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THE AGENTIAL QUALITIES OF SILENCE IN POST-OBSERVATION FEEDBACK SESSIONS

Keywords: TESOL practicum, post-observation feedback, university supervisors' silent spells

Abstract

This study explores silence in a corpus of university supervisors' (USs) utterances in the context of post-observation feedback conferences (POFCs) with their Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) supervisees. The USs' utterances and corresponding silences were divided into educative, supportive and evaluative conversational frames (Long et al. 2013), with a view to discovering the extent and nature of the silent spells within these frames. It appears that silent spells within the educative frame type were a powerful means of communication comparable to reflection hubs, which could be allocated to increased "wait time" (Rowe 1972) or "slow-time" (Bruneau 1973) and could also be considered examples of social or commission silences. The agential qualities of this silence, though, can in certain cases be disempowered due to a tutee's close-mindedness towards what happened during their lessons. Conversely, silent moments in the evaluative frame served to recall the observed lessons and included examples of empirical silence or omissive silence that the USs failed to use. This ethnographic research on USs' silence is an extension of previous studies on USs' POFCs discourse, and the self-analysis is a self-awareness-raising-tool in order that USs may become more cognizant of the ways POFCs are managed.

Introduction

Silence is generally linked with secrecy within human communication. An instance is the god Horus in Egyptian mythology, a god who was adapted and developed by the ancient Greeks into Harpocrates, the god of silence. Statues of Harpocrates

show a naked boy with his index finger touching his lips, which may symbolize the unspeakable,[1] or a present-day meaningful sign to remain silent, or to keep something secret. Silence has been problematized within multiple disciplines, for example, anthropology, business studies, cultural studies, communication, ecology, ethnography, feminism, gender studies, history, linguistics, literary studies, music, pedagogy, philosophy, psychiatry, psychology, psycholinguistics, religious studies, rhetoric, semiotics, sociology, sociolinguistics, and theology. In the words of Watzlawick, Beavin, and Jackson (1967: 48–49), "no matter how one may try, one cannot *not* communicate. Activity or inactivity, words or silence all have message value". Korwin-Piotrowska (2015), who explored, *inter alia*, silence in the structure of utterances, stated that silence constitutes communication and that speech thrives on and emerges from silence by means of language. Bruneau (1973: 18; see also Tannen and Savile-Troika 1985: xi) metaphorized speech sounds as "mentally imposed *figures* on mentally imposed *grounds* of silence". Likewise, the metaphor of "the tip of the iceberg" makes a distinction between language as the tiny visible part of the much bigger hidden construct of silence.[2] Nevertheless, silence and language exchange their places when searching for or escaping from meanings since neither of them can individually express the multitude of lifetime experience (Korwin-Piotrowska 2015: 36). This perspective is in line with the ethnographic framework which adopts "the position that silence and speech are two intersecting and equally relevant communicative categories" (Jaworski 1993: 17). They are interdependent categories because "[s]ilence can be telling as much as speech can be vacuous" (Fjeld 2022: 46). Korwin-Piotrowska (2015: 41) rightly noted that when exploring written or oral forms of language, authors sooner or later study silence as a natural consequence of its existence; "the description of human speech activity [i]s incomplete without describing silence as one of the integral components of speech behaviour" (Shcherbak and Potienko 2021: 22). In the case of this study, we elaborated on "a silence that surrounds the relation between the master and the learner" (Fjeld 2022: 46). Having examined *three* dyadic feedback conferences conducted by the author of this paper with regard to their productive, supportive, and evaluative frameworks, in this instance we focused upon silent spells in *five* post observation feedback sessions in a search for their qualitative and quantitative features. We suggest a thesis that the social or commissive silences which operate within the educative conversational frame type (Long et al. 2013), beyond merely the supportive and evaluative frames, are a powerful means of communication comparable to a reflection hub. In this way we unearth what can be termed "productive silence" (cf. Bao 2014) and locate it within the educational conversational frame. This self-analysis of silence in post-observation feedback conferences (POFCs) is a self-awareness-raising-tool that paves the way to employ silence in a meaningful manner in preservice teacher education.

