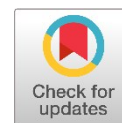# Silence as emotional regulation: Narrative case studies of medical undergraduates

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ABSTRACT

Despite growing recognition of silence's multifaceted role in human experiences (Bao, 2023; Jaworski, 2008; King & Harumi, 2020), its contribution to emotional regulation remains underexplored. Gross's (1998) process model of emotional regulation, while valuable, implicitly overlooks the role of internal, silent processing. This research addresses this gap, aligning with observations by Brackett and Katulak (2007) regarding the limited investigation into the moments of silence in shaping emotional responses. To this end, two narrative interviews were conducted with seven medical undergraduates in Vietnam, eliciting stories of emotional experiences that impacted their learning outcomes and the self-imposed silent strategies they intuitively employed. The findings reveal that silence functions as a crucial individual space across all stages of Gross's model: situation selection and modification, attentional deployment, cognitive reappraisal, and response modulation, enabling proactive and reactive emotional management. Silence emerges as a form of emotional endurance, signifying mental calmness and ongoing mental processing that fosters reflection and mitigates psychological tensions. This research highlights the significance of internal quietude in promoting emotional well-being.

1. Introduction

It has been common knowledge that the demanding nature of medical practice requires robust emotional regulation skills. Medical practitioners routinely encounter distressing situations, manage urgent patient cases, and handle the intense and often chaotic emotions of patients' families, all while contending with massive workload pressures. Recognising this challenging work reality, medical education usually emphasises the importance of students developing effective emotional management strategies in their training. They are encouraged to cultivate resilience and process their emotional responses to challenging experiences, ensuring they can provide compassionate and effective care without being overwhelmed by the emotional weight of their profession (Bird et al., 2020). This focus on emotional regulation is considered crucial for maintaining their well-being, preventing burnout, and ultimately delivering high-quality patient care in emotionally charged environments.

Building on this understanding of the critical need for emotional regulation in the medical field, this research explores an underexplored aspect of the process: the role of silence. While various cognitive and behavioural strategies for emotional regulation have been examined, the intuitive use of internal silent processing as an integral tool for managing emotions in demanding contexts remains largely unexamined.

1.1. The connection between emotion and cognitive functioning

Emotions, thinking, and learning are all interconnected. Emotions play a significant role in shaping cognitive processes. Positive emotions can enhance cognitive flexibility, creativity, and problem-solving abilities, while negative emotions might impair mental functions. For instance, anxiety and stress can cause cognitive overload, reducing the capacity for working memory and decision-making (Parke et al., 2022). Conversely, optimism can broaden attention and increase cognitive resources available for learning (Fredrickson, 2001).

When it comes to emotions in learning, emotional or affective factors are linked to language acquisition. The 'Affective Filter' theory, proposed by Dulay and Burt (1977) and later incorporated into Krashen's (1985) input hypothesis, represents a student's emotional state, which can either impede or foster the thinking process. The emotional state revolves around three key elements: motivation, self-confidence, and anxiety, which collectively influence the strength and level of absorption of the knowledge being delivered. Essentially, when the affective filter is high, or in other words, when negative feelings such as anxiety, fear, or embarrassment are elevated, these emotions act as a barrier that blocks or impedes the process of language acquisition. This means that even if the learner is exposed to comprehensible input, their ability to absorb and process this information is significantly reduced due to a heightened emotional state. In contrast, when the affective filter is low, the learner feels safe, confident, and motivated. The emotional barriers are minimized, allowing learners to acquire language and knowledge more effectively.

Beyond the adverse effects on cognitive thinking, emotional distress or malaise can lead to mental and social issues. Commonplace problematic manifestations include social withdrawal (i.e., sulking, feeling unhappy or reliant, feeling alone, having anxieties, needing perfection, feeling sad, nervous, and depressed). Attention and thinking suffer, as evidenced by the inability to sit still, difficulty paying attention, acting impulsively, performing poorly on schoolwork, or being unable to clear one's mind. More harmful, uncontrolled negative emotions can develop into aggressive behaviours such as lying and cheating, demanding attention, and destroying property (Goleman, 1995).

Neuroscience reveals that the thinking brain evolved from the emotional brain, highlighting the connection between thought and feeling. In other words, emotions existed before rational thought. This explains why, in some cases, outward behaviour might be driven by inner emotions and only adjusted properly once the emotion is well controlled.

1.2. Silence in cognitive and emotional processing

Silence has been proven to be beneficial for mental ability and language acquisition (Rogild-Muller, 2022; Pentón Herrera, 2025). Silence is explored as a positive aspect in language learning. Silence is not merely the sign of disengagement but a crucial part of cognitive processing and language acquisition (Bao, 2014, 2020). He emphasises that silence allows learners to mentally rehearse and process language, which can lead to meaningful verbal participation later on. Another study on Vietnamese tertiary environments found that silence facilitates verbal participation, which improves the quality of students' verbal output (Bao & Thanh-My, 2020; Thanh-My, 2020). They argue that silence should be viewed as a productive learning strategy rather than a sign of a lack of participation. They also propose classroom activities that leverage silence to enhance mental processing and language learning. Nakane (2006) examines how silence can be utilised effectively in classroom activities to foster cognitive and linguistic development. She argues that silence is an integral part of communication and mental processes.

