The Communicative Function of Silence in the Classroom

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Abstract

This paper deals with teacher and student silences in the classroom. The data obtained from 72 English teachers and 151 Arab students learning English in schools in Jordan clearly show that the silences of both teachers and students are functional and meaningful. Teacher and student silences express a wide range of meanings including attraction of attention, regaining orderliness, frustration, approval of reprimand, involvement in classroom activities, and carelessness. Furthermore, these meanings seem to be similar to a large extent to those meanings discussed in Gilmore (1985); this similarity is tentatively interpreted as pointing in the direction of a certain universality in the uses of silence in the classroom.

1. Introduction

Silence has been established as a means of communication expressing a variety of functions. For instance, investigations done by Saville-Troike (1985), Tannen (1985), Maltz (1985), Saunders (1985), Nwoye (1985), Lehtonen and Saajavaara (1985), and Philips (1985) demonstrate the nature of silence cross-culturally and the varied positive and negative functions of silence including respect, a sign of positive social rapport among intimates, defensiveness in the sense of "omitting to say something negative" (Tannen 1985:97), politeness (ibid:97,106), thoughtfulness, shyness, self-control, "management of strong but problematic emotions" (Saunders 1985:165), hostility, anger, deferred action, avoidance, aggression, anxiety, submission to an authority, consent, approval, and disagreement.

Such studies evidently indicate that part and parcel of understanding the process of communication or the message being conveyed is awareness of the variety of social functions demonstrated via silence experienced in a given interactional discourse. Consequently, for us to be able to develop and acquire communicative competence or communicative patterns in various settings and in different human languages, we should be aware of the social rules governing the process of communication transmitted not only verbally but also nonverbally.

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One setting among others is the classroom in which silence is always practised to express a variety of meanings and functions by both teachers and learners. Such functions as respect for the teacher, anger, self-control, and discipline are very rarely explored in relation to silence mainly because research in the language classroom has tremendously been concerned with either the linguistic competence and performance of learners (see, for example, Richards 1974, Scott and Tucker 1974, and Mukattash 1984 and 1986) or their communicative competence (see Hymes 1964 and Cazden, John and Hymes 1972, to mention only a couple of works out of hundreds on the topic). In this respect, Gilmore (1985:139) states that students should not only demonstrate academic knowledge but "must also know when and how to display that knowledge according to socially acceptable rules of classroom interaction." Despite the fact that these works have provided us with significant insights into the teaching-learning process, they have not looked upon one feature of classroom interaction: silence.

Attempting to fill in this gap, Gilmore (1985) studied the use of the silent, nonverbal communicative behavior of both teachers and students in an elementary school in a low-income black urban community. Based on observations, interactions, interviews, notes and audio tape recordings, his data indicate that silence is used as a means to an end. Teacher silence expresses a
variety of meanings, such as 'pay attention to the teacher', 'what you are doing is not acceptable', 'get attention and class cohesion', 'maintain an orderly interaction', 'maintain and regain the orderliness of the lesson structure', 'keep control', 'slow down an activity', 'interrupt or stop the pressure', and 'express strong disapproval, frustration, and a sense of loss of control' (P. 147). Furthermore, teacher silences are displayed or accompanied by body signals like a tight jaw or blushing, gestures, sounds like slamming a door, clapping hands and slapping a book down on the desk or table, and sighs. In brief, teacher silence is mainly meant to keep control via showing anger and frustration. All such meanings are intended to teach students appropriate rules that they should not violate at all.

Concerning student silence, Gilmore maintains that student silences also express different meanings. They can indicate student cooperation and involvement in the classroom activity, avoidance of confrontation with other students, anger, hostility, paying or getting attention to a student, and disapproval of what is taking place in the classroom. Student silences are marked with head downward, arms crossed at the chest, legs spread wide, desks pushed away, a quizzical expression around the eyes, a smile, or even a giggle (P. 149). Consequently, student silence, in general, is a marker of good control, a well-run classroom, and submissiveness to authority (i.e., the teacher).

