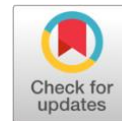


Silence, Well-being, and Learning

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ABSTRACT

I am approaching this article from the viewpoint of an ordinary human being, condemned to live in the 21st century – and of a language teaching practitioner. I have no pretensions to academic scholarship, nor to research into silence, so this will be a purely personal view.

I will first examine the negative effects that loss of silence has had on us as individuals and society. I will then suggest some ways in which we can palliate these effects in our individual lives. Finally, I will discuss the value of silence in learning (with a focus on language learning) and suggest some ways we might incorporate positive aspects of silence in our teaching.



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1. Mass Distraction

Silence, and its partner, Solitude is possibly the most important existential issue we face in the 21st century. I say this because I think there is a very real danger that we are literally losing our minds to ‘noise’ in all its manifestations.

Since the invention of the Worldwide Web and the Internet, the sheer volume of accessible information (both true and fake) has continued to expand exponentially. And, with the advent and proliferation of social media (Facebook, TikTok, Twitter, Instagram, and the like) there has been an inexorable pressure on everyone to ‘communicate’ with more and more other people. Whereas previously information was a scarce commodity and therefore valued, we are now subjected to a deluge of information, most of it trivial and irrelevant, much of it of dubious truth value, and all of it overwhelming. What we should now value is the ability to select relevant information from the mountain of garbage we are showered with and to screen out the rest.

Under the combined pressures of FOMO (fear of Missing Out), IWIN (I want it NOW) and Infoglut, our mental space and concentration have been progressively eroded. The result is that we are in a state of permanent distraction, pathologically worried we may be missing something, constantly checking that we are ‘liked’ by a larger and larger group of ‘friends’, flicking nervously from one item of information to another, dazzled by ‘noise’ (both auditory sound and environmental), leaving us unable to focus on any single thing for more than a few seconds. Our minds are drowning in a tsunami of triviality. This is well summed up in a recent work of fiction:

No one took any notice. No one looked up... All were staring at their phones. ... For so long they had been searching, liking, friending and commenting, emojiing and cancelling, unfriending and scrolling again, thinking they were no more than writing and rewriting their own worlds, while, all the time – sensation by sensation, emotion by emotion, thought by thought, fear on fear, untruth on

untruth, feeling by feeling – they were themselves being slowly re-written into a wholly new kind of human being. Richard Flanagan, *The Living Sea of Waking Dreams.* (2022, p.224)

What we have lost is the space for thinking, reflecting and creating which being alone and silence afford. Silence is now a rare – and therefore precious commodity. And solitude is ever more difficult to find. The irony is that we are ever more alone while superficially never more together. (Sherry Turkle's book, *Alone Together* (2011), analyses this in detail in relation to robotic communication.). And the compulsive addiction to constant fiddling with our smartphones is, I believe, a symptom of our inner loneliness – and terror of being alone.

One could reasonably ask, so what? Who needs silence and solitude anyway?

Before I answer that question, let us examine the effects of silence and solitude, both on the personal/spiritual level, and on our development as creative writers (musicians, artists, sculptors, actors, etc.) I will do this by looking at a few books on silence and solitude.

Sara Maitland's, *A Book of Silence* (2008), documents her life after deciding, aged 40+, that she would spend the rest of her life exploring Solitude (and with it, Silence). The book offers a fascinating account of the various locations she experiences – Weardale in a remote part of County Durham, the Isle of Skye, and the Sinai desert. She describes the effects of prolonged solitary living as follows:

1. An intensification of physical sensations: everything, from food to the sounds of nature came across with enhanced discrimination and impact. (Nan Shephard describes a similar impression in her book, *The Living Mountain* (2011). As do others who have experienced prolonged isolation from society.)
2. Total disinhibition: a kind of letting go of conventional norms. What Jung describes as being '*stripped of his persona*'. She comments, '*It was as if the silence itself unskinned me.*'
3. Hearing voices. It is as if the brain supplies the absence of others with voices it creates for itself. She emphasises that this is not a form of madness.
4. A feeling of overwhelming joy. This feeling of being connected to the universe – and understanding at a deep level the inter-connectness of everything.
5. Boundary confusion. In a way, this is a natural outcome of 4. '*If an individual is one with and a part of everything, then it is not going to be clear where the self begins and ends.*' This was exemplified in the loss of awareness of time, and the inability to distinguish between what was happening in her mind and what was happening 'outside'. An almost trance-like state of mind.
6. A sense of peril. This was not fear or terror but an exhilarating feeling of being engaged in a risky enterprise, a 'terrible joy' – of living on the edge.

