

THE SILENT CLASSROOM PHENOMENON: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF GENERATION Z'S NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION IN THE LEARNING PROCESS AT INDONESIAN VOCATIONAL SCHOOLS

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ABSTRACT

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This qualitative research, supported by qualitative data, examines the silent classroom phenomenon among Generation Z students at SMK Negeri 1 Kamal Bangkalan, involving 64 students and 31 teachers. Data were collected through questionnaires, participatory observation, and in-depth interviews to identify patterns of nonverbal communication emerging from verbal passivity in classroom interactions. The findings indicate that student silence does not reflect disengagement, but rather a shift from verbal to nonverbal communication, manifested through facial expressions, body gestures, eye contact, and digital media use. Fear of making mistakes (75%), embarrassment, low self-confidence, and a preference for digital communication (59.4%) were identified as dominant factors contributing to verbal passivity. Although 90.3% of teachers reported awareness of students' nonverbal cues, 58% experienced misinterpretations. Learning strategies integrating technology, gamification, and a supportive psychological environment were found to increase student participation by up to 79.7%. This study concludes that understanding Generation Z's nonverbal communication is essential for effective learning in the digital era.

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1. Introduction

Teaching and learning activities in the classroom are not only limited to the delivery of subject matter, but must also involve communication that will create an active and participatory classroom atmosphere. However, in practice, there is often a phenomenon called *silent classroom*, which is a condition when students tend to be passive, rarely ask questions, are reluctant to express opinions, and choose to remain silent even though they are given the opportunity to speak.

Phenomenon *Silent Classroom* In face-to-face learning, this silent attitude does not always reflect disinterest, but rather the existence of nonverbal forms of communication that are not optimally captured by educators. Generation Z, born in the range of 1996--2010, dominates high school today. The characteristics of this generation are greatly influenced by

the intensive development of digital technology, so the way they communicate is different from the previous generation. They are more accustomed to expressing themselves through social media, text messages, and visual symbols than face-to-face verbal communication (Hammad, 2025). Recent research shows that Generation Z students have a preference for interactive, collaborative, and technology-based learning, with a very high level of digital connectivity with 95% of teens having access to a smartphone and 45% reporting being "constantly connected" to online platforms (Chardonnens, 2025). This has implications in the classroom environment, where silence often does not mean the absence of communication, but rather a shift in the form of communication from verbal to nonverbal.

The nonverbal communication shown by students can be in the form of eye contact, facial expressions, body language, and the use of digital devices as a supporting medium. Teachers often face difficulties in interpreting this form of nonverbal communication, resulting in a perception gap between teachers and students. Research shows that nonverbal communication accounts for up to 55% of all communication, so understanding nonverbal cues is very important in an educational context (Coombs & Bagley, 2024). As a result, the learning process can run less effectively due to the lack of verbal feedback from students. The phenomenon of silence in Generation Z classes is not only happening in Indonesia, but also becoming a global concern where lecturers and teachers report that first-year students seem "very quiet" and communicate more through group chats or Google Docs than in person.

Psychological factors also affect students' verbal passivity in class. Recent research reveals that communication anxiety in the classroom or *Classroom Communication Apprehension* experienced by 70% of students at least once in their academic career, where students are afraid of performing poorly in front of instructors or peers (Cooper et al., 2018). Fear of negative evaluation (*fear of negative evaluation*) is the main factor underlying the high level of anxiety of students when speaking in front of the class involuntarily. Furthermore, 36% of young people meet the criteria for social anxiety disorder (*Social Anxiety Disorder*), a much higher prevalence than in previous years, which makes class participation feel very daunting for many students. This condition is exacerbated by digital communication habits that reduce the experience of face-to-face interaction, so that Generation Z students experience difficulties in nonverbal communication skills such as eye contact, expression through gestures, and reading the mood of the room.