In neuroscience, recent studies have emphasised that silence is a fundamental element for stress relief, well-being, and fostering faith in the future. A survey by Paoletti et al. (2023) describes the educational experience of using the Silence Device in the isolation setting during the second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic (May-July 2021). The results from the qualitative-phenomenological analysis of 23 male adults revealed that this silence-based technique had a positive impact on the participants' rehabilitation in three areas: coping, emotion management, and future planning. Another study by Dornelli et al. (2023) explores the impact of silence on the autonomic nervous system, specifically in relation to emotional regulation, social engagement, and adaptive physiological responses. The absence of outer noise may heighten alertness, activating the sympathetic nervous system (i.e., the fight-or-flight response). However, with training and familiarity, outer silence can be transformed into inner silence, which is a state of mental calmness. This transformation promotes social engagement and reduces sympathetic nervous system activity, leading to lower physiological

stress. Silence provides a break from constant stimuli and noise that can overwhelm the nerves, leading to stress. According to Kou et al. (2022), strategic silence can reduce cortisol levels, a hormone associated with stress, thereby promoting a state of relaxation and mental clarity.

In an academic setting, silence can be a powerful tool for emotional regulation. When it comes to the interplay between silence and language anxiety, silence was identified in various forms, such as short responses and non-talk, which are often linked to anxiety (Maher & King, 2020). Silence can be both a symptom and a coping mechanism for language anxiety. Yang and Wang (2022) discuss the role of resilience in language learning, highlighting the significant correlation between L2 learners' resilience and their experiences with storytelling, as well as other factors that contribute to resilience, such as problem-solving skills, social competence, and autonomy. Silence has been found to be beneficial in therapeutic tools and educational contexts, helping to foster relaxation and enhance well-being by altering one's perspective on time and orientation toward the present moment (Pfeifer & Wittman, 2020). Similarly, silence and solitude bring positive effects on emotional experiences, including privacy, relaxation, self-reflection, creativity, and emotional regulation (Long et al., 2003).

1.3. Silence and cognition about Gross's model of emotional regulation

Emotional regulation refers to a person's ability to effectively manage and respond to emotional experiences in a way that is conducive to achieving one's goals. In the context of learning, effective emotional regulation is essential for maintaining focus, motivation, and resilience. Students with emotional regulation ability are capable of handling academic challenges, equipped with deep learning, and achieve higher academic performance (Gross, 2015).

This regulation can be conscious or unconscious, with individuals developing diverse strategies to cope with specific emotional stimuli (i.e., situations or people) and the demands of the social context. Emotional coping strategies vary, leading to various frameworks for categorisation. The most widely used framework that I adopt here is Gross's process model of emotion regulation (Gross, 1998). This five-strategy model comprehensively illustrates how emotions unfold and how they can be effectively managed. The strength of this model lies in its cohesiveness, as it accounts for the dynamic nature of the emotion regulation process and the multiple ways individuals might employ to manipulate external factors and internal cognitions to regulate emotions.

Five major areas of focus in Gross's model include *situation selection*, *situation modification*, *attentional deployment*, *cognitive change or reappraisal*, and *response modulation*. The first four strategies are optimal before the emotion arises, whereas the last strategy is employed after the emotion has occurred.

Situation selection refers to the deliberate choice of individuals to encounter or avoid emotional stimuli. A case in point is when a student avoids group work because it is stressful to compromise with dominant peers.

Situation modification occurs when individuals alter the situation by taking actions to manipulate aspects of an ongoing situation in a desired manner. For example, a student might choose to work closely with a specific peer in a team with a matching communication style, rather than with other teammates.

Individuals adopt ***attention deployment*** by switching their attention away from events that stimulate unwanted emotions or towards events that evoke a desired emotion. For instance, a student may ignore an aggressive peer in a team to reduce frustration and prevent the project from being derailed.

Cognitive appraisal or ***cognitive change*** strategy involves the subjective interpretation an individual makes of an emotional event. This strategy helps individuals reframe or reappraise their thinking by creating or focusing on a positive aspect of the events is creating or focusing (positive reappraisal), broadening their perspective to a bigger picture (decentering), or interpreting the event as unreal or imaginary (fictional appraisal). A case in point is when a student excuses a peer's withdrawal from communication by assuming the silence is due to introversion rather than personal issues.

Once an emotion has been evoked, ***response modulation*** is the only strategy that allows individuals to modify their physiological and behavioural responses. Emotion at this stage can be suppressed or

expressed in a different way. In cases where emotional responses cannot be managed, individuals may avoid situations to initiate another process of emotion regulation.

The interplay between cognition and emotion is central to Gross's (1998) process model of emotional regulation, with cognitive change or cognitive reappraisal being a key focused strategy. Silence, in this context, serves as a crucial cognitive space that underpins the effective deployment of such strategies. It means that, before a learner can reappraise a situation or shift their attentional focus, a degree of internal cognitive processing is often necessary. The silent period allows the internalisation of the event, the activation of relevant memories and knowledge, and the mental manipulation of information that precedes a conscious regulatory effort. Thus, silence is viewed as an active cognitive state that facilitates the internal processing and evaluation required for the successful implementation of each stage of Gross's emotional regulation process.

