The place of silence in second language acquisition

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Abstract
The article examines the role of silence in learners’ language development by discussing current theories in second language acquisition and by connecting them to the silence phenomenon. A number of important constructs in SLA are brought up as they have potential to be associated with the silent mode of learning, namely the silent period, input, output, communicative competence, among others. The discussion also highlights a few theoretical gaps in SLA discourse that are related to silence.

Keywords: silence, reticence, the silent period, input, output, communicative competence

Introduction
In many teachers’ practical experiences, not every individual student who is highly articulate would demonstrate better academic skills than those who speak sparingly. For this reason, relying solely on students’ verbal participation to judge their ability and learning enthusiasm would seem to be an inadequate approach to educational practice. Even when we become aware of this reality, to be able to comprehend how students learn effectively in silence remains a challenging task. In response to the need for such knowledge, this article explores what silence means in learners’ language development by interacting with current theories in second language acquisition that can be connected to the silence construct.

The present discourse on silence in language education consists of a number of theoretical and practical gaps. First, silence has not been adequately connected to second language acquisition research apart from the discourse which recognises the roles of the silent period and inner speech in relation to learning. Second, there is hardly any principle that guides the incorporation of silence into school curriculum and classroom methodology as a learning mode. Third, silence has hardly been made part of teacher professional training and development programmes. Fourth, silence remains a question of respecting a classroom behaviour which hopefully will be useful by itself without further proposals to maximise its learning effect.

Defining silence
Silence became an important theme in the discourse of anthropology, psycholinguistics and communication since the early 1970s with the works of Basso (1970), Bruneau (1973), Noelle-Neumann (1974), Johannesen (1974), among others that provided insights into the complex meanings of silence and appealed for further research commitment. The 1980s continued to see increasing awareness of silence as a statement of refusal to communicate (Wardhaugh, 1985), a form of control and resistance in classroom settings (Gilmore, 1985), and as multiplicity of meanings in speech communication (Tannen & Saville-Troike, 1985).
Silence can be religious when it attends to space in the mind. Similar to the need for physical space away from the crowd and disruption to relaxation, humans occasionally need to take a break from the speeches of others for the mental space to renew brain power and generate fresh ideas. In visual arts, music, and environmental science, silence can become visual and spatial, being employed to draw attention to important elements and serve various social, artistic and pragmatic functions (Ollin, 2008). In communication, a pause can serve as inner time for one to absorb and reflect (Bruneau, 1973); and silence can also be a voice, which ‘can 'say' something merely by leaving something unsaid’ (Zembylas, 2004, p. 194). Silence can be defined as a permanent trait, that is, part of one's personality, or as situational behaviour, resulting from changes in circumstances. Silence can be meaningful communication strategies with clear motives such as defiance, objection, disagreement, consideration, among other intentions; or it can be meaningless, simply suggesting, as Jaworski & Sachdev (1998) puts it, an ‘absence of noise’ (p. 274).

Due to its diverse roles, silence is classified by Bruneau (1973) into three forms, namely psycholinguistic silence, interactive silence and sociocultural silence. Psycholinguistic silence refers to hesitation or discontinuity of speech in order to include supplementary meanings in speech and to assist the decoding process, very much in the same way as punctuations function in writing. Interactive silence is employed to acquire attention, reflection, interpretation, and judgment from others, to provide space for thinking, responses, or appreciation, and even to establish or prevent further development of relationship. If exercised properly, this type of silence can serve as a learning tool. Sociocultural silence is part of the cultural patterns of communication within a society which can be highly valued and, depending on contexts of use, might have various communicative functions such as demonstrating acceptance, faith, respect, protest, power, and other social attitudes.

Silence may be positive or negative. In societies where talk is the norm, silence is connected with undesirable values (Tatar, 2005) and silent students might be seen as passive observers (Lieberman, 1984) who are ‘inadequately educated’, who lack ‘independent thinking’ skills and who do not respect the teacher (Liu, 2002, p. 39-52). Silence can be used as a discriminating tool against the teacher when students resist a certain style of teaching or a certain type of teacher (Ladson-Billings, 1996), and when students resist the verbal interaction among peers (Schultz, 2009). In societies where silence is valued, it is viewed equally significant to speaking as it provides space for reflection on the communicated word (Zembylas, 2004). It also serves as an indication of respect, harmony, ‘attentive listening and active thinking’ (Liu, 2002, p. 48).

