

Silence and degrees of appraisal confusion: A barometer for the strength of teacher-student relationships

Jonathan Shachter^{a, 1, *}, Dat Bao^{b, 2}, Seiko Harumi^{c, 3}

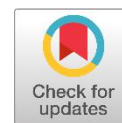
^a 2-chōme-3-1 Matsukadai, Higashi Ward, Fukuoka, 813-0004, Japan

^b Monash University, Wellington Rd, Clayton VIC 3800, Australia

^c SOAS, University of London, 10 Thornhaugh Street, London, WC1H 0XG, United Kingdom

¹ jonathanShachter@gmail.com; ² dat.bao@monash.au; ³ sh96@soas.ac.uk

Corresponding Author



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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the long-term emotional impact of student silence on non-Japanese EFL teachers, focusing on one expatriate teacher in Japan (Elliott). Utilizing a model that incorporates appraisal confusion and recursive feedback loops, the research examines how teachers emotionally process silence in ambiguous relational contexts: event—based sampling documented real-time emotional responses to silence, revealing patterns in teacher-student interactions. Key findings indicate that (1) prolonged silence triggered hesitation, frustration, and relational insecurity; (2) the lack of verbal and nonverbal cues led to persistent appraisal confusion; and (3) unresolved silent incidents, compounded by breaches of trust, culminated in emotional exhaustion. Silence operated as a barometer of teacher-student relational strength—where mutual understanding failed, emotional strain intensified. These findings underscore the emotional labor involved in interpreting silence in high-silence EFL contexts such as Japan, where ambiguity often gives rise to perceptions of disengagement, leaving teachers vulnerable to sustained emotional fatigue.



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1. Introduction

Silence in the language classroom is not merely an absence of talk—it is an interactional cue that can either reflect relational trust or trigger emotional unease. This paper argues that silence, particularly when prolonged or unreciprocated, functions as a barometer for the strength of teacher-student relationships. Drawing on a conceptual model adapted from Spilt et al. (2011), the study introduces appraisal confusion to explain how non-Japanese EFL teachers emotionally interpret moments of silence in Japanese university classrooms. When relationships are well-established, silence may be benign or even supportive. However, when trust is weak or ambiguous, silence is more likely to be interpreted through a negativity bias (Baumeister et al., 2001; Shachter, 2023), which reinforces perceptions of disengagement or resistance and intensifies emotional strain (King, 2016). By incorporating recursive feedback loops, the model accounts for how emotional responses to silence are not isolated but accumulate over time, shaping teacher well-being in dynamic and compounding ways.

While silence can serve beneficial functions—such as fostering reflection, promoting cognitive processing, or signaling respect (Bao, 2014; Nakane, 2007)—this study deliberately focuses on instances where silence is interpreted as negative. This choice reflects the reality that in the Japanese

EFL university context, prolonged or unreciprocated silence is often perceived by non-Japanese teachers as disengagement or rejection, which can have an adverse effect on teacher well-being (King, 2016; Shachter, 2023; Smith & King, 2018). Given the frequency of such perceptions and their emotional toll, this article focuses specifically on the emotional impact of negative silence.

To examine these processes, this study presents a qualitative case analysis of “Elliott,” a non-Japanese L1-English speaking university EFL teacher in Japan, whose classroom experiences were documented over a single term using event-based sampling. The paper examines Elliott's emotional responses to student silence, providing insight into how silence can erode trust, reinforce self-doubt, and ultimately affect the relational climate of the classroom. While not specifically focused on pedagogical strategies, the findings highlight a critical relational factor that should be considered when seeking to strengthen teacher-student connections in silence-rich Japanese EFL contexts.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Defining Silence

Silence in language learning has been widely studied as a complex, communicative act, rather than merely the absence of sound (Bao, 2014, 2021, 2023a, 2023b). Scholars highlight its multiple dimensions—communicative, psychological, and cultural (Bruneau, 2009; Ephratt, 2008; Jaworski, 1993; Meyer, 2014). Silence can signal reflection, respect, or disengagement depending on context (Knapp, 2000). Cultural norms shape these interpretations: for instance, silence may connote wisdom in Setswana and Arabic-speaking contexts (Al-Harabsheh, 2012; Bagwasi, 2012), caution or respect in Western Apache communities (Basso, 1990), and harmony preservation in Japan (King, 2013a; Nakane, 2007). In contrast, North American norms often view silence as awkward or undesirable (Coupland et al., 1992; Meyer, 2014).

In language education, silence is recognized as dynamic and context-sensitive. Bao (2013, 2014, 2023a) categorizes it as positive, neutral, or negative. Positive silence facilitates reflection and cognitive processing, while neutral silence reflects shared understanding, such as during individual written tasks. Negative silence, however, may indicate discomfort, anxiety, disengagement, or even defiance (King, 2013b; Nakane, 2007; Shachter & Haswell, 2022). Smith and King (2018) further classify negative silence into affective domains—such as fear, frustration, and resistance—highlighting its psychological toll on teachers.

From a pedagogical standpoint, silence is often interpreted in relation to student participation. Active talk is generally viewed as evidence of learning and teaching effectiveness, while silence may be seen as a problem (Bao, 2013). In Japan, university assessment frameworks often reinforce verbal fluency as a core learning outcome (Koizumi & Yano, 2018; Sato & Koizumi, 2020), shaping both institutional expectations and teacher perceptions. Consequently, silence—particularly when it is frequent or prolonged—is often interpreted negatively in classroom contexts.

