

Towards Valuing and Hearing Student Silence in Language Classrooms

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Abstract

This article aims to reveal how facilitators, who are neither teachers nor students, viewed student silence in a Japanese language classroom at an Italian university. Today, most consider student silence as inherently negative; however, silence studies indicate that further exploration is vital to better engage with it, drawing on diverse viewpoints such as those of the facilitators. This article shows that the facilitators strived to remove student silence, regarding it as unwelcome. However, by reflecting on pedagogical influences on us and considering what more wait-time for student silence can do, this article suggests we see silence as a rich communicative and learning resource. With this in mind, we may address student silence more cautiously and meaningfully.

Keywords: student silence, pedagogical influence, silence as social construct, wait-time

【キーワード】 学生の沈黙, 教授法の影響, 社会構成物としての沈黙, 待つ時間

1 Introduction

This article aims to shed light on student silence in a Japanese language classroom at an Italian university from the viewpoint of facilitators, who are neither teachers nor students. In language education, student silence is often considered as ‘a significant threat to effective language learning’ (King 2013: 2). However, studies on silence have revealed that student silence is not inherently negative—it shows complex, dynamic, and diverse causes and meanings (Harumi & King 2020). Effectively interpreting student silence and reacting to it demands not only our utmost caution but further insights from diverse viewpoints. So far, relevant studies have drawn on teacher and learner viewpoints only. Third-party viewpoints, such as those of facilitators, can promote better understanding and engagement with student silence. Thus, this article focuses on revealing how the facilitators, who assisted student dialogical learning, viewed and reacted to student silence, drawing

on their reflective reports as the primary data. The article discusses why they perceived student silence in the way they did and what could have been the consequence of such views. It concludes by suggesting we see silence as a vital communicative and learning resource.

2 Literature review

2.1 Defining silence

The student silence addressed by this article concerns conversational silence. It can be divided into three subcategories (King 2013). The first is *I must not speak*—intentional silence due to an external source. In classroom settings, this silence may occur when the teacher is talking. The second is *I will not speak*—the intentional silence that may occur when a student is reluctant or refuses to play the role of an interlocutor. The third is *I cannot speak*—unintentional silence caused by psychological inhibition. This may happen when students feel anxious or do not know how to respond. The causes and meanings of silence are socially constructed based on the relationship between the silent individual and the interlocutor in the specific context (Harumi & King 2020). Thus, silence can be seen as ‘a rich communicative resource whose understanding requires the sophistication of a fine-grained, interdisciplinary analysis’ (Jaworski & Sachdev 1998: 273).

2.2 Views on student silence: Overview

Overall, views on student silence have moved across the favourable–unfavourable spectrum. It was once highly valued when effective education was thought to occur in a lecture style only (Aspinall 2006). Today, most people tend to understand student silence as unfavourable in classrooms (Harumi & King 2020). Yet, silence studies focusing on student emic viewpoints have shed light on its positive aspects; the facilitative role of silence for student learning is being realised. The following sections review the multifaceted reasons why it is viewed as unfavourable or favourable and what the possible consequence—including both the reactions and outcomes—of each view can be.

2.3 Student silence as unfavourable

Western cultures likely play a role in forming negative perceptions of silence. Generally, Anglo-American English speakers consider prolonged silence as a sign of uncooperativeness and thus interactional failure (Scollon & Scollon 1981). Thus, cultural influence can be hard to dismiss in discussions of student silence (Bao 2014, King 2013).

Current discourse around *good learners* in society appears to shape a negative impression of student silence. Jaworski and Sachdev (1998: 283) observe that ‘new, progressive styles of learning introduced in many schools, involves students more actively, engaging them verbally to a considerable extent, encouraging them to ask questions, form opinions, discuss ideas and voice their doubts.’ As a result, most references to silence are contrasted with good academic achievements. Ollin (2008: 271) points out that peer-pressure—‘If I’m going to [speak], so should you’—even prompts students to view their silence as unfavourable. This image is reinforced when it comes to the current language education, where the communicative approach has gained momentum. Often, good language learners are considered overtly participative and verbally contributing (Kojima & Thomson 2019).