On the other hand, learning approaches that integrate gamification and digital technology show positive potential in increasing student engagement. A meta-analysis of 121 studies between 2000-2024 shows that gamification can improve students' cognitive and emotional engagement and have a direct impact on academic achievement when implemented correctly (Satyanarayana Jagarapu et al., 2025). Learning strategies that use gamification elements such as points, badges (*Badges*), and leaderboards (*Leaderboards*) has been shown to increase student motivation, encourage problem-solving, and create a more relaxed learning environment that encourages student participation, interest, and confidence in their learning process (Ruiz et al., 2024). These findings provide hope that with the right understanding of Generation Z's communication characteristics and the application of adaptive learning strategies, the phenomenon *Silent Classroom* can be effectively addressed.

Academic attention to nonverbal communication of Generation Z in the context of face-to-face learning is still limited, especially in the offline learning environment in Indonesia, so there is a *research gap* related to how the silent *classroom phenomenon* can be

analyzed in depth through the lens of nonverbal communication. Therefore, this research is important to understand the nonverbal communication patterns of students in classroom situations that tend to be passive. Based on the background that has been described, this study formulates three main research questions as follows: First, what are the factors that cause Generation Z students to tend to be verbally passive in the learning process? Second, what are the patterns of nonverbal communication that appear in Generation Z students when they tend to be quiet in class? Third, how do teachers understand and respond to nonverbal communication shown by Generation Z students, and what strategies are effective to overcome the silent *classroom phenomenon*?

This study aims to identify the factors that cause Generation Z students to tend to be verbally passive in the learning process, analyze the nonverbal communication patterns that students exhibit when they choose to be silent in class, and analyze how teachers understand and respond to students' nonverbal communication. In addition, this study also aims to formulate an effective learning strategy in overcoming the *silent classroom phenomenon* by considering the communication characteristics of Generation Z who tend to be mediated by technology. This research is expected to make a theoretical contribution to the development of communication science, especially in the study of nonverbal communication and educational communication, by filling the gap in the literature on Generation Z's communication patterns in the context of face-to-face learning. Practically, the results of this research can be a reference for educators in designing learning communication strategies that are more adaptive to the characteristics of Generation Z, so that the teaching and learning process becomes more meaningful and effective. The policy benefit of this study is to provide recommendations to educational institutions to develop teacher training programs in understanding and responding to students' nonverbal communication, as well as integrating gamification technologies and methods in the learning curriculum. For the academic community, this research can serve as a basis for broader follow-up research with mixed methods or in different educational contexts, as well as contribute to efforts to create a more inclusive learning environment that is responsive to the needs of the digital generation.

2. Method

This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach designed to understand the phenomenon in depth *Silent Classroom* among Generation Z students. The qualitative approach was chosen because of its ability to explore and provide deep insights into real-world problems in a way that cannot be captured through numerical data alone. The qualitative method allows researchers to answer the "how" and "why" questions by delving into participants' experiences, perceptions, and behaviors in more detail (Tenny et al., 2022). Furthermore, qualitative research is very suitable for understanding complex and difficult to quantify human processes and patterns of behavior, especially in educational contexts where phenomena such as experiences, attitudes, and behaviors require a deep contextual understanding (Lim, 2025).

Research Design

This study adopts a pragmatic epistemological stance, combining positivist and interpretivist perspectives to comprehensively examine the silent classroom phenomenon among Generation Z students.

Research Site and Participants

This research was carried out at SMK Negeri 1 Kamal Bangkalan, East Java, in the even semester of the 2025/2026 school year. The selection of this location was based on the consideration that the school has the characteristics of representative Generation Z students and experiences a fairly significant phenomenon of classroom silence in the daily learning process. The data collection process was carried out for three weeks, in September 2025, involving various levels of classes and subjects to get a comprehensive picture of the phenomenon being studied.

