

## Hearing the Silences: Engaging in Rhetorical Listening in the ESL/ELL Composition Classroom

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For as long as I've taught in Higher Education, I have always had a persistent question, one which I am certain many other instructors have reflected on – why are students silent in class? By silence, I refer to those who do not participate verbally in discussions or ask questions, those who attend classes and by the end of semester leave without having said a word. I've always wanted to understand the culture of silent students in my writing classrooms but had never directly tackled the issue beyond informally asking a few students over the years why they were silent. "Why silence?" was a question that resurfaced when I started teaching Advanced English (3211), a first-year honors writing class in the English Department at the University of Puerto Rico-Mayaguez (UPRM), in the fall of 2014. One of the reasons this question resurfaced was because of the variations in the sections that I taught. Try as I might, it seemed I could not turn my 12:30 section into the vibrant students in my 10:30 section. A steady few verbally participated in discussions, but many did not. When I tried to draw out some quiet students by calling on them, they behaved like deer caught in the headlights. They simply did not speak.

### Confronting Silence

Why silence? The question at the back of mind was further compounded by some of what we were discussing in class. While putting our syllabus together for the Fall 2014 semester and

grouping stories, my husband (who also taught some sections of the course) and I realized we had three literary texts which explored silence as a theme. These were Ursula Le Guin's "The Silence of the Asonu," Judith Ortiz Cofer's "Silent Dancing," an essay from her book *Silent Dancing: A Partial Remembrance*, and Edgar Allan Poe's "Silence: A Fable."

One of our objectives in the course was to have students analyze literary works through critical thinking strategies of interpretation and evaluation. In class, we discussed how the humans/tourists who visit the Asonu planet in Le Guin's short story privilege excessive speech, overlooking the benefits of silence. The visitors assume the Asonu are silent because they are either hiding "great wisdom," or are "dumb." They fail to recognize that silence may be a rhetorical choice that the Asonu make. In analyzing the second text on silence, we noted that Cofer's "Silent Dancing" focuses on cultural silencing and its negative effects on Puerto Ricans who had migrated from Puerto Rico to the US during the late 50s and early 60s. When evaluating Edgar Allan Poe's "Silence: A Fable," our third story, it was clear that one of the themes in the "fable" was that human beings fear silence, especially because it forces them towards introspection. Our classroom discussions of these texts led me to a deeper interest in silence. I became interested in research on student silence in the classroom, seeing this as an entry point into my age-old question of why silence.

My teaching experience thus far had been in the English-speaking Caribbean and the US, where I had also had silent students. However, my interest in student silence in Puerto Rico was not just about the topic of silence, but also how student silence operated in a Spanish speaking culture, an environment that was new to me. Unlike many of the Advanced instructors, my

Spanish was very limited. While there was a language difference between me and my students, there were also similarities. I could identify with moving between languages. Like them, I grew up on a Caribbean Island—Saint Lucia, and, like them, I moved between two languages—standard British English, a legacy left to us by our former colonial power—the British, and French Creole, a remnant of our ownership by the French.

## **Listening to Scholarship on Silence**

By the Fall of 2015, the beginning of my second year of teaching the course, my initial research had led me to a body of scholarship on silence which I came to see as revisionist, given their call for a revised approach to silence in the classroom. I had also simultaneously begun researching scholarship on silence in the ELL classroom. The revisionist scholars, mainly in Education and Writing Studies, called on teachers to listen to the silences in their classrooms. I especially noted Katherine Schultz's suggestion that teachers "take an inquiry stance toward understanding the silence in their classrooms, exploring its meaning with their students" (2835). I felt I needed to heed Ros Ollin's argument that an awareness of different types and uses of silence "could lead to closer attention to the more, subtle skills of good teaching...provide a fruitful basis for a deeper understanding of classroom practice, and [could contribute to] the professional development of teachers" ("Silent pedagogy" 278). The revisionists also offered strategies to help incorporate silence as a pedagogical tool, helping to strengthen my desire to investigate my students' silences.

