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Are they two sides of the same coin? Conflict and silence in intercultural encounters: experiences of Turkish EFL sojourners within the context of Erasmus+

Zeynep Çetin Köroğlu ^a, Abdulvahit Çakır^b and Fatma Kimsesiz^c

^aForeign Languages Education Department, Aksaray Üniversitesi, Aksaray, Türkiye; ^bForeign Languages Education Department, Ufuk Üniversitesi, Ankara, Türkiye; ^cForeign Languages Education Department, Kırşehir Ahi Evran University, Kırşehir, Türkiye

ABSTRACT

Intercultural encounters and intercultural communication are becoming widespread. For language learners, especially those learning English as a foreign language, intercultural encounters play a vital role in the way they use the target language, their communication with individuals from different cultures, and their personal development. Conflict and silence in intercultural encounters arise from cultural differences, language deficits, and personal characteristics. In this study, the conflicts and silences experienced by two pre-service English language teachers in their intercultural encounters were examined in depth in terms of intercultural communication. In the present study, the qualitative research method was used. The data were collected from the participants through semi-structured retrospective interviews and follow-up interviews. The collected data were transcribed and analysed through content analysis. The study found that the participants employed avoidance strategies to mitigate conflict. Another finding of the study was that they used silence to avoid interrupting intercultural communication. From an intercultural communication perspective, remaining silent during a conflict is an important strategy for conflict management. This study showed that in intercultural encounters, silence and hesitation strategies in conflict situations ensure the continuity of intercultural communication.

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Introduction

In today's globalising world, intercultural communication is possible in many areas, both face-to-face and in virtual environments. From education to the arts, from sports to the economy, people from different fields use English as a lingua franca to communicate and understand each other in countries and locations where English is not the first language. The field of education is more important than ever as a part of this change brought about by the globalising world. Thus, individuals who are effective in intercultural communication and have intercultural communicative competencies can reflect the concept of global citizenship (Osiadacz, 2018). Global citizens have important

characteristics such as accepting different cultures as they are, being aware of their own cultural values and belief systems, acting without prejudice towards individuals from different cultures, and approaching communication problems with a constructive attitude (Osiadacz, 2018). The meaning of silence may differ based on the cultural circumstances (Nakane, 2007).

Nakane (2007) illustrates this over a marriage proposal, after which the silence will be interpreted differently based on the cultural setting. In other words, silence can be interpreted both positively and negatively based on different contexts. To illustrate, a conversation will sound like ‘babbling’ without silence. Hence, it is essential to keep up a dialogue in an understandable tone of speech to avoid cat’s cradle conversations (Nakane, 2007). On the other hand, long silences can be discomforting (Gould, 2008). As an explanation to refer this case in an intercultural context, Duff (2002) reported that non-native speaking students are more liable to refrain from conversation with native speakers for fear of being criticised; as a result, they prefer silence to protect themselves.

Silence and conflict are two crucial concepts in communication (Kaya, 2021). Silence in communication has different meanings in various cultures. Silence holds different meanings in various cultures. It is very important to understand how silence is used and interpreted in different cultures, and what roles it plays in intercultural and interpersonal communication. (Müller, Tavares & Simao, 2024). For example, in Japanese society, silence can be used to maintain social relations, to reflect one’s embarrassment, or to show one’s emotions (Harumi, 2011). Similarly, in countries such as Finland, Sweden, and Switzerland, it is considered an essential part of communication (Tulviste et al., 2003). To illustrate, as argued by Marsh (1993), the degree of formality determines the way the Finnish people show reluctance to communicate; as the social distance decreases, the tendency to participate in a conversation increases. For many Native Americans, silence is more than a sign of acceptance; rather, it is a sign of defiance (San Pedro, 2015). For traditional Christian groups, silence is a sign of a quiet and simple life (Borella, 2015). According to Buddhist beliefs, silence is recognised as the key to inner peace and enlightenment (Mills, 2016). In Türkiye, the belief that silence is more valuable than speaking continues from the past to the present. As suggested by well-known and appreciated proverbs such as ‘if speech is silver, silence is gold’ and ‘listen twice, speak once’, silence is attributed high value across various cultures. As can be understood from the examples, the concept of silence has different meanings in different cultures. Therefore, the concept of silence is instrumental in intercultural communication between people from different cultures. From the terminological point of view, the term *silence*, defined as ‘periods of non-speech in communication’ or ‘absence of speech’, has long been known for its boundary demarcation and prosodic function (Zuo, 2002, p. 4). Just as zero has a value in mathematics, silence has an important value in communication (Samarin, 1965). According to Müller et al. (2024), when integrated with elements such as body language, silence can serve as a stable communicative tool in both verbal and non-verbal contexts. Hu and Degand (2023) argue that the communicative value of non-verbal cues, including silence, is to direct understanding and empathy within interpersonal relationships. Their study emphasises the importance of nonverbal behaviours to establish and sustain relationships that satisfy interlocutors, with silence having a key attribute in conveying attentiveness and responsiveness. According to linguists today,

silence is not an empty term, but rather a term that has structure, meaning, and function, and contributes to communication with these features. In their study focused on the synthesis between silence and creativity, Baltezarevic et al. (2022) proposed that silence has no impact on creativity. Moreover, they found that silence is a strategy particularly used to refrain from communicative conflict to reduce the feeling of tension in an atmosphere of opposing views. According to some linguists, silence is even a form of speech (Jaworski, 1993; Saville-Troike, 1985). In the past, silence was often regarded as a passive component of communication; now it is recognised as a complex, multifaceted, and essential element of human interaction (Nakane, 2007).

While speech requires one person to produce it, silence requires the cooperation of all speakers (Jaworski, 1993). Therefore, silence is fundamentally social and interactive. Enninger (1987) divides silence into two categories. The first category is silence specific to a situation, while the second is silence shaped by culture. While situation-specific silence is influenced by the expectations of the context, culture-specific silence is mainly influenced by culture.