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[1] I.e. what is not able to be expressed in words; cf. Korwin-Piotrowska (2015: 68), who mentioned the prose by Miron Białoszewski, a Polish writer, and the work of Cyprian Norwid, a Polish 19th century poet, as instances of using signals of silence, known as white spaces or white style, in their oeuvres in order to express the unspeakable.

[2] Cf. "One cannot imagine a world in which there is nothing but language and speech, but one can imagine a world where there is nothing but silence" (Picard 1961: 1).

Definitions

Silence is "a form of speech … and an element in a dialogue" (Sontag 1966/2009: 11). Silence is also considered an independent, creative and formative phenomenon (Picard 1961; Olearczyk 2016), which can function like speech or unlike speech in ways which are "nonetheless agential" by means of "shaping communicative interactions" (Brito Vieira 2021: 290, 291). Communicative silence in terms of its existence and meanings "emerge within the communicative process itself, through negotiation between multiple actors, as their communicative expectations intersect" (Brito Vieira 2021: 291).

As stated, silence is recognized and defined by comparing it to language; utterances have their corresponding silences (Bruneau 1973; Bilmes 1994). Meaningful, communicative or notable silence is juxtaposed with existential, absolute or objective silence. A subtype of notable silence is conversational silence (Bilmes 1994) and in verbal communication this is an exchange of information or problem solving, when interlocutors reduce the speed of their speech, filling the gaps with hesitations and pausal interruptions of various lengths and types (Bruneau 1973: 24, 28). The pauses and silences used by speakers are typical of their conversational styles (Tannen 1985: 107), but at the same time, the pauses are highly conventionalized and predictable as regards their length; they are connected with rules of speech, conversational rules in a given language, as well as tact, and include cultural rules; they occur inside utterances, unlike the silence that occurs instead of speech, as well as preceding or following speech (Korwin-Piotrowska 2015: 79). A syntax pause can develop into a meaningful silence by lengthening it and by using it against the conventional or syntax-prosodic rules (Korwin-Piotrowska 2015: 80). The difference between a pause and silence as defined by Tannen (1985: 109) is the following:

> When is a pause a silence? When it is longer than expected, or in an unexpected place and therefore ceases to have its 'business as usual' function and begins to indicate that something is missing.

Communicative silences have psycholinguistic and interactive forms, which together with their human communication functions are managed by sociocultural silences (Bruneau 1973), with professional communication of post-observation feedback conferences being an example that is driven by specific educational generic conventions (Copland and Donaghue 2021). Psycholinguistic silence comprises slow-time (i.e. "one slows or expands time by imposing silence") and fast-time (i.e. clock time) silences on a spatio-temporal mental time (Bruneau 1973: 22, 26). "Good, worthwhile communication" takes place when interlocutors "are open to each other's mind-time requirements" (Blackmur 1957 as cited in Bruneau 1973: 27). Yet, in psycholinguistic silences the listener is "not allowed by social convention to participate interactively"; these "lengthy interactive silences" reflect the desired "interpersonal status relationships" when interlocutors "share cognitions", reach decisions, solve problems and develop "interpersonal closeness" (Bruneau 1973: 28, 29, 30).

In educational settings, we understand silence as "a meaningful gap" on the part of the students or their teacher, namely

> [w]hen learners were silent in terms of not talking they might be engaged in a variety of internal activity—listening, cognitively processing, emotionally processing, and emotionally withdrawing. When the teacher was silent it was suggested they could be listening to gauge whether learners had understood. If both learners and teachers were silent then this might represent productive and comfortable engagement with the work of the classroom. (Ollin 2008: 272)

