

Investigating Moroccan Teachers of English's Perspectives on Students' Silence in the EFL Classroom

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ABSTRACT

From the beginning of history, sounds have played a crucial role in human life as ways of expression and communication. However, nowadays, we are experiencing an excess of speech and a relentless encouragement to expression. This condition encourages us to think about silence. Educators have yet to fully understand the complexity behind silence and how both voice and silence work together to illuminate the learning experiences of students. The present qualitative study aims to examine an under-researched issue within Moroccan EFL classrooms, which is silence. It seeks to explore silence as a means of communication and learning through the perceptions of Moroccan EFL teachers. It investigates the perception and understanding of silence in the EFL classroom, particularly in Oujda, Morocco. (n=32) Teachers of English willingly participated in the study. The findings of this study indicate that classroom silence has both negative and positive connotations depending on the context, situation, and the participants involved. By listening to both voice and silence, Moroccan teachers can come to a deeper understanding of how students learn a foreign language; in other words, their learning needs. The results of this study also confirm the paramount importance that silence can play in the learning process.

Keywords: Silence, EFL classroom, Wait-time, Classroom interaction

INTRODUCTION

Silence is a form of communication that is culture- and context-specific. It carries meaning, which, if not associated with a certain context, will lead to ambiguity and misinterpretation. Student silence in the classroom is widely perceived as a serious problem for many educators. This is particularly so in second/foreign language learning contexts, as a large body of literature has illustrated how oral interaction and production of the target language can significantly aid L2 development. More and more attention has been paid to implementing the concept of student-centredness and improving communication in Moroccan classrooms. Moreover, classroom interaction plays an important role in improving students' English proficiency. Thus, in a second/foreign language learning context, teachers value speech over silence, as it demonstrates one's ability to express ideas and discuss current issues in public. However, students' silence cannot always be categorised as passive behaviour since not all silent students are ignorant and inattentive.

The topic of classroom silence has long been debatable. Some scholars agree that silence is a passive background to the noisy activity of communication; therefore, it is perceived as a barrier to learning. For others, silence is a rich and powerful communicative resource. Some educators and teachers do not consider silence as a negative phenomenon of learning or the enemy of speech. If that is the case, what about Moroccan teachers of English? Where do they stand? The present qualitative study aims to explore how Moroccan teachers of English perceive and understand students' silence in an EFL classroom context and their beliefs concerning the use of that silence to improve students' learning experience. The following are the research questions of the present study:

Does silence impede learning?

What do Moroccan teachers think of students' silence in an EFL classroom?

How might Moroccan teachers of English understand, address and ultimately encourage both silence and talk in their classrooms?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Silence is a complex linguistic phenomenon known for its ambiguous and many meanings. As a subject for study, this often-ignored phenomenon is both potentially fascinating and problematic in equal measure. Investigating something as intangible as silence, something that can be neither seen nor heard, poses real challenges for researchers who must be creative and interpretively astute enough to capture silence's true essence. In this section, I attempt to examine research concerned with the meaning and function of students' silence in the classroom, along with works that seek to uncover how students and teachers perceive silence in learning situations.

Definition of Classroom Silence

A deep understanding of the term 'silence' is necessary to establish a strong ground for studying it. According to the Online Etymology Dictionary, silence is derived from the Latin "silentium 'a being silent', from silens, [past participle] of silere 'be quiet or still', of unknown origin." It was believed that silence only had a boundary marking, prosodic function; likewise, it was defined as an absence of speech or as "periods of non-speech or non-vocalisation in conversation" (Zuo, 2002, p. 4). In other words, the meaning of 'silence' was examined in isolation, yet to fully grasp it, psychological, linguistic, identity-based, stylistic and interactive aspects of silence must not be overlooked. Moreover, silence in different languages and cultures assumes such a broad range of qualities that finding a peremptory definition of it or an all-inclusive depiction of its various applications and functions is almost impossible. In a classroom setting, silence is defined as a pause in the dialogue where neither the teacher nor the student is speaking (Vassilopoulos & Konstantinidis, 2012). It forms when a gap occurs between a teacher's expectation of a response and the time that the respondent takes to respond (Bista, 2012, p. 77).