In a later book, *How to Be Alone* (2014), Maitland refines these into what she sees as the benefits of Solitude and its partner, Silence:

1. A deeper consciousness of oneself. She quotes Thomas Merton (1993), the Trappist monk: '*All men (sic!) need enough solitude in their lives to enable the deep inner voice of their own true self to be heard ...*'
2. A deeper attunement to the natural world. '*The experience of fusion with, or into, nature is one of the highest joys of solitude.*'
3. A deeper relationship with the transcendent – the spiritual aspect of our make-up. '*There is no major ... religious or spiritual tradition that does not recognize solitude as a part of the necessary practice for revelation, intimacy and knowledge.*'
'...the 'pressure cooker' of solitude and retreat is normally a necessary precursor to intense religious experiences.' Note that the founders of some of the major world religions: Mohammed, Jesus Christ and Gautama, the Buddha, all spent long periods in isolation before revealing the spiritual discoveries they had made.
4. Increased creativity. '*...solitude is the school for genius.*' Wrote Edward Gibbon. And this seems borne out in the biographies of artists of all kinds.

5. An increased sense of freedom. Here she makes an important distinction between ‘freedom from’ (ie. No restraints) and ‘freedom to’ (ie. Self-governing).

‘...this sense of knowing yourself alone and nakedly ... may be one part of why solitude inspires creativity – because creating something yourself, of your own, uniquely, requires a kind of personal freedom, a lack of inhibition, a capacity not to glance over your shoulder at the opinions of others.’

In this connection, it is interesting to note Anthony Storr’s comments in his book, *Solitude* (1989), on what he calls the Third Period in an artist’s life, when the individual has somehow reconciled themselves to their inevitable fate. (Note Beckett’s famous quote: ‘*Birth was the death of him.*’) He takes Beethoven as an example. What happens then is that at this stage, artists are less concerned with communication, are often unconventional – bringing together elements which at first sight are unconnected, they no longer worry about needing to convince anyone, they explore areas of experience which are intrapersonal or supra-personal rather than interpersonal – and they couldn’t care less about what anyone else thinks. In other words, they are free to do whatever seems important.

Before moving to an answer to my earlier question, here are a series of thought-provoking quotations from Michael Harris’ excellent book, *Solitude* (2017). They tend to back up the points already made above.

The alternative to solitude is loneliness.

People are lonely only because they don’t know how to be alone.

One can be instructed in society, one is inspired only in solitude. Goethe.

The power of the wandering mind is that it censors nothing. It can make connections you would never otherwise make. (Hammond too, in *The Art of Rest* (2019), emphasises the key role of daydreaming in creative discovery.)

The intuitive mind is a sacred gift and the rational mind is a faithful servant. We have created a society that honours the servant and has forgotten the gift. Albert Einstein.

Not till we are lost can we hope to be found. (To which I would add: *The only thing worth finding is what you are not looking for.*)

So, to return to my question: So, what? Who needs silence and solitude anyway?

From the literature, as well as from personal experience, it seems we can all derive considerable benefits from greater exposure to and experience of Silence and Solitude. On the one hand, we can enhance our understanding of ourselves and appreciation of the world we live in. This is the personal, even spiritual pay-off. On the other hand, as writers, we can generate a richer resource of creative ideas through the ‘freedom to...’ which Silence and Solitude offer. And as teachers we can find ways of opening up our students to the value of silence in their learning.

2. What can be done?

The greatest thing in the world is to know how to belong to oneself. Montaigne.

Of course, finding yourself through silence and solitude will not be easy. We are often not even aware how full of rubbish and distraction our minds are. Here are three ‘wisdom’ stories to illustrate this:

2.1. One day a respected Zen Master was visited by a famous university professor.

‘I have come to inquire about Zen. Please tell me all about it.’

The Master asked his guest to be seated and began to serve him tea. He poured the tea slowly into the cup until it was full. Then he continued to pour.

