Silence, Meanings and Learning

Teachers' Constructs of Silence and a Different Discourse of Practice in Teaching and Learning

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Abstract

The manner and context of teachers' verbal discourse has been well documented and much has been written on the ways in which teachers' use of spoken language impacts on the teaching and learning process. However, there has been little about 'the spaces' between the words and the ways in which different social and personal constructions of 'silence' may translate into classroom practice. This study begins to explore how silence occurs intentionally or non-intentionally within the duration of a learning session and how some teachers conceptualise and use silences. It is based on a pilot study acting as a prelude to a larger scale piece of research. The subject under investigation is teachers' perceptions of silence, exploring the hypothesis that people have different conceptions of silence and different associations with various kinds of silence. The inquiry focuses on teachers' conceptions of silences in their everyday lives (i.e. personal lives separate from their professional lives as teachers) and, using these personal conceptions as a base, the ways in which they perceive their use of silence in the classroom. By using their silences rather than their talking, the study begins to examine ways in which teachers may be helped to explore a different way of looking at their own practice.

Keywords: Teachers and Silence, Meanings of Silence, Silence and Metaphor, Teachers' Personal and Professional Lives, Practice of Teachers

Introduction

'Silence' as the subject of this paper is seen as a problematic, but potentially fascinating area of inquiry located within the 'discrepant, plural, ambiguous and multiple world in which researchers work and in which they try to make meanings' (Brizuela et al , 2000, p. xii) . The paper takes as its premise the notion that individuals have different complex, fuzzy and ambiguous conceptual understandings of silence which are linked to their own histories, socio-cultural environments and psychological leanings. It is based on an initial scoping study, indicating work in progress and focusing on teachers' conceptions of silence in their everyday lives (i.e. their personal lives as separate from their professional lives as teachers). Using these personal conceptions as a base, the inquiry then seeks to explore how they perceive their use of silence in the classroom. The main purpose of this first phase was to provide a small number of data sets which could begin to 'map the territory' for a more extensive second phase of inquiry. 1 wished to explore the range of associations with silence and how these corresponded to existing theory and whether there appears to be any correlation or overlap between the personal and the professional meanings and associations with silence.

Context

Although an immediate association with silence might be one which relates the concept to an absence or a lack of something, this is not borne out by writings from either Western or Eastern traditions. In both cultures intentional silence is generally held to have meaning, although the meaning will be interpreted differently according to belief, culture or context. In Western society the meaning and importance attached to silence, as opposed to speech, can be seen in the use of silence as the ritual manifestation of mass expression grief and loss as expressed, for example, in the two minutes silence in remembrance of those who died in the two world wars. In Eastern religions, silence has an equally strong symbolic status, being perceived as the ultimate expression of unity with the universe. In view of its high symbolic importance in both cultures, an interesting question is why it does not feature more in academic writings on human communication and culture. One reason for this may be the 'slipperiness' of the concept and the way in which it both resists definition and can be used as a metaphor for many other concepts. As silence is not an absolute, because some sound is always present, it is the nature of those sounds and the individual or cultural group's perception of those sounds that constitutes the sense of silence. As sound exists relationally to other sounds the interpretation of the significance of those other sounds depends on

expectations and context, hence where the expectation exists that talk will occur, silence will assume a relational significance. However the interpretation of silence relies strongly on the meanings and associations that are attached to it, and, as such, they may be different from person to person which may not be articulated or understood in the same way as speech. Writers on silence in the classroom have tended to focus on a spoken or written interpretative focus about what silence means to different participants in the classroom context, but this has been within the context of social interaction and discourse analysis. Although there have been a number of interesting studies in this area, they have not addressed the other dimensions of individual's conceptualisations of silence in that context, for example the use of silence as an 'ontological metaphor' to generate meaning about what is being experienced in that setting. (Lakoff and Johnson,1980).

