

Silences and Silencing Silences

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INTRODUCTION

Silence is a complex and complicated cultural phenomenon. While it is common to view silence as the opposite of speech, it is also noted that silence indeed complements speech. After all, silence and speech form a continuum of human communication. Furthermore, silence can be intentional or unintentional. Intentional silence may be a deliberate cultural practice that aims at facilitating introspection and self-discipline.¹ At the same time, the practice of presumably unintentional silence may originate from long-term acculturation and embodies semiotic experiences.² In a nutshell, both intentional unintentional silences have multiple meanings that are open to varied interpretations. In effect, silence is both the signifier and the signified.³ Thus, Adam Jaworski points out that any effort to formulate the final definition of silence can be easily entrapped in an infinite regress of definitions. Instead of searching for a final definition of silence, I agree with Jaworski that a critical inquiry into silence should focus on how silence works in different communicative contexts.⁴

In educational settings, silence plays an important yet ambiguous role in the formation of school culture. On the one hand, it is still a widely accepted belief that silencing is an indispensable disciplinary act that aims at establishing an ordered milieu for effective teaching and learning. Silence as an educational state during designated period of time thus reveals and sustains hierarchical power relationship within educational institutions. In view of the disciplinary nature of silence, Paulo Freire argues that “human existence cannot be silent, nor can it be nourished by false words, but only by true words, with which men [sic] transform the world.”⁵ In line with Freire’s effort to reconstruct the “culture of silence,” many concerned educators especially have made concerted efforts to unpack and disclose “the multiple forms of public silencing” that have contributed to sustaining oppressive cultural institutions and practices.⁶ To a large extent, these educators recognize silence as both a consequence of and a form of resistance to oppression. Beyond elucidating the structuring of silence, concerned educators are also committed to reclaiming the silenced voices.⁷ The underlying belief is that the silenced people have the right to speak out and to be heard.

On the other hand, the use of silence in educational settings may simply allow time for reflection on teaching and learning, which further facilitates more meaningful interactions between teachers and students. For instance, M.B. Rowe points out that wait-time — a moment of silence — makes positive contributions to both teaching and learning.⁸ Likewise, J.J. Cook notes that a lack of silence often characterizes unsuccessful psychotherapy while silence is an indicator of successful sessions.⁹ In addition, multicultural education movements have raised many educators’ awareness of cross-cultural differences in terms of the use of silence in educational settings. For instance, V.P. John and R.V. Dumont, Jr. find that Navajo

children are more inclined to learn by silently observing the surrounding world, whereas Euro-American cultures tend to recognize and accept speech as a legitimate and desired form of educational interaction. As educational institutions in the west tend to solemnize the right of speech, it is not surprising that western education systems stress the need to cultivate and test all students' language skills. Consequently, it is easy for teachers to underrate Navajo children's cognitive abilities, owing to their lower verbal test scores.¹⁰

As discussed above, educational discourses on silence as a disciplinary act appear to erroneously render silence as a monolithic psycholinguistic phenomenon. For example, it is not clear whether silencing as a disciplinary act is so powerful that silence is the inevitable consequence of oppression. In other words, the polarizing of the silencers and the silenced seems to oversimplify the power structure within and beyond educational institutions. Moreover, the pedagogical use of silence such as wait-time focuses primarily on the instrumental value of silence as if silence has no intrinsic pedagogical merits. Above all, while many educators have raised their awareness of varied uses of silences in different cultural contexts, educators have yet to undertake a more in-depth inquiry into aims and methods of incorporating multicultural perspectives of silence into educational processes.

The main purpose of this essay is to explore the complex nature of silence in educational settings and beyond. More specifically, I first examine the pedagogical merits of silence in facilitating "reflection in action," as advocated by Donald A. Schön.¹¹ Next, I explicate how silence as a form of resistance could interpellate hegemonic ideological beliefs and confront oppressive cultural practices. I argue that, in forging co-intentional pedagogy as endorsed by Paulo Freire, educators must not deliberately silence silence because silencing silence as an intentional pedagogical act could endorse and embrace speech as the privileged form of human communication.¹² In other words, it is essential for educators to question the polarization of silence and speech and to challenge the primacy of speech in current discourse on multicultural education. Beyond reclaiming the silenced voices, educators also need to inquire into silence as a source of pedagogical knowledge.

RETHINKING PEDAGOGICAL MERITS OF SILENCE

As mentioned before, speech and silence actually form a continuum of human communication. To a certain degree, the complementary relationship between speech and silence indicates that silence and speech are functionally equivalent. However, such a pragmatic viewpoint concerning the interdependence and inseparability of speech and silence do not therefore suggest that silence and speech have equal values in all cultures. In fact, speech has been the preferred means of communication in most modern societies. After all, the interpretation of silence demands greater efforts than the interpretation of speech.¹³ Consequently, we tend to endorse rather than query the transitivizing nature of silence.