Glenn (2004) distinguishes between expected silence and unexpected silence. Viewing silence as socially constructed, silence may be either expected or unexpected based on the context. For example, silence is typically expected from women, children, and servants, reflecting social norms that assign passive roles to certain groups. In formal settings such as funerals or courtrooms, speaking may be deemed inappropriate, and silence is thus anticipated. This is referred to as expected silence. In contrast, when silence occurs in situations where speech is the norm, it is often perceived as deviant and promptly labelled or interpreted, marking it as unexpected silence.

According to Nakane (2007), there are eight different types of silence. These are intra – and inter-turn pauses, silent responses, being silenced and silencing, not participating in specific participant structures, not participating in interaction on specific topics, not taking certain speaker roles, not performing certain speech acts, and overall infrequency of participation. Dedahanov et al. (2015, p. 484) stated that ‘centralisation would significantly affect acquiescent and prosocial silence, and as a result of the research, while centralisation positively affected acquiescent silence, it did not significantly affect prosocial silence’. Similarly, silence’s inclusion in speech with non-verbal means opens new communication modes, especially in terms of strategic silence (Dimitrov, 2017). Therefore, silence being a powerful tool in communication, the users should master and understand its pragmalinguistics functions in a given culture (Boguslawska-Tafelska, 2020). In one study, Japanese students’ silence in intercultural communication was seen as a face-saving activity and contrasted with the solidarity and egalitarian behavioural orientations of the Australian students who participated in the study. Moreover, intercultural communication was primarily initiated and guided by Australian students, whereas Japanese students’ silence seemed limited on a communicative basis (Nakane, 2007). However, these norms were not always recognised by participants from different cultural backgrounds, leading to potential misinterpretations. Hence, silence in intercultural dynamics is an issue that needs to be examined through broader historical and political perspectives (Nakane, 2007), emphasising the complexity of silence. Organisational silence mode can be broken (Pang et al., 2022).

Literature review

Approaches to silence studies

The Social-psychological approach, the psycholinguistic approach, and the cross-cultural approach cover silence studies (Harumi, 1999; Hogg et al., 1995; Stackhouse & Wells, 1997). The first social-psychological approach investigates whether social and psychological variables such as personality traits, class, age, and gender are linked to silence. Social psychology is a dynamic field that studies the interaction of people with other people in their environment. Each individual differs in terms of personality traits, interests, needs, characteristics, and motivation, and as proved by the research, these variables have effects on silence (Scollon, 1985). Research also shows that people in the middle class use silence more than working people. Similarly, silence is used more in interactions with the opposite sex than with the same sex (Scollon, 1985). The second approach, the psycholinguistic approach, examines the distribution of silence in the speech flow and its role in the planning and production of speech. Researchers who adopt this approach believe that silence is used by the speaker to make decisions about word choice and word use. Moreover, silence studies adopting this approach show that silence precedes high-frequency, complex words (Chafe, 1985; Nakamura, 2004; Zuo, 2002). However, syntactically more complex speech does not require more silence than speech containing simple but complex words (Zuo, 2002). The third approach, which is the intercultural perspective, deals with silence from relativist and universalist perspectives (Jaworski, 1993). According to the relativist perspective, there is no generalisation in the use of silence in intercultural communication, but according to the universalist perspective, even if the cultures are different, the use of silence includes common uses (Jaworski, 1993). According to Riazantseva (2001), while the duration of silence may be language-specific, its frequency and distribution are universal. However, more research needs to be conducted with different participants using different languages before such a claim can be accepted. In conclusion, although these perspectives approach the study of silence from different angles, silence in communication is an ambiguous term and has positive or negative roles depending on the context (Jaworski, 1993). In some contexts, silence indicates that the speakers understand each other, in some contexts that they reach a consensus, and in some contexts that a person withdraws from the conversation (Nakamura, 2004). Generally, silence in communication reflects a communication breakdown (Jenkins, 2000). Researchers who think that communication is like a machine that keeps running argue that silence indicates that the machine is breaking down or slowing down (Scollon, 1985). Silence in social communication is also considered a politeness strategy (Brown & Levinson, 1987). To use silence instead of conversations that may cause embarrassment, discomfort, or an undesirable situation in verbal discourse. Viewing the issue from a broader perspective, Le et al. (2019) identified the advantages of strategic silence from organisational or institutional backgrounds, particularly when silence is delayed to eliminate crises. This approach not only facilitates smoother stakeholder relations but also enables the organisation to maintain control over the communication process. Furthermore, it provides valuable time for further investigation and, when executed effectively, has the potential to support organisational image restoration. When the concept of silence in intercultural communication from a psychological perspective is considered, it is seen that speakers' foreign language anxiety is generally

effective (Nakane, 2007). Speaking a foreign language, especially when experiencing anxiety, is an important emotional filter for language learners (Köroğlu, 2016).

As explained by Wu et al. (2025), silence can be open to interpretation both negatively and positively, carrying multifaceted meaning. It can both trigger and prevent conflicts, it can maintain harmony among people, and it can be referred to avoid controversy. Wu et al. (2025) discussed that, as a non-verbal strategy, silence has a pragmatic function and addresses communication challenges. Another reason for avoiding communication in a foreign language is people's perceptions and low self-perceptions about their proficiency in a foreign or second language, rather than their actual proficiency (Lehtonen et al., 1985). When the phenomenon of silence in intercultural communication is examined, it is seen that a very limited number of studies have been conducted (Lemak, 2012; Nakane, 2007; Sun, 2016; Tatar, 2005).