According to Remedios, Clark and Hawthorne (2008), the concept ‘silence’ among students does not necessarily refer to complete quietness but is also employed loosely to denote minimal talk during classroom discussion. Furthermore, scholarly efforts have been made to look at silence and talk in more complex ways than simply treating them as sound and muteness. Silence itself can be a form of talk. If talk is sometimes referred to as externalised speech (Ridgway, 2009, p. 49) or interactive speech (Saito, 1992), silence is known as articulatory rehearsal mechanism, internalised speech (Ridgway, 2009, p. 49), subvocal articulation (Rayner & Pollatsek, 1989), or internalisation of speech patterns (Mitchell & Myles, 1998). Dealing with silence in education is dealing with a complex assortment of voices. Eventually silence might not be a proper term to encompass every phenomenon happening internally within the human mind. Silence can be classified in multiple manners and purposes, as much as talk can fall into meaningful talk, irrelevant talk, high-quality talk, low-quality talk (Edwards & Westgate, 1987), repetition, regurgitation, confirmation, discussion, debate, social chat, lecture, negotiation, critique, inquiry, negation, and so on. If standard or normal, accepted classroom talk is sometimes defined as ‘the speech of educated people’ (Edwards & Westgate, 1987, p. 28), then standard or normal, accepted
classroom silence can also be defined as the silence of educated people. Without a good understanding of it, silence may turn out to be a misadventure for the teacher in evaluating learner’s need and ability as well as in making pedagogical decisions.

**Major distinctions between silence and reticence**

The first distinction lies in the question of motives. Silence is viewed as an aspect of language and a form of conversational dominance (Picard, 1948; Brown & Attardo, 2000). It parallels speech in achieving certain communicative tasks so that these two dimensions are complementary to each other (Jaworski, 1993). Silence, therefore, represents an indispensable layer of interpersonal discourse and is a natural part of conversational skills, accompanying speech to express a variety of meanings and perform a range of language functions – including to comfort, to support, to accept, to attract attention, to negotiate power, to scold, to interrupt, to challenge, and so on (Wardhaugh, 1992; Jaworski, 1993). Reticence, on the contrary, tends to suggest subordination or a potential handicap in activating such communicative skills. As interpreted from research, reticence indicates some level of reserve in speech that might fall in line with undesirable affective features such as shyness and communication apprehension (Evans, 1996).

A second distinction has to do with their significance in educational settings. Silence can be a productive factor (Picard, 1948) which not only serves successful communication but also represents a set of skills to be learned and acquired (Jaworski, 1993; Wardhaugh, 1992). For example, silence is employed by the teacher as a positive strategy to leave wait time so that students will participate more effectively (Tomlinson, 2000; Evans, 1996). A reasonable amount of silence provided by the teacher can demonstrate adaptation teaching to the learning pace of learners, based on the understanding that the quickest way of learning is students’ own way (Knibbeeler, 1989). Reticence, on the contrary, does not indicate such supportive control; neither is it viewed as teacher strategy towards any particular communicative effect. Instead, it is often identified as learners’ inadequate ability in self-expression (Burns and Joyce, 1997; Wu, 1991; Chen, 1985), a problem in verbal response to the learning situation (Tsui, 1996, p. 145), or a lack of initiative in negotiation of meanings (Ping, 2010).

A third distinction concerns their ongoing impact on language development. Silence may characterise a mentally active period during which learners go through the process of building up language proficiency – so that once this is acquired enough learners will begin to talk (Krashen, 1982; Burt & Dulay, 1983; Stevick, 1989). Reticence, meanwhile, does not embrace such preparedness that works towards linguistic facility. Instead, it is often recognised as an impediment to communication capabilities (Foss & Reitzel, 1988) and a source of disadvantage in second language improvement (Tsui, 1996; Allwright, 1984).