The era of communicative approach could lead us to assume that student silence is an individual matter, which can play a role in painting it as negative. Communication is co-constructive, and so is silence. Yet, the communicative approach disregards the co-constructive nature of communication; it focuses on how well speakers fill the information gap between themselves and listeners using unidirectional and independent utterances (Sato & Kumagai 2017). Here, silent learners are seen as defective communicators, failing to fill the gap. Interlocutors are seldom seen as part of the silence. We often assume that learners are silent as they fear making mistakes and losing face, or in worst-case scenarios, that they are reluctant, unmotivated or lazy (King 2013). In summary, considering pedagogical influence in understanding views on student silence is essential.

Viewing student silence as detrimental to learning often prompts the act of its removal, resulting in differing outcomes. It can be beneficial for students with less autonomy and motivation, leading to outcomes such as more conversational interactions and target language development (King et al. 2020). However, such an act of removal can also be counterproductive. Drawing on

student emic views, Jaworski and Sachdev (1998: 284) argue that ‘teachers’ expectations for students to be verbally more active’ are a ‘potential source of anxiety and conflict for some students.’ Maher (2020) reports that teacher intervention in student silence has minimal influence on helping students speak up. Furthermore, some studies indicate that continuous requests to speak up can lead to impulsive and low-quality participation by language learners, leaving them feeling less satisfied (Bao 2020, Kojima & Thomson 2019). These underline the need for further discussion on the possible outcomes of our reactions to student silence to ensure more careful decision-making before reacting to it.

2.4 Student silence as favourable

Culture can also play a role in viewing silence as favourable. Compared to Western cultures, people belonging to East Asian cultures tend to tolerate silence longer and do not immediately assume it as suggesting an unwillingness to communicate (Turner & Hiraga 2003). Bao (2014) finds that, although overall, China and Korea are becoming more westernised in their approach to silence while Japan is not. King (2013: 4-5), who conducted a longitudinal silence study on Japanese learners of English in Japan, admits that ‘knowing when *not* to speak, and the ability to tolerate and interpret silence, particularly in more formal settings, were skills perhaps even more vital to successful interaction than being able to discourse on any given topic at length [in Japan].’ Cultural influence should not be overgeneralised. Yet, literature cautions us that disregarding culture can result in misunderstandings of student silence, especially when Japanese people, culture or language is involved.

To date, silence studies have illustrated the value of student silence for learning, encouraging us to see it as favourable. Jaworski and Sachdev (1998: 286) find that student silence can be ‘a facilitative device enabling students to gain access, organise, and absorb new materials.’ Considering experiences of Japanese students at a Canadian university, Morita (2004: 596) argues that ‘silence did not necessarily represent the reticent students’ inaction or a lack of desire for participation; they were in fact engaged with many cognitive, affective, and social activities.’ Bao (2014) stresses that silence is a mode of learning. These studies highlight that student silence is often

a sign of their will to learn and is, in fact, the source of their learning.

Our endeavour to value student silence and hear a voice in it has the potential to achieve far more fruitful outcomes than we assume. Rowe (1974) proposed a concept called *wait-time*—silence until a student reacts to a teacher initiation—and conducted a series of quantitative studies to see what different wait-times do to student language and logic development in elementary science programs. At the preliminary stage, Rowe (1974: 207) found that ‘teachers allowed students an average time of only 1 sec to start an answer to a question. If a response did not commence within 1 sec, teachers usually either repeated the question or called on others to respond.’ Then, she trained the teachers to introduce three to five seconds of wait-time and examined the result. The analysis detected significant changes, such as an increase in response length from seven to 27 words, increased unsolicited but appropriate responses from five to 17, decreased response failure from seven to one, and increased student-initiated questions from one to four. Thus, affording student silence even in language classrooms may prompt their increased conversational interactions and target language development.