Since Gilmore’s study is the only one that has so far, to the best of our knowledge, dealt with classroom silence, it is evident that more research is still needed in this area. This kind of research is quite significant. It helps both teachers and students to become aware of why they practise silence in the classroom. They thus become familiar with the various meanings of silence in that particular context. This awareness teaches students in particular the socially acceptable rules of behavior governing nonverbal communication. Finally, "silence and nonverbal behavior are particularly important in classroom interactions because much of student emotional communications must take place without talk." (Gilmore 1985:143).

The purpose of the present study is to examine the functions of both teacher and student silences in the classroom. This study will supplement Gilmore’s study and will attempt specifically to answer two basic questions. First, what are some of the situations in which Arab teachers and students resort to silence? Second, what are the meanings of the silences of Arab teachers and students?

This study is different in several aspects from Gilmore’s work. First, the latter was carried out in an elementary school in an urban black community in America; the former took place in six rural preparatory schools (Grades 8-9) in the northern part of Jordan, an Arabic-speaking country. Second, unlike Gilmore’s school, where teachers are both black and white, the Jordanian teachers who participated in this study belong to the same ethnic group (Arabs). Third, while Gilmore’s study got its data in and out of school by means of personal observations, interactions, field notes and audio tape recordings, this study has used a questionnaire (as we will illustrate below) as a means of collecting required information. Finally, the two studies differ in terms of the culture of the subjects; as we all know, though there are some similarities, there are more differences between Arabic and American cultures, a fact which may or may not influence the process and meanings of the silent, nonverbal communication.

2. Sample

The sample of the study consisted of 72 teachers and 151 students (a total of 223 subjects). All subjects taught/studied in preparatory (basic) schools in the northern rural area of Jordan (Irbid Governorate). Prior to the administration of the study, the teachers had taught English in various Jordanian schools for an average of 8 years. The students were eighth and ninth graders; their ages ranged between 14 and 15 years, with the average being 14.5 years. The sample consisted of 55 male and 96 female students.
3. Instrument

To collect the data for this study, two questionnaires were utilized. The first, consisting of ten items, was intended to identify the functions or uses of silence practiced by English teachers. The second questionnaire, also consisting of ten items, was meant to identify the meanings of student silence. Each questionnaire (see Appendix for a full text) incorporated ten different situations, some of which were adapted from Gilmore (1985), in which silence is practiced to serve a given purpose. Each situation is followed by three alternative meanings of silence (a, b, and c) out of which the subjects are to choose the alternative representing the meaning of silence in that situation. Finally, all the responses were converted to percentages for convenience and ease of reference (see Tables 1 and 2 below).

4. Administration of the Study

The study was administered as follows. The researchers themselves distributed the teacher silence questionnaire to the teachers concerned. They met the teachers over a period of two weeks, talked with them about the significance and purpose of the study, and asked them to respond to all the items objectively and carefully.

Of the teachers who responded to the questionnaire, six (from different schools) volunteered to administer the student silence questionnaire. Prior to distributing the questionnaire, those teachers had told the students about the purpose of the study and urged them to answer questions objectively. Finally, all the respondents were assured that their responses would be kept confidential and would only be used for the purpose of the present study.

5. Results and Discussion

In general, the results of the questionnaire reveal certain facts. First, they represent a further confirmation that silence is functional and that its functions can be either positive or negative. Second, they uncover a wide-ranging variety of meanings or interpretations of silence by both teachers and students. Teachers' silence, for instance, means a reminder to sit down, a call to orderliness, making students stop chatting, seriousness, reprimand, and other functions, as we shall see in section 5.1 below. Students' silence, on the other hand, has such diverse functions as submission to teacher, avoidance of confrontation, agreement with the teacher, ignorance, anger and dissatisfaction, among other meanings. Third, these meanings rely heavily, as indicated in Gilmore (1985), on situational and contextual cues. For instance, the same silence can be interpreted differently and, sometimes, in a diametrically opposed manner (e.g. attentiveness versus carelessness) if the situation differs. Finally, the results of this experimental study seem to be largely in agreement with Gilmore's findings which are primarily based on observations and impressions, in spite of the fact that the subjects of our study (Arab Jordanians) are, as mentioned above, ethnically and culturally different from Gilmore's subjects (poor urban black Americans). This may point in the direction of a certain universality (that might still need further confirmation) concerning the meanings of silence in the classroom.

