Learning through talk and learning through silence: in search of a stance between
theory and practice

ABSTRACT

A major dilemma facing teachers in English as a second or foreign language countries
nowadays is how students can best learn the English language – whether through ‘talk’ or
through ‘silence’. Studies have shown that many Asian ESL learners tend to be silent in the
classroom, and rely heavily on the teacher (Liu, 2002; Kaur & Lah, 1996). This study is part
of ongoing doctoral research on the study of silence in academic discourse among Malaysian
undergraduate science and non-science students. The aim of this paper is to provide an
extensive review of the literature that has explored patterns of silence in the ESL classroom
and the causes and cultural meanings of silence. Some findings on the study of silence among
Malaysian science and non-science students in academic discourse will also be presented. It
is hoped that the review will forward a stance between theory and practice in relation to
learning through talk or learning through silence in the Asian context.

Keyword: English language; Learning; ESL classroom