The subjects in this study consist of two main groups, namely students and teachers of SMK Negeri 1 Kamal Bangkalan. From the student side, the research involved 64 students from various majors and grade levels, including classes X, XI, and XII with diverse expertise programs such as Accounting and Institutional Finance (AKL), Visual Communication Design (DKV), and Software Engineering (RPL). The selection of students was carried out by *purposive sampling technique*, where the criteria used were students who actively participated in face-to-face learning and were willing to provide information related to their communication experience in the classroom. From the educator side, the research involved 31 teachers who taught various subjects, both general subjects such as Indonesian, Mathematics, and Physical Education, as well as productive subjects according to their respective majors. The teachers were selected based on their experience teaching with Generation Z students and their willingness to share perspectives on student communication patterns in the classroom.

Data Collection Techniques

Data collection in this study was carried out through two main complementary methods, namely participatory observation and in-depth interviews, and supported by the use of questionnaires. Participatory observation is a method of data collection in which the researcher is directly involved in daily activities related to the area of social life being studied, with the aim of gaining a deep understanding of a particular topic through the meaning given by the individual who experiences it (Lareau, 2021). In the context of this study, observation was carried out by observing learning interactions in the classroom, paying attention to students' facial expressions, body movements, eye contact, sitting position, and the use of digital devices during the learning process. Researchers recorded in detail how students responded to teacher questions, how they interacted with peers, and how their nonverbal communication manifested in various learning situations. Observations were made in a variety of different subjects and classroom situations to get a more comprehensive picture of students' communication patterns.

Data were collected through online interviews using Google Forms, which were distributed to approximately 64 students from various vocational majors and 31 teachers at SMK Negeri 1 Kamal Bangkalan. The data collection process was conducted over a two-month period, from August to September 2025, allowing participants sufficient time to provide reflective and detailed responses.

Data Analysis Techniques

The data that has been collected is analyzed using qualitative descriptive analysis techniques with a thematic analysis approach. Thematic analysis is one of the most widely used methods of analyzing qualitative data, offering a structured yet flexible framework for

identifying, analyzing, and interpreting patterns of meaning in datasets (Braun & Clarke, 2024). The data analysis process in this study follows six stages of thematic analysis developed by Braun and Clarke, which include: (1) familiarization with the data, (2) initial code generation, (3) theme search, (4) theme review, (5) theme definition and naming, and (6) report writing (Naeem et al., 2023).

In the first stage, the researcher conducts repeated reading of all the data that has been collected, including interview transcripts, observation notes, and questionnaire responses, to gain a deep and thorough understanding of the content of the data. During this process, the researcher makes preliminary notes about the patterns that emerge and the interpretive ideas that develop. The second stage involves a process *Coding* or coding, where the researcher assigns descriptive labels to the parts of the data that are relevant to the research question. These codes are inductively generated from the data itself, allowing themes to emerge from participants' experiences and perspectives without being constrained by predefined theoretical frameworks (Braun & Clarke, 2024). The researcher identifies key excerpts from the interview and questionnaire responses, providing a code that describes the meaning or concept contained in the quote.

The third stage is theme search, where the codes that have been created are grouped based on a common meaning or broader pattern. The researcher organized the codes into potential themes that captured important aspects of the data in relation to the research question. In the fourth stage, the themes that have been identified are reviewed to ensure that they are internally coherent (all data in a single theme is interrelated) and that there are clear differences between themes. The researchers re-examined whether the themes really reflected the overall meaning of the dataset and whether there were any themes that needed to be broken down, merged, or omitted. The fifth stage involves defining and naming the theme in more detail. At this stage, the researcher identifies the essence of each theme and determines what aspects of the data are captured by each theme. Theme names are made in such a way that they are informative and give the reader a direct idea of what the theme is all about. The final stage is report writing, where the researcher constructs an analytical narrative that tells the story of the data in an engaging and convincing way, complemented by vivid and distinctive quotes from the data to illustrate the analytical points made.