Observable causes of conflict in intercultural communication

Conflict is always likely to arise in situations where people communicate. According to Roloff and Soule (2002), conflict is directly related to meaning, meaning is linked to learning, and learning is grounded in culture. Conflict can arise from a wide variety of factors, such as the issues being discussed, personality differences, psychological factors, cultural differences, expectations, and beliefs. Conflict may result from several factors, including financial matters, children, in-laws, personal concerns such as self-worth, principles, expectations, or objectives, and relational issues such as the balance between shared and individual time, support versus control, affection, and communication (Miller & Miller, 1997). The causes of conflict in human communication may be myriad. Still, conflict is fundamentally rooted in human beings' search for fulfilment of their emotional, physical, psychological, intellectual, and spiritual expectations, and in situations where this fulfilment is not found (Miller & Miller, 1997).

Conflict is inevitable in communication involving individuals with different characters, different worldviews, different skills, and different cultural backgrounds (Ramayan et al., 2020). Today, many students travel to different countries with different lifestyles and cultures for educational purposes. Intercultural conflict, which is one of the areas of conflict studies, can be challenging and traumatic for international students if the process is not managed correctly and properly (Shupe, 2007). Conflicts that arise in intercultural communication between national and international students can often be caused by misunderstanding ideas and thoughts, poor communication skills, such as poor speaking skills, inadequate vocabulary, and hesitancy to express themselves. However, finding solutions to these problems or using a management strategy will help national and international students who have conflict problems in intercultural communication (Poyrazli et al., 2004). Developing intercultural communication strategies to avoid conflict requires increasing intercultural awareness, accepting the cultural differences of individuals from different cultures, adapting to differences in cultural perspectives, and accepting the behaviours and opinions of individuals from different cultures as they are. International students are expected to adapt and become accustomed to different environments and communications because the best way to resolve conflicts is through cultural orientation (Hammer, 2005). Since interpersonal complexity is an unavoidable part of social life, it is a part of life with various consequences (Webb et al., 2017).

Interpersonal conflict can arise in intercultural dialogues as it involves interpersonal differences and values.

Extralinguistic features

Communication involves non-verbal as well as verbal elements, and in fact, communication is much more than the words we choose to speak. In intercultural communication, body language becomes even more important, since it is considered as a powerful, yet unconscious channel through which meaning is conveyed. A gesture that signifies agreement, politeness, or attentiveness in a specific culture may be regarded as intrusive, indifferent, or even offensive in another. For example, direct eye contact can be perceived as a sign of confidence, sincerity, or a sign of attention towards the interlocutor; it can be interpreted as disrespectful or confrontational in some Asian or Middle Eastern cultures. Such discrepancies may often lead to communication breakdowns or misinterpretations when interlocutors rely on their own cultural frameworks to decode non-verbal behaviours. In communication, if our body language and the verbal message we give are not compatible, we cause confusion and anger in the person we are talking to (Gottman & DeClaire, 2001). In order to overcome such communication confusion, the sentences, body language, and tone of voice should be in harmony with each other. It is also essential to understand the cultural relativity of body language to foster effective and respectful intercultural communication. An alignment of verbal and non-verbal messages may enhance mutual understanding, reducing the likelihood of conflict in multicultural interactions (Gudykunst & Kim, 2003; Samovar et al., 2012).

Differences in style

Our past experiences, gender, culture, and many other factors influence the way we communicate. Each individual builds a peculiar style of communication shaped by early interactions, the sociocultural environment, and even family dynamics. If an individual grew up in a large and noisy household and often had to speak loudly to be heard by others, it is natural for them to speak loudly when communicating with other people, or if he/she grew up in a calm and quiet environment, it is normal for them to be afraid of or anxious about loud communication (Markman et al., 2004). Conversely, if raised in a calm environment where quietness is maintained, these people may prefer more subdued and reflective forms of expression. On the other hand, some differences may not be individual preferences, but reflections of broader cultural scripts that frame appropriate communicative behaviour. Directness, expressiveness, or social expectations to gender can shape tendencies toward assertiveness or conflict avoidance (Ting-Toomey & Dorjee, 2018). Therefore, it is crucial to recognise and adapt to diverse communication styles for effective interpersonal and intercultural interaction. This can also be significant to refrain from intercultural frustrations or cultural buzz (Ting-Toomey & Dorjee, 2018). Appreciating variation in communication styles allows people to engage more healthier relationships in multicultural professional settings (Gudykunst & Kim, 2003).

According to Martin and Nakayama (2013), there is a four-dimensional solution for managing intercultural complexity in terms of context and style;

1. The discussion style is characterised by an emotionally controlled yet verbally straightforward approach. It emphasises a linguistically straightforward approach while maintaining emotional control. Individuals feel at ease articulating dissent.
2. The engagement style, characterised by verbally direct and aggressive communication, regards powerful verbal and nonverbal expressions as indicative of sincerity and a strong commitment to resolving disagreement.
3. The accommodating style is characterised by indirectness and emotional detachment. Individuals ensure that conflict remains under manageable levels. Adoption of silence and avoidance is promoted. The preference for intermediaries in negotiations may result in the transmission of unclear messages due to the lack of clarity in attempting to bring about conflict resolution.
4. The dynamic style is characterised by indirect communication that is emotionally expressive. They exhibit ease in expressing their feelings, but they employ metaphors and analogies to effectively convey their intentions.

In addition, a conflict or conflicts that arise in intercultural communication for a variety of reasons mentioned above may lead to communication breakdown, withdrawal from communication, changing the subject in communication, or silence in communication. They may experience frustrations without noticing that they are involved in a subtle cultural conflict (Ting-Toomey & Dorjee, 2018). According to Vuchinich (1990), the speaker becomes silent to avoid conflict.

Conflicts occur in different forms. They are either potential, perceived, felt, or overt conflicts. Integration, compliance, dominance, avoidance, and compromise strategies are used to solve a perceived conflict situation (Yilmaz & Tan, 2022). These strategies are designed to minimise conflict and eliminate the negative effects that it may cause on the parties.

