

Research Space

Book

Letting students speak, or be silent if they prefer

Balchin, K. and Djedid, S.

Letting students speak, or be silent if they prefer.

Siham DJEDID and Kevin BALCHIN *Canterbury Christ Church University, UK*

Language classrooms are often optimised for developing students' speaking skills with an assumption that learning is reflected in talk. Silence, therefore, is generally perceived as a threat which impedes students' learning and foreign language development. Lausch (2018) explains that 'peers and professors often judge students who appear to be silent as disengaged, disinterested, less prepared or less intelligent. Overall, in traditional frameworks, silence is represented to the student as unfavourable, uncomfortable, and something to overcome' (p. 64). This paper challenges this perspective on silence, arguing that quiet or silent students need to be treated in a more inclusive way.

'Silent students' interviewed in researching this paper were students identified through observation as those who tended to avoid verbal interactions in the classroom, rarely raised their hands to speak, and only occasionally volunteered to express their opinions or provide answers to teachers' questions. However, somewhat unexpectedly, most of these students chose to be interviewed in English, and through these interviews were found to have a good command of the language. They also tended to perform well in examinations. This suggests that students can be engaged in learning in multiple ways, many of which may not fit with communicative or related approaches to language teaching and learning which are based around spoken interaction in the classroom.

The issue here is the stigma associated with silence, which can seriously affect students' wellbeing in terms of their perceptions of themselves, their learning, their language competence and their ability to express their perspectives in an environment that favours active spoken participation in classes.

Lessons learnt about students

In seeking to understand the experiences and perspectives of silent students, three areas came to the fore.

1. How students see themselves

Silent students showed a constant fear of being wrong or making mistakes, and tended to doubt their skills and knowledge. Their negative 'foreign language (FL) self-concept' (Mercer, 2011) seems to be associated with their perception of their language proficiency in terms of, for example, grammar, pronunciation, accent and fluency, and also with how their academic knowledge is evaluated. As one participant noted: 'I felt that if I speak in front of the teacher who is really fluent, I will be embarrassed [...] of my accent'.

2. Students' prior learning experiences

All students bring cultural and personal baggage to language classrooms. This can include preferred ways of learning, even preferred seating arrangements and preferred classroom rules and norms of behaviour. Students explained that certain participation patterns, such as speaking without raising hands or being called by the teacher, can be intimidating, preferring forms of classroom participation that they felt more accustomed to. They specifically highlighted that immersing themselves into new ways of learning without a supportive transition can be difficult.

Silent students shared some of their more traumatic experiences from previous years of study, which may explain their use of silence as a means of avoiding being mocked, for example for stumbling over their words or because of weaknesses, perceived or otherwise, in pronunciation.

3. Assessments and evaluations of students' performance

Inconsistent or negative feedback, and low grades for oral participation, can affect students' oral participation. Some students also feel intimidated to share their views publicly in case they receive negative peer feedback

Further, students interviewed in this study also felt that their teachers often focused on correcting students grammatical or pronunciation errors, even in lessons aiming for developing oral fluency skills or focusing on students' pronunciation mistakes rather than the content being shared. In some cases, students were graded based on amount of quantity of talk, which seems to punish students who are more naturally reticent.

Toward an inclusive approach in the classroom

In the light of the above, a classroom environment which, rather than seeing silent students as deficient, seeks to support and include these students seems desirable. In this inclusive environment, teachers acknowledge different modes of learning and the strengths and preferences of all learners. As a part of this, they include strategies that meet the needs of their silent students, such as:

- Constructing group work and allocating roles with care so as to avoid putting unwanted pressure on silent students to speak.
- Using multi-modal approaches and offering silent students choices about how they want to participate, express themselves or present their work.
- Varying assessment techniques, in particular avoiding assessing students based on the amount of talk they produce.
- Using sheltered ways for students to express their thoughts and opinions such as via the Mentimeter App.
- Using one-to-one or small group interactions to reduce students' anxiety.

To conclude, silent students do not exist in opposition to other learners. Through empathy, understanding and use of appropriate strategies, silent students can feel more included in their classes and so better realise their potential.

References

Lausch, S. 2018, 'Inviting Mindful Silence into Pedagogy: Supporting Agency, Voice, and Critical Engagement Through Silence', Masters thesis, Boise State University, Idaho.

Mercer, S., 2011. *Towards an understanding of language learner self-concept*. Dordrecht: Springer.