For this study, silence is explicitly defined in socio-interactional and emotional terms. Here, negative silent incidences refer to (a) moments of unwanted, inappropriate, or uncomfortable wait times, (b) unreciprocated communication, and/or (c) a desire for another party to instigate paths toward mutual understanding. By contrast, positive reactions to talk describe emotionally affirming teacher responses to student speech. These categories are distinct from “positive silence,” which is acknowledged but not the primary focus of this discussion.

While the study centers on teacher experiences, it acknowledges that student silence may reflect essential cognitive processes (Bao & Thanh-My, 2020). It can also stem from unrelated factors such as anxiety, strategic hesitation, or fear of embarrassment (Bao, 2014; Dewaele & Dewaele, 2017; King, 2013a; Shachter & Haswell, 2022). Recognizing these underlying factors brings clarity to the distinction between how silence is perceived and what it may signify. With working definitions in place, the literature review will now examine the social and institutional forces that influence silence among Japanese university learners.

2.2. Non-Japanese EFL Teacher Stress Caused by Japanese English Language Learner Silence

This study draws on Dynamic Systems Theory (DST) to examine how emotionally impactful moments of student silence emerge within the ecological contexts of non-Japanese EFL teachers. As

a flexible, supra-theoretical framework (Al-Ahmadi, 2022), DST is well-suited to explore how silence emerges as a focal event shaped by attractors—contextual, social, and psychological forces influencing behavior (Hiver & Al-Hoorie, 2019; Smith & King, 2018). These attractors can lead to recurring emotional states and appraisals. Used in conjunction with Ecological Systems Theory (see Bronfenbrenner, 1979), DST informed the study's research design and data collection strategy.

King's (2013) study found that teacher-initiated talk comprised over 90% of verbal communication in Japanese university EFL classrooms, supporting concerns that Japanese English Language Learners rarely initiate conversation (Anderson, 2019). Non-Japanese teachers often interpret silence as a communication barrier or even a rejection of interaction (Harumi, 1999, 2011). These interpretations are shaped by teachers' own cultural and educational expectations (Shachter & Haswell, 2022) and a general negativity bias toward silence (Shachter, 2023). As a result, silence frequently leads to frustration and strained teacher-student interactions.

When silence is perceived as avoidance or resistance (Cutrone, 2009; Glasgow, 2014), teachers may feel a burden to generate positivity to counteract the perceived negativity (Gkonou et al., 2020; Morris, 2022). This includes modifying classroom tasks or even altering the classroom environment (Falout, 2014). Emotional labor becomes central in these cases. As Hochschild (1983) generalized and later scholars in the field of language learning (King et al., 2020; Acheson et al., 2016) note, teachers engage in surface acting (projecting emotion) and deep acting (modifying inner emotions) to meet cultural expectations—such as the expectation to be perpetually positive (Morris, 2022). However, this emotional effort often leads to exhaustion, particularly when teachers feel their positivity is not reciprocated.

Acheson et al. (2016) describe how a disproportionate burden of motivation can lead to emotional exhaustion and ultimately burnout—a risk particularly relevant in contexts where teachers feel they must compensate for persistent student silence. Cowie (2011), King and Ng (2018), and Taylor (2020) all emphasized in their research that repeated emotional labor without meaningful engagement may erode teachers' sense of efficacy and resilience.

Further compounding the issue, some non-Japanese teachers interpret student silence as intentional or rude when students fail to use communication strategies previously taught (King, 2016). However, as Anderson (1993) explains, Japanese students may rely on nonverbal cues or resist using filler phrases unfamiliar in their native communicative norms. At times, silence may indeed be used to signal resistance, creating further tension and contributing to teacher frustration (Morris & King, 2018).

Teachers who suppress emotional reactions to silence may experience cognitive dissonance—a misalignment between their genuine feelings and their performed behavior (Festinger, 1957; Mercer & Gregersen, 2020). This emotional suppression is closely linked to the risk of burnout across various professions (Zapf & Holz, 2006). In extreme cases, teachers may emotionally withdraw or mirror the silence in the classroom, a process known as emotional contagion (Hatfield et al., 1993; Moskowitz & Dewaele, 2021).

In sum, Japanese ELL silence presents a unique emotional challenge for non-Japanese EFL teachers. These moments of silence are not isolated events, but rather dynamic, affective interactions shaped by cultural expectations, emotional labor, and recursive appraisal processes—highlighting the urgent need for a deeper understanding of how these experiences influence teacher well-being over time.

3. Scope and Research Questions

Although substantial research has examined ELL perspectives on silence and its pedagogical implications (Bao, 2013, 2019, 2020; Harumi, 2011, 2015, 2016), the emotional toll of ELL silence on EFL teacher wellbeing—particularly its cumulative and long-term effects—remains underexplored (Smith & King, 2018). While prior studies have addressed emotional labor in language teaching through semi-structured interviews (Benesch, 2018; King, 2016; Gkonou & Miller, 2021; Miller & Gkonou, 2018), and have explored emotion regulation (Morris & King, 2018; Morris, 2022), emotional wellbeing (Talbot & Mercer, 2018), and connections between student silence and negative affect (Djedid, 2020; King, 2016; Smith & King, 2017, 2018), no study to date has focused specifically on the emotional impact of student silence on non-Japanese EFL teachers.

