



Website context: Learning from internationalisation → Teaching Strategies

The role of silence in communication

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Overview

Cross-cultural studies examining beliefs about talk and the role of silence indicate that silence is viewed differently by different cultures and different social values and norms govern the amount of talk and silence in communication contexts. Scallon (1985)ⁱ and Giles et al., (1992)ⁱⁱ have shown that silence is associated with the negative values in Western culture (lack of interest; unwillingness to communicate, rejection; interpersonal incompatibility; shyness). In UK talk is seen as the norm in communication, and the role of silence as a means of communication has been largely ignored. Here discussion is a recognised teaching technique, most prominently in the humanities and social sciences and active classroom participation is encouraged and often is part of the evaluation of effective learning. This paper looks at the role silence may play in learning from a different perspective.

Silence from a different perspective

What non-Native English speakers think about the role of talk and silence in the classroom needs to be explored. Cross-cultural studies indicate that silent students find listening, thinking and reflecting more efficient ways of learning than talking. For example, Jaworski and Sachdev 1998:286ⁱⁱⁱ indicate that these learners use silence as a 'facilitative device... to gain access, organise and absorb new material'. More recently, Tatar's (2005)^{iv} study of the perspectives of non-native speakers of English on the role of silence have shown that silence is not an indication of a lack of knowledge but may be a conscious choice. The same study indicates that not only did (unstructured and poorly managed) discussion and active participation requirements clearly disadvantage non-native English speakers but that students often developed negative attitudes towards discussion as a teaching technique. Participants did not see themselves as less competent than their first language peers however. Tatar's work highlights the need for a structured and managed approach to making use of the discussion technique and attempts to actively involve learners.

Tatar's (2005: 284-293) study illustrates various dimensions of silence experienced by a group of non-native English speakers

1. **Silence as a face-saving strategy and protection.** When a student is under- confident about language and context knowledge it is not uncommon for them to refrain from exposing their ignorance to their instructors through their questions. Of similar concern was the fear of damaging public image by exposing one's self to co-nationals. This is closely related to 'face' - see below.
2. **Silence as a means of participation.** Sometimes the concept of 'participation' is broader for non-native English speakers than for their lecturers, in that it is not limited to speaking but includes any activity demonstrating engagement.
3. **Silence as a reaction to others' contributions.** Sometimes non-native English speakers remain silent as a protest to what they perceive to be low-

quality free-flowing discussions and comments relating only indirectly to the topic. Often such learners seek such talk as restricting the opportunities for students to learn. It comes from the values of careful planning and thinking before one speaks held by such learners.

4. **Silence as a sign of respect for authority and concern for others.** Because non-native English speakers (from large power-distance communities) operate under the influence of their backgrounds, speaking without being invited has to do with conveying respect and modesty.
5. **Silence as a product of a feeling of inarticulacy.** When non-native English speakers have to compete with native English speakers they fear subjecting these students with their efforts to communicate. They fear sabotaging good decisions through their efforts. Being a non-native speaker creates a sense of 'outsiderness'.

The role of active listening and silent reflection

Insistence on emphasis on active oral participation will disadvantage non-native English speakers, thus limiting their opportunity to display their knowledge, unless this is carefully managed by allowing reflective space in which learners can be silent in preparation for more active learning approaches. Active listening and silent reflection are also appropriate modes of participation. Both discussion and listening or silence need to be valued and catered for.

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November 2009

ⁱ Scallon, R. (1995) The machine stops: Silence in the metaphor of malfunction". In D Tannen and M Saville-Troike (eds) Perspectives on Silence (pp21-31). Norwood, NJ: Ablex Publishing Corporation.

ⁱⁱ Giles, H., Coupland, N. and Wienmann, J.M. (1992) " 'Talk is cheap' but 'my word is my bond': Beliefs about talk". In K Bolton and H Kwok (eds) Sociolinguistics Today: Eastern and Western Perspectives. (pp 218-243). London: Routledge.

ⁱⁱⁱ Jaworski, A. and Sachdev, J. (1998) "Beliefs and Silence in the Classroom". Language and Education 12 (4) pp 273-292.

^{iv} Tatar, S. (2005) "Why Keep Silent? The Classroom Participation Experiences of Non-native-English-speaking Students" Language and Intercultural Communication, Vol 5 No 3&4. pp284-293.