5.1. Teachers' Silence

The results of the questionnaire concerning the meanings of teacher's silence in the Jordanian classroom as interpreted by the teachers themselves are shown in Table 1. As observed above, the change in situation/context seems to have a great impact on the meanings of silence.

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In three (1-3) out of ten situations, however, there has been agreement that the teacher's silence is meant to remind unruly students to sit down or sit quietly. In situation 1 (see Appendix for a full explanation of each situation), the teacher enters the classroom and keeps silent for a while because students are out of their seats. 86.1% (62 out of 72) of the teachers have responded that this silence is meant to be a reminder to the students to keep quiet. Nine respondents, representing 12.5% of the sample, have interpreted this silence as meaning calmness and self-control, whereas one teacher (1.4%) has attributed it to anger. The views of the large majority of the respondents are in full agreement with Gilmore's (1985) findings in a similar situation to 1. In a further development to situation 1, (i.e. in situation 2), the students are still out of their seats; the teacher shouts at them and then keeps silent. 31 subjects (43.1%) have interpreted this silence as a reminder to the students to remain silent, as opposed to 26 (36.1%) who see in it a sign of self-control; only 15 respondents (20.8%) have interpreted it as a sign of anger. The respondents' views here contrast with Gilmore's findings, which attribute this kind of silence to anger. The confusion of our respondents to this question is probably due to the fact that the Arabic equivalent of the word 'still' was inadvertently left out in the questionnaire given to them. This omission made them think of this situation as a new one rather than a follow-up to the situation in 1. In situation 3, the students make noise while the teacher stands in front of the class holding a book. Most of the subjects (53 of them, i.e. 73.6%) have confirmed Gilmore's observations that this silence is meant to be a reminder for the students to sit silently. 15 (20.8%) of them have interpreted this silence as a sign of anger, while only four (5.6%) have said that it is due to the acceptance by the teacher of the students' noise.

In situation 4, where some students are talking while the teacher is explaining the lesson, 44 respondents (61.1%) have interpreted the teacher's silence as intended to make students stop chatting. This is also in agreement with Gilmore's findings. However, 15 respondents (20.8%) have viewed this silence as a sign of anger and three (4.2%) have regarded it as tolerating the students' behavior; 10 subjects (13.9%) gave no answer to this situation.

In both situations 5 and 8, the teacher's silence has been interpreted as aiming at holding students' attention. In situation 5, the teacher keeps silent when he stands near four students who have been playing with pens. 44 respondents (61.1%) have opted for the interpretation given above, thereby confirming Gilmore's findings. 27 subjects (37.5%) have, however, indicated that this silence is a means to make the students quiet and orderly, while one respondent (1.4%) has seen in this silence the teacher's frustration. In situation 8, the teacher interrupts his teaching and keeps silent while some students are arguing with each other. 57 respondents (79.2%) have seen in the teacher's silence a means to make them pay attention to him/her. Their views agree with Gilmore's observations. On the other hand, 9 subjects (12.5%) have considered that the teacher, through silence, wants to avoid confrontation with the students, while 6 people (8.3%) of the sample have thought that the teacher is waiting till the argument is over.

In situation 6, where the teacher with a tight jaw keeps silent and looks up because some students start laughing while he is teaching, the respondents were divided almost equally in their interpretation of the teacher's silence: 37 (51.4%) have seen in this silence a sign of seriousness, while 34 (47.2%) have considered it as a means to regain orderliness; one subject (1.4%) has regarded it as approval of the students' behavior. Gilmore's findings indicated that the teacher's silence in this situation is intended to regain orderliness. While 47.2% of our respondents have agreed with Gilmore's finding, 52.8% have disagreed with it, and 1.4% have indicated, as mentioned above, that this silence represents the teacher's seriousness.
The teacher's silence accompanied by staring, when three students are talking to each other instead of doing the exercise like other students (i.e., situation 7), has been interpreted by 57 subjects (79.2%) as meaning reprimand. Only one respondent (1.4%) has seen in it approval of what the students are doing, and 14 (19.4%) have regarded it as a means to keep control and discipline. Nonetheless, the views of the majority of our respondents in this situation confirm once more Gilmore's findings.