Productive silence characterizes moments when L2 learners internalize new knowledge and skills, and therefore learn (Jaworski and Sachdev 1998: 284; Bao 2014: 3). Such silent moments are filled with their inner speech. This process is not automatic though as "silence needs to be guided as a pedagogically informed and well-designed task" in order to "become productive" (Bao 2014: 3, 12). Teachers can create productive classroom silence on condition that they are "aware of learners' emotions, attitudes, experiences and the monologues that run through their minds when pedagogical actions are going on" (Bao 2014: 4). They, for example, understand "the problem of determining whether a student who has been called on is pausing because s/he doesn't know the answer (silence as omission of something), or because s/he is formulating the answer (silence representing underlying action)" (Tannen 1985: 107). Teachers, thus, ask questions and provide students with the space for a meaningful silence, a space in which they can reflect upon and respond to "controversial, important or challenging issues that require some degree of thoughtful elaboration" (Bao 2014: 48; see also Rowe 1972). In a study on primary teachers' opinions on using silence in the classroom, more than one-third of the teachers claim that they use "less silence when feeling anxious or uncomfortable" (Vassilopoulos and Konstantinidis 2012: 101). Therefore, for some speakers, silence has negative value (Tannen 1985: 93) in that by "discovering that one has nothing to say, one seeks a way to say *that*" (Sontag 1966/2009: 12). A case in point is the Bosch drawing *The Ship of Fools* in the Musée du Louvre, Paris which illustrates a group of garrulous individuals who are talking simultaneously, unable to keep silent, and thus, unable to listen to one another.

Literature review

Productive silence

Hanna (2021) researched productive silent practices within authoritarian classroom environments in secondary schools. This study revealed that silent moments were imposed by the teachers and rightfully recognized by the pupils "as a working space, and for thinking or concentrating"; likewise the pupils' moments of silence were "acts of obstruction and resistance", or manifestations of their hesitance to ask for assistance (Hanna 2021: 1164, 1166). In the former case, productive and respective silence was realized through listening to the teachers' instructions (Hanna 2021: 1166), with some of the teachers realizing that the pupils may keep silent to

"avoid risking the dismantling of a fragile subjectivity" (Finke 1993 as cited in Hanna 2021: 1161). Therefore, the non-authoritarian classroom environment requires pedagogical approaches based on "participatory and respectful" practices in the classroom (Hanna 2021: 1174).

Bista (2012) considered certain perspectives, initially as a Nepalese pupil at an American school and then, as a prospective teacher at an American college, on silence in linguistically, socio-culturally, religiously and nationality diverse educational settings. As a pupil, he hesitated to participate in classroom discussions and confined himself to "internal monologues" (Bista 2012: 76). Some teachers in American classrooms, that is those who consider pupils' silence during "an inquiry process" on the level of practical reasoning, may misjudge it and view such pupils as passive, whereas those who consider silent gaps on the level of social critical analysis may value silent moments as "positive to themselves" and not marginalize the quiet pupils (Bista 2012: 77).

Shan (2020) studied aspects of classroom silence that influenced the interactions of Chinese learners of English within a class, namely their learning motivation, language proficiency, personality, teaching materials, and the pedagogy of classroom interaction. Shan differentiated between three factors which influenced classroom silence, namely the students, their teachers, and their culture (Shan 2020: 144). In the same vein, Hanh (2020: 154), who focused on silence in EFL classrooms with Vietnamese majors, claimed that high motivation is the most significant aspect which can overcome other factors such as shyness or anxiety. It is important, together with other factors, to "reduce the distance between teachers and students caused by power, and increase students' trust in teachers to establish a sound teacher-student relationship" (Shan 2020: 147).

Silence in POFCs

Studies on post-observation feedback discourses also mention silence in relation to politeness and Face-Threatening Acts (FTA) (e.g. Blumberg and Cusick 1969; Pomerantz 1984; Heath 1992; Phillips 1994, 1997, 1999; Hopkins 1999; Copland 2008; Copland and Donaghue 2021).