Related research

A few studies have investigated the dynamics of intercultural conflicts and silence in diverse educational settings. For example, Ramayan et al. (2020) investigated the reasons for intercultural conflicts and how they are managed by students at Sunway University. The study utilised in-depth qualitative interviews with six students from different departments. The results showed that misunderstandings were the primary cause of intercultural conflicts. The research listed five different conflict management styles: obliging, dominating, avoiding, compromising, and integrating. The findings indicated that misunderstandings could have positive as well as negative impacts on relationships, depending on the situation. The research showed that Sunway University students often used the 'avoidance' strategy when dealing with issues related to gender, race, religion, and culture.

Another study on the significance of silence in learning among Turkish international students showed that silence plays a face-saving role (Tatar 2005). The participants used silence as a strategy to show respect to the authority. Lemak (2012) noted that silence can cause miscommunications and negative evaluations among speakers. According to Lemak (2012), silence is perceived differently by different cultures. Chinese, Korean, Russian, Colombian, and Iranian cultures all interpret silence in different ways. Another

significant finding is that higher language proficiency could cause negative interpretations.

According to Nakane (2007), silence is crucial in intercultural communications, especially if the interactions occur in educational settings. Her research pointed out that the silence of the Japanese students who studied at Australian universities was often evaluated negatively by Australian native speakers. Despite the fact that silence is perceived as a virtue in Japan, it was misunderstood in Australia and led to miscommunication.

Sun (2016) research to investigate Chinese students' and their American peers' perceptions of silence through qualitative interviews. Participants' educational and cultural background and English proficiency levels shape their attitudes towards silence. Of these three variations, cultural differences have the most significant impact on how silence is used, perceived, and interpreted in intercultural communications. The research was carried out to investigate these variations among diverse nationalities such as Chinese, Turkish, American, Korean, Russian, Colombian, Iranian, and Canadian. In some cases, native speakers took part in the research; in other cases, non-native speakers took part in the research, as in this one. However, there is no study that investigates Turkish teacher trainees' perception and real-life experiences about silence and conflict in intercultural communications.

Why this study?

In many contexts where different languages are spoken, if individuals do not have a common mother tongue, they use English as a lingua franca. Nowadays, sociolinguistic research often focuses on the concept of English as a lingua franca (ELF) (Pietikäinen, 2018). In her study that examined the partners from diverse lingua-cultural backgrounds and using English as a lingua franca (ELF) in intercultural relationships, Pietikäinen (2017) found that speakers tend to orient to noticeable silences due to a variety of communication conflicts. These conflicts are reported to derive from avoiding potentially face-threatening preferred responses, resisting a shift in footing prompted by humour, maintaining disagreement, signalling offence, or reflecting unsuccessful persuasion. While ELF is a well-established area of sociolinguistic research, interactional phenomena such as conflict and conversational silence have received less attention than other topics; a small but growing body of multimodal and CA research (e.g. Pietikäinen 2018). A significant factor contributing to this paucity is the challenge of data collection for these studies (Pietikäinen, 2018). Knowing how, why, and in which intercultural communication situations individuals or groups experience conflict, and become silent or are forced to remain silent (Virloget & Nevena Skrbic, 2021) will help to understand in depth the communication strategies and strategies they use in intercultural communication. The role of silence in intercultural communication has attracted some research interest (Pietikäinen, 2018), but there is a notable scarcity of empirical studies, especially those directly exploring silence as it occurs in cross-cultural conflict situations. Hence, it is suggested that more attention should be paid to the study of silence in intercultural encounters (Nakane, 2007). Although there are some studies focusing on conflict and silence relating to intercultural communication (Pietikäinen, 2017), it remains relatively limited compared to other well-established areas of EFL research. Hence, this study aims to contribute to this comparatively less examined dimension of EFL interaction in intercultural contexts.

In addition, conflict in intercultural communication is an understudied topic (Ramayan et al., 2020). There are few qualitative or quantitative studies on silence and conflict in intercultural communication in the literature. We aimed to conduct this study to contribute to the relative scarcity of research in this area. Relatedly, the current study investigates the silence and conflict experienced in intercultural communication by students studying in an English language teaching undergraduate programme at a state university in Türkiye. This study contributes to socio-linguistic and intercultural communication research by addressing this gap in the literature. This study, which uses the analytical model, examines the silence and conflict experienced by pre-service English language teachers who had to use English as a lingua franca to communicate in intercultural contexts during their one-semester stay in a foreign country as Erasmus + exchange students. The conflicts and their strategy to overcome them, silence, are examined from individual, social, situational and socio-cultural perspectives within the framework of linguistic, socio-psychological, and cognitive factors.

In this context, the current study seeks to answer the following research questions;

1. How do Turkish EFL sojourners react to conflict in intercultural encounters, including moments in which silence becomes a communicative resource?
2. How do Turkish EFL sojourners explain their self-perceived silence during intercultural encounters?

Method

In this study, the qualitative research method has been used because it allows for an in-depth examination of participants' affective variables. The qualitative research not only provides real-time access to data about individuals but also helps researchers to ask new research questions and prepare for new studies (Gu, 2023). Silence and conflict are context-dependent and ambiguous concepts, so their meanings are reliant on the participants' perceptions, interpretations, and evaluations (Jaworski, 1993). For this reason, a follow-up interview, which is one of the qualitative research techniques, has been implemented in the current study. Additionally, semi-structured retrospective interviews were used to understand the participants' perceptions, reactions, approaches, and behaviours regarding the silence and conflict situations they experienced in their intercultural communications. Related to the mechanism of retrospection, Ericsson and Simon (1993) stated that 'immediately after the task is completed, there remain retrieval cues in short-term memory that allow effective retrieval of the sequence of thoughts.' (p. xvi). According to Ericsson and Simon (1993), 'cues provided to subjects with specific items from the experiment' allow researchers to gather data after the experiment is completed, 'even after a longer delay' (p. xlix). In the current study, semi-structured retrospective interviews were used because the data were collected after the participants spent an academic term abroad under the Erasmus + programme. The purpose of using qualitative research methods in the study is to understand the insights, perceptions, and motivations of participants regarding the concepts of silence and conflict, uniquely for each participant. So, this study examines how participants cope with situations of silence and conflict, what management strategies they employ, and how they respond.