Theoretical Frameworks for the Study of Silence

A striking feature of the existing literature is the multi-disciplinarity of writings on the subject. This makes 'silence' a potentially rich but confusing area for study —a confusion reflected in the writings themselves, where authors may move between fairly rigid pragmatic analyses to broader cultural perspectives, without necessarily establishing coherence between the two approaches. The eclectic nature of the subject is also indicated in the discourse used, which encompasses descriptive, analytical, metaphorical and reference to metaphysical modes of expression, again sometimes contained within the same text. Jaworski indicates the richness and complexity of the various orientations on silence in his wide-ranging, but still far from complete, list which includes the psycholinguistic, paralinguistic, ethnographic, semiotic, pragmatic, educational, literary and philosophical (Jaworski, 1993). To some extent, each orientation generates its own meanings about the phenomenon which determine a particular theoretical framework and Jaworski elects to work within a socio-pragmatic orientation, considering application rather than definition as having the main functional significance. He argues that silence consists of 'indiscreet categories' with 'fuzzy edges' and as such resists any definitive definition (Jaworski, 1993, p. 31) and, from this position, is critical of the essentialist approach, characterised by Dauenhauer's study on the ontology of silence (Dauenhauer, 1980). However, as Dauenhauer also concedes the difficulty of finding any final definition of the concept, it could be suggested that he has reached the same conclusion as Jaworski, but by a philosophical rather than pragmatic route.

Jaworski, like many other writers on the subject, places his discussion within the field of human communication, where the significance of intentionality in the understanding of silence can be seen as influential in the construction of silence as a legitimate communicative act. An important dimension here is the notion that silence can be construed semantically as actively conveying meaning, as opposed to merely indicating an absence of something and as such that meaning is capable of communicating a message and of being subject to interpretation. Jaworski (1993) proposes the relationship between silence and talk by locating both within a range of linguistic items as indiscreet categories on a continuum.

Within the field of linguistics, much research on silence has focussed on the use of silence in communicative interaction, on pausing (Rowe,1974), turn-taking (Sacks et al, 1974) and adjacency pairs (Kurzon, 1997). Socio-cultural analyses of silence have included cross-cultural research, including writings on Apache culture (Basso, 1975) and Finnish culture (Lehtonen and Sajavaara, 1985) Within the broader socio-political cultural context, silence and 'silencing' have been seen as tools of oppression and control (Sontag, 1989, Foucault, 1990). Within the aesthetic cultural context interpersonal silence has been used as a means for interpreting literary texts (Kurzon, 1997). Silence in art has been explored by a variety of writers and artists (Jaworski, 1993, 1997). Silence and its relationship to music is an area most famously explored by the work of John Cage, both in his book on silence (Cage, 1973) and, in particular in his well-known piece 4' 33". Writers have also explored the contextual significance of silence, for example in church (Maltz, 1985) and in court (Walker, 1985). Research carried out in the classroom context generally focuses on interactional silence as in Rowe's work on pausing (Rowe, 1974). It is interesting to note that, although Rowe deals with the positive effects on pupil's responses of extended pause lengths, silence is rarely presented as strongly positive in a classroom situation.. For example, Gilmore's work on silence and emotional displays in the classroom presents teachers' silence as a mechanism for control and pupils' silence mainly as avoidance of work or sulking (Gilmore, 1985). There are however some instances in more general writings on classroom interaction where silence is seen as positive (Brookfield and Peskill, 1999, Mosher, 2001).

Various writers have attempted to create frameworks for the study of silence. Saville Troike (1985) looks at the concept from an ethnographic perspective, attempting to develop an integrative theory of communication incorporating both sound and silence. She proposes a number of categories as a means of developing a broad classification framework relevant to different levels of social

action. These broad categories identify different types of silence: institutionally —determined, group-determined and individually-determined/negotiated These are broken down into further sub-categories as for example interactive and non-interactive individually determined silence. (Saville Troike, 1985, pp. 16,17). Of interest in this category of individually- determined silence is the predominately negative set of associations identified. For example, psychological silence is associated with timidity, embarrassment, fear and neurosis, providing a strongly Westernised deficit view of 'not talking'. Jaworski is also concerned with finding a framework for analysis for studying silence in various contexts, but from a socio-pragmatic rather than ethnographic perspective. His prototype taxonomy uses metaphor to suggest how silences can be divided into 'states, activities and formulaic (lexicalised) categories' (Jaworski, 1993, p.167). However he uses these metaphors *about* silence rather than considering the metaphorical associations with silence i.e. how the concept of silence itself is used as a metaphor for other concepts.