This is particularly striking given evidence that non-Japanese EFL teachers tend to interpret learner silence negatively (Harumi, 2011; King, 2016; Smith & King, 2018), and that Japanese university classrooms may experience the highest incidence of student silence globally (Harumi, 2011; Humphries et al., 2020; King, 2013a, 2013b, 2014; King et al., 2020; Maher & King, 2020; Wiltshier & Helgesen, 2019). We argue that the combination of these two factors presents a significant threat to teacher emotional wellbeing—a key dimension of overall wellness (Stewart-Brown, 1998; Coyle et al., 2012; Talbot & Mercer, 2018).

This case study seeks to illuminate this underexamined risk by tracking emotionally impactful moments of silence—instances where non-Japanese EFL teachers report emotional responses to student silence—using an event-based sampling methodology. To respond to gaps in the field, this case study investigates the following research questions:

- Q1. What kinds of student silence emotionally impact non-Japanese EFL teachers in a Japanese university?
- Q2. What factors in student silence govern the nature of non-Japanese EFL teacher stress, and how do these factors emerge over time?

4. Methodology

4.1. Theoretical Framework and Research Design

This study adopts a social-constructivist worldview, which emphasizes meaning-making through interaction and context (Gergen, 1999; Vygotsky, 1978). Within this framework, researchers aim to understand participant perspectives by collecting data in real-world settings and interpreting the findings through their own lived experiences (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Crotty, 1998). This aligns with the project's focus on silence as a relational and emotional phenomenon in Japanese university EFL classrooms. Event-based sampling was selected as the most effective tool for documenting in-the-moment emotional responses to classroom silence over time (Hektner et al., 2007; Scollon & Kim-Prieto, 2009; Silvia & Cotter, 2021).

4.2. Conceptual Framework

This study adapts Spilt et al.'s (2011, p. 460) model of teacher emotions to better account for the emotional and cognitive challenges of interpreting silence in Japanese university EFL classrooms. While the original model focused on how teachers appraise observable student behavior and form mental representations of student relationships, it did not account for the ambiguity and emotional toll of student silence.

To fill this gap, my adapted model introduces two key modifications. First, the concept of appraisal confusion accounts for the interpretive uncertainty teachers experience when confronted with silence. In the absence of verbal or nonverbal cues, teachers may struggle to determine whether silence reflects disengagement, misunderstanding, or cultural deference. This confusion is especially pronounced when teacher-student relationships are weak or ambiguous, and it can intensify emotional strain over time. Rather than viewing silence as a neutral or context-dependent act, teachers caught in appraisal confusion may begin to interpret it through increasingly negative lenses, leading to emotional trajectories marked by frustration, self-doubt, and eventual emotional withdrawal.

Second, unlike the linear structure of Spilt et al.'s (2011) original model, the adapted framework introduces the possibility of feedback loops. These loops reflect the dynamic, recursive nature of classroom interactions in which teachers continuously reappraise silence based on prior emotional responses and shifting perceptions of student relationships. In environments where silence persists and remains unaddressed, these feedback loops can amplify stress and accelerate emotional reactions, particularly when there are no clear opportunities for clarification or repair. By integrating these feedback mechanisms, the first author's model (below) captures how seemingly minor moments of silence can accumulate into broader patterns of emotional exhaustion and relational detachment.

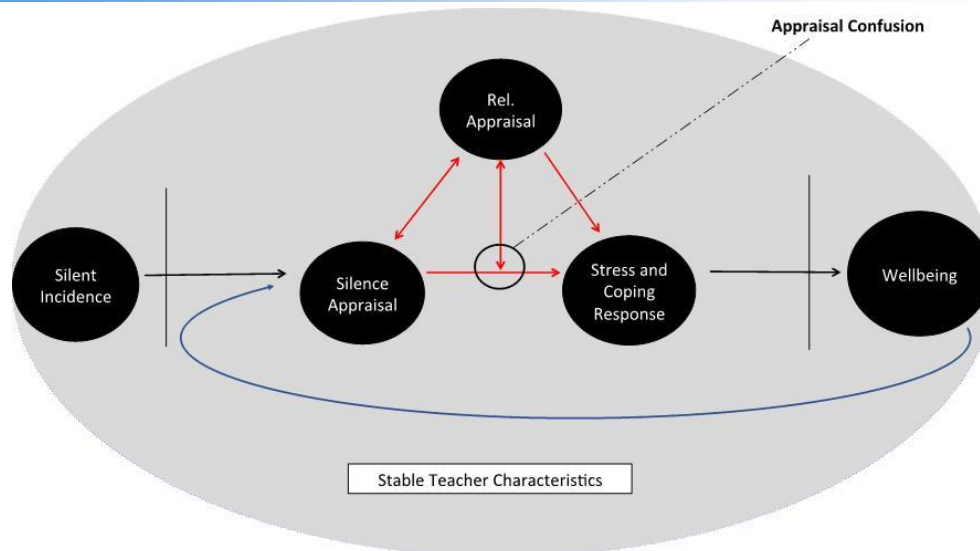


Fig. 1. Silent Incidences and Emotional Impact on Wellbeing

The adapted model retains the role of *stable teacher characteristics* as coping resources (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), but reframes silence as not merely a lack of student behavior—it is a relational cue that, depending on context, can either reinforce rapport or trigger emotional dissonance. When mutual trust is absent, teachers may fall back on negativity bias (Baumeister et al., 2001; Shachter, 2023), interpreting silence as rejection or resistance. By incorporating appraisal confusion and recursive feedback loops, this model offers a more dynamic and culturally responsive account of how non-Japanese EFL teachers emotionally process student silence—and how those experiences impact their well-being over time.