In contrast, in much of the scholarship on silence in the ELL/ESL classroom, there seemed to be an over-reliance on Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) to explain silence. ESL/ELL students often experienced “the feeling of tension and apprehension specifically associated with second language [L2] contexts, including speaking, listening, and learning” (MacIntyre and Gardner 284 qtd. in Liu and Jackson 72). According to this theory, students tended to exhibit FLA in three components: *Comprehension apprehension* (fear due to limited knowledge of the language); *fear of negative evaluation*, (students who are silent because they see language errors “as a threat to their image, and a source for negative evaluations either from the teacher or their peers).” The third component is *test anxiety* (“a situation in which students consider the foreign language process, and especially oral production, as a test situation, rather than an opportunity for communication and skills improvement” (Tsiplakides, Iakovos, and Keramida 39).

Some scholarship on ELL and silence offered explanations beyond FLA. Myung Jeong Ha, for instance, suggests that non-native students’ classroom silence included “not only language-related issues but also issues of emotion, culture, and identity” (86). In addition to mentioning “low levels of proficiency,” and “fear of making mistakes,” Tsui identified intolerance of silence, uneven allocation of turns, incomprehensible input, and short wait time” as contributing reasons for silence in the ESL/ELL class (Lee and Ng 303). My review of ESL/ELL students’ silences had me wondering if similar explanations operated in my second language classroom.

The revisionist scholarship which encouraged me to listen to silences in my classroom and ESL/ELL scholarship on what I might find in my classes strengthened my desire to

understand my students' silences and incorporate those voices into my pedagogy. First, I had to find a method to do this. By its very nature, ethnography which "proceeds from the possibility of understanding others on their own terms" (Brodkey 41), and "forces you to suspend your own assumptions" (Street 383) provided that method. Adopting an ethnographic methodology presented a means of accessing my students' perspectives on their silences. Using self-reflexive ethnography allowed me to engage in critical self-reflection about my relationship with my students. I employed three methods: observing, interviewing, and the study of artifacts or communication produced by my students. The latter took the form of a writing assignment.

I kept a journal, detailing my observations of the dynamics in my four classes. I noted the silent students and the students who were sometimes silent. I also took notes on classroom discussions on silence. These discussions were often initiated when I asked questions and no one seemed willing to answer. At points like those I would say to students, "It seems like I've asked for a moment of silence," and would launch into asking students why they were silent. During discussions, students presented a host of different explanations, including the suggestion that they were silent because they did not want to say what had already been said. I wondered whether having to reflect on and write about their silences might elicit similar responses.

During class discussions on silence, many of the silent students continued their normative stance, not saying a word. In an attempt to further understand those students, I approached a few, individually, after class, interviewing them informally. These were often students who I had tried to engage by calling on them in class but who still couldn't or wouldn't talk. Two students were representative of the typical responses I received. After class one day, I called Sandra aside and

said to her that I was sorry if I had put her on the spot by calling on her in class that day. I asked whether there was a reason she did not speak up. She responded by saying that that was okay but did not address the issue of silence. Juan, another student who simply stared and did not answer when I called on him in class offered no response as to why he was silent when I spoke with him. I observed, however, that after our one on one the two students both started corresponding with me by email—asking questions that I might have expected to be brought up in class. Juan, for instance, referring to *Eat the Document*, a text we were studying in class, emailed: “I have a little doubt from page 285-287 in the part where It starts like: “She pressed the buzzer...” Is that a flashback of how she bombed the place or what could it be?” Email became Juan and Sandra’s classroom voice. I also interviewed a few of the quiet students who came by during office hours. Many of them were clearly uncomfortable discussing their silence in the classroom. It seemed that in conversation, the students could not clearly articulate why they were silent; perhaps they had not reflected on this. However, I did have one student, Coral, who expressed her foreign language anxiety when I spoke with her during office hours. In fact, when she came to my office to discuss her absences, she brought a friend to act as her translator.

My information gathering also included colleagues. I interviewed academic peers to ask about their take on silence in their classrooms, as well as their possible explanations for silence in the ESL/ELL Puerto Rican classroom. One colleague, a product of the Puerto Rican education system, suggested that students had been socialized into a culture of silence in high-school and were unaware that they needed to approach our university classrooms differently. My colleague

had seen evidence of this in her own discussions with her students. Her take on silence in her class was that she let the classroom be silent until students felt uncomfortable enough to speak.