The professor watched the tea spilling over the rim of the cup.

‘It’s full up,’ he said, ‘There’s no room for any more to go in.’

‘You are like this cup,’ said the Master. ‘You are full of your own thoughts and knowledge and opinions. I cannot show you Zen until you empty your cup.’

2.2. A young man came to see a famous Zen monk.

'Master,' he said, 'I am desperate to find enlightenment. I will work busily day and night if you will agree to teach me.'

'Perhaps,' said the Zen master.

'How long do you think it will take me to achieve enlightenment if I really work hard at it.'

The Zen master remained silent for a while. Then he said, 'It will take you ten years.'

'Oh, but ten years is a very long time to wait. As I told you, I will do everything you tell me. I will study and meditate day and night. If I really concentrate, how long will it take me.'

There was again a pause while the Zen master reflected. Then he said, 'Well, in that case, it will take you twenty years.'

2.3. The Buddha was out visiting some villages. It was a very hot day. As they passed a river, the Buddha asked one of his disciples to bring him a glass of water.

When his disciple filled a glass from the river, he was appalled to see that the water was brown and cloudy.

He went back to the Buddha and told him, 'Your Holiness, the water is so cloudy and full of mud. I could not possibly ask you to drink it.'

'Please go back now and look at the water again,' said the Buddha.

When the man looked at the glass this time, it seemed that the water was gradually clearing. He again reported this. From time to time, the Buddha sent him back to look at the glass, until, after about an hour, he brought the glass with clear water at the top, leaving the sediment at the bottom. The Buddha thanked him and sipped the water.

'Think of the muddy water as your mind,' said the Buddha.

(Maley, 2024 forthcoming)

So, the first step will be to become aware of just how cluttered our minds have become through the onslaught of noisy distraction.

Everyone must find their own way, of course. There is no magical formula. But to explore silence and solitude you don't need to become a Trappist monk or a Himalayan hermit. Maybe just try some small steps to see what works for you.

3. Here are some of the things that work for me:**3.1. Setting**

Setting aside some quiet time each day to reflect on what has happened to me – both the immediate and more distant past, and to think about possible futures. As Socrates is believed to have said, 'The unexamined life is not worth living.' All I need to do is find somewhere away from other people for 15 to 30 minutes. The end of the day is a good time. The effects of this are summarised in this poem:

These weeks for me

Have been a time

To purge

My gnawing urge

To action:

To merge

Again with the contours

Of my child-time mind,

To find

*A peace in nothing
But the sight of woods.*

*Leached by loneliness,
Polished by silence,
All needs abolished,
Reaching for the simplicity
Of life again.
To find that you, I, we,
Subject to other laws,
Are simply a funnel
Through which
An unknown something pours.**

3.2. Daily meditation

This is different from reflection as in 1 above. It entails emptying the mind, actively not thinking about things, getting rid of the monkey mind. There are plenty of books about how to meditate (St Ruth1993; Johnson 1996). I find it helpful simply to count my breaths. I have slowly built up the length of time I meditate, starting at about 10 minutes, and now about 30 minutes. I find early morning is the best time for me, so that I can start the day with a clean slate.

Never is a man more active than when he does nothing; never is he less alone than when he is by himself. Seneca (quoting Cato).

3.3. Walking in a natural environment

Walking in a natural environment, preferably where there are trees and water. This never fails to have a calming effect. It is also a time when thoughts and ideas come to me unbidden.

Thinking about nothing

*Try thinking
without thinking about something.*

*Let your thoughts
think you.*

*Stop the vain effort
to capture them.*

*Look at the river's flow,
the slow eddying of the current,
the muscular water -
green weeds tasselling
below the surface.
Go with the flow.*

Many writers, including poets like Wordsworth, have commented on the value of simply being in a natural environment. Eva Hoffman (1998) writes movingly;

I like being alone sometimes, and having thoughts that are no thoughts, green thoughts against the blue sky. And I like meandering on the narrow paths through the fragrant fields after sunset, when the stars come out and the horizon fills out into a great bowl and the silence hums just for me, creating a great silence inside me.