4.3 Data Collection: Event-based Sampling

Event-based sampling (EBS) is a type of experience sampling method (ESM) used to capture in-the-moment human experiences in natural settings (Silvia & Cotter, 2021). Unlike signal-based ESM, where participants respond to randomly timed prompts, EBS requires participants to self-initiate reports when a predefined, salient event occurs. These events are discrete and clearly defined, such as experiencing a strong emotion or reacting to a specific behavior (e.g., classroom silence).

In this study, EBS was used to document Elliott's emotional reactions to silence over a university term in Japan. Using a smartphone application developed for this project, Elliott was instructed to report as close to the event as possible, noting what occurred, how he felt, and any relevant contextual details. He was given clear reporting guidelines, and all time-stamped entries were securely stored on a private server. Although not all reports were made in real time—for example, some were completed after class—this near-the-moment data remains more reliable than retrospective accounts and helps minimize recall bias (Coughlin, 1990).

EBS is particularly well-suited for examining emotional responses within complex ecological systems (Silvia & Cotter, 2021). Widely used in psychological and health research, it offers a practical, low-intrusion method for tracking dynamic, evolving experiences in real-world environments (Mehl & Conner, 2012; Turner & Gellman, 2020).

It should also be noted that Elliott completed a background questionnaire before the in-terms EBS. The background questionnaire was designed to align closely with the research questions guiding this investigation. Each item in the questionnaire aimed to gather foundational data on Elliott's teaching experiences, social connections, and emotional responses to student silence, which directly correspond to the study's overarching focus.

4.4. Research Participant & Setting

"Elliott," a 43-year-old American, has lived in Japan for nearly 18 years and passed the JLPT N1 in 2010, the highest level of the Japanese Language Proficiency Test, indicating advanced fluency. With three years of full-time university teaching experience at the study site and Japanese as the

primary language at home, he is deeply integrated into both the cultural and professional contexts of EFL teaching in Japan. Data for this study were collected over a 102-day term (April 9 to July 19, 2024) during the first academic term at a private Japanese university. While the institution is privately ranked within the 151–200 range nationally (with no public disclosure beyond 150), its language department is one of the most active on campus. Approximately 20 full-time expatriate foreign language instructors of various nationalities are employed in the department. All first- and second-year students across the university's 20 departments—about 3,000 annually—are enrolled in compulsory English classes. The students taught by Elliott are generally assessed at the A2 level on the CEFR scale. This context is relevant, as the frequency and nature of student silence encountered in these classes may differ significantly from what expatriate teachers experience at higher-ranked institutions or in elective English programs.

5. Findings and Discussion

5.1. Student Failure to Initiate Mutual Understanding

The theme of failure to initiate mutual understanding emerged as a central issue in Elliott's classroom experiences. In four instances during the first weeks of the term, students remained silent after receiving explicit instructions, leaving Elliott uncertain about whether they understood, agreed with, or intended to follow his guidance. This absence of student-initiated clarification led to appraisal confusion, emotional discomfort, and relational insecurity. Elliott's personality and communication style further intensify these reactions; in his background questionnaire, he described himself as outgoing, logical, and solution-oriented—someone who values harmony, avoids confrontation, extends the benefit of the doubt to others, and tends to maintain a positive, opportunity-focused outlook.

This personality profile helps explain Elliott's emotional responses to student silence and how he processes these moments of unreciprocated communication. His outgoing nature contrasts with the students' passivity, making their silence even more frustrating. His avoidance of confrontation contributes to his hesitation in repeating instructions or pressing students for a response, thereby reinforcing appraisal confusion. Additionally, his desire to maintain harmony in the classroom may prevent him from being more assertive in breaking moments of silence.

Elliott's struggle with student silence became particularly evident in situations where students failed to confirm their understanding of basic procedural instructions. The following sub-themes illustrate how this lack of response left him uncertain about whether students comprehended his directions, ultimately reinforcing his frustration and hesitation.

1) *Student Failure to Confirm Understanding in Procedural Instructions*

On the first day of term (April 9, 2024), Elliott informed students that they could leave after orientation; however, they all remained seated. He suspected a miscommunication and felt unsure how to break the silence. A similar situation occurred on April 17: even after clearly informing students they could leave, they remained silently in their seats, causing Elliott to feel uncomfortable and unsure whether to repeat himself. By May 21, a similar incident repeated, but one student stood up to leave while the others looked confused. This only deepened Elliott's uncertainty about whether his instructions were misunderstood or ignored, reinforcing appraisal confusion and discomfort.

Elliott experienced appraisal confusion, uncertain whether silence signaled miscommunication, peer pressure, or passive resistance. Across multiple reports, he described feeling “*a little bad because I am unable to find a way to break into the silence*,” “*awkward*,” and “*uneasy*,” adding, “*I am not sure if I was anxious or what*.”