My data collecting helped me to realize I needed a formal forum so that all students could provide insight into the culture of silence in the classroom. A written document, I felt, would allow even verbal students to be more reflective, while simultaneously providing an avenue for a voice for those students who did not want to orally communicate the reasons for their silence. A written document would also allow me to see whether my ESL/ELL students would express second language anxiety as largely contributing to their silence. As with any researcher who is also a participant, I recognize that my presence might have influenced what students wrote. However, given the climate that I consciously strive to create in my classroom, I believe that students, for the most part, were honest in their responses.

In the Fall 2015 semester, in addition to requiring that my students work in groups of three and write collaborative essays evaluating how Le Guin, Cofer, or Poe evaluated silence, I added a new individual ungraded assignment, in which I asked students to explore, interpret and evaluate how they used silence in the classroom. They had to respond to the following prompt:

Using the authorial silences or character's silences in "Guests of the Nation," or any short stories we've studied on silence as a starting point discuss: Why you remain or choose *not* to remain silent in your classes; how you interpret other students' silences in your classes; and what a professor should infer from your silence, or lack of silence, in class.

## Silence as a Safe Haven

Not surprisingly, some students indicated that silence represented a safe haven. They remained silent out of “a need or desire to protect themselves” (Schultz, “After the Blackbird” 2841), from their professors and their peers. Diego, who seemed comfortable and confident in class and often had something to say, articulated the fear of the professor which he felt some students had:

I think the most prevalent cause for this silence is more out of fear than anything else, and it’s something I blame the high school experience for. Thanks to it, we’ve developed a form of silent fear and worry not unlike what is seen in Frank O Connor’s “Guests of the Nation” where the narrator, Bonaparte, silently expresses fears and worries while on the way to execute a pair of British prisoners. In my school, the biggest worry during a class was getting one of our teacher’s questions right as we discussed a topic. But what happened if a student answered wrong? Sometimes absolutely nothing would happen, but oftentimes a student would be ridiculed and scolded by the teacher. Some would even call us idiots and compare us to others who seemed out of our league. This constant ridicule and harassment developed in us an ingrained fear of doubt over whether we were answering or performing correctly, hence silence during discussion.

Students were not only afraid of their instructors; their responses also indicated that they wanted “to avoid losing face with their peers” (Sanders and Sanders 27). Some were afraid of coming across as arrogant or being laughed at for providing the wrong answers. One student, Carlos, an



“A” student who in his auto-ethnography had written about battling the invisibility he faced as a Puerto Rican of Asian descent, linked his silence in the class to his past humiliation from peers:

I’ve always been one of the top three students through all my school years, and my classmates and teachers were used to always expecting correct answers from me. But when I answered incorrectly, many peers booed me for it. Since then, I’ve resorted to silence in classes, even though I could think I have the correct answer, I decline from saying it. Now, I simply wait for any classmate to answer.

My reactions to Diego and Carlos helped me begin to unpack my own attitudes to silence and to see the classroom dynamics through my students’ eyes. I had always felt that silence in my writing classroom spoke to my inability to engage my students, that I, and only I, was responsible for the student silences. If students did not speak up there was something that I was not doing. My inability to motivate, to move the discussion, to entertain students had to be the reason why students were not quick or eager to talk. Both Diego’s and Carlos’ response made me realize that this was not the case. In retrospect, my assumptions might have been somewhat unrealistic, and perhaps even arrogant. The two students’ responses also helped me to be more sensitized to the perceived danger in speaking out in class. For students like Carlos and Diego, and others like them, silence was a calculated choice they had made to avoid being embarrassed or laughed at. The students made me aware of my privileged position when it came to speaking in class. As a professor, it would be automatically assumed I had something worthy to say, that I had the right questions and the right answers. I most likely would not be laughed at or booed or be anxious about providing the wrong response. My position of power in the classroom protected

me. There was no peer in the classroom to judge me and no authority figure looming physically and mentally over me. I developed more empathy for my students.