Overall, the literature presented so far has revealed two sides of student silence, but the number of studies in this area is still limited, and further discussions are called for to better inform how we interpret and react to student silence in a context-sensitive manner. In the current discussions, the viewpoints of those other than teachers and learners are scarce. In our field, one of the growing trends is designing a classroom learning environment with not only a teacher and students but also teaching assistants, students with differing language proficiencies, and guests in and outside an institution (e.g., Thomson 2017). Understanding and integrating third-party viewpoints into discussions on student silence can be vital and fruitful. This article thus draws on the viewpoints of facilitators, who were neither teachers nor students in the classroom under study. It looks into how the facilitators viewed and engaged with student silence in the given context.

3 Study design: The course, participants and data collection and analysis

This study investigated the perception of facilitators regarding student silence in a Japanese language course of a master’s degree program at an Italian university. The 15-week course,

constituting 12 classes due to unplanned class cancellations, aimed to help the master's students majoring in Japanese Studies consider and decide the topic of their thesis while using and improving their Japanese. As an assignment, they wrote an essay in Japanese about the thesis topic based on their academic interest, as well as their discussions in and outside the classes. The discussions mostly focused on identifying *why* the topic mattered to them. They kept asking *why* questions to one another. The course teacher called these interactions *taiwa*, signifying dialogue; thus, verbal interactions were promoted throughout the semester. One teacher, 11 students, and eight facilitators were present.

Among these eight, the primary participants of this study were six facilitators, including the author himself, who submitted reflection reports. The six facilitators included three females and three males. Two were Italians, and four were Japanese. They were either a teaching-focused academic of Japanese, postgraduate student, undergraduate student, intern or postdoctoral fellow—that is, they brought differing experiences, interests, and purposes with them. Their role in the classroom was to assist the students by engaging in *taiwa* with them. Of six, three had played the same role in the classes that the teacher taught before and learnt the dialogic teaching approach. The rest were first-time facilitators who engaged in dialogic interactions with the students and assisted the students while understanding the rationale and technique for the approach.

The primary data of this study took the form of 39 reflective reports that the six facilitators wrote in Japanese or English. Two submitted 12 reports. The others did not turn them in for some weeks. The author translated reports in Japanese into English. The topics in the reports included what they did, how they felt, and why they did or felt so regarding the students and themselves. Participant observation by the author was added to the primary data for data source triangulation (Flick 2007). Drawing on the thematic analysis of Nowell et al. (2017), this study focused on identifying, organising, and reporting the salient themes regarding the facilitators' views on student silence. This article presents three notable phases the facilitators underwent as the primary findings, as illustrated below.

4 Findings: Facilitators' views on student silence

4.1 Feeling uncomfortable in a heavy atmosphere

In the first phase, which lasted until around the fifth class, the facilitators largely viewed student silence as unfavourable. The students did not speak up when the course started out, even when they were expected to, for instance, right after the teacher asked them a question. Therefore, it was not rare to observe a situation where all remained silent. One facilitator reported: 'After [an] embarrassing *silence*, a student start[ed] to answer the teacher's question' (Male A). Another facilitator could not help but write, 'I felt uncomfortable with the heavy atmosphere' (Female B).

The facilitators attributed the cause of student silence to student mental states. One facilitator reported that '[the students] seemed *only mildly interested* in the topics [under discussion]' (Male B). Another pointed out that student anxiety was resulting in their silence: 'I feel that most of us do not speak up actively ... I assume that *anxiety* is one of the causes' (Female A). The teacher, students, and facilitators often made a big circle and interacted as a group while occasionally having small-group discussions. That is, they were all being involved in the interactions and silence. The facilitators reported that they were anxious as well. Nevertheless, they considered that the issue of student silence was not theirs but an individual student matter, therefore placing themselves outside the silence.

The counteraction of the facilitators in such a silent classroom was to remove student silence. It was observed that the facilitators started to take initiative more often in decision-making processes about how their interactions could proceed and what could be discussed in the interactions. Then, they attempted to prompt student utterances by instructing more, commenting more, and questioning more. One facilitator wrote that 'as a facilitator, I want to consider and find how I can give comments to prompt student-student active discussions' (Female A). These actions were backed up by the teacher, who often recommended the facilitators to do so in after-class teacher-facilitator reflection sessions.