Blumberg and Cusick's (1969) study on the nature of supervisor-supervisee interactions identified 15 supervisor behaviour categories, with category 15 named "Silence or confusion" indicating supervisor behaviour "which tends to produce silence or confusion" (Blumberg and Cusick 1969: 10); this category was "used when there [was] silence or both supervisor and teacher [were] talking at the same time so that it [became] impossible to categorize behaviour specifically. An exception would be when there [was] silence after a behaviour on the part of either supervisor or teacher that [seemed] to have the effect of producing defensiveness". In the analyzed sample of 50 conferences, "[o]f the total time consumed, 45 per cent was supervisor talk, 53 percent was teacher-talk, and 2 per cent of the time was spent in silence or confusion" (Blumberg and Cusick 1969: 11). Blumberg and Cusick (1969: 15) underlined that this analysis did not include the content of the interactions.

Pomerantz (1984) revealed that silence can be interpreted through multiple means, including that "the teacher may have taken the point on board without discussion; or may have given a non-verbal acknowledgement cue; or may have chosen not to respond verbally; or may have been quietly appraising the situation; or may have misunderstood what was said; or a combination of some of these may have occurred" (as cited in Wajnryb 1994: 152). The silence of a tutee in discussion with their tutors is "a common pattern" comparable to "the doctor's diagnosis greeted by silence" (Heath 1992 as cited in Phillips 1999: 144).

Phillips (1994 as cited in Farr 2011: 47) found that silence can be used by trainers for a variety of reasons, for example, "to leave certain things unsaid, either because they are obvious or because they are too damaging, and it can function to allow wait and reflective time for trainees to formulate their thoughts and responses"; likewise, trainees' silence "can suggest that [they] genuinely don't know what to say, agree with what is being said, disagree with what is being said, are upset and wish to hide emotion, are supporting peers under criticism, or are availing of time to think". Phillips (1994 as cited in Phillips 1999: 156) stated that "a lack of response usually indicates a rejection of the criticism. An overt rejection of a criticism is dispreferred so silence is a less direct way of indicating disagreement".

Hopkins (1999: 44 as cited in Farr 2011: 46) claimed that "praise is often given on-record and tends to be received with silence or explanation", whereas "criticism is frequently hedged, bald on-record criticism is not supported by the group members, silent responses to criticism lead to discomfort and redressive action, and the use of negative strategies for giving criticism is not always reflective of a strongly asymmetrical power distance between the parties".

Copland's (2008) study, in turn, mentioned silence as means used by trainers to "silence the trainees" (2008: 236) or "to persuade trainees of the value of their own positions and, in some cases, to silence resistance or opposition" (2008: 254); however, trainees' silence does not automatically mean that they "agree with the trainers' opinions, have had their opinions changed, or understand more fully the pedagogy they should adopt" (2008: 236); for instance, Copland admitted that "instead of starting with an easy question in order to warm up the interviewees, I started with the 'big' question – 'What is the purpose of feedback'. The reactions from trainers – from stunned silence to guffaws of laughter – is testament to the unsuitability of having this question in pole position" (2008: 285).

In Copland and Donaghue (2021) the phenomenon of silence, among other interactional features such as delays, prefaces, indirectness, mitigation, hesitation, and laughter, was used by interactants in their facework "to mitigate face threatening acts (FTAs)" (2021: 79, 81). An instance of silence used is found in episode 3 when Eric, a preservice teacher, reacted to his supervisor's "direct criticism" with "silence or reluctance to speak", informed as "an orientation to face threat" (2021: 90). This lack of mitigation on the part of his supervisor resulted in "offence and resistance" on the part of that supervisee (2021: 95). In all, successful critical feedback needs balanced "face support" combined with "face threat avoidance" (2021: 94, 95).

In conclusion, the studies suggest that tutors use silence to avoid discussion (e.g. damaging news), to give wait time before an answer, to reflect, as a non-verbal acknowledgement cue, as a sign of misunderstanding or punishment, or to praise.

The study: Productive silence in post-observation feedback sessions

A linguistic ethnographic study (Creswell and Guetterman 2021) examined university supervisors' silence discourse in order to uncover the extent and nature of the silent spells.

The tutors' utterances in 328 turns in five dialogues were labelled either as educative, or supportive, or evaluative conversational frames (Long et al. 2013). A supervisor's utterance needed to meet the following criteria in order to be categorized as (Long et al. 2013: 184):

(1) educative: high cognitive questions, critical comments, explorations, explanations and suggestions;
(2) supportive: gentle language within "a comfortable and nonthreatening space";
(3) evaluative: noting the quality of tutees' practice.