In situation 9, where the teacher keeps silent when very few students can answer an easy question on English word-formation, frustration is the main interpretation of the teacher's silence. Indeed confirming Gilmore's findings, 58 respondents (80.6%) have opted for this interpretation, while 12 (16.7%) have chosen satisfaction, and no respondent has interpreted it as meaning hostility (choice b, see Appendix).

The teacher's silent staring at students who have been smiling without a reason, in situation 10, has been interpreted by a large majority (69 respondents, representing 95.8% of all subjects) as indicating dissatisfaction. Two respondents (2.8%) have opted for frustration and only one (1.4%) has chosen satisfaction. The large majority of our respondents have agreed with Gilmore's findings.

Interestingly enough, the various meanings given to teacher's silence in the various situations discussed above seem to agree to a large degree with Gilmore's interpretations. Except in situations 2 and 6, the majority of the respondents have, in fact, opted for the meanings given in Gilmore (1985). Needless to say, the subjects were completely unaware of Gilmore's study. As indicated above, the different meaning given to the teacher's silence in situation 2 may have been due to an inaccurate formulation of the situation in the Arabic version which the subjects relied on to complete the questionnaire. As for situation 6, the difference in interpretation was not very decisive as 47.2% of the respondents have agreed with Gilmore's interpretation while 52.8% have disagreed with it.

5.2. Students' Silence

The results of the questionnaire concerning the meanings of students' silence in the Jordanian classroom as interpreted by the students themselves are given in Table 2 below. As with teacher's silence, change in the situation/context here too seems to induce a change in the meaning of silence. Although some of the meanings attributed to silence by the respondents are related or similar, yet different meanings have been given to silence in the different situations. Moreover, except in situations 5 and 8 (and, perhaps, in the undecisive situation 2), the respondents' views seem to be in agreement with Gilmore's findings.

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In situation 1, 136 respondents out of a total of 151 (90.1%) have indicated that the students' silence while the teacher is explaining a poem means attentiveness; eight (5.3%) have indicted that it means anger, and seven respondents have attributed this silence to carelessness.

In situation 2, the teacher is rebuking a student for having interrupted the flow of the lesson (e.g., he laughs loudly); the student keeps silent with a smile and a bowed head. Although a relative majority, 74 respondents representing 49% of the elicited group, have agreed with Gilmore's findings
that this kind of silence means submission to the teacher, yet 73 respondents (48.3%) have interpreted it as meaning disobedience and four students (2.7%) have indicated that it means attentiveness. In other words, 77 respondents (51%) have disagreed with Gilmore's observations in this particular situation, but their division into two groups (3 opting for disobedience and four for attentiveness) makes the group of 74 who have opted for "submission to the teacher" the largest single group, albeit by a slight margin.

Situation 3 is about silence during or following a violent behavior. When the teacher asks two students who have been hitting each other to stop this behavior, one acquiesces and keeps silent while the other refuses to do so. 98 (64.9%) respondents have interpreted the first student's silence as meaning avoiding confrontation with his classmate, 26 subjects (17.2%) have seen in it a will to confront the classmate, 25 (16.6%) have regarded it as approving of what is going on, and two (1.3%) have failed to supply an answer.

An overwhelming majority (149 respondents representing 98.7% of the sample) see in the students' silence in situation 4 which examines the students' silence when the teacher comes in as a sign of good control of the class by the teacher. Only one respondent (0.7%) sees in it carelessness on the part of the students. No student has opted for choice b (see Appendix), which includes the answer 'anger'.

The subjects have, however, ostensibly disagreed with Gilmore's findings concerning the meaning of silence in situation 5. In this situation, the respondents have been interpreting the meaning of the students' silence when the teacher reprimands them (e.g. shouting at them because they have not done the assignment). In fact, 103 subjects (68.2%) have considered it as approval of the punishment, while 30 (19.9%) have regarded it as meaning anger and hostility, and 17 respondents (11.3%) have seen attentiveness in it. In Gilmore's study, this kind of silence is seen as a sign of anger and hostility.