To sum up, the concept of silence in this study refers to moments when learners temporarily refrain from speech and social engagement to internalise information, absorb contextual events, and process personal thoughts and emotions. This silent moment serves as a mental and emotional space that learners consciously create for themselves amidst the demands of their environment. This self-imposed silence can be a dynamic and purposeful state where inner cognitive and emotional processes take precedence over outward engagement. It can be a choice not to share specific content with certain individuals under particular circumstances. Some example key internal activities that occur during these silent moments include processing and integrating new information by making connections to prior knowledge, structuring the information in the mind, and solidifying understanding, going beyond simply hearing and reading. Silence can be the moments when personal reflections, questions, and connections to one's own beliefs and experiences are triggered. Occasionally, silence may refer to a state of not sharing specific content with certain people under certain circumstances, or intentionally acknowledging their emotions and beginning to regulate them internally, without the immediate need for external expression or interaction.

2. Methodology

2.1. Design

The study aims to investigate the relationship between silent choices and cognition related to and influencing students' ability to manage emotions, answering these questions:

1. In what ways do emotionally intense experiences encountere during the transition to university and in prior educational settings impact students' perceived learning engagement and academic performance?

2. How does silence play in the process of emotional regulation for the learning-relevant emotional challenges?

As the nature of 'how' questions in this research would require unstructured data rather than pre-existing categories, this study employed a narrative interview approach to explore the interviewees' personal stories, experiences and memories of first-year university students concerning emotionally intense incidents that impacted their learning journey, without asking questions about facts or the interviewees' opinions (Erlach & Muller, 2020) and ensure participants would benefit from conversations and storytelling, not questionnaires. According to Clandinin and Connelly (2000), narrative inquiry is a qualitative approach to collecting people's lived stories, where the inquiry revolves around reflecting on the situated lives of the participants. Narrative data can be rich in depth and convey different layers of people's lived experiences, framed within a social and cultural context, regarding the same phenomenon (Wertz et al., 2011).

Using the three-dimensional space of experience framework for analysis (Connelly & Clandinin, 1994, 2006), this study explores students' emotional experiences through three lenses: time, social context, and place. The reflection and inquiry focused on understanding the experience within these three interconnected dimensions. The objective was to understand the nature of these experiences, the students' awareness of their emotional responses, the perceived influence of these events on their academic engagement and performance, and their emotional regulation strategies, including the use of silence.

2.2. Participants

Convenience and snowball sampling techniques, which primarily rely on the researcher's circle of students, proved to be the most effective for participants in this project, as they needed to feel safe and trust the researcher to share their stories. The research was conducted at the faculty of Medicine, a private university located in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, where the researcher was working as a teacher.

Invitations were sent to first-year medical students at the university who identified themselves as being particularly prone to silence in distressing situations. Out of a total of 15 participants recruited, the study obtained agreement from eight participants and ultimately ended up with seven. Participation includes two males and five females: Bich, Nam, Phuc, Phuong, Uyen, Vy, and Yen.

2.3. Data collection

A focus group of seven participants was arranged to collect data from their reflections and storytelling. While the exploration of individual stories centered around the researched topic is prioritised, focus groups are a valuable tool for gathering data through the dynamic interaction of participants, helping to gain deeper insights into student experiences and perspectives. The purpose of focus groups is to identify and explore the patterns in which people think and behave about the subject. The combined use of the inherent interactivity of focus groups and individual storytelling in narrative inquiry facilitates the natural sharing of personal meanings derived from experiences and the emergence of insights that might not be revealed in one-on-one interviews (Parks, 2023; Morgan, 1997). In other words, in focus groups, participants can build upon the thoughts and experiences shared by others, leading to a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of their emotional incidents and silence-based regulation.

To build participants' confidence in sharing true stories about their silent incidents related to emotional regulation, which are relevant to learning outcomes, that have occurred in their lives, a series of two narrative interviews in focus groups was conducted. The second narrative interview was conducted to encourage the interviewees to reflect on and add details to their stories, in case they had missed any in the first narrative interview. This naturalistic approach offers narrative accounts of individuals' emotional experiences related to silence and the meanings they attribute to them (Mishler, 1986).

An interview guide for a focus group was created on Hennink's (2014) structure, consisting of five sections as outlined in Table 1.

Table 1. Focus Group for Narrative Inquiry Guide

Section	Purpose	No. of items
Welcoming	Welcoming the participants	
	Breaking the ice	
	Building rapport	
Introduction	Introducing the topic	
	Giving instructions	
Opening questions	Setting the context	2
	Leading to the main topic	
Key questions	Exploring personal accounts	7
Closing questions	Summarising and ending the interview	1

At the start of the focus group interview, participants were invited to get to know each other through the researcher's facilitation. This step aims to create a welcoming and comfortable environment that fosters the sharing of personal stories and facilitates group interactions. Once the introduction is settled, participants were asked to recall and describe in detail the instances where they felt strong emotions related to their learning experiences. Prompts were given as examples to encourage recall and storytelling when long silences occurred during the interview. For each identified incident, participants were encouraged to narrate the sequence of the events, including the context, their thoughts and feelings at the time, and their actions or reactions. Afterwards, participants were explicitly asked to reflect on how the emotional intensity of the event influenced their motivation, focus, attention, and engagement in learning activities, as well as their overall learning performance, both during the incident and in its aftermath. The focus of the interview is also to uncover students'

awareness of emotional regulation; instead of asking directly, 'How did you regulate your emotions, ' the narratives were analysed for instances where participants described coping mechanisms and other behaviours that suggested attempts at managing their emotional responses. The detailed interview guide, including main questions and probing questions, is available in Appendix A.