## **Silence: Entering the Conversation**

Barbara was an extremely quiet student. Even the few times she did speak up in class, she was so soft-spoken that I would often have to lean over and then broadcast what she said to the class. In her response to the assignment, Barbara included the following comments:

...there's nothing wrong with being silent. It should, if anything, be considered better than speaking. Contribution can be good, yes. However, listening is more important. Speaking only by your own thoughts would simply lead to the presentation of biased ideas. Texts can't truly be interpreted by one person alone. For that, there's a dire need to see different perspectives, and a single person isn't perfect. A single person cannot decipher all the possible meanings of something. Therefore, it is better to remain silent and instead listen to others. I've never seen silence as a problem in the classroom, honestly. Being honest, I must admit I simply do not enjoy speaking much. Some people do see silence as dumbness, but I believe silence is simply the way in which we learn...Taking others' thoughts into account is more important than speaking could ever be, since it shows the students are not distracted chatting amongst each other. ...Silence should be seen as very beneficial. I know some might be prone to interpreting silence as if it meant that students don't care, but I believe that vision is wrong.

Aurie, an excellent writer who spoke sometimes but often did not, had a similar response:

Another reason why I might keep quiet during class is simply that I do not wish to speak. Many times, I prefer to hear what my classmates have to say on whichever topic we are discussing. Their ideas are often very different from my own, and offer a new way to perceive that world that I would not otherwise think of. If I speak, they might be discouraged from saying what they had thought of because they're afraid it's too similar to what I said, or maybe they think it's not a good enough idea in comparison to my own. But their ideas are just as valuable as mine, and I wouldn't want to discourage my classmates from voicing them.

Barbara and Aurie's comments made me realize that for some students, silence was not a consequence of being passive, but instead a rhetorical choice. These students were engaging in eloquent silence, "the silences, which deliberately have been chosen by the speaker [as] an internal choice" (Moghaddam et al. 251). Like the visitors to the Asonu in Le Guin's *Changing Planes*, I realized, I had been hoping to find some deep, mysterious reason why students were silent, when in fact, for some, it was merely a conscious decision they had made.

By suggesting that silence was a means of entering an academic conversation, the students also helped me to re-assess the pedagogical value of silence. In his never-ending conversation Kenneth Burke declares:

Imagine that you enter a parlor. You come late. When you arrive, others have long preceded you, and they are engaged in a heated discussion, a discussion too heated for them to pause and tell you exactly what it is about. In fact, the discussion had already begun long before any of them got there, so that no one present is qualified to retrace for

you all the steps that had gone before. You *listen* for a while, until you decide that you have caught the tenor of the argument; then you put in your oar. (110-111)

I had never examined Burke's comment through the lens of silence, but re-reading this extract after going through my students' responses, I could see that Burke establishes silence as a precursor to joining academic conversations. This could be applied to Barbara, Aurie and other students like them. Before joining the academic conversation, they wanted to hear other voices, in this case, the voices of their peers. Remaining silent while their classmates spoke facilitated greater access to the conversation and allowed these students to engage in collaborative learning. They could hear different points of view and widen their own understanding.

I was forced to rethink the value of silence. I had always conceived of community as being manifested through talk in the classroom. I thought always letting others speak and not joining the discussion was selfish. But what if your silence helps contribute to the conversation? This was the question a number of students raised for me. This made me consider that I had failed to value silence in the classroom and to see "listening as participating" (Reda 175). Silence could help promote critical thinking skills as the students displayed a willingness to consider views other than their own. The students' comments led me to realize that there existed a complementary relationship between silence and speech, one which is in fact well documented in research (Li 158, Corradi 1-2). I had been privileging speech but not the other side of speech, silence. I was left to consider how instrumental silence was in helping me achieve the goals of critical thinking I had set out for my students. How could I prepare students for listening to and

processing opposing viewpoints in the workplace, and in everyday life without recognizing the valuable role that silence played in this process?

## **Silence as “Think-time”/Reflection**

Jesús was an “A” student who asked questions before or after our class. Like Aurie, he sometimes spoke up in class and often did not. He was one example of students who saw silence as a time for reflection:

The Professor might choose to think that the reason students remain silent is simply because of boredom, but that is not the case. I’m constantly trying my best to think of good arguments that can contribute to the overall discussion, just like other students in the class, whose usual expressions in class confirm that their silence is not one to demonstrate disinterest, but one to show self-thought and reflection.