Or this account of becoming one with trees:

Milmaq was a solitary person. He would spend hours in the forest, not hunting, simply sitting still, watching, waiting for something to happen. A spider would swing its thread across the canyon between two branches. A woodpecker would drum at the trunk of a chestnut tree, its neck a blur of speed. Above all, the trees themselves would speak to him. He would be aware of them creaking and swaying in the wind. He could sense the sap rising in them in the springtime; feel their sorrow at the approach of winter. If he put his ear to the trunk of a tree, he could hear it growing, very slowly; feel it moving towards its final, magnificent shape. (The Man Who Talked to Trees. Alan Maley)

So I walk every day for about an hour, sometimes by the river or the lake, sometimes in the wooded hills near my village. I walk with an open mind, trying only to notice what I see and hear, not trying to think of anything in particular. But it is rare for me not to have an idea or two which I can work on later. And although I tend to walk the same paths, the walk is never the same. And I always return refreshed, as if my mind had been washed clean of what William James called ‘*the booming, buzzing confusion*’ of everyday life.

3.4. Read a lot

When I read, and I read a lot, I can find a space for reflection in the company of the book. Books open alternative worlds to us, offering us a refuge from the barrage of external ‘noise’ we are submitted to daily. There are plenty of books which discuss the benefits of reading, including *The Case for Books* (Darnton, 2009) and *The Pleasures of Reading in an Age of Distraction* (Jacobs, 2009).

This poem of mine tries to encapsulate this kind of experience – as indeed Wallace Stevens’ far better-known poem on which it is based (2010):

In the Cool of the House

(Based on Wallace Stevens’ The House was Quiet and the World was Calm)

In the cool of the house it is night.

On the table the book lies closed.

I open the cover - the door to the book,

And another world is disclosed.

I enter the universe of the book,

And close the door behind me.

The words on the page transport me

To a place no one can find me.

Now I’ve become somebody else

As the words infiltrate my mind.

The world outside is an alien place:

A world I have left behind.

*As I explore the world of the words,
Go far down the path I took,
I know I'm bewitched, and I realise
That I have become the book.*

*In the cool of the house, it is morning.
On the table the book lies open.
I close the cover, come back to the world,
To a place where there's little hope in.
I shall have more to say about silent reading in the section below on teaching language.*

3.5. Writing

Writing, like reading is a largely silent and solitary process. For me, as for many others, it is a way of clarifying my thoughts, of coming to terms with problems and of discovering unexpected things about the world and about myself.

E.M. Forster puts it like this, *'How can I know what I think before I see what I say?'* And the struggle with finding words to express intensely personal meanings has to be conducted alone and in silence. This goes for both creative and more mundane, expository, forms of writing. For in one sense all writing is creative.

I have found this process one of the best ways to exclude the barrage of noise which surrounds me. I have also found the accounts of others to be helpful to my own efforts, as in the books by Nathalie Goldberg (1986) and Anne Lamott (1994).

3.6. Listening to music

I also find that listening to music can offer a retreat from other forms of 'noise'. I feel cocooned by the shell of calm which certain kinds of music can offer. Which kind of music works best to achieve this effect is obviously a highly personal matter. Much has been made of the beneficial effect of baroque music, and in particular the works of Mozart on attention, relaxation and general well-being. (Campbell, 2001) and in *'The Roar of Silence'*, Campbell suggests the value of toning/chanting as a way of creating inner space. (Campbell, 1990)

3.7. Avoid distraction

Finally, one thing we can all do is not to add to the already distracting world of noise. For example, I avoid all social media like the plague, and restrict my use of a mobile phone to essential messages. I try not to watch TV unless I can find something really worth watching (which is increasingly rare) and I put all advertisements on mute. I also try not to speak unless I have something to say. And I try to listen more than I speak. I do not always succeed.

*Wise men talk because they have something to say; fools because they have to say something.
Plato.*

Those who know do not speak: those who speak do not know... Lao Tze

To a Commuter.

*I really hate your mobile phone –
The way it gets inside my head.
It makes me want to be alone.*

*Its ringing turns my heart to stone.
It makes me wish that you were dead.
I really hate your mobile phone.*

*Each time I hear its foolish drone
It drives me mad, makes me see red –
And makes me want to be alone.*

*I feel I'm in the killing zone,
And wish I was elsewhere instead.
I really hate your mobile phone.*

*I shudder when I hear its tone.
You talk but nothing sensible is said.
It makes me want to be alone.*

*You're acting like a mindless clone.
You're not a leader, you're the led.
I really hate your mobile phone,
It makes me want to be alone.*

So, in this part I have shared some of my own ways of dealing with the crisis of attention I believe we are facing. Others may find other ways. I do not pretend that it has been easy. And I am far from achieving the degree of inner space I should like. No one finds it easy:

The Art of Solitude.

