

Silent instruction: The quiet teacher in a noisy classroom



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ABSTRACT

This paper introduces the findings of an experimental lesson conducted with a class of monolingual secondary students. The teacher gave no verbal cues to the students for the duration of the class. The purpose of this experiment was to show the learners not only the complexity of the teacher's role in the classroom and the difficulties the educators face all the time in the classroom environment but also the amount of control the students have over their own learning. Additionally, this paper presents the historical background of the Silent Way and its development, along with a modern take on its methodology. Based on the observations of the teacher and the learning assistant also show how the learning process is affected by the students' roles and participation in the classroom activities and how these elements contribute to the learning cycle. This paper is designed as both an informative tool for teachers willing to experiment with the traditional approaches to teaching and experts who might appreciate out-of-the-box thinking and implementation of the Silent Way in the contemporary classroom. It has also been written in a semi-formal style in order to introduce the topic in an approachable way to encourage practitioners to see it as a possible guideline for effective experimentation in the classroom.



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1. Introduction

Teachers have bad days, but so do the students. It is understandable, and both parties involved need to be willing to understand that, respect it, and take advantage of the situation in the best possible way. However, traditional classrooms, modern classrooms, online classrooms, flipped classrooms, and all the other classrooms introduced into the educational system since the creation of the school as an institution cannot prevent, predict, and prepare both parties for all of the behaviors, be they predictable or unexpected. I have been teaching for 15 years now, and in all my years of work, I have learned this much nothing works 'always,' no one is 'perfect' (neither student nor teacher), and everyone can be improved.

When I was a student, my teachers were omnipotent. They were reputable figures who were equally feared and revered. They made me work hard and provided me with so much knowledge, tasks, experiments, figures to learn, and equations to memorize that it did not make sense that a tiny student brain could have soaked all of it up without overfilling and leaking out of the body. Yet somehow, this knowledge stayed there and helped me, after years, appreciate the work that the teachers encouraged me to do. Despite having an informal introduction, this article is a fruit of my





experience as a teacher and student. The desired goal and outcome is for the educators to reach for it, read it with interest, and gain the courage to go beyond what is known, comfortable, and tested. The intended goal of education is to stimulate young minds and to bravely go one step forward in the journey through unknown activities, tasks, and exercises (Timperley & Schick, 2024).

Teacher-student dynamic has been evolving over time and changing from what I remember in my school years the teacher as an authority figure into what is more common nowadays the teacher as a facilitator (Bulterman-Bos, 2022). In a traditional classroom, the teacher dictates the rules and usually literally dictates the material for the student (Graduate Program, n.d.) (Batty, 2020). The notebooks I had were filled with notes and colours - for simplified memorization and one notebook was never enough to last a year (which is just for one subject). I memorized a lot (to this day, I can recite most poems and grammar rules I was taught) and spent much time on independent learning. I may not have liked all subjects (or teachers), but I behaved as if I understood the consequences. We never had group discussions in the classroom, but occasionally, we were allowed to discuss things with our desk partners. We were also easier to monitor because of the traditional setup of the desks in the class. I did not know how easy it was for our teachers to check if we were cheating. I only realized that when I ended up on the other side of that terrifying teacher's desk. Only then did I know that my teachers saw all, and if they allowed me to cheat (which, not proudly, I can admit happened occasionally in maths), it was out of the goodness of their hearts. The teachers see everything, and they do. When I started teaching this teacher-centred approach was still in play, although the new methods were gaining popularity (Abedi, 2024; Bature, 2020). I was unsure if what I was doing made sense, so from the first day I tried to pay attention to my students and guide my teaching based on their behaviour in the classroom. I have been doing that ever since.

