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Editorial

Silence seen through different lenses

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ABSTRACT

The introductory discussion brings academic readers into the first issue by sketching key ideas from all the article contributions and by interacting with them for further insights. In performing this task, the introduction captures a range of perspectives, methods, contents, and arguments, all of which demonstrate the richness of silence in context. A wide range of silences, as they are suggested by the articles in this issue, are summarised, elaborated, and connected into the relevant discourse. In the end, several gaps in silence research are highlighted to inspire scholars who wish to explore silence in more depth.

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This inaugural issue of the Journal of Silence Studies in Education maps out the dynamics of silence in multiple scopes and across diverse contexts. Each article features silence with contextualised meanings and intentions rather than as the mere absence of words or the state of not knowing what to say. From the classroom to the broader society, silence, though seemingly invisible, permeates on all levels of intellectuality, pedagogy, emotion, social communication, and cultural politics.

Each of the five articles examines silence through a specific lens of investigation. Diana P. Petrova portraits the worldview of two Romani individuals in Europe to construct a larger social picture of self-silencing. John Turnbull presents the micro case study of a Mexican individual to build insights into personal choice of silence. Eva Alerby and Jill Brown explore silent behaviour in fictions with implications in real-world communication. Kate Maher investigates Japanese university students to analyse silence as anxiety. Michael Karas and Takumi Uchihara report duo ethnographic experiences with silence and a shift in perspectives. Taken together, these works showcase not only diverse silences but also various research methods of silence inquiry.

The articles also happen to touch on at least ten diverse nuances of silence including painful silence, protective silence, personal silence, subjugated silence, neutral silence, helpful silence, adaptable silence, problem-solving silence, awkward silence, and individual versus collective silence. Such multiplicity within the theme reminds us to refrain from oversimplifying the nature of silence. Instead, it requires serious consideration of context to see how the essence of silence is shaped.

Painful silence

Silence can be a difficult experience, in many cases representing the decline of hope and confidence, as observed by three authors in the issue. Several Japanese students in Kate Maher's project, for example, internalise such doubt about their own ability that prevents them from making efforts to interact with others. By the same token, two individuals, who are Finnish and Bulgarian respectively, in Diana P. Petkova's case study of the Romani community resort to self-silencing as a way of coping with unpleasant circumstances of cultural discrimination.

Eva Alerby and Jill Brown in their analysis of a fairy tale tells a story of a child, Ninny, who decided to withdraw into her invisible shell as a way of resisting ill treatment by her guardian. Whether it is research or fiction, silence obtains its substance from the real world and voices moments when one must desist from words to remain themselves. Not speaking up, however, does not mean to stop communicating. Instead, the silence exercised by the above-mentioned individuals symbolises a socio-political strategy to battle circumstances that do not support their mental wellbeing. Along this line, Ladson-Billings (1996) observes that silence can be used as a tool to resist a certain style of teaching or a certain type of teacher. When learners sense that the teachers do not have confidence in their ability and contribution, they will feel powerless and alienated (Morita, 2004), and tend to withdraw not only from participation or cooperation but also from the whole desire to learn.

The discourse in silence as resistance has highlighted how silence can be an interactive process that responds to the conduct of other human beings (see, for example, Montoya, 2000). Silence in many cases can perform two conflicting functions, such as to oppress and to defend. While the privileged impose silence on others as a way of exhibiting their power, the underprivileged utilise silence as way of shutting down their resources and refusing to accommodate. Roberts (2000) refers to this two-way battle as 'the paradox of silence' (p.927) whereby silence acts both as a tool of oppression and as a tool to fight oppression. If we think about speech communication, things seem much easier to understand: people use verbal means to perform the act of oppression as much as the act of resisting it. In a word, both speech and silence can take on, respectively, either a liberating or subordinating function. This means that speech and silence are much more similar than many tend to assume.