Participants

The participants of the current study are two English teacher candidates selected from the fourth-year students of the English Language Teaching undergraduate programme at a state university in Türkiye. Based on the qualitative and exploratory nature of research, the aim of recruiting only two participants is to gain nuanced insights into individual experiences rather than to generalise across a population. The purposive sampling method was applied in the selection of participants. Participants are required to have spent at least one semester under the Erasmus + programme (minimum of 6 months) in a country where English is not spoken as a native language. Additionally, participants are required to have at least a B2 or C1 level of English proficiency. The participants normally reach this level of language proficiency in their English Preparatory Education before starting their undergraduate studies. The participants are both 23-year-old male students. They will be referred to by pseudonyms throughout the study to ensure the protection of their privacy. The first participant has been named Alpha, and the second participant has been named Beta.

Semi-structured retrospective interview questions

The researchers adjusted questions based on the research foci to uncover communication conflicts that were specifically derived from intercultural differences across interaction with the sojourners from different cultural backgrounds. Throughout the interviews, the participants were asked to deliver answers based on their experiences and evaluations relating to any noticeable conflicts resulting from intercultural communication distinctions. The questions covered whether participants found it challenging to communicate with someone who was culturally different from themselves or not; how to adjust their style of communication to show respect towards other cultures, the teacher's reactions in case of communication conflicts, participants' reactions, defence mechanisms, and solutions towards these conflicts.

Given the study's focus on silence as a potential conflict-avoidance strategy, the participants were also asked questions to reflect whether they resorted to silence as a form of refraining from conflict that they felt resulted from intercultural differences among other sojourners. The inclusion of directed question types aimed to understand participants' overall orientations toward intercultural conflict management with reference to concrete examples of how these conflicts were treated in practice. This mixed questioning strategy was intended to balance the perspectives of the participants with situated narratives.

Data collection

The data for the current study were collected through follow-up interviews and semi-structured retrospective interviews. The interviews took place approximately four weeks after participants' return from study abroad and served to elicit reflective narratives about intercultural conflict experiences rather than immediate recall reports. These data elicitation techniques have been used to conduct in-depth analyses of exemplary behaviours in prototypical situations. In follow-up interviews, the interview questions have

been expanded based on the participants' responses to the questions. Throughout the study, the findings are based on participants' retrospective reflections and should therefore be interpreted as indicative rather than definitive.

Data analysis

The qualitative data for this study were evaluated by transcribing the participants' follow-up interview responses and semi-structured retrospective interviews. After transcribing the responses, open-coding analysis was used to pick answers to specific queries. The researchers examined the transcribed data using themes derived from a theoretical framework. According to Corbin and Strauss (1990), open coding is an interpretive technique for breaking down material analytically. It provides new insights by challenging conventional ways of thinking and understanding the occurrences depicted in the data. The usage of open coding can facilitate inquiry and regular comparisons, breaking down subjectivity and bias. After the interviews were completed, the researcher assessed the themes, interpretations, and ideas gathered from interviews and semi-structured retrospective interviews. The researcher prepared the analysis by explaining the findings using quotes from the interviews and tables to demonstrate the responses provided by various participants to the questions. The initial phase of data coding was conducted by the first researcher. Subsequently, the process was refined through feedback and contributions from the other researchers. As a result, helping check for consistency in the interpretation of results, all members of the research team were actively involved in the data coding phase to enhance the reliability and credibility of the analysis. Relatedly, all transcripts were re-checked to ensure comprehensive and consistent coding across participants.

The analytic decisions made in this study prioritised understanding participants' perspectives within their specific interactional contexts. However, while ensuring the credibility and trustworthiness of the research process, the researchers aim to approach the data analysis process with minimal influence from their own personal perceptions and perspectives. An essential component of this approach was the inclusion of participants' individual interpretations of the subject matter. Throughout this process, participants' evaluations and biases were shaped by their own personal perceptions and the social and communicative contexts in which they were situated. These perspectives were clearly reflected in their statements. The researchers sought to represent these insights transparently in the study's findings. Therefore, the interpretation of the results was carried out in alignment with the participants' own evaluations.

Findings

The demographic information of the English teacher candidates participating in the current study is presented in the table below. Themes and sub-themes were created to analyze the qualitative data obtained in this study. The overall assessment of two participants, based on themes and subthemes, is presented below. Additionally, a detailed examination of each participant is also provided [Table 1](#).

Main Themes and Sub-Themes

Theme 1. Silence as a Strategic Communicative Resource.

Table 1. Demographic information of the participants.

Participants	Age	Gender	Language proficiency level	Country they have been to	The country of the international students whom they contacted	Duration of stay
Alpha	23	Male	C1	Poland	Portugal, Italy, Spain, Poland, Estonia, Albania	6 months
Beta	23	Male	C1	Albania	Italy, Russia, USA, Spain, Albania	6 months

Sub-themes:

1. Silence as Conflict Avoidance

Beta's silence in religious/political debates. Alpha's 'I'm staying quiet because I'll be here for a short time' approach. Knowing the discussion will be inconclusive → conscious silence.

2. Silence as Communication Termination

Alpha: Silence is a strategy used to end communication. Beta: complete cessation of communication after the discussion

3. Silence Due to Context Sensitivity

Cultural background, history, sensitive issues (Ottoman history, war-related sensitivity). Remaining silent due to the other party's vulnerability.