The datasets were the supervisors' utterances from the five post-observation conferences involving *two* supervisors and seven supervisees. This supervisory discourse covered in total 1 hour 46 minutes of POFCs which took place in 2021 and 2022. In the online feedback sessions (C1, C2, C3), and face-to-face sessions (C4, C5) recorded with the consent of the students, the supervisors' talk occupied in total *circa* 76%, the trainees' talks lasted in total about 20%, while silence was in total *circa* 4% of the conferences time (see Table 1). The findings revealed that the supervisors' utterances were mainly evaluative and covered *circa* 49% of the tutor talking time. About 43% of the time was devoted to productive language and 8% of the tutors' utterances were supportive (see Table 2). Finally, the distribution of silent spells in the frames is uneven. The longest pauses were noted in C1 and C4, in comparison to the remaining conferences. Ergo, the longest pauses in C1 and C4 were considered in this analysis in order to determine the reasons for their use (see Table 3).

Educative conversational frame in C1

Silent spells within the educative conversational frame type were devoted to "wait time" (Rowe 1972) or "slow-time" (Bruneau 1973). These were social or commissive spells with a cognitive function that the supervisor chose to use. She paused in order "to give the speaker time to think … to comprehend" (Tannen 1985: 99). For example, in *Excerpt 1* (turn 18) the supervisor's (T1) talking time lasted 38 seconds, including 9.4 (25%) seconds of silent moments used to contextualize the issue of a so-called critical incident and to wait for tutee 1 to internalize this information. In fact, the question about why some pupils outperform other pupils was not answered and the supervisor elaborated upon it in turn 18, which finally resulted in the supervisee's statement that "in the case of some pupils, new information is somewhat acquired faster".

C	Length: minutes / percentage / words			
	Total	Tutees/No	Tutors	Silence
C1	32.8 min	6.0 min (18.2%)/1	25.2 min (76.8%) 3507 words/T1	1.6 min (4.9%)
C2	29.4 min	4.7 min (15.9%)/1	23.4 min (79.6%) 3406 words/T1	1.3 min (4.4%)
C3	24.1 min	4.4 min (18.2%)/1	18.7 min (77.6%) 2661 words/T1	1.0 min (4.1%)
C4	26.6 min	6.1 min (22.9%)/2	19.3 min (72.5%) 2873 words/T2	1.2 min (4.5%)
C5	26.5 min	6.3 min (23.7%)/2	19.7 min (74.3%) 2612 words/T2	0.5 min (1.9%)
Σ	139.4 min (2h 19.4)	27.5 min (19.7%)	106.3 min (1h 46.3 min) (76.2%)	5.6 min/336s

Table 1. The ratio of tutees' talking time, tutors' talking time and silence in POFCs

Conversation	The tutors' utterances in minutes / percentages			
	educative	supportive	evaluative	Σ
C1	14.5 min/59.75%	1.2 min/5.08%	9.5 min/37.69%	25.2
C2	8.86 min/37.86%	3.75 min/16.15%	10.79 min/45.97%	23.4
C3	9.5 min/50.8%	1.9 min/10.23%	7.3 min/38.96%	18.7
C4	7.1 min/36.7%	0.4 min/2%	11.8 min/61.1%	19.3
C5	6.3 min/31.9%	0.9 min/4.5%	12.5 min/63.4%	19.7
Σ	46.2 min/43.5%	8.1 min/7.6%	51.8 min/48.7%	106.3 min

Table 2. Tutors' utterances labelled as educative, supportive and evaluative

Conversation	The tutors' moments of silence in seconds in the three types of utterances			
	educative	supportive	evaluative	Σ
C1	**35**	21	10	**66**
C2	20	7	19	46
C3	11	12	26	49
C4	18	1	**49**	**68**
C5	0	2	31	33
Σ	84 (1.4 min)/36%	43 (0.7 min)/18.4%	106 (1.7)/45.5%	233s