4.2 Ambivalent feelings about reactions to student silence

In the second phase, around the middle of the semester, the facilitators started to feel

ambivalent about their act of removing student silence. The interactions slowly started warming up in small group settings, bringing success. By contrast, some students failed to become active in whole-class interactions. At some points, the facilitators forcefully initiated interactions. Yet, prompting silent students to speak up backfired on them—the students became more silent. Observing this situation, one facilitator reflected that ‘I might have talked too much. I should have waited much longer for the students struggling until they could step forward [to say something]’ (Female C). The facilitators thus sought to move in another direction in approaching student silence. However, this did not last long.

One facilitator encountered a situation in which feeling ambivalent and altering the behaviour informed by the pedagogy were not allowed. On this occasion, all his group members agreed to take some quiet time to write down their thoughts on the topic under discussion. Nonetheless, the teacher came and broke their silence, replacing their silent learning with learning through verbal exchanges. After this incident, the facilitator expressed his dissatisfaction: ‘We were seen as doing nothing, thinking of nothing as we did not talk’ (Male C). This illustrates that silence, whether it be intentional and productive or not, was not afforded in the class. It underlined that overtly and verbally participating was almost the only way to show the evidence of learning to others.

4.3 Active, pleasant, and motivating class without silence

In the third phase, around the end of the semester, the facilitators were satisfied with the students actively engaging in the in-class interactions. The change was evident in descriptions such as: ‘[The] discussion as a whole class [had] become more and more *active*’ (Male C). That is, the students started to speak up, even in whole-class interactions. One facilitator wrote: ‘When I was late, I wondered what happened during the first 15 minutes as I realised that the atmosphere was *pleasant* as soon as I entered the classroom’ (Female B). The classroom was no longer a silent space where they had to feel uncomfortable. They considered student *non-silence* as an individual student matter; as one facilitator put it: ‘Student questions did not stop, and I felt their *motivation* and *interest* to understand us when we reported our [out-of-class] dialogues’ (Female A). They welcomed this

active verbal engagement from students; however, they might have exited the course with the understanding that student silence is inherently unwelcome.

5 Discussions and implications

Silence studies have identified a variety of reasons and meanings behind student silence in educational contexts and now encourage us to look upon it positively (Harumi & King 2020). Whether the student silence observed in this study was a result of *must not*, *will not* or *cannot* is unknown (Jaworski & Sachdev 1998). Regardless, the facilitators saw student silence as negative, considered it as an individual matter, attempted to remove it, once felt ambivalent about the act of removal but kept following the original path, and took pleasure in an atmosphere without silence in the end. This article confirms that not only teachers and learners, but also third parties such as the facilitators, are likely to perceive student silence in language classrooms as unwelcome and thus strive to remove it.

Feeling the influence of the chosen pedagogy on the facilitator views on student silence is hard to avoid. Past studies have sought to examine the reasons why we put a certain label on student silence (Bao 2014, Harumi & King 2020, King 2013). Among the reasons, culture did not explicitly play its role in this study (Bao 2014, King 2013); instead, the dialogic pedagogy appeared to exert power over how the facilitators viewed and reacted to student silence. The course set up an atmosphere where verbal interactions were promoted and valued. Ambivalent feelings were discouraged. This highlights that being free from peer-pressure is indeed challenging once established (Ollin 2008).

Now, we might be at a turning point where we reconsider what is meant by being good learners and being communicative. As illustrated in this article again, we live in an era in which we likely presume sustained engagement through verbal interactions leads to target language development (Jaworski & Sachdev 1998, Kojima & Thomson 2019). However, Bao (2020: 32) argues that the quality of learning or learners may no longer 'be measured by how much speaking occurs' alone, considering insights from silence studies to date. Thus, to keep promoting an exclusive view of good and communicative learners as overtly participative and verbally contributing in all

educational contexts appears debatable today. At least, it unlikely benefits all learners bringing diverse backgrounds with them as one facilitator hinted this. Given that silence is a valuable learning and rich communicative resource, we might want to start referring to those ‘knowing when *not* to speak’ (King 2013: 4) as good learners and communicative learners as well.

