1 Embracing Silence in Education

Silence is a belittled construct. For many years, more scholars have suspected and denied silence than have embraced and understood it. During a conference, when I recommended establishing an academic journal devoted to silence research, one hand raised: ‘Why devote a whole journal to a negative theme?’ Believe it or not, a search in the Education Resources Information Center (ERIC) database of two concepts such as ‘verbal participation in education’ and ‘silence in education’ over the past five years reveals a glaring contrast in the number of outputs. While the former shows 13,136 results, the latter identifies only 281 items (Figure 1.1). Within this search, while the use of speech in teaching and learning returns 4,242 publications, the emphasis on silent reflection reveals the humble number of 72 publications during these five years.

Such an unassertive distribution of silence in educational literature suggests that silence is something to be toned down and repaired rather than maintained and nurtured. In many intellectual beliefs, silence represents backward classroom behaviour. Petress (2001), for example, reasons that those who do not actively speak out during classroom processes ‘are acting unethically’ because ‘silence impedes student learning’ (p. 104). Although such views make up the dominant discourse on silence, some scholars think differently. Caranfa (2004), for example, argues that ‘silence is the very foundation of learning’ (p. 211). When a field involves controversial ideas and conflicting theories, perhaps that field needs more exploration and lucidity.

This overview of the book begins by recommending the inclusion of silence in pedagogy to advance it. As an explanatory entrance to the work, the discussion responds to burning questions, including why silence-inclusive pedagogy is needed and why it remains an underdeveloped area in the field, how silence has historically emerged as a theme and when silence research commenced, what makes silence such a debatable construct in language education, what complications have hindered collective scholarly efforts to consider silence in pedagogy, and, finally, how the book is structured to present what it promises.
1.1 Why Silence and Pedagogy Need Each Other

The title of this book, *Silence in English Language Pedagogy*, captures both imagination and reality – imagination because silence has yet to be a well-established component in pedagogy, at least until now; reality because the appeal for utilising the presence of silence in classroom teaching has been ongoing in the field over the past five decades. Indeed, the 1970s saw early requests for silence to enter education research (Johannesen, 1974; Clair, 1998) with minimal responses for three decades after the appeal. Up until the 1990s, such ideology was still met with negligence when scholars such as Jaworski (1993) put forward the idea that teaching practices should consider learner performance beyond the spoken word; when Stables (1995) commented on how students were suffering from insufficient thinking time in the classroom; and when MacKinnon (1999) disagreed with teachers who measure learner success versus failure based on verbal articulation versus quietness. Recently, there has been a consensus that silence remains an under-theorised and under-researched theme in education (Armstrong, 2007a). It was not until the 2000s that the field began to witness early research efforts to bring justice to this long-neglected theme in language education. This emerging history of silence research will be comprehensively explored in Chapter 3.

To attempt innovating pedagogy, the book concentrates on the process of silence rather than on the moment when silence occurs, that is, dealing more with its in-depth dynamics than its ultimate cause. Furthermore, the work does not solely promote silence as a positive learning construct but depending on the context of discussion also recognises it as an unhelpful condition that requires...
1.2 Silence As an Emerging Theme

change. Refraining from the judgement of whether silence or speech should take priority as the finest classroom behaviour, the work argues that some forms of learning are more compatible with silence than speech. Others seem more attuned to speech than silence while many can be prone to alternation between both modes. There is a fresh expanse of empirical research that confirms this multifaceted understanding (King & Harumi, 2020; Bao, 2020b). These areas will be revisited in Chapter 9 with concrete examples of task types being connected with more or less verbal ways of learning.

For a long time, many researchers have made efforts to exclude silence from pedagogy, as if without silence teaching would go on more efficiently. Some studies, such as those reported by Canary and MacGregor (2008) and Smith et al. (2005), rest upon the belief that learners’ silent behaviour is a mistake in the first place. Silence has often been perceived as low-level learning and a form of disability (Smith et al., 2005). Starting with this presumption, such projects propose instructional therapy to make everybody speak up regardless of why learners are silent and whether their silence plays a role in learning. This research stance, which will be discussed in Chapter 3, represents a major resistance to the integration of silence in teaching methodology. Ironically, while many scholars are trying to eliminate silence, in every classroom silence continues to exist even when talk occurs. Teachers continue to struggle with interpreting learner silence, being unable to decide whether it is part of communication, mental processing, or low engagement. Up until the 1990s, our inability to decode the meaning of learner silence restrained the evolvement of silence-inclusive pedagogy and reduced it to an unrealistic ambition in education.