Research Methodology

The nature of this inquiry establishes it within the interpretevist paradigm which takes the position that human action (including speech acts) is inherently meaningful and the purpose of inquiry is to grasp (interpret) the meaning behind the action, whilst being aware of the pitfalls in this process (Schwandt, 2000, Skeggs, 2002). The data were generated through a series of extended interviews with five respondents all of whom were teachers. Two were academics at different UK universities in different subject disciplines; one was a yoga teacher in adult education; one was a Further Education lecturer with a background in teacher training; one was a French experimental musician and photographer who had recently begun teaching in adult education. In terms of gender sampling, there were two males and three females. All were in the thirty to fifty age range and all but one, were experienced teachers. The limitations of the number and sample are obvious and are acknowledged in merely possessing a pathfinder function in pointing towards areas of potential interest in the future inquiry. This research will need to include teachers in the younger age group and, in particular, those teaching in schools.

Each interview contained two components, firstly an hour-long semi-structured component, followed by an unstructured discussion in which the respondent was invited to talk more about any aspect they wish to explore further or, if they wished, to comment on how they had experienced the interview. The interview questions were given for participants to consider beforehand, in recognition of the potential difficulty of the subject and also to enable the individual time to consider carefully their

own meanings. This approach was chosen to expose different communicative and ontological phenomena and to add to the richness and complexity of the data (Mason, 2002). Although there are reservations expressed by some writers on the idea of 'respondent validation' (Mason, 2002, Miles and Hubermann, 1994*),* due to the dialogic nature of the process, it was considered important that the respondents had the opportunity to revisit and validate both the data and the interpretation of the data at a later stage.

Silence in 'Everyday Life'

Three of the participants indicated an initial difficulty in conceiving of silence, as in the 'scientific' sense they suggested that it does not exist within the human experience. They indicated that there was always noise, although this fell into two categories internal noise - 'internal dialogue' within the brain - and external noise - the variety of different noises or sounds that occur in the world external to the individual. However, in the case of external noise it became evident that individual perceptions would play a part in whether this noise was deemed personally significant. Having rejected the idea of silence in any absolute sense, the participants treated the concept in metaphoric terms from a variety of different perspectives. These perspectives were located into different conceptual categories, which formed the basis of subsequent recording and analysis.

The underlying association of the concept of silence appeared to relate to the absence of particular kinds of stimuli and depended on one's associations and levels of tolerance of these different stimuli. One participant characterised this explicitly as 'conceptually relativistic'. As might be expected, the yoga teacher related silence to a set of underlying spiritual beliefs. Silence was also associated in different ways to mental activity - increased mental activity enabling cognitive processing, focus or concentration; decreased mental activity absence of anything to do which made noticeable demands on one's brain. It was also associated with an absence of demand on the individual from other people. Being on one's own was mentioned by four of the participants, in particular not having to talk to anyone. The extent to which 'human noise' intruded into 'silence' depended on each participant, being especially prominent for one respondent who equated happiness with not needing other people and where her partner's presence appeared to represent some sort of 'intrusion' into her private space. The concept of silence was associated with the concept of 'space' which recurred a number of times in the responses of three of the participants. Additionally one participant associated 'noise' very strongly with claustrophobia and constraints on freedom. The space associated with silence contained opportunities to problem solve, to think things

through, to plan, to explore oneself, to allow for individual ideas, to absorb what has gone before. Two participants used silence as space to conceptualise a movement away from something worrying them or away from being so closely involved in something that they needed to take a wider perspective.

All participants mentioned the natural world, either as being a context in which they experienced silence, or in relation to the silence of the sounds of nature e.g. birdsong, waves which were usually equated with positive feelings, generally of relaxation, peace and the opportunity to focus free from distraction. One respondent talked of sounds of nature 'fixing me to the earth' and mentioned a feeling of 'groundedness in something larger than oneself 'which echoed the spiritual dimension of the yoga teacher's experience.

There appeared to be a distinction between the use of the words 'noise' and 'sound' where sound was characterised with positive experiences which did not intrude upon their personal silence. The word 'sound' was used mainly by other participants in relation to the natural world, whereas the word 'noise' was used in relation to sounds made by the industrial, post-industrial world. One respondent, for example, made the distinction between the peaceful sound of an old-fashioned lawnmower, conducive to personal silence, as compared to the intrusive sound of an electric lawnmower. The musician expressed the ambivalence of his position as wanting to uncover the layers of sound of the natural world whilst using electronic technology as a means of recording and playing back. He also theorised the distinction between sounds of the natural world and those of new technology relating them to the ideas of the acoustic ecology movement.

