

SILENCE IN A UNIVERSITY CLASSROOM: BETWEEN REFLECTION AND COMMUNICATION

Assoc. Prof. Dr. Olga Almabekova,

Prof. Dr. Zoya Vasilyeva,

Assoc. Prof. Dr. Irina Bagdasarian,

Siberian Federal University, Russia

ABSTRACT

Prior to the reindeer state-farm foundation in the 1960s there was no scientific approach to the use of reindeer pasture not only in a mountain-taiga zone, but also all over Yakutia. The number of reindeers in the collective herd was small – only 300-500 animals. They all year migrated in traditional places of one kind or another. Thus nomads maintained the ecological balance in the first years of Soviet power until the foundation the large reindeer farms. In connection with the increase in the number of livestock herds of reindeer in Yakutia it was necessary to use reindeer pastures on a scientific basis.

Since then, the scientists have begun to study deer grazing in mountain and taiga zone of Yakutia.

Of course, reindeer grazing has a huge impact on the vegetation of pastures. The scale of the impact of deer grazing on vegetation depends on the daily and seasonal grazing areas per one deer. Therefore, the scale of the impact on the pastures are considered the best in the summer season, which clearly emerges every kilometer concrete used, and shows the load on pastures.

Keywords: reindeer pasture, vegetation, mountain-taiga zone, food supply, valleys, hills, landscape, meadows, deer grazing.

INTRODUCTION

As stated in both international[1] and Russian standards for higher education alongside with professional competences well-developed communicative and reflective skills are desired learning outcomes of university graduates, being general competences or soft skills for professional in a variety of fields.

In their previous papers[2], [3], [4], [5] the authors of this research made grounds for the benefits of integration of communicative and reflective skills in master students' curriculum.

Communication here is looked upon as the bases for the relations of equally responsible participants in the educational process and a fundamental ability to take knowledge and skills from all resources available.

The role of reflection is twofold: as the aim of teaching and learning (well developed thinking and self-management skills) and as teaching and learning tool (reflective tasks, techniques and models).

The aim of this paper is to argue that silence, standing in-between communication and reflection, makes a bridge between them serving the functions of both competences and makes an integral part of a university classroom. Being a natural human ability on the one side, silence needs to be taught if used in its reflective and communicative functions in educational contexts.

METHODS AND MATERIALS

Communication, reflection and silence have a long history of research in a variety of fields: psychology, sociology, management. In our paper, the focus is on educational perspective.

Reflection in education

Three types of reflective skills to be developed in the course for master students in Management have been identified[2].

1. Reflective skills of self-management include goal-setting, planning, self-control and correction. For goal setting, for example, a teacher can provide a life or professional case for the problem in question or asks a learner to recall his life experience. This enhances a learner ability to treat teacher's goals as his/her own and internal motivation. Moreover, step-by-step students learn to be more autonomous and set their own goals. The final reflection at the end of the lesson helps to evaluate if the set goals are achieved. Another helpful reflective ability is being aware of one's own strengths and weaknesses. It makes learning more efficient in terms of time and results.

2. Reflection as a means of knowledge construction is based on step-by-step development of critical thinking. Students gradually develop their conceptual skills advancing from the awareness of a certain issue to the ability to transform information into a different form or evaluation of a certain problem's solution and creative transferring of the idea to another context.

3. In its communicative function reflection is realized in reflective communicative skills [2], like an ability to look upon the situation (life or professional) through your partner's eyes, to play different roles and to find the solution evaluating options together with group mates. These skills bridge communication and reflection.

Communication in education

Generic communicative competence comprises a group of communication skills and abilities to communicate in a variety of life contexts. Special communication competence is profession-specific. A manager, for example, should be able to select an appropriate strategy of communication, to pass the message across to the subordinate and get a feedback and receive the result from the contact[6].

After Petrovskaya[4], we define communication competence as a bank of skills for development of efficient communicative action in a certain life or professional context of inter-personal interaction.