Students' silence is usually thought of as a means of the inability to talk or express thoughts and ideas in front of the teacher and classmates. Thus, it is associated with the limited participation or even lack of participation during classroom interaction. It is fair to consider silence as the absence of vocalisation but never the absence of thought. Students' silence cannot be categorised as passive behaviour or a hindrance to the learning process. It can signalise resistance, boredom, respect, discouragement, disinterest, thoughtfulness, or such interactional strategies as denial, agreement, request, warning, command, threat, and confirmation (Silva, 2016).

Although classroom silence is viewed mostly as an unfavourable phenomenon, it may bring educational merit and enable learning. That is to say, silence is divided into positive silence and negative silence. The former means the state that students are thinking after teachers' questioning, while the latter means an emotional state that students have no interests, no attention, and no participation in the learning contents. Put differently, some silence(s) in the classroom are facilitative and highly preferred by teachers and pupils, and others are rejected or perceived as disruptive, embarrassing or unpleasant.

There are many kinds of silence to count. Bilmes (1994) operationalises silence in two categories: absolute silence and notable silence. In this study, I explore teachers' beliefs about students' silence not simply as an absence of noise in the classroom but as an absence of relevant talk, namely notable/conversational silence.

The positive and negative aspects of silence in the classroom

According to Hall, silence is a non-verbal human behaviour that supplies non-verbal indicators of the cultural beliefs and activities of a given group (1959). That is the reason why it is ambiguous. Accordingly, Jaworski (1993, p. 24) called it "probably the most ambiguous of all linguistic forms". For instance, a woman's silence after a marriage proposal may be either a sign of approval or a sign of indignation. This kind of ambiguity creates a number of communicative issues. Thus, Silence, as a communicator, has both good and bad

influences during an interaction. During a conversation, the interlocutors struggle to think of something to say in order to break the silence. According to Malinowski, silence is best avoided while engaging in everyday communication to prevent any 'awkward' or 'uncomfortable' periods and communication breakdowns (Jaworski, 2000, p. 111).

The breaking of silence, the communion of words is the first act to establish links of fellowship, which is consummated only by the breaking of bread and the communion of food. The modern English expressions, 'nice day today' or the Melanesian phrase, 'whence comest thou?' are needed to get over the strange and unpleasant tension which men feel when facing each other in silence (Malinowski 1923 cited in Jaworski 2000)

However, silence is not simply the absence of language. The misconception that silence is totally apart from language arises from the mistaken belief that language is used solely to exchange information. Although silence, by its very nature, provides quite limited informational content about peoples, events, and actions, it is part of language, not totally distinct from it. As a type of communication, silence conveys meaning in the same way speech does. Silence and speech are not total opposites. That is to say, they "form a continuum of forms ranging from the most prototypical instances of silence to the most prototypical instances of speech" (Jaworski, 1993, p. 34). Without some silences/pauses, speech would be pure gibberish; in other words, silence allows speech to make sense. Since silence occurs alongside speech, it is impossible to avoid it. Thus, they need to be interpreted in relation to one another.

Wisdom comes about as one reflects on the nature of everything. Narrated Anas (Radhi Allahu 'Anhum): Allah's Messenger (peace be upon him) said, "Wisdom consists in keeping silent, and those who practice it are few." (Al- Baihaqi reported it in Ash-Shu'ab with a weak chain of narrators, and the sound view is that it is traced back to one of the Sahabah who quoted it from Luqman Al-Hakim). Silences/pauses within a particular conversation give each party an opportunity to reflect on the discourse. The presence of silence does not allow for speech to become empty and, at the same time, full of endless noise. In instances where speakers do not pause to take a breath, words and speech can actually be disruptive of communication.