2.4. Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was employed to identify, organise, and interpret the patterns of meaning across the participants' narratives related to emotionally intense learning experiences and their perceived impact, as well as relevant silence-based regulatory strategies. A matrix was used to document stories. Personal accounts were organised in a table, and similarities and differences in lived experiences were discerned to facilitate understanding and discussion.

The process followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach as follows.

Table 2. Data Analysis Process

Phase	Purpose
1 Familiarisation with the data	The video recordings of the personal narratives in focus group discussions were transcribed verbatim to gain a comprehensive understanding of the content and to identify initial ideas and patterns.
2 Generating initial codes	Meaning units in the transcripts that related to the research questions were identified and labeled with initial codes. This includes a line-by-line analysis to capture the nuances of the participants' experiences and perspectives.
3 Searching for themes	The initial codes were examined for connections and overlaps. Similar codes were grouped into five themes of Gross's emotional regulation framework.
4 Reviewing themes	The identified themes were reviewed to ensure coherence and distinction, and to reflect the participants' narratives accurately. Refining the themes, including merging or splitting themes, occurs at this stage.
5 Defining and naming themes	Each theme was clearly defined in relation to Gross's emotional regulation framework, which captured its essence and significance in relation to the research questions.
6 Producing the report	The final stage involved selecting compelling examples from the transcripts to illustrate each theme and provide a rich and insightful interpretation of the findings.

2.5. Data Presentation and Interpretation

The findings of the study will be organised according to the themes adopted from Gross's (1998) emotional regulation framework. Students' perceptions of the impacts of emotional experiences on learning engagement will be presented in themes. Details of these emotional incidents will be disclosed afterwards, along with the strategies employed for emotional management. This interpretation will involve networking the commonalities and variations in different types of emotionally intense experiences and their impacts, contextualising how individual incidents fit into the overall life and learning trajectory of the participants, and drawing out the significance of the participants' emotional regulation about their encountered experiences.

3. Findings

3.1. Impacts of emotionally intense experiences on perceived learning performance

1) Challenges of transition and relocation

Participants described feeling overwhelmed and isolated upon moving to university, echoing the challenges of university transition cited in the literature (Moosa & Langsford, 2021; Kahu, Ashley, & Picton, 2022). Yen, for instance, shared 'I have cried for the whole semester 1 for missing my family. I felt so lonely when I lived alone; I grew accustomed to being surrounded by my beloved family. It was hard for me to focus on studying when I felt homesick.' This emotional distress directly impacted her perceived learning engagement, as she explained, 'I just can't feel any motivation to be happy. I tried to attend lectures and do my readings, but my mind was always

back home.' Vy, another participant, shared her feelings when she first relocated to the city, saying, 'I was in cultural shock. The cost of living here was more expensive than I expected. I always have to find ways to incorporate daily activities into my routine, especially when I live independently. I felt like I had lost my old self when I had to adjust my lifestyle to accommodate the new pace of university life. I always felt I did not have enough time to study, and I was afraid to be left behind at school.' These experiences highlight the significant emotional toll of relocation and its potential to hinder focus ability and engagement during the crucial first school year.

2) Social comparison

Participants revealed their uncertainty and fear of failure at school when they are exposed to a broader learning environment where they compare themselves to peers academically and socially, resonating with the social comparison intuition in human beings (Matthews & Kelemen, 2025). Vy, in the previous story, continued sharing, 'I was always afraid to fail the course, unable to keep up with the school load, and more importantly, it would likely affect teamwork. This fear originated from the insufficient prior knowledge and lack of learning skills when I saw others were better than I was. Therefore, I felt not confident to participate.' Bich added, 'Seeing how easily some of my classmates seemed to grasp the knowledge made me feel stupid, and then I just didn't even want to try.' The self-doubt stemming from these experiences has limited the participants' ability to actively engage in the lessons, resulting in lower learning performance.

3) Navigating new relationships and learning environments

Emergent requirements in learning environments also restrain students' academic achievement. Phuc shared,

> "I struggled with knowledge acquisition during my university studies. I was shocked and unsure about my established learning skills at the beginning of the first English course. Although I can understand what teachers say in English, I couldn't think of a word to reply, so I stopped trying to avoid taking up the class time. I felt helpless in my learning, although I did make an effort to read books before class to keep up with university requirements."

Participants also revealed their intense emotions in studying during the period of building new friendships or facing difficult times in their new relationships. Nam recalled,

I was panicked when I had to choose the right people to make friends with in university. I was concerned that making the wrong friend would negatively impact my learning. This is a complicated feeling when everyone is new to each other, so I had to focus on the lesson but be observant and selective of my classmates at the same time.

Meanwhile, Uyen shared her story, 'Once I was in a crisis with my friends to the point that my overthinking distracted my attention from the lesson. I was always wondering the reasons behind our hiccups; it was even harder for me to focus on learning if that friend was studying in the same class as me.'

4) The interplay of family stressors

The impacts of the family issues, such as parental separation, created emotional distress in the children of the family and affected their concentration, motivation, and academic performance, as discussed in literature on the influence of family dynamics on childhood development research (Tabanao, 2024). Uyen shared her experiences about her mother after the divorce, 'I was empty and devastated when my parents were no longer living with each other when I was only in primary school age. My ability to study was getting worse when I witnessed the extreme emotions that my mother expressed. I was too young to know what I should do at the time. I was sitting in class, but I could not concentrate.'