In modern industrial society, technological advancement especially lures us to eschew silences and to further ratify intolerance of silences. Harry A. Wilmer's observation of American culture may be applicable in other industrialized and urbanized societies:

America is a nation of gap fillers and space pluggers. We are individuals who usually do not listen to other people. We talk all the time, even when others are talking. People are deluged by radio and television. We awaken and we go to sleep caught up in gossip, news of violence, and people acting funny interrupted by high-pitched burst of loud laughter. Our social lives are a melange of noise. We settle for lighthearted, flickering relationship and recreational sins, and revel in offensive talk on the electronic media carnival.¹⁴

As mass media and computer-mediated communication systems constantly erodes or even depletes silences at macro level, it is nearly impossible for individuals to learn to appreciate rare moments of silence.

Filling the gap of silence is also prevalent in educational settings. The traditional banking model of education does not embrace silence, for it aims at “depositing” knowledge into students’ minds rather than “facilitating” students’ evaluation of knowledge claims. Although there are silent gaps in teachers’ talks, lectures, power point presentations, and endless web pages, these gaps are meaningless and have to be filled immediately in order not to interrupt the process of knowledge transmission.

Granted, recent professional teacher education programs have made significant efforts to reconstruct such lecture-oriented teaching, and the emerging primacy of cooperative learning in the mainstream teaching education program clearly indicates teacher educators’ commitment to promoting interactive teaching and learning. Nevertheless, it is still common to separate professional educational researchers and professional practitioners regardless of the recent advocacy of “teacher-as-researcher.” Professional educational researchers are responsible for undertaking scientific research in order to build up a solid knowledge base of teaching and learning. In other words, educational researchers are the authorities and sources of pedagogical knowledge. Educational practitioners are expected to consult with educational researchers and observe a set of rules/rubrics formulated by educational researchers.¹⁵ Schön points out that such unreflective dependence on scientific method reflect “technical rationality” that still dominates most teacher training programs.¹⁶ According to such technical rationality, teaching and learning are a linear series of pre-determined activities, which may include the use of silence when the use of silence can be proved to be fruitful for learning. To illustrate, M. E. Rowe’s well-done study of wait-time includes the following findings:

1. The length of student response increased from a mean of seven words to a mean of 27 words.
2. The mean number of appropriate unsolicited responses increased from five to 17.
3. Mean failure to respond drops from seven to one.
4. Mean incidence of evidence-inference statements increases from six to 14.
5. Average incidence of soliciting, structuring, and reacting moves increase from five to 32.
6. Number of speculative responses increase from a mean of two to a mean of seven.
7. Incidence of student-student comparison of data increases.
8. Frequency of student-initiated questions increases from a mean of one to a mean of four.¹⁷

Based on the above findings, Rowe concludes that the use of silence — wait-time — can improve the quality of classroom interaction. It is apparent that Rowe’s argument is based on the assumption that the quality of classroom interaction is determined by the quantity of interactions. Thus, silent wait-time is simply to entail

verbal responses. While Rowe does attend to the number of speculative responses, it is clear that silent speculation cannot be observed and measured. Hence, the verbalization of students' speculation is the only measurable indicator of the quality of classroom interaction.

In line with Rowe's study, many teachers learn to utilize silent wait-time in the process of teaching. To a large extent, they may be aware that a moment of silent wait-time is an essential temporal space for thinking and reflection. However, the current accountability movement is so outcome driven that many teachers are inclined to view silence as a mechanic device for soliciting observable and measurable responses. In other words, silence as a pedagogical action may not be grounded in teachers' mindful reflections on teaching and learning.

In supporting Schön's advocating teachers' engagement in "reflection-in-action," Robert Tremmel points out that Zen Buddhism as alternative epistemological tradition to technical rationality sheds significant light on the possibility of reflective and mindful teaching.¹⁸ According to D. T. Suzuki:

Zen is not necessarily against words, but is well aware of the fact that they are always liable to detach themselves from realities and turn into conceptions. And this conceptualization is what Zen is against....Zen insists on handling the thing itself and not an empty abstraction.¹⁹

The devaluation of words/speech in Zen Buddhism derives from the recognition of the limitation of language. Likewise, Indian yoga tradition also discredits verbalism and embraces silence. Accordingly, S. N. Ganguly argues that silence is "the limit of our world of description or language" and "silence is silence and completely different from any kind of language."²⁰ In the same vein of thoughts, Max Picard states:

When language ceases, silence begins. But it does not begin BECAUSE language ceases. The absence of language simply makes the presence of Silence more apparent. Silence is an autonomous phenomenon. It is therefore not identical with the suspension of language. It is not merely the negative condition that sets in when the positive is removed; it is rather an independent whole, subsisting in and through itself.²¹

On the one hand, the above perspectives are problematic because the search for the essence of silence can easily result in an infinite regress of definitions. On the other hand, these perspectives are very helpful for rethinking the silence as an inward spiritual state for reflective thinking.