Silence's functions and interpretations rely heavily on the setting, the context of the situation, and the cultural and social norms of the interlocutors in communication. One can say so much without uttering words; for instance, refuse to answer a question, ignore a comment, express anger, acknowledge agreement, or show respect. In Eastern cultures, silence is generally associated with several positive impressions in communication. It is viewed as a form of comfort. When noise is absent, Easterners are not compelled to fill every pause when interacting with people. They believe that words can contaminate an experience and that inner peace and wisdom can only come through silence. In his pragmatic study of the perception and practice of silence in Jordanian society, Al-Harashseh (2012) came to the conclusion that Jordanian speakers employ silence in order to exhibit politeness or to deliver a message indirectly. A Farsi proverb says, "Silence is a sign of consent", which is comparable to the Arabic saying, "sekout 3alamato rrida". According to the prophetic tradition, the silence of the daughter may be considered as consent. Ibn Abbas narrated that the Messenger of Allah said, "The matron has more right to herself than her Wali, and the virgin is to give permission for herself, and her silence is her permission." [Jami` at-Tirmidhi 1108]. Therefore, a virgin's silence out of timidity when asked for marriage is a sign of approval.

Although silence, in some cases, is equalised with consent, it is still treated as a mystery impregnated with meaning. An Arab wiseman said, "There are 7,000 types of silence, which are summarised in seven words: silence is a worship without effort, an embellishment without jewellery, a prestige without sovereignty, a fort without walls, getting away without apologising, a convenience of the two angels (who write the man's good and bad deeds), and a mantle of faults" (AL-Harashseh, 2012, p. 36).

Silence is a multifaceted, often purposeful border between thoughts and speech or between thoughts and words. Silence might indicate thoughts that cannot be spoken, truths or realities that are or seem to be inexpressible (Silva, 2016). The focus of research on silence in the classroom has mostly been on the negative aspects of silence associated with domination and power. Silence which appears in the classroom mostly creates a negative perception and interpretation from the teacher. Teachers and students often interpret silence

differently. Silence may have pedagogical merit in some situations because it facilitates learning, but when considered in relation to a student's academic performance, teachers appear to overwhelmingly rate it as a negative phenomenon. What follows are some studies which report some positive aspects of silence in the classroom.

Jaworski and Sachdev's research on students' and teachers' beliefs about silence

Jaworski and Sachdev (1998) contribute to the study of silence with a rare qualitative study employing a questionnaire methodology to investigate beliefs about classroom silence. Jaworski and Sachdev's survey considered student silence in the classroom to be the absence of relevant talk ('notable silence'), rather than the absence of noise ('absolute silence'). They probed the beliefs and attitudes of Welsh secondary school pupils from varying socio-economic backgrounds to find out how they valued silence in their classrooms and in what situations they perceived silence to be marked or unmarked communicative behaviour.

Apart from being a linguistic flex of the lack of communication, silence is also a positive communicative item. Students surveyed by Jaworski and Sachdev believed that by refraining from talking, they could improve their learning. Generally speaking, the findings of the study suggest that learners tend to view their own unmarked silence in the classroom positively, and consider it to be "a facilitative device enabling students to gain access, organise and absorb new material" (Jaworski & Sachdev, 1998, p. 286). They further suggest that while student-centred classes have recently been encouraged in mainstream education in England, it could be causing anxiety to students who would feel more comfortable in teacher-centred classes where they are not expected to participate actively in classroom interaction. Moreover, the researchers found that teachers interpreted student silence as an overwhelmingly negative phenomenon when associated with academic matters and as a positive one when associated with students' personal traits.

Within the three Welsh secondary schools Jaworski and Sachdev investigated, on one hand, pupils believed they were more silent than their teachers in classroom situations and that their relatively unmarked silence had pedagogical merit because it facilitated learning. On the other hand, many teachers deem quiet, reticent behaviour to be a portent of possible future academic failure.