5) Influence of peer dynamics

Peer relationships were perceived to impact the participants' academic responsibilities due to social influence (Matthews & Kelemen, 2025; Nie, 2025). A case in point is Phuc, who felt the urge to socialise excessively. Phuc is a case where he confronted the fear of being marginalised if he did not participate in the shared activities of his friend group at high school. He revealed his regret when he skipped class during that time, 'I was participating with the boys to play games at

the internet shop. That experience was too exciting for me to remember that I needed to review lessons and go to school. My school results had been falling for a while.'

It can be seen that the experiences described by the participants influence their attention, engagement, and performance in learning. While it might be transformed into a positive force of motivation that triggers learners to make efforts and overcome challenges, in these stories, it has initially restrained students' ability to thrive and grow academically. This fact highlights the importance of emotional regulation and the understanding of the strategies students have employed to manage their past emotions.

3.2. Silence as an emotional regulation method

1) Silence in the situation strategies

Transitioning from high school to university can be emotionally challenging for students. The role of silence in situational strategies, including situational selection and situational modification, becomes crucial for emotional regulation during this period. Nam, Uyen, Phuong, and Yen ulitised silence as a tool to observe, reflect, and adapt to their new academic environments, ultimately finding methods to manage intense feelings and succeed.

As a leading student in high school, Nam was under pressure and skeptical about his capabilities as he transitioned to university. The perceived reasons come from environmental change, peer comparison, and new learning styles. He was quiet and feeling left behind when his previous identity needed to be reidentified. He revealed, 'I was once a tiger - the leader of the class in high school, but when I entered university, my world opened up to the point that I felt small and left behind when people were learning better and knowing more than I did. My ego turns into shame. I felt lost.' Withdrawal from class activities allowed him to spend time observing the room, absorbing how the lessons were conducted and what responses were expected from the teachers. He also realised that he had to be socially outgoing, participative, and cooperative, rather than being solo in his imagination. He began his journey of adaptation to a new environment by choosing a small group of classmates with similar characteristics, with whom he felt safe being a part.

Contrary to Nam's case, Uyen realized she was less disciplined and demotivated in her studies due to the nature of university study, with less parental and teacher intervention than in high school. Laziness to study grew big in her during the first semester of her first year at university. Being aware of this change, she adjusted her situation by making plans to balance her health and studies. She said, 'I know that I will be more likely to focus and work efficiently if she were in good health and had a refreshing mind. That's why I sleep before studying.' Quality sleep was a silent strategy for her to modify the individual context to be conducive to learning.

With a similar situation modification strategy, Phuong and Yen developed their leading role in teamwork through silent thinking and observation of the members' characteristics and team interactions. They were initially significantly disappointed with the collaboration and group effort of their classmates in their first year of university. The performance of the teams was not as good as expected, resulting in low scores and low morale among team members. They silently observed and considered strategies to enhance their teamwork styles. As Phuong reflected,

> "I wasn't happy with the teamwork. Everything turned out the way I wanted, even though I wasn't the leader at the time. I was trying my best to complete the task I was in charge of, but I believed that mutual effort would help the whole team's performance more. I was observing and paying attention to how things went in our team collaboration. I didn't share this observation with anyone until one day, I knew I could become a leader. I did that and began to take action. *Mất lòng trước, được lòng sau* (translation: "A civil denial is better than a rude grant") is a good quote for work."

For that reason, in the end, Phuong and Yen devised a strategy for their teamwork: they conducted a meeting with the team members before the project began so that they could establish the right mindset for the team. They communicated the working style and expected outcomes of the mutual projects they work on, which helped them take better control of the team dynamics.

Situation strategies not only involve the intentional choice or modification of the situation but can also involve creating a particular situation that they feel comfortable staying in, which fosters their working efficiency. That is Uyen. Whenever she noticed that she was overthinking her studies and peer relationships in higher education, she would withdraw from that thinking and engage in activities she was interested in, such as singing, reading, and drawing. She admitted that she became calm and lucid after engaging in self-reflection during that time. The environment that she created saved her.

Silence choices in the stories of Nam, Uyen, Phuong, and Yen highlight the significance of silence when students face confusion and uncertainty. By taking time to observe and reflect silently, they were able to understand the core issue and devise effective ways to make an impact on the situations they encountered in university life.

2) Silence in attention deployment

Switching focus away from a distressing situation or concentrating on a different aspect of it to alter its emotional impact is also an ideal strategy that participants employ to alleviate stress. Such focus requires adequate sobriety developed in silence. In these quiet moments, individuals can gain clarity and reframe their perspectives by shifting their attention to a more positive aspect of the issue, which eases their stress.

As Phuong, in her journey of managing instinctive temper or bluntness when things do not go her way, she smartly switched her attention to the future image of a good doctor that she had always craved for. She believed,

> "An ideal doctor should be skilled in conducting professional research, speak sparingly, and only discuss relevant topics at the appropriate time. Therefore, as soon as I notice my anger emerging within me, I will remain quiet and be mindful of the possible impacts of my response to the intense emotion. This is like a reminder for me to improve myself."

Nam shared his recent incident, which occurred when he received the test result for the Biology subject at university. He said that the consciousness of the score at the time made him focus and rethink his studying. His switch to attention zone has caused sudden and prolonged silence, which surprised and confused his classmate sitting next to him, who could not resist asking him the reason he was so quiet. He said,

> "I was so annoyed by my test score that I couldn't understand why I couldn't do better. In my silence, I feel that the biology test was like a wake-up call, reminding me that I need to focus more and actively find solutions for the subjects in which I remain weak. I was pretty confident previously."