Despite the above differences, the respective significance of silence and reticence might overlap to a considerable extent. Both of them can be employed in certain situations as avoidance (Kleinmann, 1977) or conflict-avoidance strategies (Jaworski, 1993). For example, Sprott (2000) reports a sad experience of a student who stays silent because the teacher fails to believe in her ability to contribute in the learning process. This account proves similar to how reticence is recognised by Evans (1996) as a likely sign of social withdrawal and behavioural inhibition. These feelings sometimes result from a conflict between personal values inherent in a person’s identity and the otherness that is imperialistically imposed upon him or her (Nemiroff, 2000), a situation that tends to occur among people of non-dominant backgrounds, causing them to withdraw from the power of dominant social groups (Corson, 2001). In such dilemmas, silence or reticence often represents a negative reaction to undesirable circumstances that induce anxiety (Lehtonen, Sajavaara & Manninen, 1985; Phillips, 1991; Foss & Reitzel, 1988).
Both silence and reticence, in many cases, also demonstrate communication breakdown (Yoneyama, 1999), a lack of ability to communicate, or failure of language (Tannen, 1985) stemming from shyness, anxiety or a lack of knowledge (Jaworski, 1993; Phillips, 1999; Buss, 1984; Tsui, 1996; Foss & Reitzel, 1988; Hilleson, 1996). Despite what we know, silence and reticence remain complex aspects of educational settings that are not always easy to identify. To this end, Malamah-Thomas (1996) and Jaworski (1993) suggest silence as a worthwhile object of linguistic investigation in the second language classroom as it sometimes causes confusion in which communication fails to be understood. Tsui (1996) also believes that reticence is worth examining further and suggests finding ways to help students cope with and overcome it to improve second language development.

Silence and the silent period

The roles of the silent period, which were initially proposed by Dulay et al. (1982), are to build listening competence and concentrate on comprehension rather than language production. During this time, no sufficient competence exists (Krashen, 1995) and initiation of conversation does not happen (Saville-Troike, 1988). Utterances, if any, are limited to only brief imitations rather than spontaneous, creative or natural output (Dulay et al., 1982; Krashen, 1985). Silence, on the contrary, does not necessarily indicate low competence and the silent thinker may have reached a proficient command of the language but chooses to keep quiet for other reasons than the lack of verbal ability. In other words, the notion of silence itself is not limited to the silent period but the functions of silence in general can stretch throughout all stages of the L2 learning process.

Theorisation regarding the concept of the silent period remains largely unconfirmed for three main reasons. First, there is little consensus among scholars about what this stage means. Some think it is a phase that will pass and learners’ speech will unfold naturally (Krashen, 1982); others believe that it may not pass and some learners will never speak the target language (Brown, 2002). Some maintain that this period lasts several months (Dulay et al., 1982); others suspect it may last forever. Some suggest that it is a time for comprehension of input to take place (Dulay et al., 1982); others indicate that this period occurs due to the lack of comprehension (Gibbon, 2006). Second, much conceptualisation related to the silent period relies heavily on theorists’ own observation, intellectual reasoning, and academic dialogues rather than be founded upon vigorous research efforts. Third, except a few scholars who acknowledge that the silent period may not apply to all learners due to differences in learners’ social and cognitive orientations (Ellis, 2012; Saville-Troike, 1988), most theorists attribute characteristics to the silent period as if all L2 learners are the same, which reduces silence to a homogeneous stage and neglects individuals’ potentially diverse involvements with this period. The awareness of learner differences, in fact, is a major factor in how well and how soon someone acquires a second language (Schmidt, 2010).

