



Title : **Silence in English Language Pedagogy: From Research to Practice**

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A BOOK REVIEW: SILENCE IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE PEDAGOGY

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In the 1990s, a very popular book was *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*. It was so popular that, for example, Singapore's Ministry of Education (MOE) wanted all MOE teachers to attend a workshop about the seven habits. Perhaps the most unusual of those habits was called "Sharpening the saw," which meant people doing something different to expand their horizons. Of course, teachers are very busy people. Thus, the hope of this review is that by reading the next approximately 1000 words, instead of a book of 250+ pages on the underappreciated importance of silence in education, teachers can sharpen their saws with what might be a new way of viewing education.

I first e-met Dr Dat Bao, the author of this impressive scholarly work on silence in language teaching, in his role in a group of educators seeking to exercise their poetry muscles and apply those muscles for individual growth, as well as in aid of victims of misfortunes, such as earthquakes and wars. As a believer in teachers exposing ourselves to new perspectives (sharpening our saws), I saw this book as opportunity for me and others to look at language education through a different lens. After all, I have long been an advocate for a practitioner of student-centered methods, such as cooperative learning, which are designed, in part, to have teachers talk less and students talk more. Would that fit with silence?

Background on Silence

Early in the book, Bao discusses the difficulty of defining silence. One possible definition would be that silence is the absence of verbal communication with others. Part of the difficulty in defining silence arises because of the multitude of roles that silence can play in education, and these roles are further complicated by the growth of online learning. However, complications make life fun, and they make education a fascinating puzzle. Bao acts as a guide as we explore this puzzle.

A frequent lament in the book is that silence receives far less attention than it deserves, and even worse, much of the attention given to silence paints a negative picture of silence as something that teachers and students should do their best to avoid or at least to minimize.

However, even if we do not count the time we are sleeping, most of us spend more time being silent than talking, but are we really being silent? Perhaps, conversations are going on in our minds, or maybe we are singing a song in our heads. Thus, silent students can be “talking” to themselves; they can be thinking; they can be learning; they might be formulating answers.

Also in opposition to a negative view of silence is that various trends in society – none of which are new – value silence. These silence-positive concepts include meditation, mindfulness, and reflection. All three are meant to boost mental health, enhance understanding, and deepen thinking, all of which can help learning. In other words, silence is not at all a waste of time, nor is it in competition with speaking and other forms of interpersonal communication. Bao’s goal is inclusion, to find ways that both silence and speaking can promote learning.

The Place of Silence in Learning

As to silence in classroom, the Singapore MOE has a slogan, “Teach less, learn more,” encouraging teachers to talk less. Indeed, some teachers feel the need to avoid any silent moments in their classes. These teachers worry that in many people’s minds, teaching means talking. Thus, any time teachers stop talking, especially if their students are also not talking, teachers are, according to this misguided narrative, not teaching; they are being lazy.

Of course, teachers are not the only ones who can dominate talk; fellow students can as well. Some ways to address this include students learning cooperative skills, such as encouraging peers to participate. Another way involves teachers modeling humility, such as the idea that mistakes are part of learning and that even teachers make mistakes. Third, teachers may want to monitor whether they seem to be showing favoritism to more vocal students. One way to show appreciation for less vocal students could be to respond positively to their writing. A fourth suggestion calls on teachers and peers to use scaffolding to facilitate students’ mental rehearsal, e.g., providing written examples of appropriate spoken language. Mental rehearsal is an example of what Bao means when he talks about students spending time in productive silence.

Another powerful strategy for making silence positive calls on students to utilize resources. This fits with the theory that large quantities of comprehensible input, i.e., understandable listening and reading, become knowledge of grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, and other language

elements. As technology continues to advance, students enjoy increasing opportunities to immerse themselves in comprehensible input. For example, graded readers, i.e., books developed or simplified to fit the proficiency levels of various second language learners, often now come with sound, thereby providing extensive listening practice. Additionally, more and more listening input – from songs to TED talks - is now accompanied by subtitles, which can be translated, not to mention the growth of better and better online translation tools.

One more suggestion from the more than one hundred suggestions for successful silence found in the book is to attend to the classroom atmosphere. Students who do not feel comfortable – for any of many possible reasons – with their classmates and teachers, with the educational institution they are attending or the classes they are taking, etc. are likely to retreat into negative, unproductive silence. Strategies to brighten and warm the classroom are many including open, frank communication, perhaps in students' native language. Other strategies flow from the cooperative learning literature, providing guidance for facilitating what is termed positive interdependence, i.e., the feeling within a group – be it a group of 2, 3, or 4 students or an entire class – that all the members sink or swim together; in other words, what helps one learn and enjoy learning helps the others, and what hinders the learning and comfort of one group member hinders the rest as well.

Perhaps, Bao's most useful suggestion is that silence be considered in context. For example, maybe some students have little to say on topics in which they have little interest or knowledge. Additionally, different cultures may view silence differently. Silence on students' part may also be due to the power gap they feel between themselves and their teachers. Bao's suggestions for this particular issue include teachers acting less like teachers and more like normal people wishing to have a conversation, use of topics which students feel are important not superficial, opportunities to interact with peers, out-of-class opportunities for discussion, and time for students to prepare before speaking. In contrast, Bao criticizes strategies that emphasize quantity of student talk, e.g., giving students talking chips, with each chip worth one speaking turn and requiring that students use all their chips. Similarly, some teachers use extrinsic rewards to push students to speak more.

To be clear, Bao is not arguing for 100% silent classes. Instead, he cares about balance, and he does not want quieter students to be automatically labeled as weak, uninterested, or resistant. This seems like a point about which we teachers should frequently remind ourselves. One complication with silence arises because some teachers and students may tend to overlap silence with introversion. Introverts prefer to speak less and to speak to only a small number of others, not to a whole class. Introversion is not an illness. Indeed, a large percentage of the world's population, including many teachers, are introverts. Thus, no cure or therapy is needed.

The Structure of the Book

To conclude, this book provides quite a thorough treatment of silence in ESL pedagogy and second language pedagogy more generally. After Chapter 1 introduces the book, Chapter 2 examines academic work that has already been done relative to silence in second language

acquisition. Chapter 3 looks at past trends in research on silence, and Chapter 4 offers strategies and principles for promoting a positive classroom role for silence. Chapters 5 and 6 ask about problems with silence and how these might be addressed. Next, Chapters 7 and 8 delve into the role of silence in online learning. Finally, Chapter 9 reports some of the author's own research on the place of silence in learning, while Chapter 10 interrogates possibilities for future silence research.