Communication inside the classroom and via information technologies, or using other people as resources has become a tool of teaching and learning, its efficiency depending on successful subject-subject relation between a teacher and students[8].

Communication and reflection

Methodological concepts underlying concurrent development of communication and reflection is the Multiple Intelligence Theory and learning and learner oriented approaches which promote individualisation in teaching and learning with a variety of task formats.

Learning process starts with a teacher considering learners' and own life and background experiences in the field. The new knowledge is build on the available information and former knowledge by comparing and evaluating "former" and "new" knowledge, Russian business reality and business environment. Building on one's life and work experience and knowledge from the related courses, students are encouraged to express their own views in pair and group work without being given the right answers. Thus, in the process of learning new knowledge is constructed in communication alongside with developing thinking skills of analysis, synthesis, evaluation, transferring knowledge and skills across disciplines and cultures as well as self-management skills.

Silence, communication and reflection

Recent researches give grounds for the views that silence is not simply an absence of noise but make a part of communication as important as speech[7]. In linguistic, psychological and business literature the following functions of silence are named: cognitive, social and emotive[12].

In its cognitive function, silence is represented in pauses. They play an important role in successful communication as they allow the speaker (a teacher or a student) time to organize their thoughts and the listener(s) time to understand what the speaker is saying. In this function silence makes a bridge to reflection in terms of thinking skills development and implementation.

Social function of silence means contributing to the creation, or reduction of social interaction. For example, it is better to be silent not to hurt somebody's feelings or in respect to someone's authority, especially in cross-cultural communication. In this function, silence is close to a reflective ability to see a situation through a partner's eyes and know one's strengths and weaknesses.

If you as the speaker, want to produce an impression by making a pause before pronouncing important information or by asking a rhetorical question you use silence in its emotive function. In its emotive function silence makes a strong communicative tool as questions encourage involvement of the audience in the conversation. At the same time when you are asked a question, you explore your own ideas, thus reflecting on them.

Silence in the classroom

According to the British scholar Helen E Lees[8], "silence has historically been used in a classroom for negative reasons: to keep discipline, to allow the teacher to speak and be heard (at the cost of pupil participation)".

In a traditional teaching, learners had to be silent because it is more comfortable for the teacher to do classroom management. As the result, learners associate silence with obeying, a lack of freedom, fear and authority. This is an example of disruptive silence as it weakens student-teacher relationships.

But silence can be productive if used in cognitive, social and emotive functions described in the previous paragraph.

Silence is a powerful tool for teachers in their interaction with students, both in the classroom and when working with individual students. However, most teachers feel uncomfortable being silent or when dealing with student silence. Often student-centered classrooms focus on lively class discussion, where talking equals communicating. But sometimes spoken and heard things do not have much meaning: students are encouraged to make statements simply for the sake of saying something, as they are assessed via the rate of class participation. Students who do not agree but may not say anything are left to question their own ideas in silence.

A good way out is replacing much group discussion with intensive in-class writing and editing sessions. It will de-center teacher authority and re-center student as a writer authority in expressing their views, at the same time providing our students with the valuable experience of learning to think critically through writing. Silence need not always be in opposition to communication. Rather, silence and language are interdependent: Much of what is called “silence” is in fact speech that someone does not wish to hear or does not dare to speak out[5].

Adding silence and periods of reflection to teaching provide a larger number of students – both shy and eager with the opportunity to participate in classroom activities. One student’s silence allows another to speak[9].

Silence teaches students being aware of other person’s position. Practicing communication in everyday and professional situations students become aware that good listeners make fewer mistakes, and comprehend information better and in larger volume.

Silence can be vital in developing creativity[5] and questioning authority in the classroom. The foundation of verbal meaning often takes place in silence. When students do writing tasks they pause from time to time and ask themselves if this is what they mean. The source of the answer is the feelings and mind reflecting in silence.

