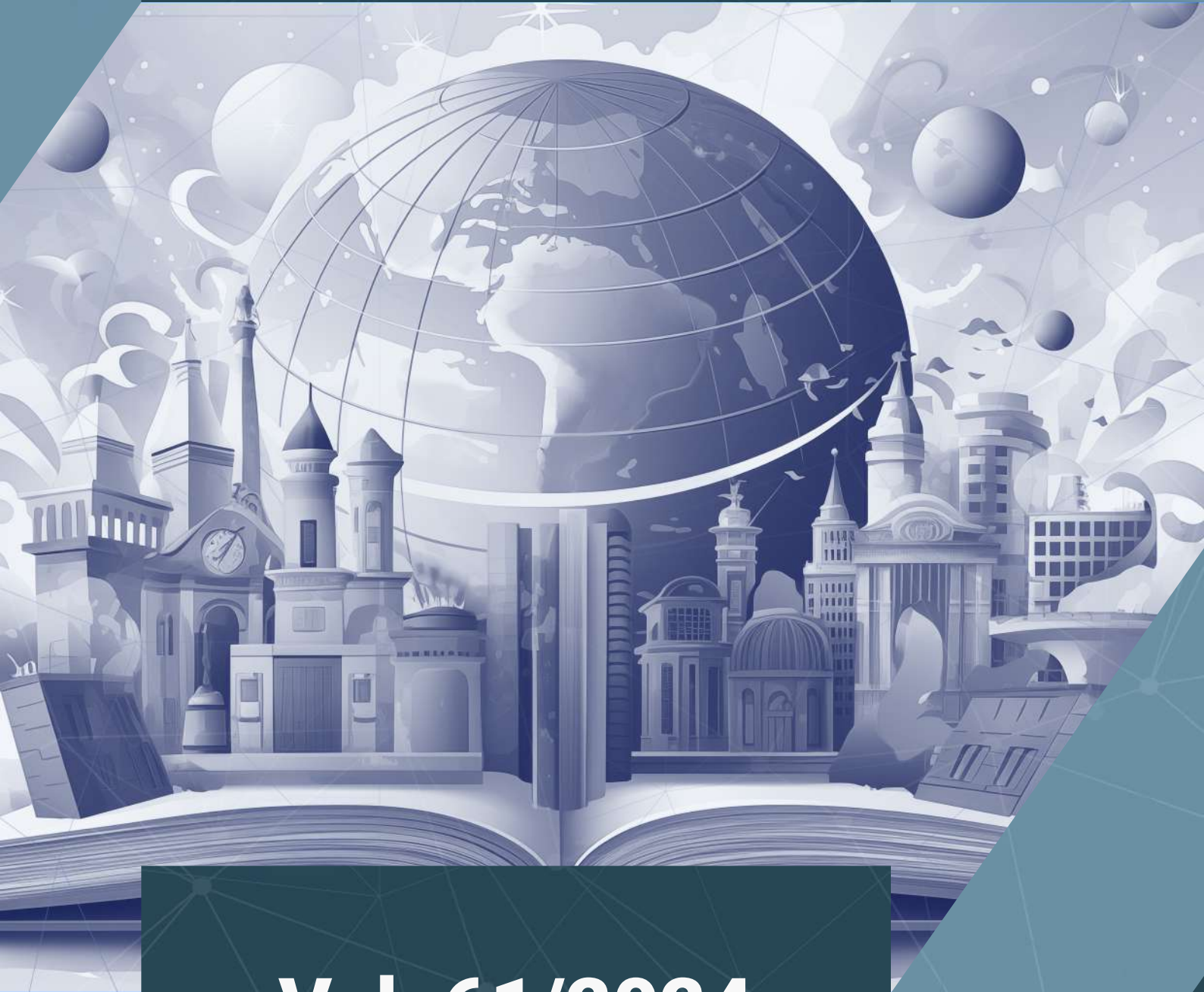




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Silence in teaching and learning: A proposed task for teachers to be silent in reading class

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Abstract. In most second-language classrooms, students are expected and encouraged to spend a significant amount of classroom time speaking. However, students' passivity in learning is not only a root of silence, but teachers' classroom styles are also viewed as a major cause of learner silence. This leads to the necessary need for teachers to have a good understanding of silence as a pedagogy that can motivate silent or reticent students to be active and to speak more. This implies that teacher plays an important role in motivating the silent students' learning by keeping silent students from feelings of being shy, ignorant or rebellious. For these reasons, this paper is going to review some viewpoints on silence and propose a task of using silence in reading class which the teachers of English can apply in their reading class.