Conversely, the majority of the subjects (137 representing 90.7%) agree with Gilmore's findings and interpret the meaning of silence in situation 6 as involvement in the classroom activity. In this situation, the students' silence is weighed when the teacher is discussing some grammatical rules. Twelve respondents (7.95%) have regarded this silence as a sign of ignorance while only two (1.3%) have seen hostility in it.

The student's silence when the teacher asks him/her about the meaning of a word in situation 7 is interpreted by 133 subjects (88.1%) as ignorance. On the other hand, 16 respondents (10.6%) have seen in it a disapproval of the teacher's question and one (0.7%) has said it expresses anger.

Situation 8 seems to have been the most confusing for our respondents as their answers to the three choices are almost evenly distributed. In this situation, the teacher tries to put an end to a dispute between two students by telling them that the dispute is not important for now and that they should forget it. The two students look angrily at each other and start smiling underlyingly while they listen silently to the teacher. 53 subjects (35.1%) have opted for choice (a) (agreement with what the teacher has said), 50 (33.1%) have chosen answer (b) (carelessness and inattentiveness), and 48 (31.8%) have selected answer (c) (avoiding confrontation with the teacher). Gilmore's observations favor carelessness and inattentiveness as the best interpretation of this kind of silence. The largest single group in our study has favored by a slight margin "agreement with what the teacher has said", while those who have agreed with Gilmore's findings represent the second largest group.

About two thirds of the respondents (98 representing 64.9% of the sample) have seen delayed action in the student's silence in situation 9, which deals with a violent physical action. In this situation, one student hits another student, who cannot hit him back because the teacher comes in.
The victim keeps silent while looking fiercely at that student. Amazingly, about one third of the respondents (47 subjects representing 31.1%) have seen in this kind of silence "respect and admiration for the teacher and the student", while six subjects (3.97) have shown that this situation means avoiding confrontation with the student.

Finally, in situation 10, the teacher punishes the whole class by turning the lights and the air conditioner off. The students' silence is seen as having a negative meaning, as 96 respondents (63.6%) have seen in it anger and dissatisfaction. The students' reaction is to remain silent astonishingly and carelessly. 54 subjects (35.8%) have, however, interpreted this silence as a sign of acceptance by the class of the punishment, while only one respondent (0.7%) has seen in it delayed action.

6. Conclusion

This study has underscored and further confirmed two basic facts about silence. In the first place, it has shown the help of two questionnaires that teacher and student silences in the classroom are meaningful and functional. Depending on the situation or context, a teacher's silence can have both positive and negative meanings such as a reminder to students to sit down and be quiet, attracting students' attention, regaining orderliness, reprimand, frustration and dissatisfaction. Similarly, a student's silence fulfills positive and negative communicative functions that vary with the situation or context. Such functions include: attentiveness, submission to the teacher, avoiding confrontation, good control by the teacher, approval of reprimand, involvement in classroom activity, ignorance, agreement with the teacher, carelessness, delayed action, anger and frustration.

Another fact revealed by the present study is that the meanings of silence in the classroom may be similar in different and distant parts of the world. Indeed, the interpretations of silence in Jordanian classrooms seem to agree to a large extent with the interpretations given by Gilmore (1985) to the silence of teachers and students in an urban, low-income black community in the United States of America. This fact may be tentatively regarded as pointing in the direction of a certain universality in the meanings of silence in the classroom.

At another level, the study opens the way for further investigations regarding the meanings of silence in the classroom. Additional studies are still needed in other parts of the world before we can talk with a certain degree of certainty about the universality of the meanings of silence in the classroom. Moreover, investigations on a larger scale may reveal other functions of silence.