RESULTS

A qualitative research study was performed involving self-observation of 18 university professors, teaching in a variety of fields – Food and nutrition, Nutritional biochemistry, Human biology, World economics, Customs tariff regulation, Biological physics, Lean production, Computer projecting, English as a foreign language, IT, Probability theory, Metabolism regulation, Logistics, Business planning, History of biology, Physics and chemistry of bioluminescence, Production management, Foundry production, Foundry equipment, Information science – and interviews with them on the issue of silence in the classroom.

The participants reported their feedback on self-observations by identifying different types of silence on the part of teachers and students and reflecting on causes of silence.

Commenting on their use of silence for various purposes in the classroom they named the following:

- Attraction of attention to important information.
- As a signal to think back on background knowledge and experience on the issue.
- As a signal to reflect at the end of the lesson on new knowledge and skills.
- For the discipline and concentration.
- For reflective tasks.
- For creative tasks.
- Pause as a signal for a change in activity or theme.

They suggest that silence can be used productively in teaching and learning for four main functions (Figure 1).

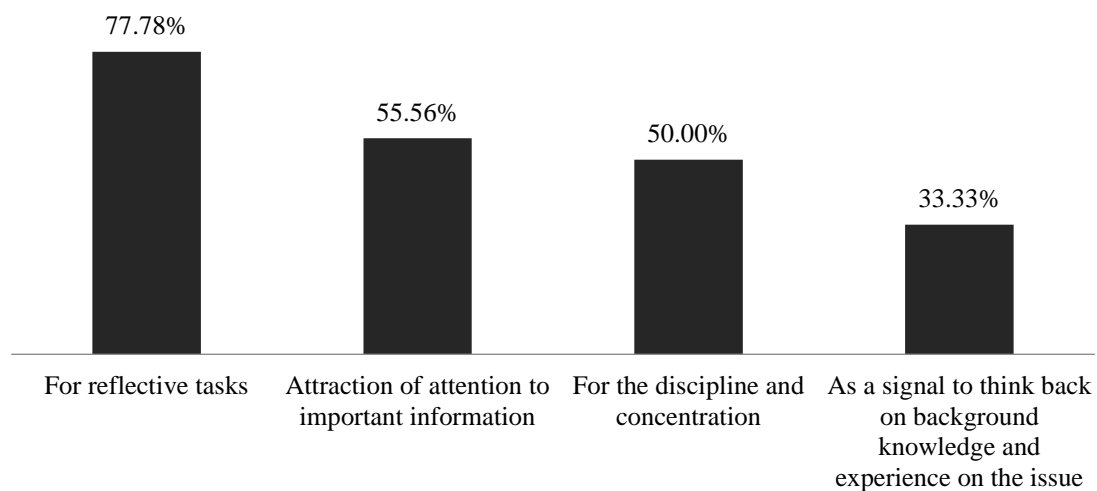


Figure 1 – Most frequent uses of silence in the classroom

Using silence for *attraction of attention to important information* and *as a signal for the discipline and concentration* has communicative nature. While *as a signal to think back on background knowledge and experience on the issue* and *for conducting reflective tasks* have reflective nature.

Three main reasons for students to be silent in the classroom were identified as presented in Figure 2.