*The art of solitude is hard to master -
The world so full of sound and fury,
Where everything moves ever faster.
And cash is both judge and jury.
Where a majority
Prefers noise to silence,
Communication to reflection,
Being in touch with others
Rather than with ourselves,
Prefers emoji's to emotions,
Contact rather than engagement,
Things to people:*

*Where 'friendship' is a calculus
Of 'like' / 'don't like',
And being alone fills us with dread –
Almost worse than being dead.*

4. Silence in Language Learning

The question of how to maximise the learning take-up from classroom teaching has been widely discussed in methodological circles for as long as I can remember. Teachers have often been urged to reduce TTT (Teacher Talking Time) and to give learners more time to think by increasing wait time. Sadly, many teachers are terrified of silence.

It is also interesting to look back at some of the alternative methodologies which arose in the 1980's, such as The Silent Way, Suggestopedia and Total Physical Response, all of which incorporated the use of silence, albeit in different ways.

The Silent Way, as its name suggests, was based in part on the teacher remaining silent for much of the time. The teacher's main task was to offer a model then leave learners the time to work on it internally before repeating it, then to indicate, largely by gesture whether or not it came close to an accurate re-production of the original. This emphasis on the learners developing their own inner criteria was a hallmark of this method, developed by Caleb Gattegno. (See Stevick (1980), for the most concise description of the Silent Way and the other alternative methodologies).

Suggestopedia, developed by Lozanov, included periods of listening to very long texts. In what was called the Concert stage, the teacher reads the text in a very special way, slowly and almost as a chant, with a background of baroque-style music. Learners sit and listen in comfortable armchairs and with dimmed lights, so the effect is almost trance-like.

The Total Physical Response method was developed by Asher in the late 1960's. Beginners in a new language were exposed to language connected with physical movement. For a long period, they were not required to speak, only to listen and do, starting by following simple instructions. Only at a later stage were they asked to speak. This method was in line with thinking on the need for a 'silent period' in mother tongue acquisition.

What can we do in practical terms to harness the power of silence and internal processing by learners? Here are a few suggestions.

4.1. Activities for readying and steadying learners before teaching begins.

Learners often come to the language class from another class, or from work, or from social activities. Their minds are cluttered with thoughts, memories, images, plans and worries. To help clear this mental rubble away, it can be useful to set aside 5 to 10 minutes at the start of every class for some simple activities to help still the mind and ready it for learning. And to make this part of a regular routine.

In the 1970's, Jean Cureau, an eccentric but highly effective teacher in a famous lycee in Paris, even persuaded the authorities to install fitted carpet in his classroom, and spent the first 10 minutes of every class with learners lying on the floor relaxing. There is no need to go that far – sitting quietly can be as effective. But it is important to explain why you are doing this, and to persuade the learners that this is not some fancy way of wasting time – but time well-spent which will enrich their learning.

There are a number of things learners can be asked to do in this pre-teaching time. All, except or one or two, are done with eyes closed, sitting erect.

~ They take slow, deep breaths, counting silently to 10, then counting to 10 again, repeating the cycle until you tell them to stop.

~ They focus on all the sounds they can hear around them (and inside them).

~ You write a quotation, proverb or other thought-provoking sentence on the board. They read it and commit it to memory, then close eyes and think about it. Here are a few examples:

Don't just play the notes – play the music. (Arturo Toscanini)

If I could say it, I wouldn't have to play it. (Duke Ellington)

Education's purpose is to replace an empty mind with an open one. (Malcolm Forbes)

Imagination is more important than knowledge. (Albert Einstein)

It's not that I don't know what to do; it's that I don't do what I know. (Timothy Gallwey)

~ You use a Tibetan poly-metallic 'singing' bowl, or a glass crystal bowl – or any other object that will go on vibrating for long after it is struck. (There are also recordings available for use, if you google 'Tibetan singing bowls') You set the bowl 'singing'. Learners listen to it intently until it fades completely and can no longer be heard. You do this several times.