Tomlinson (2001) is among the few scholars who point out that some learners can develop an L2 inner voice during the silent period, which would benefit L2 development. Inner speech, according to Saville-Troike (1987; 1988), might have both a reflective nature silence and a social nature. These views taken together suggest that the silent period may have a social nature and thus the boundary between silence and the silent period become less significant. For other scholars, the distinction between the two constructs remains relatively clear-cut because there is hardly any attempt to employ these two constructs alternatively. In most discourse, the silent period is visible and observable as it is expected to happen before learners can speak L2, if they speak at all. Silence, on the contrary, seems vague and intriguing because it does not follow any expected period of time or behaviour pattern. In fact, there remains an overwhelming tendency to believe that silence, not the silent period, is connected to reflection, insights, problem solving, and learning (Bies, 2009).
In search of silence in SLA theories

Silence is an under-explored theme in the mainstream literature on second language acquisition and on the methodology of teaching a second language. Silence is a hard topic to deal with when it comes to empirical research, simply because when learners talk, the research can record data for analysis, yet when learners are speechless, data hardly exist for one to collect and read. In fact, the association between words and silence have historically divided Eastern and Western social, educational, and academic attitudes over the past century toward which one is the more cherished mode of communication (Oliver, 1971; Okabe, 1983; Barnlund, 1989; Gudykunst and Nishida, 1994; Zembylas, 2008; Belanoff, 2001). While in some non-Western cultures, silence may be required to express a role or a voice, in many Western contexts, the obsession with words sometimes causes one to be intolerant toward silence and view the wordless person as subordinate, or in Karmen’s (2001, p. 4) words, as being ‘inadequately educated’.

Believe it or not, more research on silence has come from other disciplines including psychology and sociology than research in second language acquisition. Although the discourse has embraced rich discussion on the silent period (Krashen, 1985), the inner-speech stage (Vygotsky, 1986), internalisation (Winegar, 1997), private speech (Saville-Troike, 1988), and inner voice (Tomlinson, 2001), it has been acknowledged that today’s research on inner speech is not much easier than such research in Vygotsky’s time (Ehrich, 2006). Given all the subtleties and complexities of human talk that makes it hard to research on talk (Edwards & Westgate, 1987), research on silence is many times more difficult as there is virtually no scientific method to transcribe silence.

As a constantly evolving discipline in the fields of linguistics and psycholinguistics, second language acquisition was initially concerned with cognition and over the years has moved to exploring affect (Chambers, 2007) as well as other areas in language development. Despite such dynamics, the role of silence in L2 education has been treated with great caution and, as far as research findings are concerned, has hardly been connected to learning abilities in optimistic ways. Scholarly research in the 1970s pointed out that children who remain reticent in class were often perceived as socially and intellectually incompetent (Gordon & Thomas, 1967) as they make poorer school progress than their peers (Feshback et al., 1974; Stevenson et al., 1976; Colligan, 1979). In fact, silence in SLA discourse until the 1980s was mentioned as resistance to speech (Harder, 1980), difficulty in performance, and lack of comprehension (Dulay et al., 1982; Gibbons, 1985). While acknowledging silence as the initial stage of language study, SLA scholarly research until recently remains uncertain about how to proceed to address the continuing role of silence in the ‘post-silent era’ – a term which indicates the end of silent film era and which is mentioned to criticise how excessive talk can weaken the subtlety of communicative silence. Although this debate in the movie industry seems irrelevant to language learning, it reminds us that silence should be seen more than just a period when we were hopeless due to the inability to produce speech and that silence continues to play a significant role in L2 development. In fact, SLA shows less interest in private speech than overt production (Saville-Troike, 1988) and seems ‘insufficiently curious about silence as part of the second language learning process’ (Granger, 2004, p. 30).

This discussion is not a literature review of silence. Instead, it is a well-informed, creative attempt to position silence along with potentially connectable theories, awareness, and debate in second language acquisition. Historically, the cognitive revolution in psychology in the 1950s resisted the dominant behaviourist view at the time by highlighting the need to understand the interior of the mind rather than observing the exterior behaviour. It analyses how the brain works through actively responding to information then manipulating, selecting, and storing it for future use; and emphasises continuity of development rather than
looking at development as stages. The works of cognitive psychologist had a strong impact on many other disciplines including second language acquisition. Within what became known as cognitive approaches to SLA, there is the need to look at mental processing (Ellis, 1999; Hulstijn, 2007). Arguably, there would be no understanding of how fluency is acquired unless one finds out how the process works that takes a learner to advanced L2 proficiency.