Interpersonal silence was experienced in terms of familiarity with the surrounding environment. The main positive interpersonal silence was one of companionship, where the individual felt comfortable in the presence of another or others engaged in some kind of mutual activity. Examples given were walking in country with partner and reading newspapers together. A unifying factor here was the absence of any demands to talk in that situation. Interpersonal silence in general was related to the idea of talking, or how the absence of talking was perceived by those present. Four participants related negative interpersonal silences to situations where there was an expectation of some kind of response or intervention and this did not occur. There was one positive association with the silence before responding, (although perceived by her partner as lack of response) related to the formulation of an appropriate response to a situation. This gave an alternative perspective to a lack of response being interpreted as rejection. As the 'silent partner' she was explaining why the silence occurred and how it had for her, no connotations of rejecting

her partner. Differences between respondents occurred when considering the silence of anticipating that something will happen - this could be positive anticipating a treat or negative, the waiting before being told some test results.

Silence was frequently related to thinking time free from distractions and to time to concentrate and to focus. In some circumstances, silence was the individuals' opportunity to listen in detail e.g. 'concentrating on the little sounds'. Concentration was mentioned a number of times, especially from the yoga teacher who characterised silence as 'quietening the 'chattering' of the mind. Again here silence was related to the absence of the human voice, even though in one case the talk was each individual's own 'inner dialogue'.

There was some reference to silence being used to create a particular power relation - either on an interpersonal level or on an institutional level e.g. solitary confinement. One significant aspect of silence evident throughout the texts is the relationship of silence to the power to choose whether to be silent or not. If silence is imposed by another, then there is a negative, and potentially coercive association. Participants also indicated that if noise is imposed by another then it is also seen as intruding. The importance of the voluntary nature of both was suggested. Noise created by other people is mentioned by most participants e.g. traffic, noise of computers and other interactive technological forms which feature in contemporary institutional space. Three participants mentioned possible generational differences here, suggesting that young people may have a different idea of what constitutes intrusive noise.

Familiarity or lack of familiarity may also constitute different levels of intrusion. One participant mentioned the discomfort experienced by young urban people not used to sounds of the country and, from a different generation. Another respondent mentioned the difficulty in sleeping experienced by his city dwelling father, to whom the sounds of the countryside may have constituted intrusive noise. He also mentioned how his mother couldn't stand the silence of the empty house once her children had left home "If you associate silence with the sound of something comforting, pleasant, then the absence of that can be disconcerting.

Silence in Teaching

The categories of silence identified for 'everyday life' were, to some extent, transferable to the types of silence in a classroom situation. In addition, when asked to consider silence in relation to their teaching, there appeared some correlation between how silence was characterised by participants in the 'everyday' world and the way that they considered it in their teaching. However, the range of associations was very limited compared to the range of associations in everyday life. A question here is how

much individuals leave behind of their everyday lives when they enter a classroom setting. Participants mentioned the use of silence in terms of impact, with silence used as a kind of dramatic device for building anticipation and contrasting with periods of activity. Although participants had mentioned silence as power, no respondent indicated that they used silence as a disciplinary measure in their current work with adults. However, for two respondents, in particular, the use of silence appeared to be linked to more general ideas about how the teacher controls the classroom situation, with deliberate use of silence associated with providing an opportunity to focus and concentrate on the detail of what had gone before. For three participants, silence was associated with thinking time related to problem solving, formulating an appropriate response, organising their thinking, with the teacher 'giving space for students to work something out'. Another respondent associated student silence in the classroom with a decrease in the need for cognitive processing of what is being taught' Silence is an absence of information being passed- you have to use less cognitive power in analysing their information and more space for your thoughts'. This could relate to mental space for the student to analyse and apply what the teacher's voice has presented or to the space to daydream.

The occurrence of silence within a group possessed different resonance for various respondents. On an interpersonal level, two participants related silence within a group to negative associations. In particular, one participant, who had the strongest negative association with interpersonal silence in her everyday life, indicated that she saw the classroom as a place for interacting. As she felt that her responsibility with students was to get them to talk, she 'would not wait for silence' . Another participant related emotions of fear and embarrassment to the feeling of being isolated within a group, which may be because the conditions in the classroom are not conducive to the comfortable silence of mutual companionship. The perceptions of uncomfortable interpersonal silence in the classroom may also bear some relationship to issues of control - the individual is silent because of the imposition of conditions outside of the student's control which impose silence upon them. One respondent expressed this as 'silence under pressure'. This may relate to previous comments on 'voluntary' and 'coercive' silence.