Jesús’ point foregrounded another pedagogical value of silence. He was alluding to what I would come to know as “wait time,” “wait time2,” and “think time,” which place a high pedagogical value on silence in the classroom. According to Mary Rowe, an instructor who employs wait time allows three (3) to five (5) seconds after posing a question to students (Rowe 44). Wait time two (2) is teacher-centered. The instructor waits before he or she responds after a student has spoken (Rowe 44). Think time is both student and teacher-centered. It is described as that “distinct period of uninterrupted silence by the teacher and all students so that they both can complete appropriate information processing tasks, feelings, oral responses, and actions” (Stahl 2-3). These were uses of silence that I had never been aware of and have never even instinctively

used. Jesús' comments also led me to Bradley Baurain, who in explaining that silence might indicate thoughts "that cannot be spoken *yet* for which the process of verbalizing has not yet taken hold," (90), helped me see that silence could indicate that students were processing information.

Viewing silence from Jesus' perspective made me realize that what I had been doing in class was asking a question and expecting an immediate response. Yet, I had not been asking simple yes or no questions. I asked questions designed to get students to think, but I had not been allowing them the opportunity to do so. The issue of think time/wait time also helped me view the class and myself through my students' eyes. I recalled my days as a graduate student. I had had a teacher who would ask questions, and then, unable to bear the silence, would answer her own questions. As a student, I found this annoying. Like my student Jesús, I would have been processing the question, gathering my courage, and was just about to answer when she took that opportunity away from me. Like my former teacher, I too was also uncomfortable with silence and had also been denying my students opportunities to both think and speak.

## **Silence as Culture: Power Distance**

Elmer, an aspiring writer, was quite reflective. He would sometimes speak out in class but was often quiet. He engaged by asking questions before or after class or by email. He wrote:

Since we were young, we are taught to be silent while our teacher gave class. Even if we didn't like it, we ended up obeying it...Many teachers, believe it or not, can even look up to the student who stays silent but knows the material of the class.

This issue of being socialized into silence was reinforced by Jacqueline, a student who spoke up only if asked to in class and would then seem very uncomfortable and nervous. She wrote:

“Since I was younger I learned that while in the classroom I should always be silent. Remaining in silence allow[s] me to understand the topic better but I show my respect towards the professor... I always remember the lifetime motto of teachers ‘we are here to learn, not to talk.’”

In linking silence to respect for those in authority, students were describing a key feature of high power distance societies like Puerto Rico, according to Alvarado-Zayas (qtd. in Vega-Rosado 5). In high power distance cultures, individuals respect their superiors and avoid criticizing them. In low power distance countries, such as the US, it is acceptable to challenge superiors, albeit with respect (Bergiel, Bergiel, and Upson 72). In a high-power distance society, “Parents teach children obedience, older people are both respected and feared and there is teacher-centered education” (Hofstede 9). Elmer and Jacqueline’s attitudes reflected the cultural values of the schools that they had attended and more specifically of the wider society in which they lived.

Another of my assumptions about silence became visible to me as I read through Elmer and Jacqueline’s responses and others like them. I had always assumed that teachers shared the same view that I did—that verbal participation in class was valued and necessary. However, it was clear from the responses I read that this was not the case. Students had been socialized to see asking questions as disrespecting their teachers. As I read student responses, I discovered that there were others who saw talking and discussion as interruption. Adriana, who spoke only when called upon and was very friendly and outgoing outside of class, wrote:

I consider myself traditional in the sense that I prefer when a teacher speaks the whole class instead of being interactive and asking questions that a person of average knowledge would know the answer to. In those interactive discussions is when I “zoom out” because I feel as though I am not really learning anything new.

For Adriana, silence did not indicate a regenerative space for reflecting. Instead, it was a space where a student could be a passive participant, absorbing the information being deposited by the teacher. For her, being a passive student equaled learning. Gabriel, another attentive student who ironically often led or participated in discussions, articulated the same approach more clearly:

...speaking in class changes the mind’s focus from receiving information to composing and transmitting information, which in class, unless desired, is counter-productive. If the lesson is interesting enough, there is no real reason to speak out of turn; the main goal is to learn it.

The students clearly embraced the banking model of education. Their responses pushed me to redefine the connection of silence to learning. I had certainly not thought of students seeing silence as respect for me; if anything, I read it as some minor version of disrespect. It implied not having read, not being interested enough to engage. I had never envisioned students wanting to be lectured to and preferring not to be engaged through discussion. After reading these responses, I was left with the thought that there was an obvious disjuncture, as presented through the students’ responses, between high school and the university.