To be hindered by such a challenge, nevertheless, does not have to discourage English Language Teaching (ELT) educators from trying to utilise knowledge of silence in improving teaching. In many cases, it is the passion for improving the status quo that will defeat the fear of impossibility. Silence needs pedagogy as much as pedagogy needs silence. It needs pedagogy because, every day, numerous reflective learners around the world are failing to be accounted for in lesson planning and their strengths go neglected in the classroom (Jaworski, 1993; MacKinnon, 1999; Caranfa, 2004). Pedagogy needs silence because, without a proper understanding of how soundless learning works, teachers cannot respond to student learning with the right expertise. The dynamics between silence, talk, and pedagogy are so complex that, sooner or later, they must be addressed for pedagogy to move forward with compassion and accountability.

1.2 Silence As an Emerging Theme

Compared with research into other non-verbal constructs in ELT, silence research is a late-developed sibling, evolving decades after its counterparts. For example, research into learning motivation began in the early 1940s
(Weiner, 1990), emotional expressions in the 1950s (Dunning, 1971), language teacher identity in the 1960s (Cheung, Ben Said & Park, 2015), non-verbal communication in the 1970s (Weiner, 1990), authenticity in language teaching in the 1980s (Gilmore, 2007), and consciousness in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) in the 1990s (Gilakjani & Ahmadi, 2011); it was not until the 2000s that silence as a learning paradigm attracted scholarly research efforts (Gibson, 2006). Before that, research on silence in education had been very much one-sided and discriminatory, painting a distorted picture that connected silence with special needs and remedial treatment.

In public discourse, to this day, the silence theme does not seem to enjoy a positive presence in mass media and everyday conversations alike. In most available online resources, inspiring speakers with high expertise either show little interest in silence or perceive it as a harmful phenomenon. For instance, if one browses through a popular talk-video website such as TED: Ideas Worth Spreading and types ‘silence’ into the search engine, out of the first 100 results that come up, only ten mention silence, including:

- The danger of silence
- Break silence for suicide attempt survivors
- My 17-year vow of silence
- Ways of transmuting sound and silence
- Let’s end silence around suicide
- Let’s end silence around abuse
- Sound of forgiveness
- Someone forgets to silence their cell phone
- Hope or motivation hidden in one’s heart
- Silence-inspired design

Out of these, only two seem optimistic, that is, silence inspiration in design and silence as hope; three remain neutral, that is, silence in performing arts, forgiving, and good behaviour. The remaining six talks connect silence with problems such as danger, suicide, restraints, and abuse. If one continues to search for the next 100 and beyond, still not a single speaker connects silence with education. Out of 200 thoughtful ideas that are worth spreading, none states the function of silence as a tool for learning or thinking. This observation denotes the widespread caution around silence as a sensitive theme in public discourse and interest.

In educational discourse, silence rarely has a respected reputation either. Sometimes, I overhear a teacher praise their silent students: ‘My class is very quiet but they are hardworking.’ This compliment happens to imply that it is more common to see hardworking verbal students, but this time good virtue also applies to a quiet group. This reminds me of what a neighbour of mine, when I was living in the United States, once said: ‘I’m proud to see many Black students going to Harvard.’ This seems to suggest that, in my neighbour’s
1.3 Early Appeals for Silence in Education

thinking, normally only white students are considered qualified to go there. These comments, which tend to occur only in casual conversations when people speak their minds, are indeed found in scholarly writing as well. One such example is data discussion from a research project which states that the ‘silent students [in the study] are, despite their silence, quite intellectually active’ (Obenland, Munson & Hutchinson, 2020, p. 256). In the researcher’s mind, typically they are not.

In English language education, likewise, there has been more in pedagogy that cherishes the spontaneous conversationalist and less in it that cultivates the quiet mind. Suppose we do not feel particularly convinced by this observation. Clear evidence for it can be obtained in almost every pedagogy book: if we open a book on the computer screen and perform a word search on the computer keyboard (by Ctrl+F or Command+F) to look for ‘talk’ and ‘silence’ respectively, the outcome will demonstrate the high-frequency appearance of the former and low frequency, or ‘no result’, of the latter. In many cases, when the word ‘silence’ or ‘silent’ is found, it might come with comments such as: ‘Silent students are uninvolved students who are certainly not contributing to the learning of others and may not be contributing to their own learning’ (Smith et al., 2005, p. 9).