Cognitive psychology hypothesises that L2 acquisition requires not only attention but also effort, which includes both implicit and explicit learning (Hulstijn, 2005; DeKeyser, 2003) as foundation for skills acquisition (Segalowitz, 2003). The development of interactionism during the 1980s stretched these principles further with the argument that mental effort is insufficient but it is social interaction that provides conditions for language to be adjusted and enhanced. Based on this ideology, a great amount of research has moved in this direction to investigate at how interaction enhances learning and indicates evidence of acquisition. In doing this, research and discourse tends to develop more interest in learners’ audible talk than in the inaudible speech in the mind. In fact, SLA pedagogy has historically been informed by research efforts in L2 speech production (Pickering, 2012). The tenet of L2 development has been founded on research on negotiation, feedback, instruction, conversation, interaction, errors, repair, input, and recast, among others. The influence of the input-interaction-output model continues to be strong and the main foundation for SLA research is developed through the investigation of what happens with respect to input and output. Since learners’ verbal performance represents the evidence of output, researchers have been reluctant to link output with silence. This reality raises two burning questions: does research into L2 speech acquisition have to rely on audible output alone? How far can SLA scholars examine the internal process of verbal production?

As far as the role of internal mechanism is concerned, scholars have looked at issues such as the channel between L1 and L2 development processes, neurocognitive processing comprising functions of declarative-procedural memory and explicit-implicit knowledge, interlanguage transfer, learners’ affective factors (Mitchell & Myles, 1998; Towell & Hawkins, 1994). Theories related to cognitive processing indicate that the mind will develop an L2 system autonomously once there is sufficient input and this process happens independently from the role of other mental functions such as visualisation, attention, perception, and so on (Putz & Sicola, 2010). This approach to L2 acquisition has been critiqued for being underrepresenting learners’ real interactive experience in a broader social context. Learners’ cognitive processing takes place not only in silence but also during verbal communication (Jodlowiec, 2010), which makes it hard to connect the cognitive mind with silence alone.

Silence and L2 input

Silence itself does not equal input processing but only becomes meaningful when there is exposure to comprehensible input and efforts are made toward L2 processing. Such efforts may include actions such as obtaining meaning from input, connecting form with meaning, noticing salient feature within input, resorting to L1 to translate or explain input, and forming concepts. Silence can be problematic when it comes from distraction, loss of interest, limited ability, and poor connectedness with previous knowledge, all of which make learners become unproductive.

Cognitive psychology throughout 1970s and 1980s recognised that learning as well as memory can be implicit or explicit, subconscious or conscious. When learning becomes cognitively complex and demanding, the stimulus domain may be activated and when the rules seem simple and salient, learners will tend to resort to a more conscious mode. Scholars such as Reber (1967; 1993) and Krashen (1982) connect L2 acquisition success with implicit learning mechanism. It is indicated that the explicit knowledge source stores simple rules
while the implicit knowledge source stores the complex data. Silence as learning space, arguably, has potential to be connected to such complex, implicit domain and much of this has not been empirically investigated in L2 acquisition.

Not all types of silence benefit L2 development. Some silence facilitates SLA while others may not. Silence activates language input through attentive listening to begin with. The use of silence, however, varies among language learners depending on their abilities in employing silence for refreshing the mind, focusing attention, processing input, and rehearsing language use. Even within each of these functions, learners might not demonstrate the same thinking behaviour. As Robinson (1997) argues, learners differ in their preferences in processing input, depending on implicit, explicit and incidental conditions of exposure.

It has been acknowledged that for L2 development to be strong, comprehensible input in second language should come in great quantity or in high frequency. The richness of input, however, does not guarantee learning success but it has to depend on how learners receive it. When learners are exposed to input which is hard to understand, the mind has to work harder. According to Faerch and Kasper (1986), when input makes the mind struggle, it may not be the problem of the input itself but the struggle occurs because learners do not have sufficient knowledge to understand that input right away. It is believed that such comprehension difficulty provides negative feedback which benefits L2 acquisition (White, 1987). Without space for implicitly processing such demanding data, it would be impossible for learners to cope with new language and develop their competence further. It is useful to note that language input is processed internally whether one is silent or verbalising. While some learners prefer to process L2 data through talk, other may do so in silence.