Meanwhile, Bich was strategically distracted from negative thoughts by reminding herself of possible results she could achieve in the future. She said,

> "Whenever I feel suffocated or overwhelmed, I stop everything unfinished, take a deep breath, and jot down my thoughts, wishes, and the imaginative possible results I can achieve in a journal. Alternatively, I find household chores to be a distraction from stress factors."

In this way, physical movement while performing domestic duties, along with the modified attention, helped overcome the temptation of self-blame in the face of failure.

The value of silence in attention deployment is profound. By switching focus away from distressing situations or concentrating on different aspects to alter their emotional impact, individuals can effectively manage their stress. Silence offers a strategic distraction from negative thoughts, allowing for moments of deeper understanding and recasting the meaning of adversity.

3) Silence in cognitive reappraisal

Many participants in this study employed a similar strategic use of silence to facilitate their cognitive reappraisal. They thought about the future when they envisioned a better outcome for their endeavour. This forward-thinking approach allowed them to shift their focus from immediate stressors to long-term goals, providing a sense of purpose and motivation.

Phuc was a typical case of success following a significant event that triggered intense emotions. He was once an excellent child in his family, admired for his characteristics and efforts in learning. However, in his secondary grades, he suffered shame with his mother. He skipped class with ten other friends to play online games in an internet café, which his mother discovered through the accusation of another mother, leaving her very upset. She immediately brought him back home and punished him by making him kneel on the floor for several consecutive hours to reflect on his actions. After that incident, he promised to participate in a regional competition. He shared that the shame had compelled him to make such a decision as a means of making amends and offering apologies. He promised himself and his mother that he would win the regional academic championship. Over the next three months, he immersed himself in silence, isolating himself in his room and avoiding contact with his friends. Driven by his ambition to win the competition, he devoted himself entirely to self-study. Whenever he failed to conquer a practice test, he would go for a jog, box, or simply listen to music to relieve stress. After spending some time alone to release stress healthily, he returned home and strategically practiced areas that needed improvement. Consequently, he achieved. Speaking of the silent time that he separated himself for three months, he revealed that

> "I was in total focus mode, despite some fluctuations in my emotions during the initial days. My negative feelings about myself are mixed with determination. However, through deep thinking and time for myself, I was able to reframe my emotions; I considered this regional contest to be a singular opportunity for me to prove to my mother, recreate my image, and salvage my honor."

Phuong and Uyen similarly employed silence as a form of cognitive reappraisal when feeling overwhelmed by schoolwork and the knowledge required in medical studies. Both revealed the self-reassurance that they are stretching to the development zone where they are absorbing new knowledge. They have faith in their learning as Uyen shared, 'I would like to think of my learning in university as for real-life application rather than for testing. If knowledge is learnt for application, it must require more time than rote memorization. I allowed myself to be slow so that I could absorb knowledge.'

From that perspective, both felt more comfortable with the abundance of new knowledge and the uncertainty of learning, and started to give themselves more time to adapt to a new learning style.

Particularly in English language learning at university, being unable to catch up with the listening task, Bich felt confused and inferior. However, Bich soon got back her calmness and attention as she strategically focused on her listening skills with the awareness that 'I was good at other skills, so having some weaknesses is reasonable. No one can be perfect.' This cognitive reappraisal helped Bich regain her resilience in language learning. Indeed, resilience can be sharpened through silent, positive reflection when one recalls the obstacles one has overcome. Bich disclosed that whenever she felt stressed, she would like to think about the difficulties she had conquered and believe that the current challenges were lessons for her to grow strong and capable.

More noticeable is the life story that Uyen went through that has significantly impacted and directed her learning journey. Uyen told her story,

> "I witnessed a highly distressing event that has changed my life – my mother expressing suicidal thoughts after the divorce from my father. I didn't know what to do at the time; I was too young and inexperienced to take any action. In the extreme stage of my mother's life, or I should say 'our life' as there was only my mother and I left, I just imagined… if one day I could become a doctor, I could at least do something to help my mother or anyone in a similar situation."

This is a traumatic experience that could lead to intense negative emotions such as fear, sadness, and helplessness. Instead of being overwhelmed by these emotions, Uyen reinterpreted the situation. She decided to channel her distress into a positive and proactive goal – becoming a doctor. She is immersed in strategic silence, focusing on a long-term goal that is constructive and

meaningful for her life and her mother, which helps her manage her emotions by giving her a sense of purpose and helping her cope with adversity. Uyen's decision to become a doctor can be seen as a form of cognitive reappraisal, where she reframed a traumatic experience into a motivating factor for her future inspirations.

By imagining positive outcomes, challenges at hand can be reinterpreted as temporary obstacles. In silence, the mental shift not only helped them manage their current emotions but also reinforced their commitments to aspirations, making silence a powerful tool for emotional regulation and personal growth.

4) Silence in response modulation

Participants expressed their use of silence after developing their emotional response. They were able to modify their emotional reactions after the emotions had been entirely generated, thanks to a period of silence and solitude. This silent practice of response modulation allowed them to absorb the feelings thoroughly, ensuring their course of action was measured and appropriate to serve their purposeful goals. This strategy is particularly popular in learning settings, especially when dealing with emotional surge after failure, illustrated in the stories of Phuc and Yen.