He expressed discomfort, noting, “*I can't help but feel discomfort in this situation*,” and often questioned whether “*something must have been miscommunicated*.” He also questioned his own Japanese ability (even though he had attained the highest level of proficiency): “*Although Japanese is not my native language, I am positive that I clearly told the students*.” Perhaps because this doubt, he hesitated to clarify further, stating, “*Honestly, I don't feel comfortable enough to say it again, because the students may react by saying, 'yes, we understand what you said'*.”

His natural inclination to maintain harmony and avoid confrontation made him hesitant to repeat instructions, fearing it would heighten discomfort. This reluctance aligns with research on teacher

emotional labor, which suggests that instructors in intercultural classrooms often struggle with balancing authority and relational harmony (King & Ng, 2018; Morris & King, 2023). Elliott's hesitation reflects a broader challenge in second language pedagogy, where teachers frequently navigate tensions between maintaining control and fostering student autonomy (Talbot & Mercer, 2018). However, avoiding direct clarification can inadvertently reinforce uncertainty, as students may misinterpret this passivity as acceptance of non-engagement.

His persistent appraisal confusion reflects an internal struggle—he values clarity and expects students to acknowledge instructions without repeated enforcement. This emotional barrier prevents him from asserting authority outright, as he prefers a cooperative, self-regulating classroom dynamic. Maher and King (2020) note that when teachers rely on implicit behavioral cues to gauge understanding, a lack of overt student responses can lead to increased frustration and hesitation. Allowing students to leave early was not just a convenience but a deliberate motivational strategy that reinforced efficiency and engagement. However, when students failed to act on this opportunity, it disrupted his intended classroom environment, intensifying his frustration and uncertainty. Research suggests that such disruptions can be particularly challenging in high-context communication cultures, where indirectness and deference to authority may prevent students from actively seeking clarification (Nakane, 2007).

Elliott's frustration was not limited to students' lack of verbal confirmation; their failure to provide nonverbal cues for timing and pacing further compounded his uncertainty. Smith and King (2018) highlight that nonverbal communication gaps in second language classrooms often lead to misaligned expectations, leaving teachers struggling to assess comprehension. We now turn to how this absence of signals impacted his ability to manage classroom interactions effectively.

2) *Student Failure to Provide Nonverbal or Verbal Signals for Timing & Pacing*

On April 23, Elliott struggled to time the end of a grammar practice activity. While many students finished early, a few “*appeared to still be working*”. Unsure how to proceed due to a lack of nonverbal cues indicating readiness, Elliott delayed stopping the task, noting, “*I felt uneasy and confused*” during the hesitation and that “*I struggled to find a good time to move on.*”

Elliott's difficulty in determining when to move on from an activity due to a lack of clear student cues highlights the challenges of interpreting nonverbal communication in foreign language classrooms. This aligns with Maher and King (2020), who found that student silence and ambiguous nonverbal behaviors often lead to teacher misinterpretation, particularly in anxiety-prone language learning settings. Elliott's appraisal confusion in these moments stems from the expectation that students will indicate readiness to proceed—either verbally or through nonverbal cues such as eye contact, head nods, or body posture adjustments. However, without explicit confirmation, his uncertainty grows, prolonging hesitation and discomfort.

The cultural dimension of this issue suggests that Elliott's difficulty in reading student signals is not necessarily a failure in his instructional technique, but rather an instance of cross-cultural misalignment in classroom communication norms. The students may have completed their work, but did not demonstrate this in a way Elliott expected, reinforcing his uncertainty about when to transition. Matsumoto et al. (2002) emphasize that Japanese students often suppress overt emotional expressions and minimize gestures in formal educational settings, which can lead to misalignment in expectations between non-Japanese teachers and their students. Elliott, who expects clearer physical indicators of engagement or task completion, instead encounters subtle or non-existent cues, reinforcing his hesitation and frustration. This reflects findings by Smith & King (2018) that foreign language teachers often struggle with reading passive body language in intercultural classrooms, where silence can carry multiple, sometimes contradictory, meanings.

The reports within this theme further illustrate that appraisal confusion is not just about miscommunication in verbal exchanges but also extends to the misinterpretation of nonverbal cues, particularly in intercultural educational contexts. Without explicit student participation or initiative, teachers like Elliott may remain stuck in a loop of hesitation and discomfort, leading to unnecessary delays and increased emotional strain. Additionally, Maher and King (2020) suggest that teachers often rely on nonverbal cues to detect anxiety in students, yet these cues are not always reliable. Students may avoid eye contact, remain still, or hesitate to move, not necessarily due to confusion but because of social conformity pressures (Nakane, 2007). In this context, Elliott's assumption that a lack of visible engagement indicates uncertainty may not align with student intentions or expectations.

Instead, students might be waiting for a peer to act first or adhering to an unspoken classroom norm that discourages standing out.

Across the incidents in this theme, Elliott's frustration, hesitation, and relational insecurity were directly tied to the absence of mutual understanding. Despite his efforts to communicate clearly, students failed to confirm, clarify, or reciprocate his instructions, leading to recurring appraisal confusion. These moments not only reinforced emotional discomfort but also highlighted a gap in teacher-student expectations, where Elliott sought clarity, while students remained passive.