Silence and L2 output

The relationship between silence and output remains insignificant in SLA discourse. As a result, very little is known about how preverbal messages are processed in the mind. Preverbal messages are part of the conceptualisation stage of language processing, which precedes the formulation and articulation stages in the speech production model proposed by Levelt (1989). According to the Interaction Hypothesis (Long, 1996), which reconciles the input and output hypotheses, face-to-face verbal interaction is connected to language learning as one of the key foundation for L2 acquisition. The theory emphasises teacher-learner dynamics (Hall & Walsh, 2002) and peer interactive tasks (Ohta, 2001), both of which is centred on talk, such as who says what, who asks, and who responds; while the relationship between teacher talk and learner inner-speech dynamics is often not mentioned. The connection between silent thinking and output will need further research to illuminate it. Within what is available in the current discourse, this discussion will not be more ambitious than triggering a number of fundamental concepts to hint at this potential connection.

Silence plays the role of monitoring the accuracy of potential output. Such output may be language used for real communication in natural settings; it can be controlled or spontaneous classroom practice. The effect of output practice is undeniable in language development because it leads to procedurised and eventually automatised knowledge. Much of such processing toward output is known as mental rehearsal, which according to empirical research by De Guerrero (1991) has seven characteristics: ideational (creating thoughts), mnemonic (memorising or retrieving words from memory), textual (organising structure of a text), instructional (applying linguistic rules), evaluative (monitoring and self-correcting language), interpersonal (visualising how to talk with others), and intrapersonal (practicing inner speech).

A second role of active silent processing in relation to L2 output is that it facilitates recalls and mental experiment during cognitively demanding tasks, both of which benefit L2 development. According to Ellis (2005), when learners struggle to produce output which is
beyond their existing ability, they employ explicit knowledge of L2 structure to scaffold and construct utterances, and one way of monitoring and testing the value of an utterance is by saying it to oneself. This act of self-talk can be considered as one way of using silence. Silence does not have to be complete muteness but most importantly, it can be employed for whispering or mental rehearsal. Research shows that many L2 learners practice spontaneously speaking to themselves for years without realising that they have such skills and habit (De Guerrero, 1991). According to Innocenti (2002, p. 62), ‘most of the words we use in our inner speech, before speaking or writing a sentence, exist in auditory or visual images in our consciousness’. The nature of such practice is that learners are not aware of how silence is used and it is educators’ responsibility to raise this understanding as a learning strategy. It has been widely acknowledged that purposeful attention and awareness play important roles in language learning success (McLaughlin, 1990; Schmidt, 1990; Long, 1990).

A third role of mental rehearsal is that it supports the enhancement of motor performance, especially through the use of kinaesthetic imageries (Ryan & Simon, 1982; Woolfolk et al., 1985; Decety & Ingvar, 1990). Vygotsky (1987) believes that humans do not deal directly with the physical world but rely on mediating tools. Arguably, our mental facility to control the surroundings can be regarded as one such tool. As Lantolf (2000) indicates, mental rehearsal as private practice plays a supporting role toward tasks that involve the use of L2 ‘where the primary goal is not learning but performance’ (p. 88). While it is commonly known that explicit knowledge is developed through learners’ conscious efforts to comprehend and construct meanings and implicit knowledge is developed during fluent language production, there is real potential for the latter to improve through internalised processes. The human mind, in fact, has the ability to connect the physical world with mental manipulation and learn from this process to evaluate tentative action. Lantolf & Centeno-Cortes (2007) provide an analogy of how one can mentally rearrange furniture in a room in a similar fashion as one would perform this task in the real world, and argues that this ability has relevant, flexible applicability to language learning.

Although it is often acknowledged that implicit, subconscious conditions of learning, rather than conscious awareness, build foundation for productive verbalisation, Robinson (1997) discovered in a study that learners with good grammar sensitivity have the ability to transfer explicit knowledge to verbalisation, which means that there is a connection between what we know, how we think and how much we can perform in language. In other words, the mind and verbal mechanism have such strong association that in many cases it is possible to speak an L2 well even although one may not articulate L2 frequently.