Keywords. silence, reading, reading class

1. Introduction

In most second-language classrooms, students are expected and encouraged to spend a significant amount of classroom time speaking. And, teacher's role is to facilitate all students to speak more. However, students' passivity in learning is not only a root of silence, but teachers' classroom styles are also viewed as a major cause of learner silence, for example, silence in the traditional Vietnamese classroom in which the teacher decides who talks, when to talk, what to say, how to say and when to stop talking is viewed as reticence rather than a learning mode (Bao, 2013; Ollin, 2008). This leads to the necessary need for teachers to have a good understanding of silence as a pedagogy that can motivate silent or reticent students to be active and to speak more. For this reason, this paper is going to review some viewpoints on silence and propose a task of using silence in reading class which the teachers of English can apply in their reading class.

2. Viewpoints on silence

2.1. What is silence in classroom?

Silence in classroom refers to "a refraining from speaking, a lack of communication contact with others" (Bruneau, 2008, p. 78). According to Kurzon (1997), silence is basically composed of two main types: *intentional* and *unintentional* silence. The former is strategic (due to speaker's own choice) and used for some effect (due to external source), whereas the latter

is the inability to speak (e.g., lack of knowledge), and arises when a person is very shy, anxious or embarrassed. However, when it comes to forms and functions of silence, Bruneau's categorization is most likely reviewed and used as a background for doing research.

According to Bruneau (1973), there appear to be three major forms of silence. The first is *psycholinguistic silences* which refer to discontinuity to reduce uncertainty by creating hesitations. The discontinuity is done consciously by speakers to organize message. Hesitations which are forms of silence can also take the form of non-lexical intrusive sounds (such as "uhm"), repeats, sentence incompleteness, etc. The second is *interactive silences* which are paused interruptions in dialogue, conversation, discussion, debate, etc. that are often for thinking. The third is *sociocultural silences* which are those determined by social and cultural patterns of communication in which silences take place. The determination of context will help the functions of silence work well. For example, in Western culture, silence is considered as social disagreement, so being silent is to show the disagreement with something presented. However, in other societies such as Asia, silence appears to show hierarchical order of status, to show respect, to protect power, to argue against violent expression and ignorance, etc.

Bruneau's (1973) categorization has demonstrated that the functions of silence in classroom vary in different social interactions (Kurzon, 1997; Granger, 2004; King, 2013). Therefore, understanding the multiple forms and functions of silence plays a useful role in helping teachers recognize what could be happening when students prove silent. Bao's (2013) spectrum of silence below can be criteria for teachers to evaluate what students' silent behaviors mean.

2.2. Bao's (2013) spectrum of silence

- Active and passive silence: Active silence is the way that learners choose to be silent, whereas passive one is the way that learners are unable or not allowed to speak.
- Conscious and subconscious silence: Conscious silence is the way that learners decide not to talk for a clear reason, and subconscious one is the way learners keep silent without any intention or reasons.
- Weak and strong silence: Weak silence is viewed as punishment which teachers impose on students with misbehaviors, while strong silence is viewed as personalized space for learners to develop interests and learning discovery (Bloom, 2009, as cited in Bao, 2013).
- Eventful silence: Eventful silence is a goal-oriented activity which requires thinking rehearsal. This silence is considered a motivation to support students' performance.
- Decentralized silence: This is a kind of silence showing student's incompliance with the teacher's instruction on how to learn by behaving according to what the silent individuals are doing.
- Confrontational silence: Confrontational silence is seen as an intended silence showing disagreement with or low cooperation towards the teacher or the rest of the class.
- Uncooperative silence: Uncooperative silence is also seen as an intended silence showing a refusal of involvement in the conversation when someone is talking.
- Misleading silence: This type of silence occurs when no one but the silent person in class understands why he/she is not participating.
- Interpersonal silence: This is a kind of silence showing mutual respect by listening silently and attentively to what interlocutors talk, and then taking turns to talk.
- Eloquent silence: This is a kind of intended silence expressing or communicating a meaning (Agyekum, 2002; Sifianou, 1997 as cited in Bao, 2013).

- Semiotic silence: This is a kind of non-verbal language such as gestures, facial expressions, etc. This kind of silence requires the cultural knowledge and ability to decode and interpret (Yankah, 1995; Agyekum, 2002, as cited in Bao, 2013).

2.3. Some of previous researchers' viewpoints on silence

In Western classrooms, silence is often viewed as something problematic to avoid and be broken quickly. By contrast, in Asian ones, silence must be avoided and broken when students are being shy, ignorant, or rebellious, or when students' silence is oppressed (Bruneau, 1973). This suggests that the functions of silence cannot be denied by the advantages of talk in second language acquisition. The positive function of silence can be highlighted in Japanese and Vietnamese culture, for example, for Vietnamese people; silence is a conscious choice and used to enhance the quality of talk (Bao, 2013). Moreover, Ollin (2008) also suggested that silence enables students to engage in creative activity without the need for a vocalized performance. This creative silence provides an opportunity for learners to take a fresh look at an idea or an issue.