This pattern aligns with research on teacher emotional labor (King, 2016; Taylor, 2020), which suggests that teachers often engage in surface acting to maintain authority and composure, even when they experience internal frustration or uncertainty (Morris & King, 2023). In Elliott's case, his hesitation to interrupt silence and request explicit confirmation reflects his emotional investment in maintaining a non-confrontational classroom environment. However, this reluctance prolongs his discomfort, reinforcing a cycle of uncertainty and stress.

Given his personality traits, this passive silence was particularly unsettling, as he naturally seeks to communicate openly and maintain harmony. However, his reluctance to confront silence directly meant that each incident prolonged his uncertainty, intensifying the emotional burden. The consequences of such silent moments extend beyond classroom management to teacher well-being, reinforcing the need for structured interventions to facilitate clearer teacher-student communication. Research suggests that explicit check-ins, direct follow-ups, or visual cues (e.g., hand signals, colored cards) may help bridge this gap and reduce teacher uncertainty (Talbot & Mercer, 2018). Without clearer confirmation mechanisms, teachers like Elliott remain vulnerable to ongoing hesitation and frustration, which reinforces emotional exhaustion and reduces classroom efficiency.

Elliott's struggles with unreciprocated communication extended beyond procedural misunderstandings and ambiguous student behavior. Silence was not only present in moments of instruction but also shaped the way his attempts at humor were received. The following section explores how humor-related silence reinforced self-doubt and relationship insecurity, complicating Elliott's ability to establish rapport with students.

5.2. Emotional Acceleration, Trust, and the Breaking Point

The following report provides a unique example of emotional progression, where an initial silent incident set the stage for an intensified emotional response to a cheating incident later in the same class session. His experience demonstrates how initial emotional restraint, trust, and silence can accumulate into a heightened reaction when another event breaches professional expectations. This phenomenon aligns with research on emotional acceleration, which describes how suppressed emotional discomfort intensifies later reactions to separate but related stressors (Talbot & Mercer, 2018).

Full Report:

"I was in a Listening and Speaking class for 1st-year level 4 students (lowest level). When I was checking their homework, I found that some of them had turned in a picture of a page that they did not write. The textbook was probably handed down from a 2nd-year student. I showed the picture to the class without revealing who uploaded it. I was annoyed, but I tried to stay calm and explain to the students that when they submit assignments as pictures, they cannot be removed by them; therefore, they can become evidence of cheating. I found that although I put much effort into joking about the situation while making it sound serious, I couldn't help but shake. I shivered while talking to the students. I could not help but feel emotional about it.

It is possible that my frustration was further fueled at the beginning of the class. A student had approached me for the first time, after not attending class for three weeks and not contacting me in any way. His excuse for not being there was that he "didn't know which room" the class was in. I could not help but think that he was lying and just making up an excuse for showing up before he was permanently dropped. At that moment, I had already worked to stay calm, which is probably why I couldn't be calm during the speech about cheating." (Report 5; Thursday, May 2, 2024)

At the start of class, a student who had been absent for three weeks without prior contact approached Elliott with the excuse that they "didn't know what room the class was in." Given that students have multiple ways to check schedules and communicate with instructors, Elliott suspected this was simply a last-minute attempt to avoid being dropped. Though frustrated, he chose to suppress his reaction and avoid confrontation, maintaining composure despite the apparent lack of student initiative. This aligns with research on teacher emotional regulation, which suggests that instructors often engage in surface acting—externally presenting calmness while internally experiencing frustration—to preserve classroom harmony (Morris & King, 2023). However, this restraint did not dissipate his frustration—it merely delayed its release.

Later in class, Elliott discovered multiple students had submitted copied homework from a previous year's textbook, a clear act of academic dishonesty. To address the issue diplomatically, he displayed the copied work without naming those responsible, using humor to diffuse tension. However, despite his efforts, he experienced an involuntary physical reaction—shaking and shivering—indicating that his earlier frustration had intensified, making it harder for him to regulate his emotions. This aligns with findings by King and Ng (2018), who argue that unresolved emotional suppression can lead to emotional acceleration, where minor stressors trigger disproportionately strong reactions due to accumulated emotional strain.

Elliott's pre-term questionnaire provides insight into why these incidents were particularly distressing. Describing himself as someone who "prefers to give people the benefit of the doubt" and maintains a positive outlook, he experienced a double breach of trust—first with the absent student's weak excuse and then with the cheating incident. This erosion of trust heightened his emotional response, making the situation feel more personal and challenging to navigate. Research on teacher-student trust dynamics suggests that when students violate implicit social contracts, teachers may struggle with emotional dissonance, as their expectations of professionalism and integrity are challenged (Talbot & Mercer, 2018).

The following section examines four key themes that emerge from this experience.

5.3. Themes Emerging from This Experience

1) *Emotional Acceleration and the Impact of Suppressed Frustration*

Elliott's experience demonstrates emotional acceleration, where suppressed frustration intensifies responses to subsequent stressors. His initial restraint in response to an absent student's weak excuse did not resolve his frustration but stored it, making him emotionally vulnerable later in the class. Research on teacher emotion regulation suggests that unaddressed stress accumulates, eventually leading to stronger-than-usual emotional reactions (Morris & King, 2023; Spilt et al., 2011).

