

## Fostering Communication and Social Engagement in Quiet Learners Within the Classroom: A Case Study

O.K.P. Vayathmi <sup>1\*</sup>, Shashini Tennekoon<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1,2</sup>*Sri Lanka Institute of Information Technology,*

Corresponding author\*: [paveesha.kit@gmail.com](mailto:paveesha.kit@gmail.com)

### Abstract

This study investigated some of the barriers faced by students when participating in the teaching learning process actively, such as social anxiety, lack of confidence, or difficulty in communication. The study focused on a student in a Grade 6 classroom who consistently remained silent, avoided discussions, group work, and peer interactions. This behavior not only affected the student's learning but also influenced the classroom dynamics. Recognizing the importance of inclusive education, we conducted action research to identify the reasons behind the student's silence and to develop strategies to encourage his engagement through structured peer collaboration activities and low-pressure strategies. These strategies aimed to build confidence, foster connections with classmates, and create a supportive environment where the student felt safe to contribute. The efficacy of the strategies was assessed through teacher observations and by comparing the student's participation before and after the intervention was implemented. Findings revealed that small-group interactions and non-verbal participation methods helped the student to gradually increase his engagement in the classroom activities. Over time, his willingness to communicate improved, positively influencing classroom inclusivity. This study highlights the need to address silent learners who are often overlooked in traditional teaching approaches. By identifying individual challenges and adapting classroom practices, educators can ensure that all students feel valued and empowered. Therefore, this research underscores the importance of fostering an inclusive learning environment where every student's voice can be heard.

*Keywords:* Quiet Learners; Classroom Participation; Social Interaction; Teacher Strategies; Inclusive Education

### Introduction

In a dynamic classroom environment, communication serves as the foundation for meaningful learning, collaboration, and personal growth (Sedova & Navratilova, 2020). However, not all students find it easy to express themselves or actively engage in classroom activities. Some remain quiet and often go unnoticed, yet their silence speaks volumes about hidden struggles, fears, or unmet needs. Addressing these silent barriers is essential in fostering an inclusive and supportive educational experience.

This investigation focused on a Grade 6 student who was given the pseudo name 'Shehan' and who consistently displayed minimal interaction and verbal communication in the classroom. The observations revealed his reluctance to participate in discussions, group work, and even one-on-one interactions. While his peers participated and engaged enthusiastically, Shehan remained physically present but socially and emotionally withdrawn. Shehan demonstrated understanding of academic content; however, his quietness appeared to hinder his ability to fully engage in the learning process and form meaningful social connections. This lack of interaction not only

negatively impacted his academic performance but also affected Shehan's confidence, sense of belonging, and overall classroom experience.

Motivated by a commitment to inclusive education, this study attempted to explore the causative factors that contributed to his silence and implemented targeted interventions to enhance his confidence, communication, and social integration. These interventions were done to change his usual demeanor as an individual who was noticeably quiet, who rarely initiated or engaged in conversations with his peers or teachers, and often avoided participating in group discussions or collaborative activities. Thus, the following research problem was addressed in this study: "How can targeted strategies be implemented to enhance the confidence, verbal communication, and social interaction of a quiet Grade 6 student who demonstrates minimal classroom participation?" Consequently the research objectives focused on how - to identify the factors contributing to the student's limited confidence, verbal communication, and classroom participation; design and implement targeted strategies (such as peer support, interactive activities, and positive reinforcement) to encourage the student's active participation; evaluate the impact of these strategies on the student's confidence and willingness to engage in verbal communication; assess improvements in the student's social interaction with peers during classroom activities; and provide recommendations for teachers to support quiet students in developing confidence and communication skills.

Drawing on pedagogical theories, namely, peer collaboration and evidence-based strategies, this research aims to create a classroom environment where quiet learners like Shehan feel safe, valued, and empowered to participate in ways that align with their strengths. By documenting this journey, the study highlights the transformative potential of empathy, patience, and tailored teaching approaches in ensuring that every student's voice is heard. One pedagogical theory that was drawn on was Bandura's Social Learning Theory, where students are said to learn social behaviors through observation and imitation. "Training in social skills can effectively reduce classroom silence and shyness, which reflects Bandura's idea that students learn from modeled behaviors" (Abbasi et al., 2020). Similarly, "using social stories provides structured modeling of appropriate interactions," according to Turner (2021), which can help shy students by giving them guided ways to communicate. According to Vygotsky's Social Constructivism theory, knowledge is built through interaction and scaffolding. "Silent students show different participation patterns in classroom talk, supporting the idea that structured interaction enhances learning" (Sedova & Navratilova, 2020). Additionally, other studies, such as Medaille and Usinger (2020) emphasize that classroom environments strongly shape how quiet students engage. According to humanistic learning theories by theorists such as Rogers and Maslow, teaching should support self-esteem, motivation, and individuality. This is shown through the following study which states that "Introverted students can still be socially engaged and demonstrate higher self-esteem when supported, highlighting the importance of valuing individuality" (Tuovinen et al., 2020a, 2020b). Additionally, according to Nadiv and Ricon (2020), "Teachers' strategies that acknowledge personality differences can also foster confidence in shy learners," which further supports humanistic approaches toward teaching quiet students.