However, the differentiation between learner's silence (positive silence) and learner's reticence (negative silence) may prove difficult to the teacher because Bao (2013) points out that the former becomes the latter when it is not intended or is imposed on the learner as a result of low language proficiency or poor pedagogy. He also adds that instead of viewing silence and talk as polar opposites, the two should be actually reassessed as tools that can work collaboratively in classroom. To do this, teachers should be equipped with the skills needed to understand silence and act on their understandings.

2.4. My viewpoints on silence

As we all know, a young infant, at the oral stage, learns to speak through silently listening to his/her mother's talk. Therefore, in comparing between silence and talk, I think that silence will be beneficial if it is used consciously and purposefully. I offer my own experience as reasons why silence would be beneficial. *Firstly*, I can process information best when I listen and think in silence. Information processing involves me comparing with my knowledge I have acquired before. This processing then helps me come up with a talk with high-controlled quality. *Secondly*, from my learning experience, silence allows me to handle a larger amount of data in my head than talk does. This is because most of my best ideas come from silently listening to others. At that time, the quality of my ideas really depends on how I am silent. *Finally*, I can work well with relatively quiet people. Group working is a particular situation in which I cannot work well with talkative members. In discussing solutions to a problem, for example, they talk all the time and try to propose as many ideas as possible, but what they talk and propose proves unhelpful to me. Unfortunately, they often evaluate that I am not active in group working.

For those reasons, if the teachers' role in class is to talk a lot, silent students will not have any chance to talk. Therefore, in order to motivate the silent student's participation in classroom, I think that teachers should:

- *Start or end a class session with meditative silence.* Teachers can ask students to do a meditative writing or simply to sit in quietly meditative contemplation of what has been learned in last session. The activity may only last a few minutes, but it must be enough to do. Moreover, teacher must genuinely participate in the activity. If not, the students may feel that the request is unrealistic and will choose not to participate in.

- Say "*I don't know.*" and leave it with some moments for silence if the teacher genuinely does not know the answer to a student's question. This is to show teacher's honesty

and redirect the question back at the students. At this time, the students are faced with a choice that they can dismiss the question, they can try to give an answer right then, or they can reflect upon it later through further research, through dialogue with their classmates, and through other ways of investigation.

- *Respond to a question with a question.* Teacher responds to a student's question with another question, and then asks other students to discuss his/her question. By doing this, the questioner will come up with the answer while other classmates are discussing. This is to help students easily find the answer in the way they are active but silent.

- *Respond by specific redirection.* Teacher responds to a question by directing that question to a specific classmate, right then to the whole class. But in fact, who the teacher chooses to answer that question would be based on the selected student's prior knowledge (ability or willingness to answer). Teacher does this through reading the students' writing or through conversation or other means. More importantly, teacher should not cause the selected student's feelings of being coerced to speak. In this way, the teacher performs a kind of skillful bridge-making and creates a sense of community.

- *Perform a kind smile.* The teacher simply smiles with kindness. When a student raises an innocent question, for example, "Why the heck should I be in college, anyway?", the teacher should not try to answer that question instead of smiling as a way to show the appreciation of that student's question, and then make warm eye contact with that student to assure that her question was welcomed. This is because if teacher says something going against what student hopes to receive, he/she will cause that student's silence.

- *Allow for freer exploration of texts.* A teacher will arrange study groups in which students will wrestle together with what texts mean. The teacher will stay silent, not providing any answers. If asked, the teacher might provide clues, or might remain totally silent. In this way, students feel freer to voice their own interpretations. They have less fear that they will "get it wrong" simply because they do not know the teacher's view and then do not need to compare themselves to the teacher.

- *Become "strategically naive".* Teachers should sometimes pretend that they don't know the answer to a question. This kind of performed silence will help students feel more comfortable voicing their opinions.

- *Allow for meditation before continuing dialogue.* When a student says something extraordinary or unsure, the teacher will stop the flow of conversation, repeat what that student just said, and then say to the class. The teacher asks for the whole class's discussion to provide that student with a clearer understanding instead of giving his/her own opinion.

This is some basic ways to avoid and break student's silence in classroom. These ideas hopefully allay student's anxieties created by the performance, and create a meditative, active performance/participation. However, these ideas require teachers' patience, endurance and faith in the students' capacity to develop.

3. Teacher's silence: a task of using silence in reading class

This session is to develop a task for teachers to be silent in reading class. This task shows that teacher's role is viewed as a "silent witness" to students' performance.