Theme 2. Conflict Management Styles

Sub-themes:

1. Avoidance as Primary Conflict Response

Both participants frequently disengaged and closed the topic. The understanding was, 'There's no need to argue.' Time constraints → 'I'm only going to be here for a short time anyway.'

2. Accommodation style in intercultural conflict

3. Engagement style in intercultural conflict

4. Influence of Personality Traits and Duration of Stay

Alpha's case

The data collected through follow-up interviews and semi-structured retrospective interviews, along with the analysis of these data, are presented in detail below. The collected verbal data have been transcribed, and situations have been analyzed according to conflict resolution styles. Additionally, the responses they provided in the follow-up interview and questions are presented below.

Researcher: Describe a time when you found it challenging to communicate with someone who was culturally different from you.

Alpha: Polish people are culturally and behaviourally distant from us. While talking to someone in Türkiye, it is extremely easy, *I avoided interaction there unless I had a reason to speak.* (Silence as Conflict Avoidance)

Researcher: How do you adjust your communication style to respect the various cultures and customs of the people you are speaking with?

Alpha: I adapted out of necessity. *I never talked about their cultural backgrounds, and when the topic came up, I quietly listened. Because they are very sensitive about this issue.* (Silence as Conflict Avoidance) When I said I didn't like your city, they said 'do not talk like this, we love here.

Researcher: So, how did you respond when they said that?

Alpha: 'I apologise and say, *'Well, if you feel that way, then I won't say such things in your presence.'*' (Accommodating style in intercultural conflict). I said it, but my thoughts continued in this way. We had a teacher from Ukraine who was somewhat overly prejudiced against Turks and was racist. In a few classes, we had issues with him as Turkish students; there was a girl and I who had come from Türkiye. Despite our pronunciation level being much better than the other students, at the end of one class, he made us pronounce a word for 5 min to mock us and cause harm. He made derogatory remarks like 'This is how it's pronounced.' *Afterwards, we had to inform the coordinator about the situation.* (In conflict, forcing style). In the next lessons, this behaviour was addressed.

Researcher: So, how did you react to the teacher during this conflict?

Alpha: We said we were pronouncing it correctly, but the teacher continued to behave the same way. The other Turkish girl next to me cried. *'I told you that what you're doing is not right.'* (Engagement style in intercultural conflict). When he cried, the teacher stopped the pronunciation practice.

Researcher: What is your solution in conflict environments?

Alpha: *Since I will be in that country for a short time and will not see those people again, I prefer to distance myself from the discussion rather than engage in it.* (Avoidance as Primary Conflict Response).

Researcher: So there's no need to argue then?

Alpha: Yes, yes. (Avoidance as Primary Conflict Response).

Researcher: Have you broken down communication and contact with the people you disagreed with?

Alpha: *I broke down my communication when I had issues with both some Turks and foreigners because, in the end, I won't see these people even if I want to.* (Avoidance as Primary Conflict Response).

Researcher: For example, if you are engaged in a serious discussion and conflict with someone from a foreign culture, what would you do?

Alpha: At first, I respond; if it's going nowhere, I distance myself. If it continues, I seek help from someone else. (Engagement Style and Avoidance as Primary Conflict Response)

Researcher: Did you stay silent during moments of conflict and then continue the communication later? Or did you cut off communication by remaining silent?

Alpha: I believe that staying silent is not a communication strategy, but a strategy for breaking communication. If it's someone I want to continue communicating with, I focus on resolving things through conversation. If it's not someone I care about and I don't want to talk, I stay silent and don't speak. (Silence as Communication Termination)

Researcher: How do you think individuals' reactions change during a conflict?

Alpha: I think it depends on the character traits of the individuals and whether the issue is a red line for the person. (Influence of Personality Traits and Duration of Stay)

Researcher: Do you think you avoided the discussion because of the time limit?

Alpha: Yes, definitely. I didn't care much about many things since I was already going to leave. (Influence of Personality Traits and Duration of Stay)

Researcher: Would you like to go to Erasmus + again?

Alpha: Yes, I would like that if it were a different country. It provides a new experience.

In these environments, where many students from different countries are present, and English is used as a lingua franca, Alpha has experienced numerous instances of silence and conflict. When analysing the qualitative data collected from Alpha, it is observed that Alpha has extensively employed withdrawal and avoidance strategies to avoid conflict in intercultural communication situations. However, during the conflict with a teacher in the classroom, he used an engagement style, reacted to the teacher, and sought a solution to his problem by consulting relevant officials. In general, the Alpha who employs avoidance and adaptation strategies has used an interventionist style in situations where the conflict threatens his rights or the rights of those around him. Alpha believes that conflict situations in intercultural communication are related to individuals' characteristic traits and the duration of their stay in foreign countries. After his six-month intercultural encounter experience in Poland under the Erasmus + programme, he stated that he is eager for intercultural encounters again. The analysis of data collected from As can be understood from the conflict situation they experienced with the Ukrainian teacher, Alpha states that the historical past of individuals involved in intercultural communication marked by conflicts, wars, and disagreements negatively affects contemporary intercultural communication.

Beta's case

The data collected through follow-up interviews and semi-structured retrospective interviews from Beta and their analysis are presented in detail below. The collected verbal data have been transcribed, and situations have been analysed according to conflict resolution styles. Additionally, the responses they provided in the follow-up interview are presented below.

Researcher: Tell me about an incident when you witnessed racial tension among others during an interaction. How did you react?