~ You play as softly as possible music which calms. For example, an Indian morning raga, pieces like *Spiegel in Spiegel* by Arvo Part, a Chopin nocturne, etc. It is worth spending some time trying pieces out to see which work best for you. Learners simply listen.

~ Learners relax each part of their bodies in turn – first tensing them, then letting go. They start with their toes and move up to their scalps. You may find it helpful to talk them through this in a slow, calm voice.

4.2. Activities to develop retention.

All too often, teachers expect an immediate response to a question or prompt. This leaves learners with little or no time to process the language. These activities all help strengthen the inner processes which will lead to acquisition. In this connection, the ideas of N.S. Prabhu are also relevant. In his ideas of a procedural syllabus, based on learners completing tasks, he claims that as learners' conscious minds are focussed on completing the task, they are sub-consciously acquiring the language. (Prabhu 2019)

1) 'The inner workbench'.

Adrian Underhill, who coined this term, recommends a range of activities designed to promote deep processing of language input. The main aim is to give learners the mental space in which they can flex their own linguistic muscles – first in silence, and only then in speech. He describes various types of inner activity:

Inner hearing/The inner ear/The mind's ear; Inner speaking/The inner mouth/The mind's mouth; Inner seeing/The inner eye/The mind's eye; Inner muscles/The mind's muscles/ The neurology. And the inner process of assembling, practice, replay and rehearsal of words, sentences, self expression...

He draws an analogy with the way athletes and musicians are able inwardly to rehearse actions they will later perform outwardly.

Here are just a few inner workbench activities:

~ Project an array of about 20 words, all printed in a variety of colours. Learners look at them for one minute. You then close the slide. They then try to remember as many words as possible by silently visualising them. They do not write anything until you give the word. Let them then discuss how they recalled the words.

~ You give them either a single sound or a word. You only give it **once**. They are asked to hold the sound in their minds, first hearing it, then repeating it silently. Finally, when you give the word, they speak it out loud.

~ You say a word **once**. They listen to it and silently repeat it to themselves. How many syllables does it have? How many sounds? How many letters? Where is the stress in the word?

~ Each student prepares a sentence about 5 words long, which is true of them. eg. *I am five feet tall*. They do not speak their sentences out loud. Instead, they rehearse saying them internally. They are told to try out as many different ways of saying the sentence as possible. For example, varying speed, volume, tone, stress, etc. After about 5 minutes, they speak their sentences out loud.

~ Give them the written versión of something which has been recorded. They are asked to listen to the text silently as they read it. They then practice reading it silently, trying out different ways of speaking it. Finally, they listen to the recorded version.

All these, and many other similar activities are aimed at allowing learners time to process language internally before they utter it.

2) *Two dictation activities. (from among the many described in the resource book, Dictation by Paul Davis and Mario Rinvoluceri, 1989)*

~ Running dictation.

The text of the dictation (5 sentences long) is pasted on the back wall of the classroom. Teams of five students stand at the front of the classroom. On the word, one member of each team runs to the text on the back wall of the classroom, reads the first sentence, tries to commit it to memory, then runs back and dictates it to their group, who write it down. Then the second learner runs to the back, reads the second sentence, memorises it and brings it back ... and so on till the complete text has been retrieved. The group with the most accurate transcription is the winner (not necessarily the fastest!)

~ Normal Speed Dictation.

You dictate a short text at slow-normal speed, without pausing as in traditional dictation. Learners listen. They do not write anything. When you stop reading, they can write anything they recall from the text – isolated words, phrases etc. You then read it again. Again they can only write when you stop reading. They write any additional ítems they can recall. You continue this process until they have reconstituted the whole text. Usually, you will need to read the text about 5 times to get to this point.

Both activities demand intense attention and processing of language internally, in silence. They also necessarily require multiple repetition.

3) *Extensive reading.*

The value of silent reading has already been discussed above, and there have been many advocates of making it a central part of classroom teaching, ranging from Michael West's *The Teaching of English in Difficult Circumstances* (1960), to Stephen Krashen's *The Power of Reading* (2004). Indeed, a number of Ministries of Education have attempted to introduce what has been termed *Uninterrupted Sustained Silent Reading (USSR)* into the language teaching curriculum, with varying degrees of success. In recent years, *The Extensive Reading Foundation* has done excellent work in promoting the use of extensive reading. (<https://erfoundation.org/wordpress/>) and in offering information, ideas and materials for teachers who wish to incorporate ER into their teaching.

