
Book Reviews

Silence in the Second Language Classroom

Jim King, Palgrave Macmillan (2013) (211 pages). ISBN 978-1-137-30148-2 Price: 12,002 yen

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Encouraging students to speak more in the second language classroom has long been a preoccupation of language teachers and researchers, particularly in the context of Japan where critics have lamented the reticence of learners to communicate in their second languages. The question of why learners may be hesitant to speak has been discussed before in, for example, the literature on language anxiety (e.g., Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986; Young, 1992) and willingness to communicate (e.g., Macintyre, 2007). However, as Macintyre notes, this is “not a simple question when one recognises the various relevant individual, social, linguistic, situational, and other factors” (p. 154). In a refreshingly direct approach, Jim King places silence at the centre of his 2013 work, *Silence in the Second Language Classroom*. By doing so, he aims to unmask some of the complexity behind the silent behaviour that language teachers experience. The work is successful as both an incisive and enlightening investigation of the phenomenon of silence in language classrooms in Japan, providing much food for thought for the teacher as they negotiate the complex meanings of the silences they encounter on a daily basis.

The work is organised neatly and logically in the form of eight chapters, which may be differentiated into two halves: a comprehensive literature review

and three empirical studies. The first half of the book presents firstly, an overview of relevant models of silence; secondly, a socio-cultural investigation of the origins of silence within the Japanese context; and finally, a critical discussion of how the Japanese education system is likely contributing to the problem of silence. These interdisciplinary reviews are rigorously researched, and presented with clear and meaningful prose, and a number of enlightening observations are offered which resonated with this reader. King describes, for example, that silence is not simply the opposite of orality but has a “multiplicity of forms and functions” (p.30), some of which may overlap with speech during meaningful communication. He also explains that while silence plays an important role in the pragmatics of Japanese communication, stereotypes of the “Japanese as silent” do not provide an adequate description of the intricacies of this phenomenon. Indeed, these early sections continually assert the complexity of student silence and the importance of avoiding generalisations of silent learners and cultures:

In order to truly understand a learner’s silent episode we must first consider the underlying attitudes and beliefs towards the relative merits of speech vs silence in his/her culture, whilst at the same time paying close attention to the context in which the silences occur. (p. 62)

As such, it is no surprise that King later opts for dynamic systems theory (DST) as the orienting lens through which to discuss his own findings. DST, originally a mathematical concept, posits that human behaviour is inherently complex, and therefore that factors affecting behaviour are highly interrelated (for a more thorough discussion of the application of DST to SLA see De Bot, Lowie, & Verspoor, 2007; Larsen-Freeman, 1997).

The second half of the book takes the form of three empirical studies conducted on student silence. In chapter 5, King describes a quantitative observational study of classroom behaviour, for which the author created the Classroom Oral Participation Scheme (COPS). This instrument may be used to observe and record the types of interactions that occur in classrooms on a minute-by-minute basis, and was employed by the author across nine universities in Japan to provide an illustrative depiction of the silent landscape (previously published in King, 2013). In chapter 6, King reports on a series of semi-

structured interviews that he conducted with eight students, the focus of which was to provide depth to the data he obtained in his quantitative study (chapter 5) through discussions of the forms and functions of silence that the students used and encountered. Finally in chapter 7, King describes a stimulated recall study, wherein the author discussed critical incidents of classroom silence in interviews with seven participants, enabling him to investigate more acutely a series of silent events he had observed.

The results of these studies were, at least to this reader, highly compelling. That only seven communicative acts were observed to originate from students rather than teachers across 48 hours of research with 900 students is a truly astonishing statistic. In addition, the revelation that that only 16% of observed class time was spent with students interacting with peers in pairs or groups is startling, and suggests the Japanese government's ongoing push for communicative instruction is not yet working. King makes a cogent argument for viewing silence as a dynamic and complex system in his qualitative analyses (Chapters 6 and 7), since his inquiry unveiled a plethora of factors that may influence students' silent behaviour. These factors included, among others: mental characteristics, previous learning, task complexity and interest, the relationship between student and teacher, and social factors within the class. King notes that DST "emphasises that multiple concurrent variables may influence one's classroom behaviour at any one time" (p. 145) and provides evidence of this in his stimulated recall study (chapter 7). One relatable case given is that of Nao, a non-language major who remained almost entirely silent throughout three observed classes, even during whole-class drills. King's stimulated recall with Nao revealed that her reluctance to speak was not governed by simplistic cause/effect logic, but rather was influenced by multiple-factors such as limitations in her own first-language expressiveness, general apathy towards English, and the teacher's approach to the class. The conclusion raised here is that in order to tackle silence properly, teachers need to adopt a "multi-strategy intervention" (p. 168) for which King discusses some practical suggestions in his concluding chapter.

Beyond the rigour of the literature review and the significance of the results presented, the book has a number of strengths which are worth highlighting.

Firstly, the writing concerning the students and their decisions to use silence is commendably non-judgmental. While King acknowledges early on in the text that he views silence to be a negative prospect in the language classroom when considering its effect on language acquisition, at no point does he criticize the participants in his study for using silence. In fact, the author makes pains not to single out the Japanese as the only culture reluctant to communicate in a second language: “I can testify that the Japanese certainly do not have a monopoly on reticent students” (p. 162). (King does however, make critical remarks of governmental agencies such as MEXT for their failure to correlate their rhetorical policies with their institutional level support, and these felt earned to this reader in the context of his literature review.) A further strength to the work is the degree of clarity provided to the methodological considerations taken in the studies. While introspective methods such as the stimulated recall can be remarkably informative, they require stringent planning and design (Gass & Mackey, 2000). Here the author outlines his methodological decisions with detail and clarity, and offers useful advice and practical guidelines in the appendices for those wishing to explore silence in their own contexts.

If there is any weakness to the work, it could be argued that King fails to deliver the same level of detail to the teachers involved in his studies that he provides his participant students and institutions. For example, in his observational study, he explains that the institutions involved were both private and national, and varied in size and reputation, and we are given clear information about the age and proficiency levels of students; however, we are given scant details of the teachers or their methodological choices. It may be that King was required to offer anonymity to his participant teachers with regards to these matters; however, if so, it is not mentioned clearly. Consequently, a number of times as I read the book I found myself wondering about the instructor, the curriculum they were using, and the methodology they were employing. Given that King identifies the student/teacher relationship and chosen teaching style as potential causes of silence, and also given that he strongly critiques the grammar-translation method still common to Japan, I felt that the inclusion of more background information about instructors and their pedagogic choices would

have provided greater contextual understanding.

Overall, the book is a highly readable, informative and compelling investigation into a subject that all experience and many oversimplify. In the eight months since first reading the text, the themes of the book have often returned to my own classroom, and I have a newfound curiosity: is this student quiet because he/she is shy, or is it because of my own actions? Should I be holding this student to a higher standard of oral participation than I currently do? Will proactively discussing silence with this student be a positive way to deal with the issue? This inquisitiveness is perhaps the most important consequence of the work, which I feel has had a positive impact on my teaching. King challenges readers to look beyond simplistic understandings of silence as a reflection of learner anxiety or low ability, and to reassess how they understand silence. The book achieves this goal by combining rigorous research with highly detailed empirical studies, and it would make a compelling read for any interested in learning more about why Japanese students are seemingly attracted to silence when learning a second language.

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