The following anecdote demonstrates the above awareness. During the early 1990s I was working as a cultural assistant for the School for International Training, which was based in Brattleboro, Vermont. My job was to guide heritage students, who were Vietnamese descendants but were born and grew up in the United States. Working with the director of the programme, I helped organise for this group to learn Vietnamese language and culture during an overseas semester in Vietnam. An interesting case caught my attention. One of our students, Damon, who all his life had spoken only English, both in the home and at school, after being in the country for three weeks began to speak Vietnamese at a surprising degree of fluency. Although Damon grew up listening to Vietnamese now and then, he had never actually spoken the language. It was in Vietnam that for the first time in his life he attempted to speak Vietnamese and succeeded to an incredible extent. As the event demonstrates, the language acquisition process in fact happened within Damon’s mind for twenty years completely in silent listening. This phenomenon suggests that there is more potential for the use of learners’ silent mind than empirical research in SLA has explored.
According to German psychologist and philosopher Willhelm A. Wundt (1832-1920), language is a mental product comprising two dimensions, an internal domain and outer domain. The internal domain handles a mental process filled with imageries and silent speech (Thomas, 2010), which then get transformed into linguistic elements (Segalowitz & Trofimovich, 2012). Since language production is heavily monitored by the inner formulation system, focusing on speech production alone would amount to only a partial understanding of output. This could mean looking more at the outcome than the process while it is these internal learning processes that would further support scholarly explanations of L2 acquisition. Segalowitz and Trofimovich (2012) provide a useful list including various aspects of language that can be processed in the mind. These include words, sentences, structures, discourse, skills, emotions, thoughts, attention, and even automaticity. This is not to mention other operational features such as L1-L2 transfer or switching, interaction of new and previous knowledge, drawing and applying rules, formulating questions, consulting an external resource, observing the speech of others, evaluating input, selecting notes to write down, picking up sociocultural signals and values, making judgment, attempting to overcome anxiety, error correction, speech repair, and other types of language editing at different stages of learners’ proficiency development. All of these are subject to research attempts if the field is more interested in looking beyond spoken output as evidence of L2 development.

Nonverbal influences on speech production

L2 development can be triggered by three important nonverbal factors, namely perception, social surrounding, and interlanguage thinking. The first factor is learners’ perception in the mind. There is a logical connection between learners’ linguistic insight and their production (Pickering, 2012), in the sense that improvement in thinking has potential to bring out improved verbal output. If the mind is well nurtured to rehearse and develop good processing skills, what the mind produces would reflect on the quality of speech. This internal-external transfer may work effectively with content and linguistic structures rather than in physical and motor performance. For example, it may not happen strongly in the case of accurate phonological production when learners are constrained by difficulty in articulating certain syllable types (Flege, 1981) and pitch level to denote tones (Willems, 1982).

The second factor is comfort with the social surrounding where learning takes place, which plays a role in how well one learns and develops language competence. A study by Hansen (2006) demonstrates that language learners develop L2 proficiency best when they feel contented rather than restless, and that social constraints have a damaging effect on their language development. This understanding suggests that learners who are forced to behave in ways they feel uncomfortable are likely to make slow L2 learning progress as their learning mechanism does not operate naturally.

The third factor is the ability to use interlanguage, that is to say, employing useful features of the mother tongue to improve L2 communication. The mother tongue, which operates in ways inaudible to other interlocutors, may generate resources to process new information in the target language, which means that what learners have in their L1 system as a reasoning device can be used to process information in the target language. Making learners frequently speak out in the target language without allowing this interlanguage processing is to demand L2 production too early and this may take away learners’ opportunity for enhancing their learning repertoire.

Silence and communicative competence

It is important to note that silence has an inherent relationship with communicative competence. According to Hymes (1967; 1972), language competence comprises three
elements: knowledge, ability and actual use. Although silence may allow space for the
construction of knowledge and ability, it may not show evidence of the actual use of
language. The gap between silence and actual verbal communication, however, is not always
clear-cut due to the existence of private speech and internalisation. Private speech can happen
in silence, through whispering to oneself or others, or in spoken and written form. It serves to
draw one’s own attention (Frawley, 1997) and has a self-regulatory nature (John-Steiner,
1992). All of these skills are able to function thanks to learners’ exposure to social interaction
and therefore it is hard to say that silence is far removed from verbal communication. Instead,
the internal world and the social world can be quietly negotiated in learners’ mental
processes. Such negotiation, which is known as internalisation (Winegar, 1997), has the
potential to become useful in future communication.