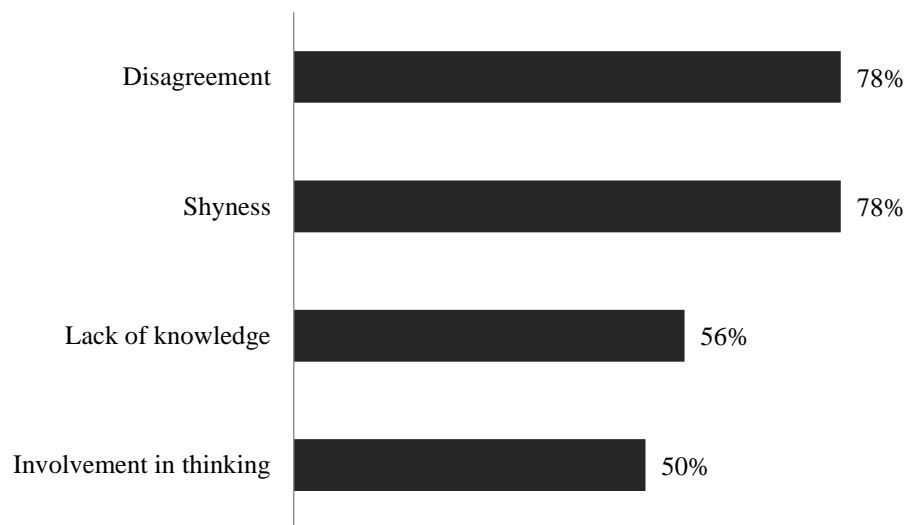


Figure 2 – Types and causes of students' silence in the classroom

As can be seen in the bar chart the only productive reason is *involvement in thinking*. The teachers reported on three main activities conducted in silence (Figure 3).

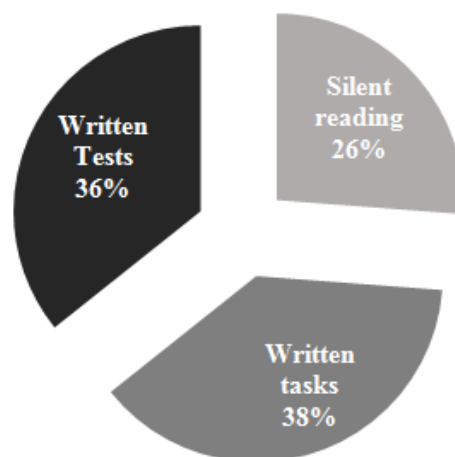


Figure 3 – Learning activities conducted in silence

All of them are reflective in nature and demonstrate productive use of silence.

Below a number of ways to integrate silence in master students' classroom are proposed.

In the beginning, students are provided with the lesson theme written on the board. Their task is to reflect on the background knowledge from their life and/or related subjects they are taught. Alternatively, they can be shown a picture or a famous scientists saying and guess the theme of the lesson. In the end five minutes are spent on final written reflection on the objectives of the lesson being achieved or not, new information recalling, etc.

The next use for silence is to provide time to let the student think. The teachers should understand importance of remaining silent themselves so students could engage in their own discussions or individual meaning creation.

Pause as a manifestation of silence can be used in its emotive function for attracting student attention to the most important information or in its communicative function can signal a transfer from one stage of the lesson to another.

Silent reading can be a make a good habit of reading professional books and promote active reading with periodical asking comprehensive or provocative questions on the part of a student with a teacher being also silent.

Silence can also be used as a tool to constantly renegotiate teacher – student roles in the classroom. Sabine Groote [11], a German teacher provides an interesting example of an effective use of silence to de-center her own authority in the classroom via using an online system called “Interchange” with her students; Sabine makes all assignments and announcements through the computer. Her students work individually and in groups. They “speak” to each other by writing on Interchange, and Sabine rarely gets involved in such discussions. Interchange can be helpful in discussing topics hard to be spoken openly like racism or sexism “without the interfering/moderating/controlling teacher eradicating difference, disagreement and hostility, through use of her position as an authority”.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, using silence can enhance learning and teaching if treated as a bridge between communication and reflection.

Introducing silence in the classroom starts with listening to any concerns, exploring potential challenges and explaining its benefits to students.

Entering into a silent state can bring both a teacher and a student many powerful benefits. It can:

- Put a learner in touch with their mind and enhance individual reflection.
- Perform a target task in reflection.
- Rebalance a tense atmosphere.
- Create a moment for a change in theme or transfer to the next stage of a lesson.
- Another competence development.

There are, however, a number of challenges to integrating silence into a classroom. For instance, do teachers need to get trained to learn how to bring silence into their classrooms? Do they need specific qualifications? Should teachers practice silence in their personal life? Knowing how silence works as a personal and educational tool can enable teacher to train students self-management skills e.g. to concentrate on a target task when an environment is noisy. This research being aimed mostly at teachers’ perspective of silence perception and integrating in teaching, the further research will focus on students’ perspective of using silence in learning.

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