Book Review

East Asian Perspectives on Silence in English Language Education. Edited by Jim King and Seiko Harumi, Multilingual Matters, 2020.

Reviewed by Ellen Head

In the course of getting acclimatized to teaching in Japan, ELT professionals frequently come up against silence from students. We develop strategies for dealing with it, asking students to "Discuss the answer with your partner first", "Write it down before you speak" and so on. But there are still times when teachers may ask a question and get no response and not know why. *East Asian Perspectives on Silence in English Language Education* aims to address that question. The book brings together eight studies, offering an excellent overview of research in this area. The papers in this book help us to understand that silence does not necessarily mean failure, but at the same time there are potential interventions which could make for more productive classrooms. The editors have both been involved in researching silence in Japanese ELT classrooms for a substantial period of time, with Seiko Harumi completing doctoral research on the topic in 1999 and Jim King in 2011. King published the results of his thesis in 2013. It was an influential study of 48 hours of class video-observation across 900 university students, showing that that talk initiated by students only accounted for 0.24% of the lesson (p. 124), and 20% of lesson time was silent. The current volume attempts to broaden the context, both in terms of geographical scope and theoretical base. Two of the studies are based on research in China, five on Japan and the remainder include informants from Mongolia and South Korea, in the context of study abroad. Notably, there are two contributions involving researchers known for studying willingness to communicate (Tomoko Yashima and Jian E. Peng), which look at silence as the obverse of WTC. Peng's observation-based study highlights the state of "Willing Silence and Silent Willingness to Communicate" as part of a dynamic system and suggests positive ways that teachers can help students who are "silent but yearning to speak" by simple interventions such as offering a smile or waiting longer for a response (p. 161). Yashima contributes to a group paper with King, Humphries, Aubrey and Ikeda about a longitudinal study aimed at reducing speaking anxiety by having students do a fun, social activity outside class (p.

60-79).

In the introduction, Harumi and King lay out the groundwork for the whole book, with the suggestion that silence is a complex phenomenon which may arise from very different situations: a sign of linguistic or psychological difficulties; an expression of solitary, reflective activity; or a signal which has social or cultural significance. Interestingly, none of these three possibilities are quite the same as unwillingness to communicate. Harumi and King refer to silence as "an interactional resource" (p.1), reminding us that the effect, meaning and interpretation are highly context dependent and silence is not inherently negative. They claim that "education-oriented research into … silence has the potential to have a significant impact not only on second-language acquisition theorists but also on classroom practitioners and education policy planners alike." (p.1) The introduction offers a historical outline of research into silence with an emphasis on intercultural factors, citing studies such as Yamada (1997), which found that the average waiting time in a Japanese meeting was 5 seconds, as against less than 1 second in an American business meeting (p. 4). However, they caution against stereotypes of East and West, pointing to findings suggesting a longer wait time in Finnish culture (p.4), among others. Each chapter has several prompts for self-reflection to assist the reader in applying the findings to their own experience.

Two of the chapters offer particularly interesting data about silence from the point of view of language learners. Chapter 2 "Silence, talk and in-betweens: East Asian Students' Responses to Task Challenge in an Australian University" by Dat Bao, reports on an interview study in which he asked students to describe the reasons for their choice of speech, silence or what he calls "in-between" combinations in which speaking is preceded or followed by reflection, in relation to particular tasks. He highlights the importance of "the productive silent moment" (p.31). This was especially interesting in relation to "tasks which require alternation between silence and talk" such as problem-solving or discussion. For these, most students preferred an "in-between" mode such as self-talk or whispering to one's neighbor, in other words "neither public talk nor complete silence" (p.27). Bao points out that these choices relate to the ecology of the classroom, including peer dynamics and teacher factors, and calls for teachers to monitor more carefully: "to allocate processing time, monitor it well, follow up on it in a timely manner,

demonstrate receptivity and organize discussion." (p.29). One interesting finding was that students generally try to adapt to the communicative norm of the host country (p.30).