The ability to 'read' how students are reacting to silence was discussed. One participant specifically mentioned the need for teachers to be very aware of the non-verbal cues that may give an indication of how the silence is being experienced. Silence which related to feelings of escape seemed to be especially important to one respondent, who in his everyday life talked about the act of' turning your back and walking away' as a means of breaking a pattern

when he was struggling with a problem. He used the idea of the teacher absenting himself from the students as a means of enabling that space for thinking which the teacher's presence might inhibit. This could possibly relate to the idea that once the teacher's voice is absent this provides the 'emotional space' for students to develop their own ideas. This appears to correlate with the respondent's earlier comments about parents and children 'Mothers and kids - absence can mean emotional space

The ideas developed by the yoga teacher were different from the others, in that most respondents identified classrooms as places for talking and getting students to participate. However they also saw classrooms as places where students needed silence i.e. a space to think. Between the participants there appeared to be a variation in their perceptions of the appropriate balance between the two. This poses an interesting question as to which different theoretical models of teaching and learning e.g. social interactionist models or cognitive processing models inform consciously or unconsciously the various understandings of 'silence' expressed by individual participant teachers.

In the case of the yoga teacher there was little ambiguity about her role which she perceived as modeling an accepted method of teaching, following the lead of a particular religious 'swaami', where success in teaching is measured by the extent to which that model is replicated. Decisions about how the teaching was carried out were led by the way that her swaami had taught her - even, she suggested, to the length of the pauses. Her sessions were not primarily about interaction between teacher and students, but were about the role of the teacher to 'actively guide the students into silence'. She identified a paradox in that she is talking almost all the time in order to achieve this.

Possibly one skill of teaching implied by most participants is how teachers balance the silence and the voices ' You've got to think about the balance of silence - how silent are they; How silent are you?' For the yoga teacher, as students were giving voluntary consent to be guided into silencing the 'inner dialogue' then the main balance for her was a consensual agreement that her voice would mainly predominate. One respondent linked the idea of creative silence with the use of activities which did not require talk or any other use of words e.g. he talks of approaches to problem solving using plasticine - 'mould your problem'. He did however pull himself back from that direction 'I'm in danger of allying silence with space', indicating the continued metaphorical character of the association.

The intrusion of technological noise was also mentioned within the educational institutional context (although two other participants had specifically mentioned computer noise in their answers on everyday life.) One respondent talked about the spaces that institutions create for silence to

do with thinking and concentration, which instead have become places where the technological noise of computers predominates. She made particular reference to learning centres and how they have created a different type of environment to traditional libraries. She also refers to the process by which students seek out their own spaces within the institution for the silences of concentration as well as those of mutual companionship. In terms of architectural design these physical spaces used for metaphoric silence may not be those the institution or the architect intended.

The issue of generational differences in relation to silence and noise was mentioned by three participants. In the case of one respondent this is linked specifically to issues she believes teachers should be addressing which are about the sounds which for the younger generation may carry the emotional equivalent of the sounds identified by her generation in terms of familiar, comfortable sounds which allow different kinds of cognitive and emotional space.

Conclusions

The data generated were rich and complex, encompassing different values and perspectives on both personal and professional lives and it appears from this initial scoping study that there could be some fruitful areas to explore in the second phase of the research. The potential themes which could be explored as a result, appear to be numerous and at this stage I will merely suggest some possible directions for the second research phase. There were many positive (as well as negative), and wide ranging associations with silence in everyday life and far more limited associations with silence within a classroom context. This might indicate it would be interesting to explore further the relationship between the teaching identity and the personal identity and how the more extensive and positive repertoire of silences in everyday life could be used within the classroom context. As part of this, it would be interesting to research the work of teachers who are trying to encompass the full range of positive associations with silence into their classroom teaching. Other areas for further research could include: the use of silence as a metaphor for many significant aspects of people's lives; the relationship of silence to noise and sound and the associations and levels of tolerance to different stimuli, where it would be interesting to consider which noises or sounds are found to be intrusive and whether there is any generational difference between perceptions. The variety and relevance of these themes to different bodies of knowledge suggest that there may be considerable potential for theoretical generalisability in future research.

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