Elliott's escalating frustration aligns with emotional contagion theory (Hatfield et al., 1994), which suggests that emotions, particularly stress, can unintentionally transfer and amplify in social interactions. His attempt to address the cheating incident diplomatically was accompanied by a physical reaction—shaking and shivering—indicating emotional overload, a phenomenon also discussed in Chang (2009) regarding physiological responses to accumulated stress. The stress from the earlier silent incident had carried over, amplifying his response to the cheating situation. This aligns with studies on teacher stress and burnout, which suggest that repeated minor stressors accumulate until a triggering event causes an emotional rupture (Taylor, 2020).

Emotional contagion literature suggests that unresolved negative emotions tend to escalate, especially in environments where emotional labor is required (Meyer & Turner, 2006). Moskowitz and Dewaele (2021) further highlight that teacher emotions—whether positive or negative—can significantly influence student attitudes and classroom dynamics. While their study focuses on teacher happiness as a contagious factor, it reinforces the idea that unspoken emotional states can shape interpersonal interactions, sometimes in unintended ways. Elliott's experience suggests that his unresolved frustration may have inadvertently contributed to classroom tension, further intensifying his emotional distress.

In Elliott's case, his emotional suppression in the first incident intensified his reaction to the second, reinforcing how unresolved frustration escalates teacher stress. While prior research (e.g., King & Ng, 2018) explores teacher stress responses to student disengagement, your study highlights the role of suppressed frustration in triggering emotional acceleration, offering a new perspective on burnout and teacher emotional regulation. The interaction between emotional contagion and emotional

acceleration in this case suggests that teacher well-being has a direct impact on classroom dynamics, making emotional regulation a crucial factor in long-term teacher resilience.

2) *Silence as a Desire for Mutual Understanding (But Receiving None)*

Both the silent incident with the returning student and the cheating episode reflect Elliott's desire for mutual understanding—yet in both cases, students failed to initiate it. The returning student's silence showed a lack of effort to reach out for help before coming to class after three weeks. Similarly, the cheating students did not attempt to justify or explain their actions, reinforcing the teacher-student relational gap. This aligns with Varonis and Gass (1985), who highlight that miscommunication is not solely a result of linguistic barriers but also stems from breakdowns in interactional repair. Without efforts to clarify intent or understanding, misunderstandings persist, creating barriers to effective communication in both instructional and social contexts. This connects directly to our definition of negative silence (section 2.1), where one component is:

“(c) a desire for another party to instigate paths toward mutual understanding.”

In both incidents, Elliott hoped for a reciprocal acknowledgment—a student-initiated clarification, an apology, or at least an effort to justify their behavior. Instead, he was met with continued disengagement, reinforcing his perception of emotional distance between himself and his students. Research on teacher-student rapport in L2 contexts (King & Ng, 2018) suggests that teachers who experience repeated failures in reciprocal communication report higher levels of frustration, professional dissatisfaction, and emotional exhaustion.

3) *Silence as Perceived Understanding: The Assumption That No Questions = Comprehension*

Another layer to this issue is the assumption of perceived understanding. Research suggests that when students do not ask questions, teachers often interpret this silence as comprehension or lack of confusion (Cazden, 2001). However, the cheating episode suggests that students were aware of the assignment policy but ignored it—indicating that silence did not necessarily mean comprehension, but rather a lack of concern or adherence to classroom norms. This aligns with Nakane (2007), who argues that in Japanese classrooms, student silence is frequently misinterpreted by teachers as understanding, when in reality, it may stem from deference to authority, reluctance to stand out, or disengagement rather than genuine comprehension.

In Western educational settings, particularly in the U.S. and many European countries, asking questions is actively encouraged and often seen as a sign of engagement, critical thinking, and initiative (Cazden, 2001). Teachers expect students to take responsibility for clarifying misunderstandings, which aligns with the individualistic and low-power-distance nature of many Western classrooms (Hofstede, 2001). In contrast, in high-context, collectivist cultures such as Japan, silence can serve as a sign of respect, deference, or even strategic ambiguity (Meyer, 2014; Nakane, 2007). Students may avoid asking questions to prevent disrupting group harmony or because they assume the teacher will eventually clarify any unclear points without needing explicit intervention (King, 2013a).

This cultural difference can lead to miscommunication in intercultural classrooms—Western teachers may assume silence means understanding. In contrast, Japanese students may assume it is a regular part of the classroom dynamic. Elliott's frustration highlights this disconnect, as he expected students to take responsibility for clarifying expectations, but they remained silent instead.

4) *The Erosion of Trust and Emotional Impact*

Elliott's self-described approach to trust (background questionnaire, April 2024) plays a major role in why these moments were so frustrating for him:

“I prefer to give people whom I have never met the benefit of the doubt.”

This good-faith assumption of students was broken in two ways. Firstly, the student who was absent for three weeks provided a flimsy excuse rather than taking responsibility. Secondly, the

students who cheated demonstrated a disregard for academic honesty, thereby undermining the integrity of the learning process. This highlights a hypothesis that silence functions as a barometer for teacher-student relationships. When trust deteriorates, the scenario can be imagined as follows:

Continued silence and broken trust lead to teacher frustration and emotional exhaustion.