Protective silence

Silence can be a shelter of protection, in which case to break silence may bring awkwardness or humiliation. The students discussed in Michael Karas and Takumi Uchihara's article, who refrain from speaking and wait for the teacher to nominate them, do so not because they fear speaking or are incapable of expressing themselves, but more because they consider who is to blame for creating embarrassment. Suppose these students volunteer to speak and do not speak well, they will be responsible for their own shame. However, if they let the teacher makes this decision for them to speak, it is now the teacher's fault for causing such uncomfortable situations.

In many cases, however, it is the sociocultural context that decides the effect of one's behaviour. Although breaking silence might bring embarrassment, keeping silence can bring embarrassment too. The latter is particularly true in environment or situation where talk is expected (Yashima, MacIntyre & Ikeda, 2016). Both scenarios means that silence itself does not contain an inherent meaning or impact, but what one does with silence and where silence is exercised matters. Sometimes fear is caused by silence, and at other times fear is caused by the loss of it. Kate Maher's discussion of anxiety suggests that the significance attached to silence can be a subjective, complex process. For example, the silence that results from fear of speech may be directed towards either the self or others. A student who directs fear towards themselves would worry that their speech might ruin their image. Someone who directs their fear towards others would worry that their speech might cause negative reactions. While these perceptions are two sides of the same coin, every individual may suffer from reticence in a self-centred or communal way.

Personalised silence

The situations narrated above also indicate that the use of silence is subject to idiosyncratic mindsets. While some individuals hold on to silence because they are too nervous to speak (speaking seems too advanced for them), others keep quiet because they are too confident to demonstrate ordinary speech (speaking seems too low-levelled for them). These internalisations not only indicate different personalities but also occur in the same person across contexts. One of the two authors in Karas and Uchihara's article experience such a shift in perception towards the significance of silence. Although Takumi used to believe that not being able to carry on speech can cause communication breakdown, he has come to realise that not being to pause at the right time also causes the same problem. This observation reveals that appropriate use of silence in social context is an indicator of interpersonal fluency.

Some communicators feel that silence brings respect and harmony, especially in contexts where a debate becomes heated, and any further disagreement would upset some people's peaceful mood. Others recognise that it is speech that brings respect and harmony, especially in situations where negotiation is important and where keeping silence may cause severe misunderstanding. In Bao's (2014) research, the same Japanese participant, Saki, reveals two conflicting perspectives. Back in Japan, Saki kept silent in meetings most of the time to show his cooperation and good manner; having lived in Australia for several years makes him realise that to demonstrate cooperation and good manner requires his effort to frequently speak up.

Subjugated silence

During classroom processes, students sometimes feel they are being overpowered by the teacher or emotionally intimidated by peers and such circumstances shut them off from the inspiration to share ideas. The teacher holds the kind of power they may not be aware of. In Eva Alerby and Jill Brown's article, they can determine who speaks and who stays quiet, whose voice is heard and whose voice is subdued, who remains visible and who becomes invisible. Such control can be consciously or subconsciously exerted through both verbal and non-verbal gestures including a tone of voice, a look, who questions are directed towards, who is selected to answer certain questions, the way student contribution is followed up upon, and so on. Whether the teacher is mindful that their behaviour has an impact on student feeling, that is a reality. The classroom, after all, is more than a place for teaching and learning but can be a political site where power is distributed or repressed and where voices are nurtured or silenced. It is where politics characterises education.

The outcome of such characterisation can be social inclusion or exclusion, which is about how one's dignity, advantage, perspective, and identity are respected. For instance, when an introverted student who enjoys quiet reflection on issues is forced to speak or when an outgoing student who wishes to share their view is ignored and must remain silent, social equity suffers. These students would feel isolated and lose their sense of belonging in the community. The case of Roma minorities in Diana P. Petrova's case study is a vivid example of individuals who are subject to prejudices and whose humanity is rejected by the dominant society. Not only are they denied from having a voice, but they are also discouraged from being themselves.

Neutral silence

Neutral silence is a relatively uncommon phenomenon, that is, when silence is natural and expected as an inherent part of communication. Kate Maher's discussion of the relevant literature on silent behaviour with a range of research-based insights confirm that such silence exists. Silence can be neutral when one has nothing to say to others. Having said this, the neutral intention of the silent person sometimes can be misinterpreted by someone who happens to perceive that behaviour in a different light. By and large, it is not easy to resist impressionistic and personal interpretation (Bryman, 2008), abandon one's prior knowledge, and maintain fair judgment (Asher, 1996; Minichiello, Aroni & Hays, 2008).

