

Understanding Silence and Reticence: Ways of Participating in Second Language Acquisition.
Dat Bao. London: Bloomsbury. 2014. Pp. 229.

For many language teachers, a significant amount of classroom time is dedicated to helping students speak. Generally silent or reticent students are often encouraged to participate and speak more; their silence is deemed counterproductive and/or non-participatory. Because of this, much second-language acquisition (SLA) research has been dedicated to talk in the classroom and ways that it can be improved and encouraged by both students and teachers alike. However, while talk is an important element of a second-language (L2) classroom, silence can be equally important. In *Understanding Silence and Reticence: Ways of Participating in Second Language Acquisition*, Dat Bao takes a close look at this often neglected element of the L2 classroom and offers insights into the role of silence in SLA.

After outlining the rationale for the book, Bao presents six case studies focused on Australian, Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Philippine, and Vietnamese perspectives on silence. Bao chose to investigate the Chinese, Japanese, and Korean contexts because each has a “high degree of tolerance” (p. 6) of silence and diverse ways of utilizing silence. The remaining three contexts were inspired by Bao’s own experiences with students from these backgrounds and offer a variety of perspectives. One of the greatest strengths of the book is its use of both English and non-English language resources. English language research into silence is relatively limited, but in many of the contexts included in the book, silence has been more thoroughly investigated. This fact, and Bao’s personal research lens, helps him expand the discourse on silence and reticence in SLA. The book concludes with a comparison of the case study data and offers insights on how silence can be used pedagogically.

In Chapter 1, “Repositioning Silence,” Bao discusses silence and its perceived unimportant role in L2 learning. In accordance with Granger (2012), he argues that silence should not be viewed as an absence of talk, but as a means of communication on its own. Notably, Bao distinguishes between *silence* and *reticence*, arguing that silence has many positive traits and uses. Silence is a controlled, voluntary action that is vital for interpersonal discourse; in the classroom, it is a skill that needs to be acquired, and it can be used to build up language proficiency. Reticence, conversely, often suggests difficulty in activating language skills and is a barrier to communication. Silence and reticence can overlap, and both are complex elements of language education. Bao concludes the chapter by noting that within SLA, silence remains an under-explored issue.

Chapter 2, “Australian Perspectives on Silence,” reports on a case study of 10 Anglo-Australian university students and their utilization of silence in L2 learning. Bao notes that in the Australian context, much like the North American context, silence is viewed as indicating a lack of critical thinking, social phobia, inhibition, and a host of other negative traits. Generally speaking, in most Western contexts, talking and interacting are privileged, and even necessary, elements of learning (Granger, 2012). However, Bao’s interview data yielded surprising results as the majority of the students counted silence as a significant tool for L2 processing. Despite being highly verbal in their first language, many of the participants felt that silence was useful to them in trying to learn a second language. For example, some of the participants reported that they silently formulated responses in their minds and imagined interactions as ways of enhancing

their L2 learning. Going against the common stereotype, the Anglo-Australian participants were similar to the East Asian participants (discussed in the following chapters) in how they viewed and utilized silence for L2 learning.

Chapter 3 is entitled “Chinese Perspectives on Silence.” While silence has traditionally been valued in China, reforms in education have recently questioned the relationship between silence and Chinese students’ communicative ability, both at home and abroad. Bao surveyed 112 university students in mainland China and followed up with 11 interviews to determine how participants viewed silence. His findings indicate that silence was perceived as both useful (e.g., provides space for thinking and signifies interest in and respect for others) and detrimental (e.g., signifies timidity and participation avoidance) for the participants in the L2 classroom. Two significant insights were generated. The first is related to “saving face.” While past studies have suggested that Chinese students avoid speaking in order to avoid embarrassment (Jackson & Liu, 2009), Bao’s study found that many of the students used silence in order to not embarrass their classmates, showing less concern for themselves. The second insight generated from the participants is the need to investigate teacher performance and methodology as a cause of silence or interaction. Many of the participants noted that they struggled in transitioning from high school, where they were generally passive and silent learners, to university, where they were expected to be much more vocal. Bao argues that teachers must take this difficult transition into consideration. Other authors have emphasized the importance of these factors in causing students’ silence and reticence (Lee & Ng, 2010), and Bao argues that more research is needed.

Chapter 4 turns toward “Japanese Perspectives on Silence.” In Japan, silence is deeply-rooted and often praised as a virtue. For this case study, Bao interviewed 10 Japanese students studying at Australian universities. Overall, the participants expressed the belief that foreign languages can be learned through silence. However, many of the participants were able to adjust their learning styles to suit the more verbal Australian classroom. Instead of perceiving silence as a negative symbol of withdrawal, the participants displayed a high level of mature thinking as they adapted their behavior. These insights are new to the literature as previous work on Japanese students, both in Australia and in Japan, reports on participants who struggled to communicate in more oral dominant classrooms (Ellwood & Nakane, 2009; Harumi, 2011). Similar to other findings reported in the book, this chapter offers new perspectives and results that break away from previous research.