Throughout the analysis process, the researcher applied the principle of reflexivity, in which the researcher actively engaged with the data and acknowledged their theoretical positions and personal biases that might influence the interpretation of the data. Reflexivity is an important aspect of quality qualitative research, ensuring that the analysis is not only descriptive but also interpretive and critical (Braun & Clarke, 2024). To increase the credibility and dependability of the findings, the researchers also conducted *member checking*, i.e. verifying interpretations with multiple participants to ensure that the themes identified accurately reflect their experiences.

Data Validity

To ensure the validity and reliability of the data in this qualitative research, several strategies are used in accordance with the criteria stated in the qualitative research literature. The credibility of the data is ensured through triangulation methods, where researchers use various data sources (observations, interviews, and questionnaires) to verify the findings. This triangulation allows researchers to look at phenomena from multiple perspectives and reduce the biases that may arise from reliance on a single data source. In

addition, a long period of research involvement in the field (three weeks) allows for *prolonged engagement*, where researchers have enough time to understand the context in depth and build trust with participants.

The dependability or reliability of research is maintained through careful documentation of the entire research process, from research design, data collection, analysis, to interpretation. The researcher makes a trail audit that explains in detail the methodological decisions made during the research, so that the research process can be tracked and understood by other parties. The verifiability or objectivity of the data is ensured through the practice of reflexivity, in which the researcher explicitly acknowledges and documents personal assumptions, values, and biases that may influence the research. Researchers also store raw data (interview recordings, observation notes, questionnaire responses) as evidence to support research findings.

The transferability or ability to apply the findings to other contexts is maintained through the provision of rich and thick *descriptions* of the research context, participants, and research processes. By providing sufficiently detailed information, readers can judge for themselves the extent to which the findings of this study can be transferred or applied to their own context. Although qualitative research does not aim at statistical generalization, in-depth descriptions allow for *theoretical generalization* or *analytic generalization*, where the concepts and understandings developed in these studies can provide insights into similar contexts.

Research Ethics

This research was carried out by paying attention to the applicable research ethical principles. Before data collection begins, the researcher obtains formal permission from the school and approval from the local Education Office. All participants, both students and teachers, are provided with complete information about the research objectives, the procedures to be carried out, the benefits of the research, and their rights as participants. Informed consent is based on information obtained from all participants before they engage in the study. For participants who are minors, consent is also requested from their parents or guardians.

The confidentiality and anonymity of participants are strictly maintained. The participants' real names were not included in the research report, and identity information that could identify a particular participant was omitted or disguised. The collected data is stored securely and can only be accessed by the research team. Participants were also informed that they had the right to withdraw from the study at any time without negative consequences. During the interview and observation process, the researcher sought to create a comfortable and non-judgmental environment, so that participants felt safe to share their experiences and perspectives honestly.

3. Results and Discussion

Characteristics of the Silent Classroom Phenomenon at SMK Negeri 1 Kamal Bangkalan

Phenomenon *Silent Classroom* at SMK Negeri 1 Kamal Bangkalan shows a consistent pattern in daily learning interactions. Based on observations and interviews with 64 students and 31 teachers, it was found that the classroom atmosphere tended to be quiet, especially when teachers asked questions or asked students to discuss. A student of class X AKL 2

described, *"The atmosphere is usually quiet, many friends hesitate to raise their hands, some are waiting for each other to answer first"*. This condition reflects the collective doubts experienced by Generation Z students in expressing themselves verbally in the classroom. The teacher's perspective shows a variety of interpretations of student silence. Of the 31 teachers interviewed, 16 teachers (51.6%) interpreted silence as a form of student passivity, while 15 teachers (48.4%) understood it as another meaning such as students thinking, needing a break, or having a quiet character. The Indonesian teacher stated, *"Silence in class can be because students are less enthusiastic or they are embarrassed to be active"*. This difference in perspective shows that there is a gap in understanding between teachers and students in the context of classroom communication, in line with the finding that nonverbal communication plays an important role when verbal communication is not effective (Kustiawan et al., 2022). Interestingly, students actually have a different view of silence. A total of 42 students (65.6%) stated that they felt comfortable and calm when the class was quiet because they could focus more, while 22 students (34.4%) felt awkward and strange. A student of XI DKV revealed, *"Feeling happy, because usually the class is silent when writing notes or assignments given by the teacher"*. This contrast of perspective indicates that silence is not solely a negative problem, but rather a different communication preference of Generation Z.