I had to evolve with the classroom approaches, not always seeing them as favourable to my students or teaching. That is, however, the teacher's destiny – no day is alike, no classroom the same even if it is the same day and the same classroom. The teacher's role moved from being the center figure in the class to more of a guide through learning (Keiler, 2018). Tables were merged, group activities and discussions became the new 'it' in the learning pattern, and students received more independence and control over their learning process. And that was only the beginning. The world started moving faster and faster, and what once was perceived as a work of fiction quickly became a reality. Technology sped up and developed; we moved from having encyclopedias, grammar reference books, and small libraries in each home to relying on small pocket-size devices (which in turn rely on battery life and service access) (Rashid & Kausik, 2024). The world shrank, and with it, as brutally as it may sound, education.

I am not trying to be the devil's advocate. It is obvious that more people have access to various information, but this also comes with a price. Less and less is reliable as no credentials are needed to insert new information to this ever-present existence of data. This makes teaching more challenging as students challenge teachers in the classroom and not in a good way. Every teacher likes a student who questions information provided in the classroom. I don't think I speak for myself only. It makes teachers proud to know that the students listen and think – as this is the ultimate challenge – to make students think, rethink, question and challenge. We know then that they listen, and if they listen, they show interest. Listening and hearing in the classroom are not easily achieved. Modern students have a rather small attention span and they have to be constantly intrigued, surprised and challenged (Li & Zhang, 2024). They are not used to paying attention which makes teacher's role (already being complex and built out of different characters, from educator, guide to entertainer) even more complicated. Getting students' attention can be tricky as keeping discipline has moved out of the priorities in the classroom making it more democratic than authoritarian (Obispo et al., 2021; Toshalis, 2024). This however, causes from time-to-time behavioural issues which are not easily overcome by positive behaviour reinforcement.

One of such classes has become the unwanted inspiration for the experiment which is the focus of this paper (Koumadoraki, 2022). About eight years into my teaching career, I was mostly dealing with the Young Learner age groups. I never minded that as I believe teaching children can be very rewarding – especially in the initial stages of language education when progress is truly visible on a daily basis. Unfortunately, this class presented itself as more of a reluctant duty than a challenging opportunity. Their interest I learning English was minimal and they made a point of telling me that they did not wish to study and it was their parents' choice to send them for classes. It made teaching

them difficult, to say the least. This was the first time that I truly felt I was experimenting and my experimenting was on a whole other level. There were games, discussions, technology, art, all of the traditional approaches led by reading and listening tasks and a variety of others. The list was long. Not much worked and even if I had an initial success with an activity, my assumption and faith that it would work twice with this group was misplaced.

One of those days, their behaviour and attitude to learning were so bad that for the first time in years I was ready to lose my patience and explode like a dormant volcano – unpredictably and violently. I managed to compose myself (which to this day makes me very proud), and I started planning (plotting) my next lesson (revenge). My idea did not come from a good place. I was not thinking of my students' progress or their possible achievements, I just wanted to show them that teaching is not an easy job. That one person's actions have long and lasting consequences on classroom environment and they are not easily overcome, fixed or forgotten.

2. Methodology

The next class was approaching fast and I still had no clue how to approach my class (have my revenge) to show them that their behaviour and attitudes were not appropriate for the classroom and that their actions were highly disrespectful (Barbetta et al., 2005). I was thinking of what I wanted to tell them, and it made me realize something unexpected – I did not want to tell them anything. I had no desire to speak with them as I was tired of being either disrespected or ignored (Madsen et al., 1968). Unfortunately, I still was bound by the contract and I had to show up to class and fulfill my educational duties as a teacher. I just did not know how to make these two contradictory elements work together. Frankly, I did not want to speak to them at all. That is how the idea for the class was born – by not feeling at a lot like talking to this young group of students.

An opportunity presented itself in a form of a sore throat and a slight cold which became my excuse for the experiment. I decided (supported by my teaching assistant) that my health would become an unspoken (literally and figuratively) excuse for the treatment and the experiment designed for the class (Edward P, 2012). To be completely honest, I had my doubts that this angrily concocted plan would work. I feared that it might backfire as a sort of tragic minor version of the Stanford prison experiment . However, I was determined to see the plan through to the end.