Renee T. Clift and Robert Houston point out that the western cultural conception of "reflection" tends to emphasize "analysis and problem-solving."²² To a large extent, this type of reflection relies upon speech/language in defining terms and concepts, formulating hypothesis, and evaluating outcomes in a very linear process. In contrast, in *Returning to Silence*, Dainin Katagiri notes that Zen reflection is about sit down and just be "present" right now, right here. This is a continual process. Process is really dynamic energy; it is not a concept of energy or concept of process. Process is process."²³ In other words, Zen reflection does not aim at specific pre-determined outcomes or search for desirable outcomes. Instead, Zen reflection embraces a mindful awareness of "here and now." As language and speech are highly structured and regulated, one's undertaking speech acts can easily distract

one's engagement in such mindful and reflective process. However, as a pedagogical process, silence, devoid of regulative linguistic structures, can be conducive for both teachers and students to raise awareness of here and now as the pedagogical process. In other words, the pedagogical use of silence does not aim at soliciting any prescribed or desirable verbal responses, as implied in Rowe's study of wait-time. The pedagogical silence simply is facilitative to invite students to enter the mindful process of self-directed learning. All in all, it is not necessary to structure teaching solely through talk/speech. Nor is it prudent to "evaluate" students' learning according to their "verbal participation" in in-class learning activities. Instead, it is important to be reflectively attentive to the process of teaching and learning.

It is also essential for concerned educators to become more mindful and reflective about what S. U. Philips terms "interaction through silence" in formal educational institutions.²⁴ Such silent interaction can "incorporate all the situations in which the silent, nonverbal, physical, visual, and other signals override speech in interpreting the communicative behavior of the participant(s), although speech and other vocal signals may be present and need not be excluded from the interpretation of a given speech situation structured through silence."²⁵ In highly structured educational institutions, teachers as well as students gradually acquire tacit knowledge in encoding and decoding silent interaction. Also, they are fully aware of the clear demarcation between acceptable and unacceptable silent interaction even though the rules are rarely spelled out. Many educational ethnographers further note that students' success in school is not solely determined by their acquisition of academic knowledge. Rather, students' success, to a large extent, depends upon when and how to display acceptable interaction competence in classroom settings. Such interaction competencies often constitute students' attitude toward learning in the schools. To illustrate, Perry Gilmore's study points out that academic tracking indeed can be based on students' silent attitudes. He also notes that teachers and students all use silence to negotiate their power relationships. However, while teachers tend to exert and display power, students are more inclined to defy and claim power.²⁶ Thus, in view of the significant impact of students' attitude, teachers like psychotherapists must listen with "the third ear" to what is often left unsaid.²⁷ In other words, reflective teachers must attend to and redress the asymmetric power relationship that exists in the silent interaction.

RECLAIMING SILENCED VOICES AND SILENCING SILENCE

Silencing as a disciplinary act reveals and sustains imbalanced power relationships between individuals and between groups. The state of silence indeed signifies a state of oppression. In confronting cultural imperialism, Gloria Anzaldúa pointedly exclaims that "The Anglo with the innocent face has yanked our tongue, thus sentencing colonized cultural beings to silenced culture. Drowned, we spit darkness. Fighting with our very shadow we are buried by silence."²⁸ To silenced people, the desire and ability to speak out is a liberating process. Thus, bell hooks points out that "Moving from silence into speech is for the oppressed, the colonized, the exploited, and those who stand and struggle side by side a gesture of defiance that heals, that makes new life and new growth possible."²⁹ Henry Giroux and Peter McLaren also state that the minority students' voice "is the discursive means to make themselves

'heard' and to define themselves as active authors of their worlds."³⁰ Reclaiming silenced voices thus has emerged as the central theme of the recent postmodern multicultural education movement. To many concerned educators, the reclaimed silenced voices are the liberatory voices that could redress historical injustice at the macro level. At the micro level, many educators also strive to establish an ideal discursive community in the classroom, where the "silent" students can "speak out." Metaphorically, these educators are eager to silence silence in order to achieve human liberation. However, there are problems with endorsing silencing silences as a liberatory pedagogical and social movement.