There seemed to be two cultures at work. While some K-12 teachers, especially in high schools, seemed to have promoted silence as showing respect and being focused on learning, in



University writing classes, good pedagogical practices involved verbal discussions. A colleague, a product of the K-12 bilingual Puerto Rican school system, a system out of which many of my students in Advanced English emerge, helped me understand what I saw as a divide. The bilingual schools and the Catholic schools which these students attend, she said, are often “systems which are quite right-wing and some of these students [who we encounter in our Advanced classes] are therefore somewhat old-fashioned” (Quintero). When these students first attend the universities, there is often a “clash with more left-wing university professors and their methods,” she suggested (Quintero). Perhaps there was a need to orient students about how to approach silence in the university classroom, I reflected.

## **My Western Model of Silence**

It was clear, as Linda Briskin narrates about her own experiences with silence in “The Challenge of Classroom Silence,” that there are multiple reasons why students choose to remain silent. The issues my students expressed seemed to have little to do with foreign language anxiety. This could be explained in a number of ways. My students were not living or taking classes in a country where the official language was English. This might have lessened anxiety about English. In some ways, English was perhaps not foreign to my Advanced students, who in fact had to prove above average competence in English by getting at least a 4 out of 5 on their entrance test to be assigned to the Advanced class in the first place. Because Puerto Rico is a US colony, students often moved between the US and Puerto Rico, for personal travel purposes, to participate in internships, or to represent UPRM on a national level. With that movement comes

exposure to English. Bilingual education from age 4 in K-12 institutions in Puerto Rico, as well as private schools with English Immersion, also played a role.

The explanations my students offered for silence were typical of what one would find in a class where students were being taught in their first language. My silent students had a fear of how peers and the instructor would respond to them, independent of language issues. Some choose silence because they placed great value on listening and on hearing what others had to say. Others needed silence to think through responses to their questions. There were those who had been socialized into a culture of silence in the classroom and still others who saw silence as the only way to “absorb” information and to engage meaningfully with the class.

Reading my students’ responses allowed me to uncover my assumptions about silence. My responses to students made me realize that even while I disagreed with the broad strokes of the label, I embraced what researchers call the “Western Model” of silence. In this model, silence is seen as a “malfunctioning” (Kim Min-Sun 131), or “a failure to engage” (Jordan 286). I had expected that there would always be what Scollon calls a “steady hum or buzz” in my classroom (qtd. in Kim 132). Like one of the teachers interviewed for Ollin’s study on teachers’ construction of silence, I thought of my classroom “as a place for interacting and saw it as [my] responsibility to get my students ‘to talk’” (“Silence Meanings” 445).

## **Hearing My Students: Engaging in Rhetorical Listening**

In gaining insights into my, and my students’ attitudes to silence, I became aware of my own ignorance about silence in the classroom. I then understood the usefulness of what Claire

Margolinas, Lalina Coulange, and Annie Bessot call the “awareness of the ignorant principle” (211). I had been asking the right question: “Why were students silent in class?”—but for the wrong reasons. Like Martha Gimenez who writes about setting out to vanquish the “silent classroom” (184), I had been hoping to solve the problem of student silence by trying to “fix” my students, rather than focusing on how my own terministic screen needed adjusting.

I decided to make changes in my writing classroom, geared toward redefining participation, and using silence as a pedagogical tool. I wanted to break free of what Paul Corrigan calls the “addiction” (10) to speaking. My student Ambar’s words represent where I believed I wanted to end up:

When introducing the class professors should make clear that silence WILL be tolerated. The acceptance of silence is an important part of the classroom dynamic. People who are silent sometimes are more capable of analyzing the points raised, and are more capable of understanding the professor. Many professors tend to think that students who do not normally participate verbally in class are the ones who are not paying attention. On the contrary, sometimes students who are silent have better comprehension and retention of the class than students who verbalize often. Silent students are a vital part of the classroom ecosystem because it is in silence that we can truly expand our thinking [...] I think silence should start to become a valuable sound in the classroom. The true appreciation of silence in the education system could be the key so that we the silent ones can also feel comfortable in the classroom and in our learning experience.