Such insights signify patronising research that treats silence as inferior and in need of help. By and large, many empirical projects were, in the first place, rooted in the researcher’s disapproval of silence. These studies do not view speech and silence with an open mind but are designed to prioritise the former over the latter. This standpoint seems to contradict research methodology courses at universities in which lecturers often advise students to be detached from their assumptions in designing research projects. We ask students to stay truthful to non-biased realities irrespective of our egoistic thinking and professional habits. We teach students that ethical research should unfold new ways of seeing the world rather than consolidate pre-existing conceptualisation. Eventually, it should not matter whether silence is seen as golden or deadly; it is down to the integrity of the researcher to explore and present discoveries that please or surprise them as true in context, regardless of what they would prefer to see.

1.3 Early Appeals for Silence in Education

Although scholars in the 1940s began to disturb the idea that silence was being treated as the mere absence of speech (see, for example, Picard, 1948/1952; Baker, 1955), it was not until the 1970s that awareness of the diverse roles of silence became more visible in the discourse (Bao, 2014). Silence evolved into an important theme in the literature of anthropology, psycholinguistics, and communication with the works of Basso (1970), Bruneau (1973), Noelle-Neumann
(1974), and Johannesen (1974), among others that provided insights into the complex meanings of silence and appealed for further research commitment. In one early conceptualisation, silence is classified into three forms, namely psycholinguistic silence, interactive silence, and sociocultural silence (Bruneau, 1973). Psycholinguistic silence refers to hesitation or discontinuity of speech to convey supplementary meanings in speech and to assist the decoding process, very much in the same way as punctuation functions in writing. Interactive silence is employed to acquire attention, reflection, interpretation, and judgement from others, to provide space for thinking, responses, or appreciation, and even to establish or prevent further development of a 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 that can be highly valued and, depending on their contexts of use, might have various communicative functions such as demonstrating acceptance, faith, respect, protest, power, and other social attitudes.

The 1980s continued to see increasing awareness of silence as being shaped by a multiplicity of meanings in speech communication (Tannen & Saville-Troike, 1985), including, for example, a statement of refusal to communicate (Wardhaugh, 1985) or a form of control and resistance in classroom settings (Gilmore, 1985). Despite such attentiveness, for three decades, from the 1970s to the 1990s, few empirical studies addressed the function of silence in communication (Johannesen, 1974; Clair, 1998). During these years, the occasional appeal for empirical investigation into the function of silence in educational realities frequently fell into oblivion.

In recent literature, the concept of learner silence does not necessarily refer to complete quietness but loosely denotes minimal talk during classroom discussion (Remedios, Clark & Hawthorne, 2008). In societies where silence is valued, it is viewed as equally significant to speaking as it provides space for reflection on the communicated word (Zembylas & Michaelides, 2004). It also serves as an indication of respect, harmony, ‘attentive listening and active thinking’ (Liu, 2002, p. 48). In many cases, silence even functions as a form of talk. If talk is sometimes referred to as externalised speech (Ridgway, 2009, p. 49) or interactive speech (Saito, 1992), silence can be the space for articulatory rehearsal mechanism, internalised speech (Ridgway, 2009, p. 49), subvocal articulation (Rayner & Pollatsek, 1989), and internalisation of speech patterns (Mitchell & Myles, 1998).

Scholarly efforts have been made to look at silence and talk in more complex ways than simply treating them as sound and muteness. Dealing with silence in education is dealing with a complex assortment of voices. There has also been a recent effort to interact with the discourse before silence research was conducted. For example, silence has recently been classified into multiple manners and purposes, including confirmation, discussion, debate, social
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chat, lecture, negotiation, critique, inquiry, negation, and so on. As much as talk can fall into meaningful talk, irrelevant talk, high-quality talk, and low-quality talk (Edwards & Westgate, 1987), there can be meaningful, irrelevant, and multiple-quality silence. 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.

Scholarly appeals for taking silence into account in education have been an enduring request for seventy years now. However, only the past two decades truly witnessed responsive research efforts. If most appeals during the 1950s–1990s asked for a consideration of the overall study of silence as a meaning-making mechanism (Picard, 1948/1952, 1963; Scott, 1972; Dauenhauer, 1980; Kalamaras, 1994; Clair, 1998), the yearning for silence research since the 2000s has become increasingly concrete through tangible suggestions for investigating specific areas of pedagogy.