3.1. Goals of the task

Basically, the task is developed to create a convenient condition for both silent and talkative students to share their own opinion, thinking, as well as understanding by teacher's silence. Otherwise, the task is designed with the following goals:

- Teacher is expected to learn something new from the discussion, or to think about the assigned reading in new ways.
- Students feel more comfortable to raise their voice if they want to share everything in their mind.
- Students come up with an in-depth understanding of the text that all students have read in common.
- Students give their own answers to questions in the way that they do not think much about the “correct” interpretation because teacher stays relatively silent in the course of students’ discussion.
- Students engage in the discussion activities actively by sharing what they find interesting, unsure or extraordinary.
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3.2. Steps of performing the task

- Before reading class begins, teacher arranges students in a whole-class circle. The goal of this arrangement is to make face-to-face conversations in which students use non-verbal language such as eye contact, gestures, facial expression, etc. to support their verbal language.

- As class begins, students will be asked to read the assigned texts. The text based on the course’s requirement can be selected from different sources such as textbook, newspaper, journal, etc. The important thing in selecting the text is that the text must be interesting and cool enough for students to read.

- Teacher allows students to freely explore the texts within a period of 20 or more minutes which depends on the length of the text. The teacher organizes group or pair working in which students will wrestle together with what texts mean. The teacher will stay silent, not providing any answers. If asked, the teacher might provide clues, or might remain totally silent. In this way, students feel freer to voice their own interpretations. They have less fear that they will make a wrong understanding of the text simply because they do not know the teacher’s view. Thus, they do not feel the need to compare themselves to the teacher.

- Next, one student will volunteer to stand at the front of the classroom. He/She will call on students who raise their hands to offer their discussion question(s). He/She then write the discussion questions on the board. After all questions are offered (as many as possible), he/she will open a quick discussion to decide on which question the class would like to start with. He/she then comes back to his/her seat.

- While the discussion is taking place, teacher’s presence will be in silence. *Firstly*, the teacher will act as an observer who recognizes what could be happening to students who keep silent. He/She will have to evaluate what the students’ silence means. He/she then comes to a strategy to deal with those silent students on the basis of his/her evaluation. *Secondly*, teacher will not reveal his/her full identity. This means that teachers should sometimes pretend that they don’t know the answer to the question if the question is directed to the teacher. This kind of performed silence will help students feel more comfortable to voice their opinions. *Finally*, teacher acts as a controller. This means that when a student says something extraordinary or unsure, the teacher will stop the flow of conversation, repeat what that student just said, and then say to the class. The teacher asks for the whole class’s discussion to provide that student with a clearer understanding instead of giving his/her own opinion.

- At any point, any student may make the suggestion to move on to a new question. If other students may then disagree to move on, they can add a few more comments to the discussion at hand before moving forward.

- Students are allowed to move discussion to any previous readings, if the class feels that this is helpful to understand some ideas or points in the discussion. But, the important thing is that conversation must relate to the assigned readings. If the conversation goes beyond or does not relate to the assigned readings, teacher must stop the flow of the conversation by redirecting back to the current discussion, for example, teacher can ask students to make further discussion at the end of the lesson.
- It is unessential that all the questions on the board will be discussed because students are encouraged to make an in-depth discussion of a single question rather than doing a shallowly touching upon all of them.
- At the end of the discussions, teacher asks students to do a meditative contemplation of what has been discussed before. The activity may only last five minutes and requires teacher to take part. In the meditative activity, the students will do the thinking of, try to make sense of the assigned reading, as well as try to understand its significance and meaning.
- After the discussion, it would be a great idea for students to synthesize the ideas, contents, and inspirations from the assigned reading after the discussions end. They then write an essay that reflects how they understand the assigned reading.
- Remember that, for this activity, teacher is not a leader but a silent witness. In some situations, teacher may speak with a view to cooling down the too-heated discussion (in which bad language is being used, for example) or to stopping the flow of the conversation if that conversation goes beyond the assigned reading.

4. Conclusion and recommendation

Before coming to conclusion regarding the role of silence in language teaching and learning, I would like to make an emphasis on Bruneau's (1973) viewpoint that silence must be broken when students are being shy, ignorant, or rebellious, or when students' silence is oppressed. This implies that teacher plays an important role in motivating the silent students' learning. In other words, teacher will have to keep silent students from feelings of being shy, ignorant or rebellious. To do this, teacher needs to evaluate the teaching style and teaching method they use in class. However, with regard to the teaching style, teachers cannot change his/hers immediately or in a short period. This is due to that the teaching style has a close relation to one's personality which is shaped when he/she was born. This means that teachers can only change or adjust his/her teaching method. In my opinion, the task mentioned above can be viewed as a practical example for teacher to design new ones.

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