“Korean Perspectives on Silence” are analyzed next in Chapter 5. Bao interviewed eight students studying at a Korean university to learn about their attitudes and experiences with silence and L2 development. Six of the participants reportedly sought to move away from silence and become more verbal, and many felt that silence is a drawback of the Korean education system. Overall, the participants sought more learner autonomy in a dynamic classroom that would allow space for ample speaking and reflection. Instead of having information merely handed down to them by an instructor, the participants expressed a desire for a classroom where they shared responsibility with the teacher for creating a more verbal environment. These results do not connect with the common view of “silent” East Asian students; instead, the Korean students in this study are portrayed as wanting to be more verbally interactive in their university classrooms. Bao echoes the arguments of other authors to avoid stereotyping Korean and other Asian learners (Granger, 2012).

In Chapter 6, the focus turns away from students and toward teachers in “Philippine Teachers’ Use of Silence.” For this case study, Bao focused on the decision-making of teachers during class time. Utilizing classroom observations and stimulated recall with two teachers, the main finding of the study was that teacher silence is filled with inner speech focused on altering in-class practice to improve pedagogy. While learner silence is often self-centered (i.e., focused on comprehension or preparing L2 structures before speaking), teacher silence is more outwardly focused and looks to accommodate students in the class (i.e., allowing time for students to speak and assessing classroom atmosphere). Bao argues that these findings have implications for teacher development; future educators need to be aware of silence as a tool that can mediate teaching behavior.

Chapter 7 examines “Vietnamese Perspectives on Silence.” Although Vietnam is a country with a long history of valuing silence, there has been a recent push for more verbalization in the classroom. Utilizing data from interviews with 10 Vietnamese students, Bao found that silence was useful to participants for processing target language structures. Instead of viewing silence as a forced, passive behavior, they saw it as a voluntary and helpful language learning tool. The data show a relationship between productive use of silence and quality speech. Bao argues that silence and speech have benefits for these participants; silence has a social nature, and both teachers and students are responsible for utilizing silence as a learning resource.

In the last chapter, “Implications of Silence for SLA and Pedagogy,” Bao offers a final analysis and implications for some of his findings. Notably, he found no significant distinction between the Anglo-Australian students and Asian students with regard to how silence was perceived and employed in L2 learning. While learner silence and reticence may not be distinguishable to the teacher, as Bao points out, the former becomes the latter when it is not intended or is imposed on the learner, for example, as a result of low language proficiency or poor pedagogy. Not all of the participants admitted to experiencing reticence as defined by Bao, but the data did show that the participants used silence as an L2 processing tool. Unlike reticence, Bao argues that silence is a choice which results from a variety of learner needs (social, cognitive, emotional, and so on). It is context dependent, and much like talk, it can be of high or low quality and can be overused. Instead of viewing silence and talk as polar opposites, the two should be reassessed as tools that can work collaboratively. The case studies point to the possibility of maximizing learning through silence and talk, but the author argues for the necessity of “silence literacy acquisition” (p. 168) in order for this to be fully achieved. In other words, much like students learn to speak, they also must learn the complexities of silence.

To conclude, Bao introduces Silent Engagement Pedagogy (SEP). As he notes, SEP does not aim to promote silence, but instead to utilize silence in the L2 classroom, like many of the participants in the book’s case studies. Instead of having activities that are pre-determined as “silent” or “talking” activities, he argues that students should be allowed to carry out the tasks in the way that they see fit, and teachers and textbooks need to accommodate this. Silence and talk should be treated as equal in the classroom, but with the realization that students always need to be challenged to escape their comfort zones.

Bao's book is a worthy contribution to the literature. Written in a clear style, it stresses the usefulness of silence and engages the reader to reassess his/her view of silence in SLA. Avoiding cultural stereotypes, Bao outlines numerous ways in which non-verbal activity can be used to enhance language acquisition. One criticism of the book relates to the methods of data collection used in the case studies. While they offer a variety of data, the methods employed were generally interviews and questionnaires. Only in the chapter on Philippine teachers were observations utilized as well as interviews. Interpreting silence is a difficult task; one cannot read the participants' minds. However, by observing a class and watching students' non-verbal cues, or perhaps by conducting stimulated recalls with participants, more diverse data could be gathered to determine if students truly use silent periods productively in class. The interviews and questionnaires provided useful data, but they have their limitations.

A second criticism is in regard to the lack of information on how silence can be used positively in a communicative classroom. Bao explicitly states that he is not promoting silence, and he offers a potential model for incorporating reflective silence in the classroom, but more information on how silence can fit with highly verbal communicative classrooms is needed. For example, many of the case study participants noted that they often prepare L2 structures in their head before speaking. In a communicative classroom, it could be difficult, and even problematic, if students only pay attention to their inner speech instead of the conversations and interactions going on around them. More information on how to deal with such issues would have been helpful.

Despite these minor criticisms, the book is a valuable contribution to the growing literature on silence and reticence. As borders become blurred and students and teachers travel to a variety of contexts to learn and teach, a greater understanding of silence and reticence will become more and more vital. This book offers excellent insights for both the novice SLA student and the seasoned researcher.

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