Spilt et al. (2011) and Cui (2022) suggest that trust violations between teachers and students have long-term consequences on teacher well-being, particularly when teachers initially assume good faith and later encounter repeated instances of unreciprocated trust. Elliott's reaction reflects this erosion—what began as an attempt to remain calm during a student's weak excuse became an emotional weight, ultimately intensifying his reaction when another issue arose. This aligns with Talbot and Mercer (2018), who argue that teacher-student relationships are fundamental to emotional resilience. When these relationships are strained by unreciprocated trust, teachers experience heightened emotional fatigue.

Elliott's experience highlights the cumulative impact of silence, broken trust, and emotional suppression. What began as a minor frustration was exacerbated by subsequent violations of professional expectations, leading to a visible emotional response. His physical reaction (shaking/shivering) suggests emotional overload after prolonged restraint, reflecting the challenges of emotion regulation in high-stress teaching environments. Morris and King (2023) discuss how teachers engage in contextually dependent emotion regulation, with their strategy choices directly influencing well-being. Elliott's case illustrates how unresolved emotional strain, rather than dissipating, can resurface in heightened physiological responses, reinforcing emotional exhaustion. This shift in perception—from simple frustration to a more profound loss of trust—reinforced emotional distance between him and his students.

This theme illustrates that teacher emotions do not exist in isolation—silent moments, unreciprocated communication, and breaches of trust accumulate, shaping how teachers react to future challenges. Research on teacher burnout (King & Ng, 2018) suggests that unresolved emotional strain, particularly when tied to repeated experiences of student disengagement, increases the likelihood of teacher detachment or emotional exhaustion. In Elliott's case, the combination of student dishonesty, his expectation for mutual understanding, and his trusting nature created a moment of emotional overload, reinforcing how silence—whether intentional or unintentional—significantly impacts teacher well-being and classroom relationships.

6. Limitations of the Study

Given the in-depth qualitative case study approach, the article presents specific inherent weaknesses. Firstly, the limited sample size and the focus on a single academic term prevent the capture of long-term trends or changes in emotional responses. Additionally, the study centers on a narrow range of emotional responses, primarily emphasizing negative impacts. Furthermore, due to the challenging nature of the participants' experiences, the article overlooks how silence might also foster reflection, learning, or other positive outcomes in specific contexts.

7. Recommendations for Future Research

Future studies might consider using a larger and more diverse sample size that encompasses different academic contexts, demographics, and experiences. This would enable a more comprehensive understanding of emotional responses across diverse populations and settings. Conducting longitudinal studies that span multiple academic terms or years would help capture long-term trends and changes in emotional responses, providing insights into how experiences evolve.

Employing a mixed-methods approach, which combines qualitative and quantitative data, can provide a richer understanding of emotional dynamics. Surveys, interviews, and observational data can together paint a fuller picture of the experiences and emotions involved. Scholars might wish to investigate the influence of contextual factors, such as teaching methods, classroom environments,

and individual differences, on emotional responses. This might uncover aspects that contribute to positive outcomes in the face of challenges.

Future research can also explore a broader range of emotional responses, including both negative and positive impacts. This could illuminate how silence might facilitate reflection, resilience, learning, and other constructive outcomes in different educational contexts. One could examine instances where silence contributes to positive educational outcomes, such as increased reflection or enhanced critical thinking, helping to balance the historical focus on negative emotional impacts.

8. Conclusion

This study explored how one non-Japanese university teacher in Japan experienced and emotionally responded to classroom silence over a single academic term. The findings suggest that when mutual understanding between teacher and students was not clearly established—either through verbal confirmation or nonverbal cues—Elliott's emotional reactions to silence intensified. These reactions were shaped not only by individual incidents but by a broader relational context, where unresolved ambiguity and lack of reciprocal communication gradually led to emotional withdrawal.

The adapted conceptual framework proposed in this study accounts for such experiences by incorporating appraisal confusion and recursive feedback loops. These additions help explain how relationally ambiguous silence can trigger prolonged cognitive and emotional strain, particularly when initial uncertainty remains unresolved. Rather than viewing silence as a fixed or singular phenomenon, this study frames it as a dynamic signal—one that reflects and reinforces the underlying strength (or weakness) of teacher-student relationships over time. In this sense, silence operates as a barometer for relational security, with degrees of appraisal confusion revealing how firmly (or weakly) those bonds are established.

While Elliott's humor and positivity were central to his teaching identity, these traits were repeatedly challenged in silent moments that offered no clear social cues. His efforts to build rapport were at times met with silence that was difficult to interpret, reinforcing emotional distancing and hesitation. These findings suggest that emotional labor in EFL classrooms is not only a matter of individual regulation but also deeply tied to the relational context in which silence occurs.

Though this was a single case, the data underscore how prolonged exposure to unreciprocated silence may lead to shifts in teacher appraisal patterns, diminished motivation, and eventual withdrawal. This study forms part of a larger PhD project examining the emotional impact of silence on expatriate EFL teachers in Japan. Results from another ethnographic case study are forthcoming. When considered alongside the findings from a previously published autoethnographic study (Shachter, 2023), a cross-case analysis will offer further insight into shared and divergent emotional responses to classroom silence. These findings will also highlight how silence, across cases, consistently serves as a measure of relational strength—and provide insights for improved pedagogy in Japanese contexts.

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