Although it is commonly acknowledged that silence plays a role in monitoring
language, it remains a mystery how exactly that role can help develop communication
strategies. Strategic competence is the ability to make conversational plans and compensate
for difficulties in verbal communication (Canale & Swan, 1980). Even though one can
quietly internalise such strategies through attentive listening, observing others’
communication, and engaging in self-directed speech, the development of such competence
needs to be negotiated within the framework of language use (Bachman & Palmer, 1996). So
far the relationship between silent observation and strategy development has rarely been a
concern in second language acquisition research.

Oxford (2001) argues that there is a connection between learning and social skills:
those who are good at social communication strategies often tend to be good at language
learning strategies. Based on this understanding, if silent learners develop effective ways to
learn L2, they have potential to develop social skills. These abilities, which Celce-Murcia et
al. (1995) refer to as interactional competence, requires practical actions such as managing
social introduction, turn-taking, initiation of talk, closing conversation, changing topics,
interrupting, recognising the difference between L1 and L2 social norms, and so on. Someone
who remains silent from such practice may experience difficulty in communication.

One may need to keep in mind that silence, in a similar vein to talk, is not context-
free. If talk has to be socioculturally appropriate depending on who, where, when, what role
and what content, silence as part of language also shares similar needs in order for one to be
welcome, accepted, valued and understood rather than to cause confusion and
misinterpretation. Celce-Murcia et al. (1995) maintain that social competence includes
factors such as power, politeness, and cultural awareness. Arguably, if these elements play a
role in how one communicates through talk, they also must play a role in how one
appropriately keeps silent. In other words, to keep silent cannot be a decision made by the
silent language user alone but is contingent upon social situations. In the context of the
classroom where the regulation to moderate between silence and talk is negotiated and co-
deided by both the teachers and students, silence needs to take place within the expectation
of the class society rather than occur accidentally.

On an additional note, today’s changing globalised contexts may prompt the need to
research on silence beyond a face-to-face learning mode, that is, online silence. Nowadays as
words such as ‘interaction’ and ‘chat’ are placed on Google search, their meanings often take
on a digital connotation. Likewise, the concept silence has altered its meaning as the nature of
communication in the digital age constantly changes. As much as the concepts of social
presence and social interaction have been modified (Gunawardena et al., 2001; Leh, 2001),
silence can also refer to the state of being quiet from writing rather than from talking
(Zembylas & Vrasidas, 2007). When someone is not making written comments during
engagement with online discussion, the person is considered as keeping quiet. Silence in this
sense indicates social and psychological distance between humans, that is, the lack of
attentiveness, engagement, responsiveness, and participation. The need to understand the nature of and reasons for such types of silence should be studied alongside the need to improve online learning and communication.

**Conclusion**

The rationale for researching on silence cannot be more emphasised: learner silence is an issue which has entered into almost every teacher’s mind ever since teachers step into the classroom at an early stage of their career wondering about the reason behind learner silence and how that may affect the quality and nature of teaching performance. Compared to knowledge of verbal communication, knowledge about silence remains minimal despite increasing bodies of research and discourse on this topic over the past five decades. Not unlike talk, silence constitutes a significant part of classroom behaviour. One can transcribe talk but it is impossible to transcribe silence unless it is translated into words. Suppose scientists were capable of inventing a micro-device that could be planted in the head of every learner, the recording from that device would be even noisier than any recording of talk.

This article has highlighted a number of theoretical resources, including inner speech, reticence, the silence period, and communicative competence, which can support the understanding of silence to some degree. Although silence has rich potential for L2 learning and development, at the present moment empirical research evidence remains insufficient to illuminate the role of silence in SLA. The discussion responds this gap by constructing a synopsis of how the mind works toward L2 learning and development.

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