Factors Causing Generation Z Students to Tend to Be Verbally Passive

Analysis of interview data identified several dominant factors that caused students to choose to remain silent in class. The biggest factor was the fear of being wrong experienced by 48 students (75%), followed by embarrassment in 39 students (60.9%), and lack of confidence in 35 students (54.7%). A student of XI AKL 2 admitted, *"I'm afraid of being wrong and afraid of being laughed at by my friends"*. These findings show that psychological and social pressure are the main obstacles to students' verbal participation, in contrast to the characteristics of Generation Z who are actually interested in technology and looking for ease in communication (Syafrina, 2025). External factors also play a significant role. From the teacher's interviews, it was revealed that monotonous and less interesting learning methods triggered students' reluctance to participate. The Mathematics teacher revealed, *"Students are not interested in the material presented by the teacher"*. The digital culture that is characteristic of Generation Z also influences their communication patterns. A total of 38 students (59.4%) admitted that they were more comfortable expressing themselves through symbols or emojis in class groups than talking directly. This reflects the communication adaptation of Generation Z who are more accustomed to digital interaction than verbal face-to-face. Fear of being ridiculed or negatively labeled by peers is also a serious obstacle. A student of XI DKV said, *"I'm afraid to answer because I'm afraid of being labeled pretentious or pretentious, afraid of being shunned by my friends"*. This phenomenon shows the complexity of the social-psychological factors behind it *Silent Classroom*, not just a lack of understanding of the material.

Nonverbal Communication Patterns That Arise in Students

Although they tend to be verbally silent, students actively communicate through nonverbal channels. The study found that 56 students (87.5%) used facial expressions, body gestures, and visual language to indicate their understanding or misunderstanding. One student explained, *"If I understood I would smile and nod, if I didn't understand I would scratch my head while raising one eyebrow"*. This form of communication shows that students are

actually involved in the learning process, just through a different medium. Eye contact is an important indicator that teachers observe. A total of 28 teachers (90.3%) stated that they paid close attention to students' facial expressions and body movements during learning. The Productive Teacher explained, *"Facial expressions show the extent of students' understanding"*. This pattern of nonverbal communication is in line with the findings that nonverbal communication is helpful in improving student understanding and engagement, especially in the context of education (Nabila et al., 2025).

Body language such as sitting, nodding, taking notes, or even lowering your head becomes a meaningful communication repertoire. Research in the context of EFL shows that kinetic behaviors such as gestures, facial expressions, and postures contribute significantly to message delivery (Sopyanti et al., 2025). In context *Silent Classroom*, students use a similar mechanism to communicate without words. An interesting phenomenon is the use of digital devices as an alternative medium of communication. Students are more courageous to express their opinions through group chats or digital platforms rather than speaking directly in class. This reflects the characteristics of Generation Z who are more comfortable with technology-mediated communication, according to the findings that they are interested in new technologies and are looking for ease of use (Syafrina, 2025).