2.1. Class profile and roles within

There were 10 students in the class, which was a standard for a private English class in a language school. The class met twice a week for a 90-minute lesson. They were all between the age of 14 and 15. The lessons were held in a traditionally set up classroom with the teacher's discretion to change the layout to support the lesson objectives. The students had to take two-step language tests in order to qualify for the level. They first completed a diagnostic test which was a combination of grammar, vocabulary and writing determined to establish the students' level of general knowledge. It was followed by an additional speaking test with one of the school's teachers to make sure that the students were placed in appropriate levels. Additionally, students were placed into the classes based on their age groups to support them not only through their language levels but also by putting them in classes with their peers. Considering that the school was located in a non-English speaking country, most of the time the classes were monolingual which led to a more needed control over the use of L1 in the classroom.

This class was placed at a level B2 on the CEFR scale and they working together for about 3 months so the students knew each other quite well. Despite the fact that the students were placed in the class according to the level, it was still a mixed ability class and I had a good idea of the skills the students had (mainly who could manage responsibility and who needed more support). At that point, I was familiar with the dynamics present in the classroom and knew what to expect from it. The class had a teaching assistant assigned to it as the class was located outside of the school's main campus. Her job was not only assisting students with their learning but also providing any additional and unexpected duties which may have arisen from this semi-remote location. The system we developed was more symbiotic and not based on superiority as we quickly assumed that we both worked better supporting each other rather than assigning each other strict roles with unblurred lines. She was aware of the lesson I planned and was there to support my class verbally if the situation led to it. We both agreed that for the experiment to work, I had to remain silent at all cost.

2.2. The Design

The idea was simple – it was meant to be a lesson led fully by the students with the minimal input on my side (Robson, 2024). The students were to be the teachers and they were to lead the class from the first to the last minute (Gosser & Roth, 1998). After getting the students in their usual seats, I wrote this message on the board:

'Good evening, unfortunately I am sick and I lost my voice.

I won't be able to explain things to you,

so you will be responsible for your learning today (Hmelo-Silver et al., 2007).

The class was given a moment to settle because as expected they got excited thinking that they would just have free time. After they quieted down, I continued writing:

'You will be responsible for your learning today.

Each of you will teach a section of the class.

You will be given instructions (at this point they were shown 7 envelopes with numbers on them) and you will follow them teaching the class assigned section of the book.'

At this point, the students were intrigued which was the reaction I was hoping for. What should be mentioned was the fact that I stopped and looked for confirmation that the instructions were understood after each part. I wanted to make sure that the class was paying attention and knew what was being expected of them (Loyens et al., 2008).

The bait was in the water. I decided to build this lesson of only 7 parts, with some students working in pairs and leading their parts for better efficiency. The students who were more confident and possessed better language skills were given tasks that were considered more difficult or more complex to lead.

Each envelope included a set of instructions referring the students to a specific task in the book or providing them with a worksheet (they were handed out by the teaching assistant). The leading student was also given the answer key so that they could lead the checking of the task. In order to make the class less challenging (they were already enough challenges this day), I tried to keep to the order of the classroom activities that they were familiar with. At that point, we had already established a routine that they knew, so that they knew what to expect each day.

The first activity, as suggested by most initial TESOL teaching courses, was designed to activate schemata (Carrell & Eisterhold, 1983). Student 1 (named this way for being the first to take on the responsibility of teaching) had to lead a preliminary discussion introducing the topic of the lesson. The instructions in the envelope were always the same and they referred to responsibility of the teacher-student and the rest of the class. They always started in the same way:

1. Your job is to:	
2. You will read the instructions:	
3. You will time and monitor the activity:	

4. You finish the activity and hand the task over to the next student

This set design made it easier for the students to follow as it introduced an additional step in the routine and made it more relaxed and simpler for them to assume these new roles. The students were supported by the teaching assistant who handed out any worksheets that were needed to complete the tasks. She was also there to explain if the teacher-student experienced any difficulties leading the task. However, we tried to make it as student-led as possible and not to interfere unless absolutely necessary. The class was closely monitored throughout the lesson to make sure that it was efficient and did not deviate from the objectives set by each activity. The tasks were also simplified in how they were phrased to limit any challenges the leading students might have had, as their understanding of the task was crucial to the success of the task. I also made sure that there were no tasks that required detailed explanations, like grammar or complex writing. The activities in the envelopes ranged from discussion, through listening to reading and simple vocabulary activities. Students who showed their

skills as not as advanced got to lead simpler tasks that had straightforward answers or focused on creativity and expression rather than correctness and skill.

2.3. Origins of the Silent Way

(Gattegno, 1972) in his Teaching Foreign Languages in Schools: The Silent Way introduces his innovative way of teaching the Silent Method. It emphasizes learner autonomy and minimal teacher intervention. The use of specialized tools like sound-colour charts and Cuisenaire rods are also favoured. This approach aims to develop students' criteria for correctness and ability to transfer knowledge to new contexts. The teacher remains mostly silent, guiding students through gestures and materials rather than modelling language. Key principles of this method include encouraging student self-correction and viewing errors as natural parts of the learning process. The students aim to develop language for self-expression and strive to self-correct, use peer correction, and ask the teacher for help as a last resort. According to the Silent Way, learning occurs in four stages: Awareness stage, Exploration stage, Transitional stage and Transfer stage. This process aims to develop students' independence and responsibility for their own learning. It is also not by accident that the stages of learning resemble the stages of how a child develops their language skills.

In one of the early articles, introduces the new method of teaching – The Silent Way. Benioni describes the method as one to focus on students speaking more and more in the classroom and the teacher using fewer words and preventing themselves from interrupting the students and interfering. The most important part of the article mentions that the learners are encouraged to feel secure and at the same time are strongly encouraged to familiarize themselves and recognize the language used by the teacher rather than traditionally – memorize lists of words. This shows a clear move from a teacher-centred classroom to one with the students in charge of their learning. The teacher serves a role of a model and the responsibility of error correction is taken off his shoulder (Stevick & Gattegno, 1974). It is the teacher's job to plan an effective lesson to help the students achieve their goals, but the bulk of learning stops putting the focus on the teacher.

(YÜKSEL & Caner, 2014) in their paper summarize all the point Gattegno made in his work 40 years earlier. It summarizes Gattegno's findings, goes through the theory and also suggests activities that could be implemented in the classroom. It is a comprehensive article that goes through the stages of teaching step by step and is worth suggesting to the educators willing to experiment with the Silent Way. It also provides a sample lesson plan with the use of the coloured rods.

In his 1979 article, The Silent Way: Panacea or Pipedream? Varvel critically examines the effectiveness of the Silent Way method in language teaching. He acknowledges its innovative approach (the teacher remains mostly silent to encourage student discovery and active participation) but also highlights several limitations, such as the method's potential to overwhelm students who are not accustomed to this level of independence. Varvel agrees that the method can promote learner autonomy, however, he argues that its structure might not suit all teaching contexts or learning styles. According to the author, the Silent Way has merits, but it should be considered as part of a broader, more flexible teaching strategy rather than a 'one-size-fits-all' approach.

3. Analysis and Findings

What was the end result? Overall, I have to admit it went better (and worse) than expected. Students were more engaged than I initially expected which meant that they possess skills necessary to work during the class. They were intimidated by the fact that they had to put themselves in a position of a leader — a leader who was not there to disrupt the class but in reality, lead and provide support to the rest of the class. I was happy to see that they were uncomfortable in that role (as bad as it may sound) and it seemed that they quickly realized that being responsible for others, their progress and the fact that they had to follow instructions in order to give instructions was not an easy task.