Silence is neutral when no one pays attention to the person who exercises it. For instance, during a lecture or a seminar, while the presenter is speaking, the audience are supposed to be silently listening. This behaviour would be accepted as normal. No attention or effort is generated to judge

the quality of silence among the audience unless someone starts making noise. However, there are situations in which silence is exposed to critical evaluation. Imagine someone who is being asked a question keeps quiet for too long while others are waiting restlessly to hear an answer. This person then becomes the focus of attention. Their silence might be frowned upon as incompetent or inappropriate, and the degree of tolerance might vary from one listener to another.

Suppose in the middle of an oral presentation, a speaker suddenly pauses for five seconds and begins making eye contact with the audience. Different members of the audience may develop different perceptions. Some could feel that the presenter is giving them a chance to digest what they hear while others may grow impatient and wonder what seems wrong. Some would remain calm and politely wait for the speaker to continue the presentation, while others may begin to doubt the knowledge or ability of the presenter. These scenarios denote the reality that for silence to be neutral, it should not upset common expectations and should not disturb the feeling of participants in a shared context. In all these cases, it is not that every silent moment projects multiple meanings. Instead, silence often has only one genuine meaning but happens to be misinterpreted as having many. In other words, although silence itself may be simple, the incompetence in decoding silence might make it unnecessarily complicated. Silence is highly subject to personal judgment.

Helpful silence

Michael Karas and Takumi Uchihara's duo-ethnographic discussion notes that silence is an integral component of fluency without which conversation would simply remain incomplete. The timing and duration of pauses during communication, however, can be subjectively and arbitrarily exercised depending on how an interlocutor perceives the need to use silence. Such choices, which are a highly complex area, varies according to speakers' personality, mood, cultural understanding, interpersonal receptivity, and interaction circumstances.

John Turnbull's case study narrates silence as a processing space to reach a solution to a problem. In her reflection on such experiences, Danielle, the sole participation in the study, mentions performing a series of actions quietly in the mind. These include thinking about a challenging issue, planning ways of responding to it, making decision what to do next, modifying her attitude, and, thanks to her solution, feeling more positive about the situation. This practice of silence is productive and meaningful because it helps improve a situation, shifting it from the initial discomfort to a more desirable interpretation of a problem and, most importantly, a practical plan of action.

Adaptable silence

Silence can represent efforts in adjusting to a new context. Such decision often comes from the interlocutor's evaluation of the ongoing situation and the need to modify behaviour. Takumi's reflection on how he was advised to speak more in a Canadian educational setting and not to keep quiet so much like he used to back in his home country in Japan is an example of behaviour modification as one shifts between silence and speech.

When one first moves to a new culture and needs to survive in a new language, quiet observation would naturally happen on an everyday basis. Danielle, in John Turnbull's article, employs silence as a strategy to repair her speech and to navigate her cultural understanding. This use of silence can be regarded as a tool to adapt oneself to communication situations through which she develops familiarity with the social surrounding, practises new expressions, modifies her identity, eventually overcomes language barrier, and builds confidence in communication.

Problem-solving silence

Daniella in John Turnbull's case study finds herself moving between silence and speech in accordance with her language competences. Sometimes she decided to keep silent in English speaking situations because she does not have a strong command of the language rather than because she does not have anything to say. To make up for not being able to express herself

verbally, she resorts to private speech, that is, by speaking quietly to herself as a way of processing thoughts in the target language. The value of self-talk, whether one speaks in the mind or whispers to oneself, has been recognised in the relevant discourse as an important skill in developing language proficiency. Such speech can be directed internally or externally towards the self. It can also be directed privately towards a person whom one feels comfortable enough to share a thought with. Eventually, such moments of rehearsal can lead to the ability and confidence in directing one's speech towards an audience. Along this line, research by Obrien, Segalowitz, Freed & Collentine (2017) of Spanish-language learners and Towell (2002) of French-language learners demonstrates that learners with frequent L2 exposure can speed up internalised procedural knowledge and improve the rate of processing L2 dramatically.

