4ᵗʰ World Conference on Psychology, Counselling and Guidance (WCPCG-2013)

An exploration on the silence in the classroom within a diagnostic perspective: Whose silence is this?

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Abstract

This article proposes a framework for the process of revealing personal information about one's self to other people via reflections on one's personal beliefs, feelings and experiences in response to silence in the classroom. The purpose of this study is to explore silence as a means of communication through the perceptions of foreign language learners and teachers. Reflections on a language learners' psychological approach towards the interaction with the teacher have been discussed in terms of their attitudes to their teacher talk. The findings of this study are the outcome of the research on the analysis of learners' diaries conducted by Renan Saylag in 2013 at Bahcesehir University, Istanbul, Turkey. The participants of the study were 32 students from the B1 levels and speaking class students. The results of the study revealed that students' criticism of silence via diaries have shed light on the possible reasons for silence in the classroom.

Keywords: slience, diagnostic, perspective, personal information

1. Introduction

Human beings need silent period to acquire the language needed to communicate about a new topic, idea, concept or complex issues especially in the development of target language skills to speak or communicate verbally in the second language. (Saville-Troike, 1988: 567). On the other hand, unconscious factors and questions of identity might have a role to play in the aspect of silence in second language acquisition. Guiora *et al*. (1972: 111–12) proposed the idea that 'the task of learning a second language poses a challenge to the integrity of basic identifications such as the identity, or self, or self-concept, of the individual subject.". Brown(1994) emphasized the role of what he calls self-identity in language acquisition and suggests that younger children may learn languages more easily because their identities are less formed, and he puts forward the idea that adults learning a second language, by contrast, must overcome inhibitions in order to make 'the leap into a new or second identity.' Social identity is defined through culture which is based on social knowledge that is acquired, through the medium of language, in negotiation between individuals and groups (Riley, 1991: 275).When individuals are exposed to a new culture, their social knowledge might cause some come conflicts within the new culture and the individual learner may switch off or prefer to keep silent until he feels confident and gain some knowledge of the social criteria of the new culture. Such incidents might be observed in language classrooms, too. A language

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teacher; in this case should be aware of the situation and give time to the new guest in the target language community or foreign language learning classes. In this respect, understanding of 'the true direction of the development of thinking not from the individual to the social, but from the social to the individual' is an important factor (Vygotsky, 1997: 36). It is a well-known fact that human beings use their inner dialogues when they keep silent. That is why; they shouldn't be addressed as really being silent. What keeps them silent in fact is the time they need to absorb all the information, go through it, make analysis and start talking when they feel ready. This is almost similar while learning a mother tongue. In the sample of L1 learning, it is the mother who keeps patient, encourages and help the child to build on the personal identity and wait for the day of the first words. Therefore, it is apparent that our *personal identity* is constructed by foregrounding certain patterns that we make in our inner dialogue and feelings as we set them against the background of what we are taught to take as 'outer' events. This takes the same shape in foreign language classes. Students first need to shape their personal identity in EFL classes, feel confident, listen, comprehend and start talking and get over silence when they feel ready. At this point, it shouldn't be denied that silence can be even an advantage in terms of the quality and the level of the language they have been using.

1.1. Focus of the Study: Silence as Participation: the Case in Turkish Students

The second-language learners' silence can be a problem for educators, caught between their own pedagogical visions, the individual needs of their students, and the externally-imposed demands of curricula. By and large curriculum policies and documents, and consequently classroom practice, seem to operate implicitly within the same 'common-sense' metaphors of silence that were noted at the beginning of this study as informing some SLA research: in second language classrooms where the explicitly stated is production, silence can be pedagogically imposed on a learner. However, students shouldn't be pushed to produce when they don't feel ready. For example, in a case where a learner's silence in a language class is due to the fear of being continually corrected, a pedagogy that allowed that student to learn without worry about ongoing correction might reduce silence.   Such silences may be understood as grounded in the individual's unconscious, activated in the language–learning relationship, and symptomatic of a kind of fear not of *making* but rather, in a profound psychical sense, of *being* a mistake (though it must be granted that from a psychological perspective, the two are not unrelated).And so, in addition to working within a system whose assessment requirements demand measurable products, educators faced with a lack of language production (in the form of silence) might well believe that they must determine the meaning of the very particular silences of individual students in order to find ways to respond to and eliminate them.