Language learning was quite challenging for Phuc when he noticed that his decoding skills in the English language were not strong. He disclosed,

> "I was very stressed, especially when learning English with you [the teacher-researcher of this study], as I realised that I wasn't good at communicative English as I thought. I couldn't write down the exact words as I listened, although I understood the meaning. Now I know why I struggle to improve my English communication skills."

On that day, he felt most helpless and disappointed about his situation in learning. The next morning, he woke up with a to-do list for actions to improve his English.

This strategy occurred similarly in Yen when she grew committed to self-learning after an incident with a low score on her Chemistry test. She said she was spending a night in solitude to plan the modules she would need to study to fill her knowledge gaps.

Phuc's creation of a to-do list and Yen's commitment to self-learning highlight the effectiveness of using silent moments to reassess and plan for improvement. These strategies exemplify response modulation, promoting a proactive and resilient mindset in the aftermath of emotional turbulence.

5) Silence as an emotional endurance

One emotional regulation strategy emerged from this research, which is beyond the four main strategies proposed by Gross (1998). That is, silence can be a sign of emotional endurance. It refers to the suppression or acceptance of pain or hardship without displaying feelings or uttering complaints. This silence embodies the concept of maintaining a calm and composed demeanor while offering space to acknowledge the current emotion. In this nuance of silence, doing nothing with emotion is believed to be a way to regulate emotion. No pre-planned emotion regulation strategies were used; instead, they immerse themselves in intuitive silence, which creates a space for their feelings to be present without mental effort interfering with them, as in Vy's story, where she put on a cheerful front and encouraged her father to stay healthy on a phone call while living away from home, even though she had failed her course.

> "At the time it [the emotion] occurs, I sense it, and I acknowledge its occurrence within my heart. However, I choose to let it be without sharing it with anyone. I believe time would eventually heal my intense emotions, and I would be fine then. One time, my sick father video-called me. I knew he would be worried if he saw my anxiety about the problems I was facing, that I had failed the course."

Silence, in this case, means time, space, and waiting – a truly absolute inner quietude. One wishes to acknowledge the emotion and patiently let it be without ruminating on it. In academic settings, students can similarly learn to expect and manage intense emotions that arise during their activities and routines, particularly when they encounter new experiences and challenges.

This form of silence is deeply intertwined with emotional intelligence in Stoicism, an ancient philosophy that emphasised virtue, reason, and inner tranquility (Margaret, 2009). Stoic believes that silence helps quiet the mind, reducing distractions and allowing individuals to focus on their thoughts and emotions. This fosters self-awareness and emotional stability by allowing for reflection and reasoning. By practicing silence, one learns to control thoughts and emotions, rather than being controlled by them, fostering inner peace even in difficult circumstances (Sellars, 2006).

Silence, as a form of emotional endurance in this notion, does not advocate for suppressing emotion entirely, but rather for understanding it as a judgment that can be true or false, right or wrong. It resonates with the core Stoic principle of 'dichotomy of control' (Irvine, 2009), distinguishing what is within our control (our thoughts, judgments, and reactions) and what is not (external events, other people's actions). Silence provides the space to observe these judgments without immediate response. This aligns with psychological approaches, namely Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT), which focuses on reframing thoughts and emotions by challenging distorted thoughts and maladaptive behaviours that lead to emotional distress, thereby learning to develop healthier thinking patterns and coping strategies (Beck, 2020). This gap between stimulus and response is central to Stoic self-control.

Another particularly compelling aspect of silence's impact is its role in cultivating resilience-building. According to the participant Vy in this research, silence enhances emotional and memory processing capabilities related to self-awareness and adaptive coping. She demonstrates the characteristics of a resilient individual who understands her emotional landscape and employs effective coping mechanisms in response to external factors (Lopez et al., 2021). Necessary silence in adversities fosters a revised self-image, where individuals become aware of unexpected abilities when rising to challenges.

4. Discussion

Along with the findings found in the discourse of emotions, silence and learning (Bohn-Gettler & Jaakinen, 2022; Marti-Gonzalez et al, 2022; Martyres, 1995; Nakamura, 2023; Sampson, 2023), the narratives of emotionally charged events in this research uncovered significant, yet underexplored, domain of emotional regulation occurs within periods of silence. This study extends Gross's models in two key ways: first, by introducing 'silence as emotional endurance' as a novel form of emotional regulation, and second, by detailing specific emotional regulation techniques employed during silence that are not fully captured by Gross's existing categories.

The figure below visualises the presence of silence in Gross's model of emotional regulation and the emerging form of 'silence as emotion endurance'.
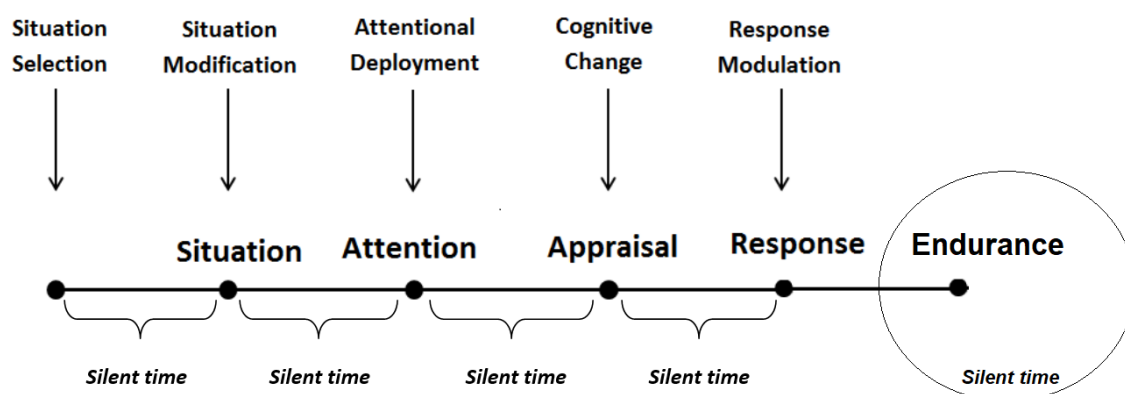

