

Quiet Considerations: A Rough Guide to the Silent Treatment

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ABSTRACT

In the ESL classroom there is no greater source of frustration, or worry, than that of the silent student. As educators, this causes us to speculate over our own ability and its limitations. As humans, we are forced to muster our deepest empathy and patience.

But what causes these otherwise vibrant and gregarious youngsters to fall silent in the language classroom? What is the root of their fear, the source of their restraint? Is it natural, or even normal? Can we isolate that nervous energy and recycle it in to a productive force? What tactics should we employ to break down the wall?

This study highlights some of the fundamental reasons for the existence of the silent student, and illustrates some ways in which we can bring reluctant learners back to the flock.

I Cultural background

Burns and Joyce (David Nunan, 1999) suggest that there are three factors which may cause reluctance in a second language learner:

- i) cultural factors
- ii) linguistic factors
- iii) psychological/affective factors

By looking specifically at the cultural factors which affect the Korean student, we discover a whole range of institutionalized practices and habits which are liable to both hinder and disturb a second language learner. Due to large classroom sizes and demanding curricula, Korean students are brought up in an educational system which

favours quantity over quality. Rather than promote a healthy learning environment, which nurtures critical evaluation and understanding, teachers are pushed to meet deadlines in the continuous examination hurdle. As a result, students receive a lecture-style education from an early age. While teachers cram vast amounts of information in to every period, they leave little room for question or debate. Thus the Korean student is trained, from an early age, to understand that classroom interaction is a one-way street.

Many students, we find, have a strong desire to ask questions and to solve their difficulties. But they have never been taught how to ask.

As Kasumi Kuwahara (2005) notes:

“In Asia, it is considered rude to show any kind of doubt for elders. Age equals respect. (...) Students have a difficult time asking questions in the classroom for fear that they may insult the teacher. They may be quiet but are active listeners, wanting comments and feedback. If no reaction comes from the teacher, the students will lose confidence.”

The fear of showing any disrespect towards one’s teacher is a cultural taboo, based on the Confucian moral that the king, father and teacher all possess the same authority. Although this ideology is now waning in Korea, many students still carry around a moral adversity to speaking out in front of their teacher, should it result in embarrassment for the educator or, much worse, for themselves.

II Silent period

The ‘silent period’ (also known as the ‘pre-production stage’) is most often associated with Krashen’s input hypothesis (1981), and refers to the period of time when the student is first introduced to a second language. During this period, the learner will be unable, or reluctant, to produce sound or language. However, it is during this period that the second language student will be building up vocabulary, along with listening and comprehension skills. Krashen’s hypothesis claims that this period can last for weeks, or up to a year. Critics of the theory have pointed out that this theory cannot be attached to adult learners.

If we consider the idea of a silent period on a smaller scale, and within the classroom, we discover that this phenomenon occurs every day - and it is often mistaken for shyness or reluctance to speak.

When the teacher asks a question to the native speaker of English, for example “Why did an ancient King build the Great Wall of China?” that speaker, without necessarily knowing the correct answer, can give an immediate and fluent reply. Meanwhile the average second language learner is, in the same period of time that it has taken a native speaker to produce a full answer, trying to recall the meaning of the words ‘ancient’, ‘wall’ and ‘China’ in order to produce a relevant response.

“Do not be afraid of silence...time yourself and wait a full sixty seconds before breaking the silence. Sometimes and uncomfortable silence will be just what a hesitant student needs to speak up. For other students, that small amount of time can be enough for them to gather their thoughts and formulate what they would like to say before they open their ouths. If the teacher is filing in all the conversation spaces, your students are not likely to interrupt and it may appear that they do not want to participate in the discussion.”

- Susan, busyteacher.org

As adults, we dread silence – our immediate and instinctive assessment of silence tells us that there is something wrong. We associate silence with danger, fear, isolation and loss. But as ESL specialists, it is our duty to recognize that a silent period exists at all levels of second language learning. More often than not teachers, who are distracted by trying to maintain the flow of a class, are too fast in breaking the silence, without giving adequate opportunity for output to evolve.

III Things that your silent learner isn't telling you

When we approach the silent learner, and gently confront the issue, we discover that many of these learners share the same problems and worries. None of which are particularly complex. Moreover, none of which are unsolvable. Below are some comments from students who struggle to speak up in class:

- i) I need time.

- ii) I'm trying my best.
- iii) I don't understand all of the words.
- iv) I don't want to do this alone.
- v) I can't see the board clearly.
- vi) You're speaking too fast.
- vii) I need an example.
- viii) I can't say all of my answer in English

In the case of i), Ellis (2005) suggests that it is crucial to give students an adequate amount of time not only to perform the oral task, but to prepare their answer.

With regard to iv), Tsui (1996) encourages teachers to allow peer support in the classroom, giving quiet learners an opportunity to check their answers with a peer, before making an announcement in front of the whole class.

Items iii) and vii) were largely connected to how the students could relate to the materials provided. When the learners felt that the concepts were unfamiliar, it followed that the vocabulary was too. Nation (2000) states that the teacher can improve the students' experience by pre-teaching key oral skills, strategies and goals. Similarly, in the case of vii) students were more inclined to speak when they were given an example which related to their own age group or culture.

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BIODATA

Victoria received an MA in Philosophy from the University of Glasgow, and is currently finishing off an MA with Nottingham University, England, specializing in English Literature and Linguistics. She has been an ESL teacher for the past decade, and at various levels. Her professional interests include developing methods in which to bring classic literature in to the contemporary classroom; language, gender and the divide; and bringing student autonomy to the classroom. She is the immediate past president of Jeonju North Jeolla KOTESOL, and an active member of the local community. She regularly volunteers her time and translation skills with a Seoul-based NGO. Her goal is to wade further still, in to the field of Translation Studies.