References


Maltz, D.N. 1985. "Joyful Noise and Reverent Silence: The Significance of Noise in
Pentecostal Worship." In D. Tannen and M. Saville-Troike, eds., pp. 113-137

Appendix

The following is a full text of two questionnaires given to Jordanian teachers and their students to elicit opinions about the functions of silence in the classroom (the subjects were given an accurate Arabic translation of the English text):

Teacher Silence

1) When the teacher enters the classroom, he keeps silent for a while because the students are out of their seats. His silence expresses
a) anger  b) calmness and self-control
 c) a reminder to the students to sit down

2) Several students are still out of their seats; the teacher shouts at them and then keeps silent. The silence expresses
a) anger  b) self-control
 c) a reminder to those students to sit down

3) The students make noise while the teacher stands in front of the class holding a book. The teacher tells them to stop making noise, and then he keeps silent. His silence expresses
a) anger  b) acceptance of the students' noise
 c) a reminder to the students to sit silently

4) The teacher starts the lesson while some students are still chatting with each other. He suddenly stops the lesson (reading a passage) and looks up silently. This silence expresses
a) tolerance of what those students are doing
b) anger  c) a means of making the students stop chatting

5) The teacher keeps silent when he stands near four students who have been playing with pens. This silence expresses
a) a means of getting orderliness
 b) a means of holding students' attention
 c) frustration

6) While teaching, the teacher with a tight jaw keeps silent and looks up because some students start laughing. His silence expresses
a) a means of regaining the orderliness of the class
 b) approval of those students' behavior
c) the teacher's seriousness about what he is teaching

7) While the students are doing the exercise, three students are instead talking to each other. The teacher silently stares at them. This silence expresses
a) a reprimand for those students
 b) keeping control and discipline
 c) approval of the students' interaction
8) While some students are arguing with each other, the teacher gives up teaching and keeps silent. The teacher's silence means
   a) asking for attention
   b) avoiding confrontation with students
   c) waiting till the argument is over

9) When the teacher realizes that very few students could answer an easy question on English word derivation, he remains silent for a while. His silence shows
   a) satisfaction b) hostility c) frustration

10) Without saying anything, the teacher stares at the students who have been smiling without a reason. His silence denotes
   a) frustration b) dissatisfaction c) satisfaction

Student Silence

1) The students keep quiet and silent while the teacher is explaining an English poem. Students' silence expresses
   a) anger b) attentiveness c) carelessness

2) The teacher is rebuking a student for having interrupted the flow of the lesson (e.g. he laughs loudly); the student keeps silent with a smile and a bowed head. The student's silence expresses
   a) submission to the teacher b) attentiveness c) disobedience

3) The teacher asks two students who have been fighting to stop this misbehavior. One student stops fighting his classmate and keeps silent; the other student does not do so. The first student's silence expresses
   a) confrontation with the student
   b) avoiding confrontation
   c) approval of what is taking place

4) When the teacher comes in, all the students keep silent and quiet. The students' silence denotes
   a) good control b) anger c) carelessness

5) The teacher starts reprimanding all the students (e.g. shouting at them) because they have not done the assignment. In turn, the students remain silent. Their silence expresses
   a) approval of the punishment
   b) anger and hostility c) attentiveness

6) The students sit silently trying to understand what English grammatical rules the teacher is discussing with them. The students' silence denotes
   a) ignorance b) hostility
   c) involvement in the classroom activity

7) When the teacher asks one student about the meaning of an English word, that student remains silent. His silence indicates
   a) anger b) ignorance c) disapproval of the teacher's question

8) The teacher tries to put an end to a dispute taking place between two students by telling them that the dispute is not important for now and that they should forget it. The two students look angrily at each other and start smiling in secret while they silently listen to the teacher. Their silence indicates
   a) agreement with what the teacher has said
   b) carelessness and inattentiveness
   c) avoiding confrontation with the teacher

9) One student hits another. The other student cannot hit him back because the teacher comes in. This student keeps silent while looking fiercely at that student. The second student's silence indicates
   a) respect and admiration for the teacher and the student
   b) delayed action c) avoiding confrontation

10) The teacher punishes the whole class by turning the lights and the air conditioner off. The students carelessly remain silent. This silence expresses
   a) acceptance of the punishment
   b) delayed action c) anger and dissatisfaction