prioritize Task Completion over meaningful interaction, often resulting in premature sequence closures.

Week 4 (Wait-time Intervention)

Following the implementation of extended wait-time and follow-up questions, the teacher noted: "*Sometimes one sentence opens something bigger.*" This observation suggests that when instructors manage the "Space for Learning" (SFL) effectively, particularly through extended wait-time and restraint from immediate turn completion, interactional sequences are more likely to develop, reducing problematic silence and creating opportunities for increased student agency.

Taken together, these findings provide the empirical basis for the development of a Conversation Analysis-informed pedagogical framework, as presented in the following section.

Pedagogical Guidelines for Developing Classroom Interaction

Drawing upon the empirical findings and analytical insights of this study, as well as the frameworks of Conversation Analysis (CA) and Classroom Interactional Competence (CIC), this section proposes four key pedagogical guidelines. These guidelines, supported by the observed interactional



patterns among learners of varying proficiency, aim to transform the interactional architecture of Thai EFL classrooms from teacher-dominated discourse into a more collaborative and evidence-based Space for Learning (SFL).

1. Managing Wait-time and Strategic Pausing

Teachers should differentiate wait-time based on the proficiency levels identified in this study. However, beyond simply waiting, teachers should explicitly train students in "Pausing Tactics" (Ali, 2025). This involves teaching learners how to use interactional fillers to signal a "thinking space" rather than a "communication breakdown." This practice transforms the silent lapse into a strategic pause that, as Van Zant et al. (2025) suggest, enhances the speaker's perceived competence and ensures the teacher provides sufficient space for learner self-repair.

2. Encouraging Student-initiated Turns through Interactional Fillers

To foster agency, students, especially in the low-proficiency group, should be equipped with temporal cues (e.g., "Well," "Let me see"). These tools allow students to "hold the floor" during the cognitive processing of a second pair part (SPP). By practicing these pausing tactics, students can manage the interactional architecture more effectively, moving from passive recipients to active negotiators of meaning.

3. Employing Face-Saving Repair Strategies

To mitigate the anxiety rooted in the Thai concept of "face," the framework advocates for "repair-initiation" over direct correction. Instead of utilizing teacher-led other-repair, which often triggers learner withdrawal, instructors should employ clarification requests and prompts that encourage Self-Repair (Han, 2024). This approach minimizes face threat by allowing students to rectify their own linguistic errors, thereby maintaining their status as competent interlocutors. By shifting the focus from "evaluating accuracy" to "negotiating meaning," these strategies transform potential interactional breakdowns into opportunities for learning, fostering a low-anxiety environment where students feel secure to experiment with the target language.

4. Balancing Teacher-Student Talk Time to Foster Agency

High-quality classroom interaction is defined not by the quantity of teacher talk, but by its ability to facilitate learner involvement and create a "Space for Learning" (Li & Walsh, 2023). This guideline encourages teachers to consciously limit excessive Teacher Talking Time (TTT) and avoid "interactional fillers" that prematurely close the floor. By increasing Student Talking Time (STT) through referential questioning and providing sufficient wait-time, teachers empower students to move beyond minimal responses toward extended turns. This balance is essential for fostering student agency, allowing learners to take ownership of the conversation and develop the complex interactional repertoire necessary for real-world communication.

Discussion

The empirical findings of this study provide a nuanced understanding of classroom interaction among Thai EFL learners across different proficiency levels. The significant disparity in silence durations—where low-proficiency learners exhibited pauses nearly three times longer than their high-proficiency counterparts—suggests that silence may not be a monolithic phenomenon of “Thai reticence,” but rather a context-sensitive phenomenon linked to learners’ linguistic competence and the interactional architecture of the classroom. This section addresses the research objectives by interpreting how interactional patterns and challenges identified in the findings inform the development of a Conversation Analysis-informed pedagogical framework.

1. Strategic Pausing vs. Interactional Lapse

As evidenced in Excerpt 1, high-proficiency learners utilized brief, intentional pauses (0.5 - 0.7s) to facilitate self-repair. This behavior aligns with Van Zant et al. (2025), who suggest that appropriate pausing enhances the perception of speaker competence. In contrast, the prolonged 2.0-second lapses observed in the low-proficiency group (Excerpt 2) functioned as communication breakdowns. This indicates that for lower-proficiency learners, silence may function as an “unfilled pause,” potentially associated with increased cognitive load and interactional difficulty, whereas for higher-proficiency learners, it appears to serve as a resource for maintaining the floor.

2. From Task-Oriented to Meaning-Making

The teacher reflections in Week 3 and 4 further validate the shift from “Task completion” to “Meaning-making.” When the instructor moved away from teacher-led turns and provided increased wait-time, learners began to produce Extended Learner Turns. This is consistent with the view that “appropriate pausing” may be teachable as a pedagogical strategy or “pausing tactic” (Ali, 2025). By explicit training in using fillers (uhm, well), Thai learners can move from passive silence to active negotiation of meaning, effectively building their Classroom Interactional Competence (CIC).

Implications & Implementation

The pedagogical guidelines proposed in this study - strategic pausing, wait-time management, and face-saving repair - provide a concrete pathway for transforming Thai EFL classrooms.

- Implementation for Teacher Development

Consistent with Li and Walsh (2023), this study argues for the integration of Conversation Analysis (CA) into teacher education. By utilizing video-stimulated recall, teachers can develop “interactional awareness,” allowing them to diagnose student silence not as a lack of motivation, but as a cognitive or interactional requirement. This shifts the focus from blaming the learner’s culture to proactively adjusting the teacher’s “interactional architecture.”



- Implementation for the Curriculum

In alignment with the practical trends suggested by Ali (2025), this study advocates for the explicit teaching of pausing tactics. Training learners to use temporal cues and fillers allows them to "hold the floor" and manage the cognitive load of second language production, effectively reducing the face-threat associated with prolonged silence.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

While this study offers preliminary insights, it is limited by its specific context of 28 English majors at a single Rajabhat University, which may affect the transferability of the findings to other Thai EFL settings. Although 12 hours of data were sufficient for micro-analytic purposes, future research could adopt a longitudinal design to examine the development of learners' Classroom Interactional Competence (CIC) over time. In addition, comparative studies involving both Thai and foreign instructors may further illuminate the role of intercultural factors, particularly in relation to face negotiation.

A further limitation concerns the analytical scope of the study. Although multimodal data capturing students' gaze, gesture, and body orientation were systematically collected, the analysis focused primarily on verbal interaction and silence duration. Given that non-verbal conduct constitutes an integral dimension of classroom interaction (Sert, 2019; Mondada, 2019), its exclusion limits the ability to account for the full interactional work performed during silence episodes—particularly in relation to face-sensitive behaviors such as gaze aversion. Future research should therefore adopt a multimodal Conversation Analysis approach to provide a more comprehensive account of how silence is managed across different proficiency levels.

Conclusion

Ultimately, the findings of this study provide preliminary evidence that learner silence in Thai EFL classrooms may be better understood as a complex, proficiency-dependent and interactionally shaped phenomenon, rather than solely as a fixed cultural trait. By bridging the micro-analysis of talk with the macro-goals of education, this framework establishes a data-driven foundation for fostering Student Agency. As Thai EFL classrooms move toward more collaborative Spaces for Learning (SFL), the insights from this study offer a scalable model for enhancing interactional competence and empowering learners to become active participants in their own linguistic development.

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