Teacher's Understanding and Response to Students' Nonverbal Communication

The level of sensitivity of teachers to students' nonverbal signals varies. A total of 28 teachers (90.3%) admitted that they were very concerned about students' nonverbal communication, but 18 teachers (58%) had experienced a misunderstanding in interpreting silence. The Productive Teacher said, *"Once, a student was silent, I thought he didn't understand, but he understood, he just wanted permission to leave the classroom but was afraid"*. This misunderstanding indicates the need to improve nonverbal communication literacy for teachers. The strategies that teachers apply to break the silence are very diverse. From the interview data, the most commonly used methods were to provide lighter questions (22 teachers, 71%), *ice breaking* (19 teachers, 61.3%), and using digital quizzes such as Kahoot or Quizizz (16 teachers, 51.6%). The Software Engineering teacher explained, *"Providing reflection from the material studied and if from that reflection the student understands the material means proceeding to evaluation"*. This approach shows the teacher's efforts to adapt the learning method to respond to the communication characteristics of students. The effectiveness of these strategies is considered to vary by teachers. A total of 18 teachers (58%) considered their strategies to be quite effective, 10 teachers (32.3%) rated them effective, and 3 teachers (9.7%) felt less effective. The PJOK teacher stated, *"Less effective, students need reasoning and learning concepts that are easy and can be digested well by students"*. This shows that there is no single strategy that is universal for all contexts, but rather that continuous adaptation is needed according to the characteristics of students and learning materials.

Effectiveness of Communication Strategies in Overcoming Silent Classroom

The use of digital methods and gamification of learning showed positive results. A total of 51 students (79.7%) stated that polls, online quizzes, and digital media helped them participate more boldly. One student revealed, *"Yes, because you can answer without having to talk in front of the class"*. These findings are in line with research that nonverbal communication teaching materials developed with digital methods have been proven to be

effective in increasing participation (Ghazali & Hermanto, 2024). A relaxed and non-stressful communication approach has also proven effective. Students are more comfortable expressing their opinions when the teacher gives them time to think, does not directly point fingers at students, and creates a classroom atmosphere that is safe from ridicule. A student of XI AKL 2 explained, *"I am more comfortable if the communication is relaxed, not rushed, and the teacher appreciates every answer"*. This emotional aspect is very important, as nonverbal communication also contributes to building an emotional connection between teachers and students (Nabila et al., 2025).

A variety of learning methods such as group discussions, educational games, and project-based learning help reduce silence. Teachers who use multimedia, learning videos, and interactive presentations report increased student engagement. This suggests that nonverbal communication through visual media can be an effective bridge to increase participation, as seen in the context of child-friendly tourism where nonverbal communication through physical means increases engagement (Suyani et al., 2025). This study confirms that *Silent Classroom* It is not the absence of communication, but the shift in the form of communication from verbal to nonverbal that requires understanding and adaptation from educators to create more effective and inclusive learning for Generation Z.

4. Conclusion

This study reveals that the silent classroom phenomenon among Generation Z students does not indicate the absence of communication activities in learning, but rather reflects the transformation of interaction patterns from verbal forms to the dominance of nonverbal expressions. The findings show that students' silence is triggered by a variety of complex interrelated factors, ranging from psychological distress in the form of fear of making mistakes and feelings of shame, to the influence of digital culture that shapes their communication preferences through the medium of technology. Students show active involvement through various nonverbal channels such as facial expressions, body gestures, eye contact, and the use of digital platforms as an alternative communication tool. Although most teachers have recognized the importance of paying attention to nonverbal signals, gaps are still found in the ability to accurately interpret hidden messages from students. Learning strategies that integrate digital technology, create a psychologically supportive classroom atmosphere, and provide space for expression through visual media have been proven to increase student participation. Success in overcoming the silent classroom requires a deep understanding of the communication characteristics of Generation Z who prefer technology-mediated interaction over conventional face-to-face communication.

Future research is encouraged to examine the silent classroom phenomenon across different educational levels and cultural contexts to assess the generalizability of Generation Z's nonverbal communication patterns. Longitudinal and experimental studies are recommended to evaluate the long-term effectiveness of technology-integrated and gamified learning strategies in enhancing student participation. Additionally, further studies should focus on teachers' competence in interpreting nonverbal cues and explore the role of psychological factors and digital literacy in shaping students' classroom communication behavior.

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