I was also happy/unhappy that they managed to lift this responsibility and treat it seriously. My teaching assistant and I both expected the students to act out and completely disregard the activities, but it turned out that the burden of leading motivated them to work harder. There still were issues with behaviour which had to be monitored throughout the class, but that was to be expected. I had to assume that the plan would fail in some part. As planned, I did not say a word to the class and the extent of my communication was limited to me knocking on their tables when they were being unreasonably noisy. Additionally, we both observed that against the initial assumptions, students did not share the

answers with the class as we were worried they would. This showed that they were treating the responsibility given to them seriously (this was the moment I also feared the most as I had a dark image in my brain of the lesson turning into to Zimbardo's experiment and my students becoming nightmarish teachers from the worst literary and movie works).

Students seemed uncomfortable with this unusual set of dynamic seeing their peers in control of the classroom tasks but they adjusted fast. However, not all of them were comfortable leading the activities which, it is my belief, is a sign of their lack of confidence either in their knowledge or assuming the role of a leader in the class.

3.1. Role of the Teacher and Students

As the roles shifted and each student had a chance to experience both sides of the coin, I was given an opportunity to monitor their interaction closer and to establish which of my students were actual dominant characters and which ones just put on this brave and loud façade during the previous lessons (VYGOTSKY, 1980). It turned out that the roles did not reverse much, but the number of 'class leaders' turned out to be smaller. Out of 3 students who usually led all of the shenanigans in the classroom, caused most disruptions and were the focus of weekly behavioural emails to the parents, only one ended up delivering his class with confidence (Sabornie & Espelage, 2022). Initially, one of the assumptions was that the linguistically strongest student would feel most comfortable in the role of a teacher (simply because the task would seem the least challenging). However, it was the student with decent English but also the most outspoken one in his L1 who ended up showing most confidence and reason in his short teaching practice. This shows that students need to be monitored closely and observed in terms of more than linguistic and behavioural performance but also in terms what may not be obvious. Constant observation and adjustments of the classroom materials, activities and dynamics in terms of types of tasks implemented (individual work, pair work and group work) need to be encouraged to ensure students' progress and teacher's development alike.

3.2. How does silence shift the teacher's role?

My role as a teacher was limited to making sure that the students stayed on task and their behaviour did not stray (Wilkins et al., 2023). It was strange to see myself being limited to a disciplinarian in the classroom and not providing any input to the students. In the same time, it was also very refreshing to see that the students can take more responsibility for their learning, if this responsibility is carefully planned and designed for them. This experiment designed to teach a lesson to my students, ended up being also a valuable lesson for me. It showed that the students, even the most misbehaving ones, are ready to take on more responsibility if only provided with enough stimuli and faith in their ability to perform up to standards. The teacher moves aside from being the dominant presence in the classroom to being a facilitator of learning (Le Ha, 2014). The students get a chance to speak up more often and in turn develop their problem-solving and critical thinking skills. This makes them more independent learners ready to take on more responsibility for their learning and allowing them to move into autonomous learning.

3.3. Implications for Educators

Every experiment, even a filed one, teaches us something new about our comfort zone in teaching and it shows us how far we are willing to take the activities in the classroom. Using silence as a teaching method is not an easy task, as it requires a lot of patience and determination not to scream out in frustration (from time to time). It also obliges the students to adjust to the lesser presence and involvement of the teacher. Students from cultures where a teacher is still seen as an omnipotent and respectful being might show a high level of discomfort due to this new behaviour of a teacher (Holliday, 2011). That is why it is important to implement these changes slowly to allow a period of adjustment for the class. It is also crucial to realize that a silent lesson may not work with all classes and a teacher needs to be ready to take over, one way or another, the control in the classroom (Bergdahl, 2022; Golden, 2023; Safura et al., 2023).