Empirical evidence in recent years have shown that part of communication fluency develops silently in the mind before it displays as social interaction, with research conducted within speakers by Bao (2014; 2020), De Jong et al. (2012), Derwing, Munro, Thomson & Rossiter (2009), and Riazantseva (2001) that traces utterances back to thought processes. These studies are inspired by the discipline of social psychology where the combination of cognition and behaviour naturally forms speech in a social context. Such processes need to be applied in education to assist learning. As Clore (1992, p. 133) observed, many educators tend to care about 'the content of thought' but neglect 'the experience of thinking'.

Awkward silence

Silence can be uncomfortable when it is either untimely or incomprehensible to participants in a shared educational setting such as in a classroom or in a virtual learning environment. When a learning activity is designed to invite some responses, either collectively or individually through voluntary participation, and no one seems willing to respond, the teacher can be at a loss and feel unsure how to proceed. From a learning perspective, that activity does not achieve its intended purpose of sharing and learning from one another. When students do not assist each other in learning, silence does not have meaning except confusing everyone and thus, a task may be considered as failing its aim. Takumi comments that sometimes silence proves to be unhelpful in an online setting where students are expected to put aside some time to place their written posts to a forum and they neither make any contribution nor explain why they refuse to do so. When this happens, it is a challenge for the teacher as they find themselves having to guess the reason for such uncooperative behaviour. Even when some teachers ask students why they do not provide any forum posts, the response, in many cases, is mysterious silence.

Individual versus collective silence

Silence can be practised alone or together. Being a solitary, idiosyncratic process within every individual, it can also become a collective space for mutual understanding. When someone feels contented with solitude and quietness, that person in their consciousness is utilising silence for a meaningful reason. When two people experience a silent time together and feel comfortable, this might show the evidence that empathy or bonding exists. When a group of people choose to be unanimously silent, they may be demonstrating a collective attitude such as resistance or acceptance. One society might value silence more than another society does, simply because the former practises silence very much in the same way as the latter practises speech. Besides, silence can be social or personal. It is social when one chooses not to speak such as to avoid talking nonsense; silence is personal when one decides to clear the noise in their mind such as to bring self-peace. Silence can signify mindfulness when one uses it actively for mental processing; but silence can also characterise mind-emptiness, when one needs to relax by taking a break from incessant thoughts.

Silence can be normal or abnormal. Sometimes, two people may disagree with each other about the use of silence. This is because humans misinterpret silence as frequently as we misinterpret each other's utterances. In a recent television series titled Duty/Shame (Giri/Haji 義理/恥), there was a scene where two characters, a Japanese man named Kenzo and an Irish lady named Sarah, were having a conversation in a cafe. After exchanging some knowledge about each other's families, Sarah suddenly changed topics and asked: 'Do you have any scars?' to which Kenzo showed one on

his arm but was curious: 'Why do you want to know?' She replied: 'I'm not sure why. I just feel the need to fill in the silence between us'. Kenzo became more interested: 'Why are you not comfortable with silence?' to which Sarah had no explanation. This scenario demonstrates the fact that some of us are brought up into a culture where either speech or silence is more of a natural social behaviour than the other. Because of our respective value, it might be uncomfortable when we encounter a member of another society who does not seem to internalise the same receptivity towards silence or words.

In that incident, Sarah perceived silence as hardly performing any social function. Because of this, she decided to break silence and return to verbal communication. Kenzo, in the meanwhile, treats silence as having a shared function, that is, a reposing space for thinking and energy renewal before resuming the conversation. Towards the end of this scene, he challenged Sarah by counting the time for Sarah to keep quiet to see how much she tolerated silence. After a brief effort to cope, she felt less stressed out and calmly stayed quiet for a moment. This scene reminds us of the need to sometimes stretch beyond one's comfort zone as a way of gaining new experience and developing an alternative perspective. One example of such experiments would be to invite talkaholic people to practise meditation and to invite shy people to practise public speaking.