Beta: Two friends from Albania, one from China, one from Türkiye, and I were chatting and discussing various topics. Suddenly, a problem arose between an Albanian man and a Chinese girl. After that, the Albanian guy began to insult the Chinese girl regarding their food culture, particularly about eating insects and mice. The Chinese girl felt very bad, and while saying, 'It depends on the regions, so we don't eat them,' she left the table. I felt bad too. After that, I spoke to the Albanian guy and told him that his behaviour was completely lacking in intellect, and I provided him with reasons. *In the end, they didn't talk anymore because neither the guy nor the girl initiated a conversation. So it ended up like that* (Silence as Conflict Avoidance)

Researcher: Talk about a time when you changed your behaviour to better communicate with someone from a different country.

Beta: At first, I was shy and hesitant to start a conversation with someone from a different country, (still a little). However, after making friends, this behaviour of mine began to change naturally. *Also, during the conversation, I was silent* (Silence as Conflict Avoidance), but later I began to be active all the time.

Researcher: Has there been a situation of debate or conflict in the school environment or where you are staying?

Beta: I had a friend who came from Hong Kong. A large part of Albania is inhabited by Muslim Albanians, and this segment follows the Bektashi sect of Islam, which does not emphasise the concepts of halal and haram very much. A friend from Hong Kong, upon witnessing the behaviour of the Albanians, initiated a religious debate by asking, 'How can you call yourselves Muslims when you don't have the concept of halal and haram?' Some friends were Christians in this discussion. They tried to prove their religion, *but I remained silent in this discussion.* (Silence as Conflict Avoidance). Because at that moment, I knew that there would be no outcome in the discussion. *I generally prefer to remain silent on religious and political issues.* (Silence as Conflict Avoidance). *After serious discussions, communication ceases, and the friendship ends.* (Silence as Conflict Avoidance).

Beta: I had gone to a cafe with friends, and there was an Albanian girl there whom I had just met. Using body language to refer to the Ottomans and pointing at me, say sentences like, 'You did it this way, you did it that way.' I said, '*I swear I didn't do it*' (Accommodation style in conflict) to soften the atmosphere, and we laughed. Then he said, 'I was just joking, too.'

Researcher: So there's no need to argue then?

Beta: *Yes, there's absolutely no need.* (Silence as Conflict Avoidance).

Researcher: For example, if you are experiencing a serious discussion and conflict with someone from a foreign culture, what would you do?

Beta: My Russian friend experienced a similar situation. While the Ukraine-Russia war continues, everyone has started blaming the child. Although the child said how much he was against the war, others continued to clash with him. *The guy then did not talk to any of these people and only communicated with those who did not blame him.* (Silence as Conflict Avoidance). *They even pressured me by taking the issue back to the Ottoman period. Some were joking around, while others were speaking quite seriously. Before the discussion started, I would say from the beginning that I didn't want to debate if the topic was critical.* (Silence as Conflict Avoidance). *Characteristically, I am not someone who enjoys debating either.* (Influence of Personality Traits and Duration of Stay)

Researcher: So, what did you do?

Beta: *I said you are right.* (Accommodation style in conflict) Conflicts generally arose from past experiences due to a shared history. They approach people based on their nationalities rather than recognising and evaluating them as individuals.

Researcher: How do you think individuals' reactions change during a conflict?

Beta: I think the mood of a person is also important during a discussion, although it depends on the character and the subject. (Influence of Personality Traits and Duration of Stay)

Researcher: Do you think you avoided the discussion because of the time constraint?

Beta: *Yes, definitely.* (Influence of Personality Traits and Duration of Stay)

Researcher: Would you like to go on Erasmus + again?

Beta: Yes, but I would like to go to a different country. It provides different perspectives.

In environments where many students from different countries are present and English is used as a lingua franca, Beta has experienced many instances of silence and conflict, similar to Alpha. When analysing the qualitative data collected from the follow-up interviews and semi-structured retrospective interviews, it was found that Beta often uses silence as a strategy to avoid discussion in intercultural conflict situations. Beta has witnessed conflict situations involving students from other nations and has intervened in some cases. However, in the conflict situations he experienced, he either used avoidance strategies or adaptation strategies. Beta has stated that he does not enjoy conflict situations, that he will be in an intercultural setting for a limited time, and for this reason, he avoids discussions. Qualitative data collected from Beta indicate that individuals are inclined to adapt to intercultural conflict situations and tend to avoid conflict intensely.

Discussion

1. How do Turkish EFL sojourners react to conflict in intercultural encounters including moments in which silence becomes a communicative resource?

Each participant has generally preferred to avoid conflict situations through avoidance methods. Both Alpha and Beta have stated that conflicts in intercultural encounters are generally based on historical events, shared pasts, and negative experiences. Alpha has used a forcing style and an engagement style in conflict situations related to his rights. Beta has used a compliance style in a direct conflict with himself. Both participants believe that personality is an important factor in intercultural conflicts. Additionally, the limited duration of their stay in an intercultural environment (one semester; approximately 6 months) is a factor that influences their behaviour in situations of silence and conflict. Participants in the current study have used silence as a politeness strategy to avoid difficult situations in certain circumstances. Similar findings are also present in the studies of Nakane (2007). When examining the findings in the context of the first research question, participants' use of avoidance and accommodation strategies suggests that individuals in intercultural encounters tend to postpone and suppress conflict rather than address it directly. On the other hand, Alpha's display of a coercive and interactive attitude when experiencing rights violations exemplifies how conflict is closely related to perceptions of equality and power. The conclusion that can be drawn from this study is that conflict depends on context and potential risks rather than personality traits. Ultimately, silence in conflict situations is a situational defense mechanism that is temporary and context-dependent rather than a universal politeness strategy.