The findings suggest the need for further emphasising that student silence is a social construct. The effort of the previous studies (Harumi & King 2020) seems to have an insufficient effect today. Perceptions of student silence as an individual matter persist, as evident in the facilitators seeking the cause of student silence in student’s *interest*, *motivation*, and *anxiety*. This may be due to the current pedagogical influences, which tend to sublimate communication as individual, unidirectional, and independent speeches (Sato & Kumagai 2017). If communication is to be seen as a social construct, so too should silence. In fact, we are part of creating, sustaining, affording or removing student silence (King 2013). With this in mind, we may address student silence more cautiously and meaningfully.

The ambivalent feeling that once emerged in the facilitators seems encouraging for those wanting to give more wait-time for student silence than usual. Being silent does not mean doing nothing or learning nothing, as this study and previous studies have illustrated (Jaworski & Sachdev 1998, Morita 2004). More than one second of wait-time may afford student cognitive, affective, and social activities, allowing learners to access, absorb, and organise what is new, intriguing, and inspiring to them (Rowe 1974). In fact, the facilitators appeared to sense the potential of silence and thus hesitated to justify its quick removal. As one facilitator reminded us, ‘obligatory talk can be frustrating when learners are required to publicise their half-baked thought’ (Bao 2020: 33). Learners who experience it may raise their voices less and less, as this study suggests.

6. Concluding remarks

Let us now consider what teachers can do to better engage with student silence in classrooms. First, they can gain more insights into student silence, explore its causes and meanings, and change their mindsets to it. Silence is a rich communicative and learning resource; keeping this in their minds may mark positive differences in student learning. Further, teachers could discuss the

meanings and roles of silence with *all* classroom members, including third parties. Harumi and King (2020: 3) write that ‘silence is an issue that touches all who teach.’ Yet, silence touches all who learn as well. According to Vassilopoulos and Konstantinidis (2012), prolonged observation of classroom behaviour seems essential before acknowledging the need for silence, as evident in experienced teachers utilising silence more than novice teachers. This suggests that learning to value silence in classrooms is not easy for all. Compared to teachers, learners and third parties are less likely to make such a prolonged observation. Thus, gaining adequate support from teachers appears vital for them.

Such cooperative efforts among teachers, learners, and third parties to recognise the value of silence in classrooms may help build a convivial future. Let us see the Council of Europe (2016), listing the skills of listening and observing as Competencies for Democratic Culture, which the conference in the year thematised. Listening and observing are accompanied by silence. That said, the council stresses that increasing attention to the positive role silence plays can help us pursue and sustain a healthy democratic society. Overall, we could say that silence has potential in many ways. We can sense it as the facilitators indeed did. However, the major conclusion this article draws is that we seem to need more than *sensing* the potential, considering the case of the facilitators who came to disregard it in the end. To move us one step further, more studies that provide insights into complex, dynamic, and diverse causes and meanings of student silence will be worthwhile. Beginning to try out and share educational practice in which we can *acknowledge* the potential of silence will likely help us as well.

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教室で学生の沈黙を大切にし、沈黙の中の声を聞くことを目指して

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要旨

本稿はイタリアの大学の日本語クラスで、教師でも学生でもないファシリテーターが学生の沈黙をどのように捉えたかを明らかにした。学生の沈黙は否定的なものとして見られがちだが、近年の研究はそうではないことを明らかにし、より多様な視点から沈黙への洞察を得る必要性を示している。特に、教師や学生ではない教室参加者の視点を探る必要がある。本研究ではファシリテーターが学生の沈黙を歓迎せず、取り除こうとしたことが見えてきた。しかし、教授法の影響を批判的に検討し、学生の沈黙を待つ時間の必要性を考慮し、沈黙をコミュニケーションや学習リソースとして捉え直すべきだと提案する。