In particular, the teacher’s role in how learners employ silence in learning has received more emphasis (Harumi, 2011). Other requests have been made for researchers to inspect teacher management of turn-taking experiences (Wong & Waring, 2012; Ingram & Elliott, 2015; Karas, 2017), teachers’ practice of silence (Vassilopoulos & Konstantinidis, 2012; Bao, 2014, 2020b), teacher tendency to fill in the silent gap (Walsh, 2011), learner proficiency (Hosoda, 2014), various of types of productive silences (Ollin, 2008), teacher ability to deal with dilemmas (Harumi, 2020), silence as a process of interaction rather than outcome (Gardner, 2007; E. L. Lee, 2007), space for learning (Walsh & Li, 2013), elicitation strategies (Harumi, 2020), the role of interaction modelling (King et al., 2020), peer exclusion (Bao, 2020b), question types (Smith & King, 2017), learner preferences (Bao, 2020b), and cultural expectations (Nakane, 2005; Bao, 2020b; Harumi, 2020), among other factors which might influence the presence and nature of silence. The dynamics of these factors represent endless promising possibilities. Many of them have been minimally responded to in scholarly research efforts while, debatably, other potential factors remain unknown and have yet to be discovered.

Despite the above gaps, many achievements have taken place in the quest for a more profound understanding of silence. Recent contributions to research-based knowledge include the facilitative role of silence in learning (Li, 2001; Granger, 2004; Reda, 2009), the consideration of misperceived silence in communication (Fujio, 2004; Scollon, Scollon & Jones, 2012), the reinterpretation of silent behaviour in multicultural contexts (Harumi, 1999; Nakane, 2007), the dynamics of frustration with silence in intercultural communication (King, 2016; Verouden & Van der Sanden, 2018; Morris & King, 2018), the process of negotiating multiple identities (Morita, 2004), the range of meanings decoded in silent experiences (Harumi, 2011; King, 2013a, 2013b; Bao, 2014),
and the modifiability of learner behaviour (Zhang & Head, 2010; Talandis & Stout, 2015; Yashima, Ikeda & Nakahira, 2016). This list will be expanded in Chapter 3 of the book with qualitative elaborations.

### 1.4 The Challenge of Defining Silence

The conceptualisation of silence ranks among the most mysterious areas of all the non-verbal constructs in ELT. After all the debate and controversy relating to the construct (as will be reviewed in this chapter and comprehensively unpacked in Chapters 2 and 3), it seems impossible to capture silence in any one adequate definition. This is because silence is fluid and can only have comparative, rather than absolute, meanings. Although the literal sense of this concept signifies the absence or inaudibility of sound or words, researchers for a long time have realised that the broader sense of silence does include sound and words in it. For instance, while one person is keeping quiet, others may be speaking out simultaneously, which causes words and silence to overlap in time.

In an online learning context, ways of documenting silence need to be modified so that the conceptualisation of silence as the absence of speech is no longer essential. Instead, silence adopts a flexible stance as it denotes the lack of both written and spoken responses depending on the available choices and features of learning tools. When written communication takes over and dominates the learning environment, the act of silence then refers to non-participation in scripted modes. For instance, if someone posts words on a discussion forum, they should be seen as ‘speaking’. It is when they resist texting or cease to engage in a virtual dialogue that they can be captured as being ‘silent’. Regardless of the context, however, the nature of silence in both virtual and face-to-face settings continues to be equally complex as silence might represent either the unwillingness to contribute or the need to incubate thoughts and prepare for participation.

In face-to-face social settings, silence does not necessarily refer to complete quietness but also represents marginal talk during classroom discussion (Remedios, Clarke & Hawthorne, 2008). In many cases, silence exists as the norm rather than an aberration. We humans spend much more time silent (but mentally active) than we do articulating thoughts. We are private as well as social beings and for many legitimate reasons do not wish to disclose our very thoughts and emotions. Although silence is often considered soundless, it is connected to the spoken word. Even when someone is silent, within the person’s mind there may be an inner voice going on (Tomlinson, 2001b) and that voice, though inaudible to everyone else, is unquestionably audible to the thinker. As Clair (1997, p. 333) expounds, ‘voice is not independent of silence’. With its inseparability from speech, silence can hardly be identified and
conceptualised as a standalone construct. What makes silence even more complex also comes from what happens within the silent space itself. As far as functions of silence are concerned, there exist many views and categorisations which do not see those functions in the same way. The following are a few examples of such views.