Silence can be externally or internally generated. As an external process, the decision to be silent comes from the influence of the environment. As an internal process, silence remains an individual choice that suits one's disposition and favourite learning style. The silence of a person, in the meanwhile, can take on a sociological nature, that is, by sending out a message to the public. Mills (2000), in proposing the idea of sociological imagination, argues that an individual's issue of concern or trouble, which seemingly a limited social experience, may not be a single case but can represent the concern of a group or a society. In Diana P. Petrova's case study, for example, the lives of two participants, which seem individualistic, can signify the status and reaction of their community.

Insights for further research

The articles in this issue might inspire for academic readers to raise new questions for future investigation. In this regard, I was thinking aloud about a few inquiries that researchers of the silence theme might consider exploring if we wish. From a minority community that seems to suffer from social prejudice, what kind of interaction with the mainstream society can smooth out the process of integration and reduce the undesirable impact of silence? This question is asked because in some contexts, there have been attempts to bring about change and the marginalised group instead of having to accept their destiny may have a choice of creating involvement. Kelly et al. (2012)'s discussion on the participation by Indigenous communities in the broader society of Australia is the evidence that this is happening. There is a growing body of literature on this topic that points to different approaches to making such involvement more possible (see, for example, Kowal, Anderson & Bailie, 2005; Mosavel et. al., 2011). When scholars can identify such small efforts, the field would evolve so that silence of oppression does not have to be silence of accepted oppression.

What incidental and intentional classroom management behaviour among teachers create a divide between articulate and silent students and hinder social rapport? Although recent research has investigated how responsive teaching can cater for all learning styles (Jordan et al., 2017; Nguyen, 2007; Millrood, 2004), much of this happens more on a hypothetical level than on a foundation of reality. Because of this, more research needs to be conducted into innocent mistakes made by teachers that happen to marginalise certain learning styles and silence students against their will.

What forum can be created for silent students who suffer from classroom performance anxiety be given a forum to discuss their fear-based verbal processing skills? Hypothetically, if students are given the opportunity to discuss their problems with peers or a mentor they trust, as well as receiving academic support from the expert in a well-organised program, there may a chance for effective management of desirable learning behaviour. Research has shown a logical relationship between human ability in verbal processing, previous experiences, and current academic performance (see, for example, Carpenter et al. 2019). However, empirical research in this area needs to move forward with more investigation of these relationships and more open dialogues about individual experiences. Besides, we might wonder how far our knowledge of silence-use

strategies can be expanded based on personal narratives. Compared with research about others, research about the self remains humble. Instead of constantly conducting investigation of silence as the issue of someone else, it may be equally useful to scrutinise how one has experienced the use of silence within the individual, including within researchers themselves.

Conclusion: Useful quotes from the articles

For a taste of what each work has to offer, I have selected a few favourite insights taken from the contributors' words in this issue. By presenting those as they are originally written, I was hoping to illustrate the essence of the type of silence shaping the main discussion in each article.

> 'Self-silencing might be a strategy for survival in particular cases but it has negative consequences for individuals' (Petrova).
>
> 'We listen to sound, but rarely do we listen for silence' (Alerby & Brown).
>
> 'Those who listen may need time and space in stillness to allow the message to sink in' (Alerby & Brown).
>
> 'Anxious learners may attribute various meanings to their in-class silent displays, triggering negative thoughts. This then heightens their anxiety about using the target language, often leading to more silence' (Maher).
>
> 'They [or participants] acknowledge the presence of silence in their efforts to speak an additional language and regard it as a kind of refuge, lamentable for them at times but also useful in managing their exposure to existential and economic pressures' (Turnbull).
>
> 'The students preferred to be nominated by the teacher, but at the same time, they had a fear of making mistakes and did not want to be the centre of attention' (Karas & Uchihara).

The above quotes suggest that sometimes the silent experience is the choice of the individual, but at other times, silence occurs by the force of circumstances. Together, the insights remind us that to truly understand the meaning of silence, one would need to move beyond the question of personal identity to, more importantly, examine the dynamics of silence in its broader sociocultural and educational context.

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