Fig. 1. The integral existence of silence in the emotional regulation process, explored and reviewed on the framework of Gross's process model of emotional regulation (Gross, 1998)

As shown in Figure 1, the straight line represents the thread of emotion development. Five emotional regulation techniques from Gross's model, which are at the top of the figure, are situation

selection, situation modification, attentional deployment, cognitive change, and response modulation. These techniques are used either separately or collectively to influence the decision on a situation, attention, appraisal, or response. Silent moments lie along this regulatory thread, which have been proven to be an integral foundation for efficiently processing and managing emotions. The end of the emotion line in the figure describes the situation in which emotions are accepted or suppressed in silence – emotional endurance, a form of emotional regulation, has emerged in this study beyond Gross's model. The closed circle surrounding 'endurance' describes the nature of emotional endurance, where emotions are either kept intact or transformed into adaptive coping mechanisms.

This proposed extension of Gross's framework incorporates 'silence as emotional endurance' and details the specific silent-infused techniques employed within it. While Gross's model focuses on strategies that directly influence physiological, experiential, and behavioral aspects of emotional responding after an emotion has been generated, emotional endurance speaks to the prolonged maintenance of emotional control in the face of ongoing emotional elicitation or internal pressure. Silence, as a form of emotional endurance, can be identified as 'affective containment' — a distinct strategy that involves a deliberate, internal effort to compartmentalise emotional responses. It shares some superficial resemblance with suppression (a form of response modulation); however, 'affective containment' is a more proactive and sustained internal effort to prevent the expression of emotions. It is more than merely inhibiting an already generated response; instead, it is a continuous, internal vigilance to maintain emotional integrity.

This study has a limitation in interpreting silence solely as intentional and strategic. It should be acknowledged that some forms of silence can indicate a lack of focus and concentration, psychological distress, a lack of safety, or even malicious intent. The impact of silence in general is not uniform. It is crucial to differentiate between various forms of silence, as not all quietude is beneficial. Its effects vary significantly depending on its context, duration, and the intention behind it.

Pedagogical approaches should shift from solely valuing overt participation to recognising and supporting the productive, internal labor that occurs during silent moments. This implies creating learning environments that normalize and provide space for quiet processing, teaching explicit strategies for emotional management, and developing assessment methods that acknowledge diverse forms of engagement beyond immediate verbal and behavioural responses. Beyond that, fostering an awareness that 'silence as emotion endurance' can empower students with a broader repertoire of self-regulation skills crucial for the emotional demands of learning and life.

Specifically, to make the best use of silent experiences that induce positive emotions conducive to learning outcomes, one should direct their attention to these three foci systems to guide their cognition and reactions. They are soothing, change, and protection. A gentle system can function when one slows down, rests, soothes, is safe, and kind. A change system can function when one aims to achieve goals, consume or accomplish tasks. The protection system functions when one manages threats, seeks safety, or finds measures to survive. These three focus systems can be switched frequently among each other to ensure emotional management (Gilbert, 2014). These systems also align with Gross's model of emotional regulation, as presented in this research, which incorporates the application of silence.

5. Concluding Remarks

Silence, or the deliberate absence of speech and noise, can be a powerful yet often overlooked tool for managing emotions, especially for enhanced learning outcomes. This study offers valuable insights into how the integral presence of silence facilitates emotional regulation at every stage of emotion generation in academic settings. Silence was found to extend beyond the response modulation strategies outlined in Gross's framework to encompass the continuous, internal maintenance of emotional integrity, endurance, and resilience. It is a connecting thread that links emotional awareness, wisdom, and transformative reactions. Pedagogical approaches are called to support productive, internal labor during silent moments, and more training on emotional regulation would be helpful. Despite the strategic and intentional role of silence in emotion regulation discovered in this study, it is crucial to acknowledge the other effects of silence, considering the context, duration, and intention behind it. Responding to the calls of Bao (2023), Brackett and Katulak (2007), Glenn (2004), and King (2018), this research provides irrefutable evidence regarding the relationship between the experience of internal quietude, emotional regulation, and learning performance.

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APPENDIXES

Appendix A: Narrative Inquiry Questions

1. Have you ever experienced any strong emotion during the time you transitioned to university that related to or affected your learning?

2. How about your previous schooling? Did you experience any strong emotions related to or affect your learning?

3. Can you describe what happened in detail?

4. What were you thinking and feeling at the time?

5. How do you think this experience affected your learning or your study approach?

6. Can you walk me through how you handle emotionally challenging situations you just mentioned?

7. What helped you to regain your equilibrium?

8. Would you prefer to discuss it with others, or do you find that you need more personal space and time to work through it?

9. How did you find the results after handling your emotions in that way?

10. Do you have anything else to share?