Some scholars portray silence according to what it performs in the mind. For example, when silence is perceived as mental rehearsal towards second language (L2) output, according to empirical research by Guerrero (1991), silence takes on seven characteristics: ideational (creating thoughts), mnemonic (memorising words or retrieving them from memory), textual (organising the structure of a text), instructional (applying linguistic rules), evaluative (monitoring and self-correcting language), interpersonal (visualising how to talk with others), and intrapersonal (practising inner speech). Other theorists characterise the functions of silence by connecting it with at least one more element such as communication or gesture. It is then recaptured as eloquent silence, which is intended to express or communicate a meaning (Sifianou 1997; Agyekum, 2002), or semiotic silence, which is coupled with visual elements such as gestures, facial expressions, designs, colours, flowers, and traditional artefacts which serve as ‘silent proverbs’, most of which require cultural knowledge and ability to decode and interpret (Yankah, 1995; Agyekum, 2002, p. 43).

Several theorists prefer to build a dichotomy for silence by framing it in opposites such as active and passive silence (also known as busy or idle silence; Kenny, 2011). The former happens when learners choose to be silent and the latter happens when they are unable or not allowed to speak. There is also a dichotomy between weak and strong silence. The former is a form of punishment imposed on students if they misbehave; the latter, by contrast, allows personalised space for learners to develop interests and learning discovery (Bloom, 2009). Others identify silence by removing the conceptualisation of sound from it altogether, arguing that silence is not about the absence of sound but is about the absence of shared ideas. For example, in today’s social media context, such as in an online forum chat or email exchange, where neither talk nor sound is being created, silence can be identified as not typing ideas in the shared communication space. If we type words such as ‘interaction’ and ‘chat’ into Google search, their meanings often take on a digital connotation. Likewise, the concept of ‘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).

All these conceptualisations come in a wide variety and without consensus. Together, they have unpacked the word ‘silence’ into an endless range of notions, to the extent that makes it less possible for silence to stay as one
concept anymore. Despite all this, there are still scholars who choose to keep the meaning of silence incredibly concise and make efforts to rename silence as something else. Each term arguably denotes a particular stance towards silence, in the sense that silence can become a peculiar tool to be employed for a particular purpose. In my current synthesis, there are fifty interpretive expressions that capture the essence of silence, twenty-two of which denote positive values, eighteen negative values, and ten neutral values. What follows is a list of these expressions, which is open to further expansion.

**Positive ways of capturing silence:** interior language (Picard, 1963, p. 71); activity-involvement consciousness, for example, intended silence in art, music, politics, and religion, etc. (Dauenhauer, 1980); a self-discovery process (Ehrenhaus, 1988); subvocal articulation, that is, the phonological rehearsal of words (Rayner & Pollatsek, 1989); silence as the foundation of learning (Guerrero, 1991; Lantolf, 2000; Caranfa, 2004); internalised speech (Mitchell & Myles, 1998; Ridgway, 2009, p. 49); a form of symbolic rhetoric, that is, implicit expression rather than explicit speech (Kalamaras, 1994); a way of making meaning (Kalamaras, 1994); attentional processing (Schmidt, 1994; Tomlin & Villa, 1994; VanPatten, 1996); mental activity (Wertsch & Stone, 1999); inner voice (Tomlinson, 2001b); attentive listening (Liu, 2002, p. 48); contemplative silence, that is, the use of silence for reflectivity and creativity (Caranfa, 2004, 2006); performative behaviour; that is, silence whose meaning depends on individual behaviour or action (Acheson, 2008); silent speech (Thomas, 2010); complex assortment of voices, that is, different ways of employing silence for various purposes (Bao, 2014, p. 12); ‘inner formulation system’ (Bao, 2014, p. 24); mental rehearsal (Bao, 2014, p. 172); internal output (Bao, 2014, p. 172); input processing; conscious processing (Bao, 2014); mental process (Thomas, 2010); on-task silence (Harumi, 2020; Bao, 2020b).

**Negative ways of capturing silence:** communication avoidance (Kleinmann, 1977); withdrawal behaviour (McCroskey, 1977); failure of language (Tannen, 1985); inadequate ability in self-expression (Chen, 1985; Wu, 1991; Burns & Joyce, 1997); an impediment to communication facility, that is, silence that causes poor communication (Foss & Reitzel, 1988); poor listening skills (Pearson & West, 1991); ‘a state of idle ignorance or unlearning’, that is, silence without a purpose (Jaworski, 1993, p. 69); communication apprehension (McCroskey, 1977; Aitken & Neer, 1993); social withdrawal (Evans, 1996); conflict avoidance (Frymier & Houser, 1997); receiver apprehension, that is, refraining from responding to information for fear of misinterpreting it (Chesebro & McCroskey, 1998); communication breakdown (Yoneyama, 1999); shyness (Cole & McCroskey, 2003); low language proficiency (Nakane, 2005; Tatar, 2005); fear of incompetence (Prentice & Kramer, 2005).