First, while it is true that various forms of public silencing have deprived the silenced people's of their right to public speech, it is misleading to assume that the silenced people are unable to protest and resist silencing. Also, it is important to recognize that the silenced, such as women, can be complicit in the cultural practice of their silences.³¹ Although silenced people's complicity in social silence does not therefore justify the act of public silencing, it acknowledges the silenced people's human agency. Furthermore, it should be noted that the silencers cannot escape the pervasive impact of silencing "the others." In other words, the silencers can easily deprive themselves of the right to listen to different voices. To illustrate, in examining women's being silenced in most cultures, Susan Gal finds that while the silenced women may be powerless in the public domain, they are able to develop alternative communicative skills, such as attentiveness and responsiveness to others in conversation. She further points out, "the fact that social silence has neglected women makes women of the past and other cultures seem silent, when in fact the silence is that of current western scholarship."³² Thus, silencing silences not only might reaffirm the primacy of speech but also might perpetuate the dominant groups' speech as the norm at the macro level. In the classroom settings, as teachers enlist "participation" as an evaluation criterion, they inevitably suggest that silent active listening is not a legitimate form of "participation."

Second, it should be noted that the silenced people's reclaiming their voices often relies upon the mastery of the dominant groups' languages. Thus, although bell hooks recognizes the liberating force of moving from silence to speech, she also notes that many African Americans view "English" as the "oppressor's language which has the potential to disempower those of us who are just learning to speak, who are just learning to claim language as a place where we make ourselves subject."³³ Audre Lorde echoes bell hook's concern: "Certainly for Black women our struggle has not been to emerge from silence to speech but to change the nature and direction of our speech. To make a speech that compels listeners, one that is heard."³⁴ But, is it imperative for the silenced to reclaim their voices in order to redress various forms of oppression? Jurgen Habermas is fully aware that speech can be systematically distorted to privilege some individuals or some groups over others. Yet he strives to articulate the "ideal speech act" as a means to the emancipation of the oppressed.³⁵ Lorde's efforts to "make a speech that compels listeners" certainly mirrors the Habermas' pursuit of an "ideal speech act." Nevertheless, it is doubtful that the oppressors must "hear" the silenced people's compelling speech in order to be aware of their perils. Nor is it certain that the dominant will surrender their privileges upon

listening to the reclaimed silenced voices. In fact, it is more likely that the dominant groups will desire to enhance and preserve the privileges that had led to the oppressive silencing at the first place. Thus, it is not prudent to put an undue burden on silenced people to make compelling public speech. Instead, it might be essential for the dominant groups to unpack their presumably “invisible privileges” at the macro level, as suggested by Peggy McIntosh.³⁶ Likewise, instead of compelling students to perform verbal participation, a reflective teacher ought to be more attentive to the silent interaction in the classroom, which reveals human desires, interests, and power relationship.

Third, reclaiming silenced voices undoubtedly can raise our awareness of individual as well as group differences. However, Trinh Minh-ha points out that “The Third World representative the modern sophisticated public ideally seeks is the *unspoiled* African, Asian, or Native American, who remains more preoccupied with her/his image of the *real* native — the *truly different* — than with issues of hegemony, racism, feminism, and social change.”³⁷ In other words, “differences” can be easily transformed into the form of commodity in advanced capitalism, as suggested by Frederic Jameson.³⁸ Patricia Hill Collins further argues that “the difference to be commodified is an authentic, essential difference long associated with group differences of race, ethnicity, gender, economic class, and sexuality.”³⁹ While the commodification of the marginalized and silenced voices and the consumption of otherness certainly contribute to the continual diversification of scholarly discourses, they also distract needed attentions to the imbalanced structural power relationships between various groups in the political and economic dimensions. Furthermore, the tendency to essentialize the reclaimed silenced voices often lead the consumers to quest for specific voices in terms of formats and contents. Consequently, the performance of reclaiming silenced voices will inevitable lead to the silencing of unmarketable voices at the macro level. Similarly, teachers are able to compel students to engage in verbal participation in the classroom settings, but they are unlikely to hear and listen to students’ inner voices that do not meet the teachers’ expectations.

In short, reclaiming silenced voices as a pedagogical and social movement may carry the risk of disempowering silenced individuals and groups. Thus, any deliberate educational efforts must attend to the multiple meanings of silences before they begin silencing silences.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, silence and speech are the inseparable foundations of human communication. However, the dichotomization of silence and speech misleads us to devalue silence and privilege speech. My affirmation of the pedagogical merits of silences does not aim at “silencing” speech. Rather, I call for a recognition of the need to dismantle this false dichotomy and to develop a pedagogical understanding of silences.

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