Bao suggests that tasks should include instructions about learning strategies or performance strategies which incorporate time for thinking and rehearsal (p.31). His paper offers the strongest reminder that silence is an essential concomitant to meaning making in the classroom. "Pedagogy founded on a profound understanding of productive silence can liberate learners from the constraint of having to produce impulsive, low-quality participation." (p.32). This statement is quite inspiring. However, the reader has to remember that the interviewees were all postgraduate students on master's degrees in education. The same strategies might not work successfully with teenagers in compulsory English classes with little knowledge of English. Secondly, the use of L1 was not discussed, but presumably when students are planning how to do a cognitively challenging task, L1 talk is one of the resources which they might use.

The other chapters in the book are set in EFL rather than ESL contexts, and many of the authors mention the social norms of deference to the teacher and allegiance to the group as creating a cultural tendency to silence. Chapter 5 "Examining L2 Learner' Silent Behavior and Anxiety in the Classroom using an Approach based on Cognitive Behavioral Theory" by Kate Maher gives striking insights into a single learner who suffered from extreme anxiety about speaking English. During the course of work as a learning advisor, Maher had the chance to prepare an intervention to help the student to analyze the reasons for her anxiety and identify behavioral changes which she could implement. This chapter exemplifies the potential of a single case study to reveal insights which are highly relevant to teachers and learners. If we have never agonized over our self-expression in a foreign language, it is hard to realize how frequently classroom silence may be the result, not of laziness or stupidity, but of debilitating anxiety. Here is Maher's interviewee: "I stayed up until 2 am practicing what I wanted to say, but when I went to class and sat with my group, I looked at their faces and imagined what they were thinking about me. Then it was gone. I didn't speak." (p.80).

During the course of four interviews, the researcher created a visual model to help the student clarify her beliefs, thoughts and feelings in the moment of stopping speaking or deciding not to speak. (p. 95). The diagram has a space for "feared

predictions", "self-focus image", "safety behaviors" and "somatic and cognitive problems". Maher explains the theory from Cognitive Behavior Therapy which underlay her intervention. After analyzing thoughts and behaviors, one can look for alternative behaviors and explanations, offering a way out of the cycle of anxiety. In addition, Maher asked the student to make a graph showing how her confidence fell during the group work with classmates who made her shy, and increased again next day. This kind of task helped the student to realize that the anxiety is limited in scope, and to expand the thoughts which do not lead to anxiety (p.99). Such an approach might be difficult to realize in class, but approaches or tools from language advising can be used if there are supportive relationships between classmates, or in one-to-one situations if teachers notice that a particular student needs help with anxiety. In addition, the chapter is a salutary reminder of just how deeply some students may fear that speaking out will expose them to censure or ridicule, and refrain from speaking, not due to laziness or apathy but due to fear.

East Asian Perspectives on Silence is highly recommended to everyone teaching in East Asia. It is hard to do justice to the book in a relatively short review. That said, there are two areas of which would be interesting to see more consideration in relation to silence: mindfulness approaches, and the question of proper use of L1. Movements such as mindfulness-based teaching (Zeilhofer, 2020) and mindfulness in language advising (Mozzon-McPherson, 2019) offer helpful approaches to understanding silence and overcoming the barriers which lead to unproductive silence. Secondly, it seems that the use of L1 was not seriously considered as a possible tool for facilitating classroom learning. Although outside the scope of this book, there is evidence that L1 can help put students at ease and signify a willingness to accept their culture, reducing the defensiveness which some groups feel about foreign culture and language. (Carson and Kashihara, 2012, p. 42). In addition, as Carson and Kashihara, remark, "L1 can assist when L2 examples cannot alleviate confusion." (Carson and Kashihara, 2012, p. 48). I mention these points, not because they seem to be omissions from the book but to give a sense of how, after reading *East Asian Perspectives on Silence*, I found myself thinking about silence in a new way and making new connections.

References

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