## **Materials and Methods**

This study adopted an action research approach to systematically investigate and address the challenges faced by the quiet Grade 6 learner in classroom participation and social interaction for several reasons. The cyclical nature of action research allowed for continuous observation, intervention, reflection, and refinement of strategies tailored to the student's specific needs. The research was conducted in a government school in Sri Lanka, where the 12-year-old male student, who exhibited persistent silence and minimal interaction with peers and teachers, was enrolled. His teacher, who was also the researcher for this study, taught him Information and Communication Technology.

Both quantitative and qualitative data collection tools were employed to ensure a comprehensive understanding of Shehan's behaviors, including what caused them and how they changed. Structured observations using checklists documented the student's verbal and non-verbal behaviors during various classroom activities, including lessons,

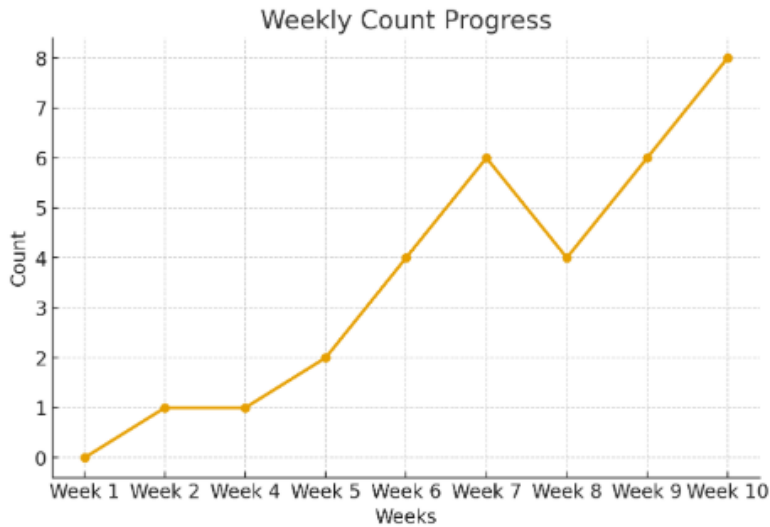
group work, and breaks, to grasp his actual behaviors. Additionally, semi-structured interviews were conducted with his teachers, peers, and family members to gather insights into Shehan's behavior across different settings. Furthermore, document analysis of his notebooks, attendance records, and academic assessments were conducted in depth to find further evidence of his engagement patterns. Triangulation of these data sources enhanced the validity of the findings.

The intervention was implemented in two phases. The first phase focused on building trust and encouraging non-verbal engagement. Strategies included daily greetings, casual conversations, written tasks such as journals and worksheets, and structured play activities, including Ludo and cricket, to foster peer interaction. These activities were directly implemented by the teacher-researcher, ensuring consistency and alignment with the aims of the action research. The second phase aimed at scaffolding verbal participation through small-group activities such as think-pair-share and peer interviews, assigned classroom roles (e.g., book distributor, subject monitor), and choice-based sharing opportunities during circle time with visual prompts. These activities were conducted in the learner's mother tongue to minimize the influence of English language proficiency on participation. Despite this, the student continued to demonstrate reticence, confirming that the issue was not primarily linguistic but rather related to confidence and social interaction.

Data analysis involved thematic analysis to identify recurring behavioral patterns, such as avoidance of eye contact and preference for written tasks over verbal responses. Progress was measured through observable changes in the student's behavior, such as increased smiling, greater willingness to collaborate with peers, and voluntary participation in tasks. Ethical considerations were strictly followed, including obtaining parental consent and student assent, using pseudonyms to protect confidentiality, and anonymizing data when reporting.

## **Results**

The findings of this action research demonstrated meaningful progress in Shehan's ability to engage with classroom activities and peers. Through systematic implementation of targeted interventions, observable changes emerged across multiple domains of the student's school experience. In terms of non-verbal communication, the student showed remarkable improvement from the initial withdrawn behaviors to more engaged participation. He previously avoided all eye contact and maintained closed body language, but post-intervention observations recorded consistent eye contact during 60% of interactions. His physical demeanor transformed noticeably; he no longer hid his face or hunched his shoulders; he began to display open postures and smiled frequently at appropriate times. One classroom note captured this shift aptly: "He smiled at me when I handed him the worksheet, something he never did before." These changes first emerged during one-on-one interactions with the teacher before gradually extending to peer exchanges. The chart below shows the student's weekly count of positive interactions with his peers and the teacher.



**Figure 1**

*Weekly Count Progress*

Shehan’s verbal communication developed through distinct stages, beginning with single-word responses to direct questions before progressing to short sentences. The student’s most significant breakthrough occurred when he voluntarily read two sentences from his journal to the class, an action that would have been unthinkable prior to the intervention. As one peer remarked afterward, “I didn’t know he could read out loud like that and it was nice to hear him.” While still reserved in whole-class settings, his participation in small group discussions increased substantially, particularly during structured activities such as think-pair-share exercises.