Table 3. Tutors' moments of pauses and silence

Excerpt 1

T1: When it comes to Mikołaj, for example, during the first lesson (0.3) he couldn't answer a question and someone else wanted to answer this question, but you said (0.1) it happened twice (0.1) on the consecutive one as well (0.1) you kind of protected that person so that s/he could freely, slowly provide some answer (0.1). Well, it was a typical (0.2) just (0.1) a (0.1) critical event during a lesson (0.3) [**turn 18, time 9.03–9.30**]

T1: But why do those other persons (0.2) wanted to give answers for someone else, for Mikołaj, for example, what do you think? (0.6) [**turn 18, time 10.09–10.20**]

Likewise, in *Excerpt 2* (turn 41) the supervisor's (T1) talking time lasted 20 seconds with 14 (70%) seconds of long pauses following the four questions asked. The supervisee answered them by starting with "that means", followed by the supervisor's encouraging filled pause "hmm", before explaining her interpretation of that critical incident related to talking with pupils about their favourite games.

Excerpt 2

T1: Were you glad when you got them (0.3) involved in that theme about games? (0.1) Were you glad? How did you feel then? (0.4) Is that what you wanted to achieve? (0.6) [**turn 41, time 21.41–22.01**]

Evaluative conversational frame in C4

Conversely, silent moments in the evaluative frame served to recall the observed lessons. The supervisor T2 used empirical silence, but did not choose to employ omissive silence. Silence, interwoven in evaluative utterances, allowed the supervisor to recall the required fragments of the lesson. For example, in *Excerpts 3* and *4* of C4, supervisor's T2 talking time lasted 41 seconds, including 31 (75%) seconds of silent moments used to recall the lesson fragments with the help of the two tutees (PsT) participating in that conference.

Excerpt 3

T2: and maybe there (0.1) it is worth mentioning is the game, I mean, (0.2) the first, I mean it was there (0.2). It was (0.2) what was the game, one moment (0.2) [**turn 4, time: 5.00 – 5.13**]

PsT: the wheel of Fortune

T2: oh, yes, the wheel of Fortune. Yes. That is right. And (0.2) and here (0.4), and here (0.2) you (0.5), aha, Ok. [**turn 5, time: 5.15 – 5.31**]

Excerpt 4

T2: and the last, the second game which was there (0.6) it was about (0.3) [**turn 8, time: 10.17 – 10.29**]

PsT: about gap filling

Conclusion

This critical linguistic ethnographic study on silence discourse is an addition to previous studies of USs' POFCs discourse. This is a self-study and it was intended to develop expertise in the field of effective and appropriate supervision. As stated by Wang and Demszky (2023), access to "consistent, high quality coaching" is limited and, therefore, this analysis offers a solution to the lack of training for tutors or teacher educators on how to provide feedback. The most recent studies on improving the capacity of AI and ChatGPT to coach future teachers have addressed the issues of providing future teachers with "insightful, novel and truthful feedback"; however, much as it may be part of a not too distant future, the researchers highlight that these computational methods should not replace human involvement, but that they could operate where there is a lack of effective and empathic supervisors, mentors, and counsellors (Zhang and Danescu-Niculescu-Mizil 2020; Demszky and Liu 2023; Wang and Demszky 2023). Our study redirects the supervisors' attention to productive language and shows that silent moments within the educative frame have their "agential qualities" (Brito Vieira 2021). The longer pauses observed in this frame are moments of meaningful and intentional silence, providing time and space, as well as functioning as reflection hubs. These are meaningful moments when nothing else can be said, but moments when there is a lot to think about, understand, and internalize. We have not analyzed the tutees' reactions to the longer pauses on the part of their supervisor, but we realize that these reactions reveal a tutee's level of open-mindedness towards their lessons, their readiness to deal with the issues advanced, and critically reflect upon them. Conversely, the longer pauses in the evaluative frame appeared unintentional. However, the empathic and natural reactions of tutees to support their supervisor in recalling the content of the lessons show all parties' natural and realistic engagement in their dialogue.

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