2. How do Turkish EFL sojourners explain their self-perceived silence during intercultural encounter?

The silence of Beta can be a strategy to avoid confrontation in surface communication as well as the violation of social rules. Similarly, Nakane (2007) emphasised that there may be resistance and disagreement underlying the polite behaviour of Japanese students. Students participating in the current study have used silence as a strategy to avoid

conflict. The reason for their silence is that they do not want to argue and do not wish to be involved in a conflict (Thomas & Kilmann, 1974). Contrary to these findings, Nakane (2007) states that the linguistic inadequacies of Japanese students are the reason for their silence. However, these differences can be explained by the differences among the participant profiles. The participants in the current study have a language proficiency level of B2/C1. In Nakane's (2007) study, the participants were undergraduate students studying at an Australian university. Alpha, one of the participants of the current study, mentions that students with weak language proficiency struggle with intercultural communication, attempt to communicate with body language, and seek assistance from mobile translation tools to understand each other.

When the qualitative data of the current study are evaluated in general, it can be concluded that both participants were satisfied with their intercultural encounters. The participants of the study believe that intercultural encounters have provided new perspectives to them and have enriched them culturally.

In this study, data on the concepts of silence and conflict in intercultural encounters have been combined with qualitative research. In the current study, hidden silence has been observed in some cases during the intercultural encounters of both Alpha and Beta. In Jaworski's (2000) terms, it can be described as 'an absence of something that we expect to hear on a given occasion, when we assume it is 'there' but remains unsaid' (p. 113). Intercultural communication, which encompasses both observable and hidden silences and conflicts, reveals the complexity of perceptions and performances unique to intercultural communication. Silence manifests at various levels of communication. In addition, silence is a concept that is quite context-dependent and ambiguous, which can lead to misunderstandings or a break in intercultural communication (Nakane, 2007). In the current study, silence has been examined as a tool for disrupting communication or avoiding conflict. The findings of the current study will hopefully trigger future research in this area. If we want to improve our understanding of how silence and conflict affect intercultural communication, more studies are certainly needed.

Conclusion

This study examined the silence and conflict situations experienced by two English teacher candidates during their one-semester stay (approximately six months) in an overseas country under the Erasmus + programme, in the context of intercultural encounters. The study dealt with how two sojourners interpret and experience silence within intercultural communication contexts, with a specific focus on the meanings attributed to silence, its perceived functions, and its influence on communicative behaviours. The findings of the study indicate that both participants were partially or situationally satisfied with their encounters with different cultures. The participants of the study believe that intercultural encounters have provided them with new perspectives, have enriched them culturally and contributed to their intercultural competence. The results also demonstrated that Alpha and Beta generally preferred to avoid conflict situations through avoidance methods. Both participants have stated that conflicts in intercultural encounters are generally based on historical events, shared pasts, and negative experiences. Alpha used the forcing style and the engagement style in conflict situations related to his own rights. Beta used the compliance style in a direct conflict related to himself. They used silence as a

politeness strategy to avoid difficult situations in certain circumstances. They both believe that personality is an important factor in intercultural conflicts. Generally speaking, the findings elicited that silence in communication may culturally reflect situated norms, interpersonal expectations, and individual communication styles, rather than serving as a uniform and universal phenomenon. The limited duration of their stay in an intercultural environment (one semester; approximately six months) should also be taken into account, as longer or shorter stays might have influenced their reactions in situations of silence and conflict.

From a pedagogical perspective, the study underlines the importance of preparing language learners to navigate not only linguistic issues but also pragmatic and culturally grounded communication patterns. In terms of silence and conflict in interaction in multicultural contexts, it is essential for the learners to develop sensitivity to cultural norms and evaluations, both their own and of interlocutors. This may foster more nuanced and confident engagement in intercultural communication.

Limitations

This study relies on retrospective and follow-up interviews. Thus, real-time access to participants' interactional behaviour during intercultural encounters could not be maintained. In this sense, retrospective accounts are shaped by participants' memory, subsequent reflection, and subjective interpretation. As a result, the data may include reconstructed narratives that do not fully correspond to the temporal or sequential details of the original interactions.

In the current study, qualitative data were collected using qualitative research. Due to the nature of the study, detailed analyses have been conducted, and each participant's intercultural encounter situations have been examined one by one. The participants provided interpretations influenced by recall processes, personal perspectives, and the meanings they attributed to silence and conflict after their experience of intercultural encounters. Furthermore, semi-structured retrospective interviews are well suited for exploring participants' perspectives and for examining the individual significance they assign to moments of silence or conflict, they cannot replace the fine-grained interactional detail that would emerge from conversation-analytic or multimodal data. These methodological constraints should be considered in the evaluation of the results, which represent participants' self-reported understandings rather than direct observations of real-time interaction. Moreover, the analysis in this study is based on participants' retrospective and follow-up interviews conducted after the intercultural interaction, rather than employing micro-interactional data such as audio or video-recorded data occurring naturally in conversations. This constraint reflects the methodological scope of the data and informs the interpretive boundaries of the study.

Although this point may not be considered a limitation, the experiences of students from different nations with varying language proficiencies in intercultural encounters, particularly regarding silence and conflict, can be further explored to further clarify this subject. Intercultural face research takes into account the emotional and identity threats that challenge the conflict and inclusion systems of two or more individuals or groups (Ting-Toomey, 2015). In this regard, studies on conflict and silence should be evaluated in the context of intercultural face research competencies as well. As a suggestion,

future research would benefit from a more diverse participant pool to enhance the transferability of research findings.

Moreover, given the researchers' role in conducting, transcribing, and interpreting the interviews, the risk of researchers' bias can be acknowledged, as with many other qualitative studies. In this study, the focus on silence as a form of avoidance or politeness may have been shaped by the researchers' own cultural frameworks, expectations, and prior experiences. Although other factors, such as power dynamics, language anxiety, and group interactions, could impact participants' use of silence, these were not covered in depth in the current analysis. These alternative interpretations can be considered more thoroughly, and triangulation methods can be incorporated to mitigate individual bias and broaden interpretive perspectives.

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ORCID

Zeynep Çetin Köroğlu  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-9456-8910>

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