It has been my experience that the same activity may be very successful in one class and be a total and utter failure in another. This should not discourage the teachers form trying but show them that it is an opportunity to test and reflect. I was lucky, and my silent lesson worked better than expected. However, I have in the past planned lessons and activities that I was excited to try and in turn I ended up in tears. The students were not engaged or not interested or my careful plan flopped. When planning

a silent lesson, entrusting students with so much responsibility, my suggestion would be to plan this class with students who are familiar to you so that the expectations can be measured and not too high. Also, I would advise you to add extra few minutes per task as the students lack experience in juggling such responsibility and they might need to figure out how to work with each activity. It can be more challenging as expected. What is a basic task for an experienced teacher, even for a student who practiced a given task many times and seems to know their way around it, leading a task and being in charge of its implementation is, for the students, more complex as it can be out of their comfort zone. Even saying words as simple as 'open your book' might put a student in an uncomfortable position as it is a way of giving an order to their peers.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

4.1. Discussion

This experiment which started with the failed control of the classroom behaviour, ended up being very educational. However, did it really provide me as a teacher and my students with an educational progress or even a moment of reflection? I would like to believe that yes. Unfortunately, in order to be able to answer this question more research would have to be implemented. I base my research on classroom experiments and only after I read on the tests and trials of the more accomplished researchers. I did enjoy (in an evil way) seeing my students struggle and find it challenging to teach and I hope that they understood that teacher's job only looks easy on the surface. I was told that my job is easy because I only sit behind my desk and do nothing. I felt offended but only initially. I realized that it must look this way for a person who has never taught before. I started thinking if it can be changed as a general outlook on teaching career or even in my own classroom. I still do not know. Sometimes I feel like this is the only thing I am doing and the sole impact I have on my students is imprint of the terrifying image of my looming figure from behind the desk. Is it possible to remove the teacher even further from the classroom and make the lessons fully student-centered? Wouldn't it defeat the purpose of a teacher? can using silence in the lesson be seen as an opportunity or only a sign of neglect? Do these questions have one answer or do various factors have to be considered making this and individual case for every class we teach, every level and every configuration raging from nationalities, age groups, educational and religious backgrounds? can we find a golden ticket and be able to create a template which would incorporate all these factors and allow us to set up a perfect lesson with the balance of interactions and silence all beneficial and all useful.

4.2. Conclusion

It did not escape my attention that there is an overwhelming number of the words like I, my or me. However, to make this article effective and give it a chance to reach a wider audience, it was crucial to make it personal and show the accidental and frankly unintended effect of a revenge activity which turned the unresponsive class into slightly more cooperative group of young people. It may sometimes be difficult to relate to many activities present in a variety of reputable publications simply due to their depersonalized nature. I hope that through this more reflective way of writing, I am able to encourage teachers who fear that relinquishing linguistic control in the classroom may lead to solely negative results.

The extensive use of technology in the classroom may be seen as using silence to teaching, but it is my belief that this assumption would be wrong. Independent work using technological advancements is another type of teaching and it may not be as assisted as a task guided by the teacher but the lack of interaction with a human being should not be viewed as silent teaching. Relying on the use of computers and nowadays more and more on AI does not seem like the use of silence for reflection or the development of critical thinking. It is just a simplified way of reaching the results faster. I have learnt that using silence in the classroom is very challenging and it actually requires more focus from the teacher. It may seem like a class to get paid for while doing nothing, but it is more complicated. It requires more preparation, monitoring and detailed instructions to guide the students accurately without interfering.

Using silence in the classroom, even for a small part of the lesson, can be strange for all present in class. That is why it should be implemented slowly, providing the students a chance to get used to the process and take advantage of its many benefits. It does not have to be an extreme version of it, as presented in this paper, but a chance for the students to claim control over their development and take

responsibility for their learning. Silence can also give students a chance to settle and control their emotions, which especially with secondary students may be hard to manage. I hope that this rather informal paper caught your attention and provided you with an idea how to use silence in your class. Start small and see how the students are adjusting to this method. It is important to remember that students come from different backgrounds and they may have different expectations from the teacher – student interactions. It is also my advice not to try to implement long silent segments in a new classroom as it is my belief that it works best with a group of students who are already familiarized with the teacher and each other (Byram & Grundy, 2002).

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