Teaching the use of spoken language, it is necessary to look at silence as a significant social and psychological component as talk and silence are inseparable parts of human speech. Thus, the present study aims to foster an awareness of silence as an existing phenomenon from students' perspectives, their perception and attitudes towards teachers' approach to students' own silence in the classroom. This study also briefly proposes a new perspective on treating classroom silence. The studies referred to above draw on a number of sources: classroom observation, learner interviews, and reflections on teaching experience. This study further attempts to explore as to why students tend to keep silent and also proposes pedagogical approaches which reflect learners' points of view. In examining these issues, the questionnaires served the purpose of learners' interpretations of the use of silence in EFL classes. Students' diaries and three interview questions reveal reasons for silence and their expectations from their teachers.

Currently most of the students in EFL classes at Bahcesehir University in Istanbul Turkey have tendency to avoid speaking in language learning classes. The classes they take include reading, writing, listening and speaking. The curriculum is adopted according to a 24 hour, B1 level weekly program. In line with the exploratory nature of this study, it concentrates on the following research questions:

RQ1: What are the main reasons students from different cultures in EFL learners at prepatory school apply silence in the class?

RQ2: What are their perceptions and attitudes towards their teachers' reaction to their silence?

RQ3: What are their needs to get advantage of use of silence in the classroom?

2. The psychological perspectives of silence

Communication is an inseparable part of human existence. It happens when a person turns into inner-self. Without knowledge and awareness of inner-self, a person ca not communicate effectively.. A person reaches inner-self if only he or she communicates with others. 'Inner dialogue and feelings', also has a part to play in the creation and recreation of the social self and the relations between that self, the world and the psyche (Lemke, 1995: 89). Taking all these facts into consideration, it can be stated that learners resist learning due to their self-ego and mainly secret-self is the reason. Pitt (2000: 65) terms his 'insistence that there exists, at the very core of the individual, a permanently isolated and secret self'. But by helping us to listen to the silences behind the words, and to take the hints that live in the spaces between the lines, psychoanalytic theory may have helped us hear a little of it: for even in the silence of the untold story, the unconscious speaks.

Breaking the silence in the classroom or even in social setting is quite difficult. An individual needs to reach her or his inner soul in order to understand who he or she is. Winnicott (1967) maintains that individuals need to feel authentically themselves in order to be emotionally healthy. If a person feels possessed or they are in fact not themselves it gets them prisoned in their own silence. Winnicot (1967:33) approaches this prospect in his claim as a symptom of denial of the self which mostly arises from human beings' inauthentic experience of feeling 'unreal, of feeling possessed, of feeling they are not themselves. This phenomenon should be regarded as a case which can be observed among individual students who don't feel as if the part of the team or the class. Overposession of the teacher may prevent the students from their independent learning, which in turn can be an obstacle in classroom participations or team work. When a student doesn't feel he is himself in the class, he may start turning into his inner-soul and stop communicating with the others and the teacher. Here, the role of the teacher is quite important, by pushing the students to talk without feeling ready and not giving time to identify themselves in the social environment; it is quite difficult to break the silence in the class. In this respect, pre-language self must be taken as a vital factor in determining the unconscious reactions of the students.

Phillips' (1999) is also in line with idea of the pre-language self, lost in a sense with the acquisition of language and present as a kind of shadow in every speech act, the inarticulate contribution of the unconscious to the relations we make with the world outside ourselves, through speech. In her paper, Pitt (2000: 65) prompts us to think about 'the notion that the most secret aspect of ourselves resides in the unconsciousness. To the extent, then, that the acquisition of language disturbs the pre-language self, it also challenges the secret self – inviting it to communicate. The individual, and the secret part of his or her self, is stuck between languages, might well be demonstrated by silence. For even if the self's wish to reveal itself should prevail despite its ambivalence,. Since the new language is not sufficiently acquired, the secret self cannot be expressed even if a person wants to express his feelings or communicate via L2 which gives rise to silence.

3. Research Procedures

The population of the study are 32 students whose speaking grades are below 50%. The sample consists of 66% men and 34% women, 96% of whom fall in the age group of 18 to 25 years. These students are B1 level students who are supposed to communicate in English at pre-intermediate level. The data collection instruments used were students' diaries and four open –ended interview questions which indicated students' feelings, perceptions , attitudes, towards their teachers' talk and her expectations from them to break the silence. Students first answered the open ended questions in 20 minutes time. The questionnaire was given in Turkish. It consist of

three questions which were: 1. What are your feelings and attitudes towards your teachers' talk? 2. Do you ever feel obliged to talk? How does it make you feel? 3. Do you prefer keeping silent in classroom activities? Why? 4. What are your expectations in terms of being able to use silence during language learning process if you are in favor of it?

3.1. Discussion of the data

Diaries written by second-language learners with the aim of analyzing their acquisition experiences can be a solution to understand as to how they keep silent. Such diaries can give a good record the learner's experience of what happens during the language learning process. The results of the student diaries and questionnaires show that students have been suffering from their teachers' talk and feeling obliged to speak.