Social interactions with peers showed encouraging development. From initially avoiding group work completely, the student began actively contributing to pair and small-group activities, especially those involving his interests in science and art. Break time observations revealed new patterns of behavior, including shared laughter during games and occasional initiation of conversations with close classmates. A peer reflected, “Now he asks me if I want to play with him, but earlier he just sat alone.” Peers reciprocated this engagement, with several of them spontaneously including him in activities without teacher prompting.

Qualitative feedback from stakeholders regarding Shehan was as follows. Teachers reported consistent engagement in group activities and in asking questions about unclear points. His class teacher observed, “He now says ‘good morning teacher’, without me reminding him.” Peers commented on his increased verbal participation, and his mother provided particularly poignant testimony: “He comes home and talks with me more than he used to.”

The intervention’s success appears to be rooted in three key factors: the establishment of trust through consistent, low-pressure interactions; carefully scaffolded activities that allowed incremental success; and the cultivation of peer acceptance through structured collaborative work. While challenges remain particularly in whole-class verbal participation, the student’s transformation from a withdrawn observer to an engaged participant demonstrates the potential of tailored, empathetic educational approaches. These results suggest that even profoundly quiet learners can develop meaningful classroom engagement when provided with appropriate support structures and sufficient time to progress at their own pace.

## Discussion

This study chronicles the journey of a quiet learner from silence to gradual engagement and reveals important insights about fostering inclusive classrooms. The student's transformation unfolded through carefully structured interventions that provided space for growth at an individual pace. Beginning as a withdrawn and hesitant participant, the student progressed from tentative responses to morning greetings, to sharing thoughts through writing and eventually finding comfort in small peer group interactions. These observable changes did not emerge suddenly, but through consistent and compassionate support. The foundation for this transformation was built on establishing trust through daily, low-pressure interactions. The process mirrored constructing a bridge, one careful plank at a time, starting with simple acknowledgments before introducing more complex social tasks. The student's growing comfort manifested in physical ways, including relaxed shoulders and increased eye contact, which replaced previous tension and avoidance. These findings align with existing research confirming that emotional safety serves as a prerequisite for academic risk-taking among quiet learners. Peer connections emerged as a particularly significant factor in the students' progress. When classmates began recognizing the quiet student as a valuable contributor during structured activities, a positive feedback loop developed. Each small success, whether participating in a science project or sharing a quiet moment of laughter, created ripples that expanded Shehan's social confidence. Teachers noted increased initiation of conversations, while family members reported that the student would share school experiences at home more frequently. However, the experience also highlighted important nuances. While the student demonstrated marked improvement in small group settings, whole-class discussions remained challenging. This observation underscores that growth occurs unevenly across different contexts, similar to how plants require varying conditions at different growth stages. Some classroom situations may always feel less comfortable for quiet learners, and that reality deserves acknowledgment and accommodation.

These findings carry both practical and philosophical implications for educators. Simple modifications, such as offering alternative participation methods or providing advance notice before calling on students, can create meaningful differences. Furthermore, at a deeper level, the study emphasizes looking beyond surface behaviors. What might initially appear as disengagement often reflects internal processing and engagement. Classrooms that welcome diverse participation styles benefit not only quiet learners but the entire educational community through enriched perspectives. Shehan's journey serves as a powerful reminder that educational inclusion focuses not on uniformity, but on creating conditions where everyone can thrive. The quiet learner in this study did not need to transform into an outspoken participant but rather required support to contribute in authentic ways. In an educational landscape that frequently favors extroverted expression, these findings affirm the value of honoring all communication styles and cultivating classrooms where every voice can find its place.

## Conclusion

This case study demonstrates that quiet learners can thrive in mainstream classrooms when provided with targeted, empathetic support. The student's journey from silence to gradual engagement underscores the transformative power of patience and individualized interventions that honor different communication styles. Key findings reveal that building trust through consistent low-pressure interactions, creating structured peer collaboration opportunities, and valuing non-verbal participation forms serve as critical catalysts for quiet students' academic and social growth. The study highlights several important takeaways for educators. First, quietness should not be misinterpreted as disengagement but rather recognized as a distinct learning style requiring alternative pathways for expression. Second, small, incremental changes in participation, whether through written work, small group interactions, or classroom responsibilities, can collectively lead to meaningful progress. Third, the classroom environment plays a pivotal role, where psychologically safe spaces and peer acceptance significantly influence quiet learners' willingness to engage. While challenges remain, particularly in whole-class settings, Shehan's demonstrated growth affirms that inclusive teaching practices can help quiet learners find their voice without

compromising their authentic selves. These findings advocate for a paradigm shift in how educators perceive and support quiet students, moving away from deficit-based perspectives toward strength-based approaches.

Future research could explore longitudinal outcomes of such interventions across diverse cultural contexts and age groups. However, this study's immediate contribution lies in its practical demonstration that when classrooms make space for quiet learners to participate on their own terms, the entire learning community benefits from their unique perspectives and contributions. Ultimately, truly inclusive education recognizes that every student's voice matters, whether spoken softly, written thoughtfully, or expressed through other meaningful forms of engagement.

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