4) *Creative writing.*

Writing is, as noted earlier, a quintessentially private and silent activity, but which involves the writer in a complex of mental processing of language – selecting, manipulating, revising language repeatedly – and silently. Here I offer just two activities which stimulate the deep processing which is so important for the acquisition of language.

~ Word Arrays.

You provide an array of words drawn from a short existing text – each different word only appears one in the array, even if it occurs multiple times in the text. Here is an example:

<i>he</i>	<i>in</i>	<i>me</i>
<i>sent</i>	<i>i</i>	<i>most</i>
<i>parks</i>	<i>anyway</i>	<i>was</i>
<i>of</i>	<i>never</i>	<i>flowers</i>
<i>silence</i>	<i>took</i>	<i>wrote</i>
<i>it</i>	<i>said</i>	<i>what</i>
<i>letters</i>	<i>restaurants</i>	<i>how</i>
<i>to</i>	<i>cannot</i>	<i>love</i>

<i>spoke</i>	<i>we</i>	<i>remember</i>
<i>met</i>	<i>but</i>	

Stage 1. Individually, students make up as many sentences as possible using any of the words in the array, but no others. They may not add any new words, nor change any form of a word. They may use words as many times as they like. And they do not have to use all the words (though it is best if they do)

Stage 2. They then work in pairs or small groups. They pool their sentences, then choose some to form a short text (poem or prose).

Finally, you give them the original text from which the array was derived so that they can compare their texts with it. In the above array, the original was:

He never sent me flowers. He never wrote me letters. He never took me to restaurants. He never spoke of love. We met in parks. I don't remember what he said but I remember how he said it. Most of it was silence anyway. Leon Leszek Szkutnik.

~ Metaphor poems. (This idea comes from Jane Spiro's great book: *Creative Poetry Writing*. 2004)

You prepare two columns of nouns – one abstract, one concrete, as in this example:

<i>Hope</i>	<i>a spoon</i>
<i>Life</i>	<i>a knife</i>
<i>Marriage</i>	<i>an egg</i>
<i>Love</i>	<i>a brush</i>
<i>Anger</i>	<i>a window</i>
<i>Disappointment</i>	<i>a mirror</i>
<i>Work</i>	<i>a banana</i>
<i>Happiness</i>	<i>a rope</i>
<i>Time</i>	<i>a bus</i>
<i>Hate</i>	<i>a cup</i>
<i>Fear</i>	<i>an alarm-clock</i>

In the first stage, learners make up 3 metaphors by randomly combining words from each column. Any item in column one can go with any item from column 2. eg.

Anger is an alarm-clock.

Work is a rope.

Marriage is a banana. etc.

They then choose one of their metaphors and add 2 lines to contextualise it / explain it

eg.

Love is an egg.

Better eat it

While it's still fresh.

Both these activities demand intense internal processing of language, including the repetition which is so essential to acquiring language.

Some of the most intense, silent concentration I have ever observed has come about in creative writing sessions. This poem records one such occasion with a creative writing group in China, at the mountain monastery high above the city of Fuzhou.

'Flow' until ...

*In the teahouse,
Dark rosewood chairs,
Miniature Yixing teapots:
A view of the Mingchang river
Far below
In a glow
of diffused light.
The mountain, dark behind us.*

*A subdued chatter of tea cups
Forms the drone
To our silent morning raga.*

*We sit in a Rembrandt painting ~
Faces lit from the teahouse window,
Our backs to the dark ~
Lost in our writing.
The tannoy relays
Chanted sutras.
In the quiet of the teahouse,
Then this sudden mobile phone!*

5. Concluding Remarks

I have tried to make the case for Silence and Solitude both in our everyday lives and in our professional practice as teachers. I hope to have persuaded you that it is worth exploring the power which Silence and Solitude undoubtedly give us access to – and to resist the colonisation of our minds. Good luck!

The rest is silence!

Author's © note: All the poems used are the original work of the author.

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