Ambar was a very verbal “A” student who contributed to most discussions in class. In her ideal classroom, there would be acceptance of the silent students and the valuable contribution they make to the classroom. I wanted to realize Ambar’s ideal, which was supported by the revisionist body of scholarship on silence.

Listening to what my students had said, I incorporated several strategies the following semester. I followed Paul Corrigan’s advice, and my own instinct, to let students know how I planned to use silence in the classroom (10). I started to actively think of silence as a learning style and not as an absence. I decided to respect students’ silences and therefore did not try to force them to speak. I also incorporated wait time and think time, what Charlie Wesley calls “sanctioning silence,” into my classroom. This had the effect of making me feel less pressured and allowing students time to think through questions. I began to feel more comfortable with silence in the class, seeing it as a friend, not a foe. I followed Schultz’s advice to offer students “alternative modes of participation” (“The Role of Silence” 24). For example, I drew on John Bean’s advice of using freewriting instead of talking to respond to a question (207).

I also followed Schultz’s advice to address silence by allowing more opportunities for students to talk. This proved quite rewarding. In the Fall 2016 semester, in one 3211 section, we discussed the concept of being an outsider to one’s homeland. Instead of trying to speed up the class, although we were running out of time, I decided to allocate more time to discussion. To my surprise, Jan, a student who had always seemed slightly irritated about being in the class, spoke about moving from the US back to Puerto Rico and feeling like an outsider. He was often ridiculed by students for his interests and manner of dressing, which no longer fit into the Puerto

Rican mold. Jorge, another student who had never said a word in class, told us about his cousin's similar experience. The changes in my classroom and the positive outcomes lent credence to Ollin's belief that listening to the silences in the class "provide[s] a fruitful basis for a deeper understanding of classroom practice" and contributes to "professional development ("Silent pedagogy" 278). This process forced me to see myself as a teacher in new ways.

## **Interrogating the Interrogation of Silence**

By combining ethnographic methods with traditional research, I learned many useful strategies to engage with student silences. Wait time and think time were useful, as was the idea of informing students of how I planned to use silence in my classes. But I want to challenge the idealized view of silence I held during much of this process, a view I suspect which some others may share. A year later, after I had my students write about their silences, and implemented new strategies informed by what I had discovered, I reflected on those students whose silences I had not challenged the previous semester. I wondered whether those students had felt abandoned. Had they felt that I was focusing only on those who choose to speak? Experience has taught me that there is often a body of students who want to be forced to speak up in class so that they could be brave enough to continue doing so on their own. In the past, there have been students who thanked me for drawing them out. In accepting their "right to silence" had I done some students a grave disservice? The feeling lingered as I passed my former silent students in hallways around the campus and felt like I barely knew them, outside of their written assignments.

Another issue is the practicality of some of the strategies offered by the revisionists. Instructors are urged to reflect on the values of Western societies, which privilege talk over silence. The implication of those arguments is that privileging talk over silence is a faulty pedagogical approach. However, particularly in a second language context, I began to realize that the importance of speech ought not to be undervalued. Many of my Puerto Rican students would not have many opportunities, unless they sought them out, to speak in English and to continue developing mastery of that language while residing in their Spanish speaking homeland. In such a context I think instructors should endeavor to offer as many opportunities as possible for oral communication in English, even if that involves defining participation through speech and placing students in situations where they are forced to speak up in class.

Even while I agree with Huey-li Li, that “it is not necessary to structure teaching solely through talk/speech,” (161) I think it is important to see talk as an essential part of what all students, whether ELL or native speakers, will need in conventions, conferences, and presentations, as well as in interviews. In my context, about 90% of my students had informally expressed their desire to migrate to the US mainland. It is important to remind ourselves that we should not create artificial situations for our students, leading to their frustrations upon graduation. While there is a place for silence and listening, the work world beyond the academic classroom often does not respect employees’ rights to their silence, nor does it redefine participation. I could see this clearly in the forms I often filled when my Puerto Rican students applied for internships in the US mainland. Inevitably, one of the questions would be about the student’s ability to communicate orally. I believe that in a second language context, it is

important for composition teachers like myself to realize that FLA should not be our first resort in trying to explain silence in the ELL classroom. It is also important to avoid holding a romanticized and idealized view of the utility of silence.

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