73% of the students feel strain from the effort to be expected to speak in the class. 65% feel generally bad and as not part of the team as they claim their teacher talks a lot and don't give time to refer to their prior knowledge and process the new data. 95% say that they feel obliged to speak, and it makes them more silent.74 %.62 prefer keeping silent due to too much load of information and vocabulary which they can't handle in a short period of time.72% are in favor of getting advantage of using silence and listen more.

Some of the examples from the students' diaries with a criticism to related literature have been given below:

* One student says she was situated in a language classroom, where target language was used as the medium of instruction which reminded her feel like more an outsider, alien to herself. Another student thinks that his shyness is the main reason for his silence. He also adds that he is so shy while he is speaking in his mother tongue, too. John Schumann attributes to shyness this observation: 'I prefer eavesdropping to speaking as a way of getting into a language ... [and] I prefer to get input by listening to the TL without having to become involved in a conversation' (Schumann & Schumann, 1977: 247).

*One Turkish student said that she felt exhausted and empty as it was too difficult to grasp everything the teacher says in English quickly with too many unknown words. She also asserted that when she tol her teacher to speak slowly and less unknown words the teacher told her the faster I speaker the better you get used to native speaker speech. Further this student said even if I listen to another language in such a fast pace even for twenty years I don't think I will develop my listening skills.

*One female student claimed that she feels like being in sibling rivalry and her teacher compares her to her other friends. She thinks that she will never be able to get the award given by the teacher to the best speaker of the day.

*Another student prefers behaving like a child when her teacher wants her talk. She says in this way I know my friends won't laugh at me when I make mistakes because they already laugh at me. I feel more confident when I behave like this.

*Another student complains about not being given the right by the teacher to make the decision to speak. He feels obliged to speak. In this example student may be affected by various factors which also decreases learner autonomy. Little (1999) specifies autonomy as a capacity for a certain range of highly explicit behaviors which are influenced by intrapersonal factors or aspects of identity that affect a learner's readiness to speak. Such autonomy honors not only silence but also the right of the individual to determine how and when – and indeed whether – that silence should end.

*Another student complains about the intolerance of her teacher by stating that her teacher never lets a second to stay silent. If she can't see any fingers raised up, she starts picking us which makes us more excited and I feel like being pushed to stand up and walk like a baby who is not ready for it. This much authority and pressure adds on her silence. AmyTsui (1996) has also written about teachers' intolerance of silence in second language classrooms. Beginning with the observation that 'getting students to respond in the classroom is a problem that most ESL teachers face' (Tsui, 1996: 145), she further comments that many educators 'dislike or are afraid of silence and ... feel very uneasy or impatient when they fail to get a response from students' (1996: 151).

This dislike or fear is quite understandable; for silence can disrupt not only a lesson but also the deeply held personal constructs of the participants in that lesson about the particular learning that ought to be taking place.

4. Conclusion and Pedagogical Implications

Silence which can be seen as a threat may also have some advantages for students learn and produce. In fact, students need silence for a while to think of what they have learned and how they can produce it. It is in human nature, to think for a while before taking an action for something or talk about something. At the classroom level, both teachers and learners come to any pedagogical encounter with their own complicated sets of personal constructs constituted from individual, social and pedagogical histories, and comprise deeply held ideas concerning what teaching and learning – which in the language classroom include speaking and silence (Little, 1991: 21–22). When it comes to language learning, learners can get the advantage of this silence with application of proper methodology .Several teaching methods use silence as a construct. Total Physical Response' (TPR) method in which students remain silent and obey teacher commands in the target language and The comprehension-based approach which focuses explicitly on language comprehension and emphasizes the development of comprehension through listening, and does not insist on learner production can be applied by the teachers to use silence for the pleasure of learning.

In the light of that partialness, that tenuousness, silence as a kind of methodology might at times be useful for educators, too. Learner-centered approaches such as those recommended by the learner autonomy model might be useful – if they can help teachers to understand that both speaking and silence belong, ultimately, to the learner. Teachers need to make a place for themselves where they can find the silence that will permit them to draw their experience and understanding into expression. It seems that such a kind of silence opens up rather than shuts down. In this respect, it is an undeniable fact that a real communication and interaction ca not happen without one part taking the power of silence when it is necessary. This can be either on the teacher or students' side. If a teacher does not enjoy the pleasure of this silence and always acts in rush just to finish the curriculum, the natural process of learning can fall into a hole which has been dug unconsciously by pushing and forcing the students produce. That is why; this study can shed some light into procedural learning and applicability of curriculum and can answer the question of whether teachers are teaching for curriculum or for the pleasure of learning and teaching.

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