Katherine Schultz's book: Rethinking Classroom participation, listening to silent voices

As an academic, Katherine Schultz began thinking seriously about silence after the publication of her book *Listening: A Framework for Teaching Across Differences*. After writing the book and talking about it with teachers and university scholars, Schultz realized that there is little writing and thought about listening to silence; thus, she began to read widely about it. She challenges prospective teachers, experienced teachers, teacher educators, educational researchers, and educational leaders to expand their understanding of the value of silence as a tool for learning. In her book, *Rethinking Classroom Participation, listening to silent voices*, Katherine Schultz asserts that the reliance on verbal participation to assess learning "often ends up rewarding compliance (e.g., talking because that is what a teacher expects), rather than thoughtfulness and learning" (2009, p. 6).

How does silence work in the classroom? What are the functions and understandings of silence in the classroom? What are some possible responses to student silences? are some of the questions Schultz raises for consideration. In an attempt to answer such questions, she offers examples from research in elementary school and university classrooms, as well as, the insights from her ten years of classroom observations. Class participation is often associated with verbal contributions or talking in class, while students' silence is rarely viewed as a contribution to classroom work and learning. Schultz wondered if silence could be a form of participation and how might silence be reframed as a positive or useful contribution to classroom discourse. Through her work on silence, Shultz aims to show how silence can be a form of participation, and offers ways for teachers to investigate silence with students to eventually rethink the processes and context of teaching.

Participation is about contribution and connection. It "consists of any verbal or non-verbal contribution in aural, visual, or written form that supports learning for the individual students and/or other members of the

class.” (Schultz, 2009). Schultz observed how students use silence as a form of communication, which led her to explore the many ways students might participate without speaking aloud.

Rethinking Classroom Participation: Listening to Silent Voices is a unique contribution to our understanding of the power of silence to promote student learning by investigating the forms it takes in our classrooms. Schultz highlights and explores the group dynamics that influence silence in the classroom. She asserts that silence plays five key functions in the classroom setting: 1. Resistance 2. Power 3. Protection 4. Response to Trauma 5. Reflection.

Students' silence and Active Listening

Silence is essential when listening, while listening is only possible when there is silence. Listening and silence belong together. Within the classroom, the engaged silence of listening is fully as, if not more important than, words and actions. Students may choose to remain silent because they want to listen to their classmates' views to integrate them into their own perspectives. To give preference to others through listening (silence) is to “join with them in the joys of creation, while listening compassionately is to join them in the suffering. Both experiences often lie beyond the bounds of what words alone can ever tell” (Garrison, 2011 as cited in Baurain, 2011). It is thus a question of striving for openness and sensitivity towards others and towards that which is said, in words or in silence, which in turn demands true listening.

Arabic Islamic culture links silence to listening and learning. The verbal root n-ṣ-t in Arabic expresses particularly the silence required for listening to another's discourse. According to Fahr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, inṣāt “means at the same time listening (istimāʿ) and remaining silent (sukūt)” (1415/1995, vol. 5: 439, as cited in Zilio-Grandi 2016: 11). This term is found in sūrat al-Aʿrāf. Allah said: “And when the Qurʾān is recited, give ear to it (istamiʿū la-hu) and pay heed to it (anṣitū) that ye may obtain mercy” (Koran, 7, 204). The importance of silence is demonstrated in this verse since it is crucial to listen to the words of God and not chatter away while the Koranic passages are recited by the Imam, or during the sermon ‘*xuṭba*’ that accompanies Friday's prayers and other mandatory feast days.

In addition to cultivating one's spirituality and the feeling of nearness to Allah, adopting the practice of silence is believed to enrich one's knowledge in faith and life. According to Muḥammad ibn ʿAbd al-Wahhāb al-Sukkarī, “Silence (ṣamt) guarantees a man two good things (ḥaṣlatayn) at once: the integrity of his religion (al-salāma fī dīni-hi) and the comprehension of what his companion says (al-fahm ʿan ṣāhibi-hi).” (as cited in Zilio-Grandi, 2016). Silence as listening is not only the acknowledgement, respect for and understanding of others, but also the recognition of being one part of a group of interlocutors.

The studies mentioned above suggest that silence in the classroom should not always be regarded as a negative and detrimental element. While the negative aspects of silence should not be ignored, it is fair to say that silence in the classroom has its positives and merits to learning. However, it tends to be overlooked by education researchers, who instead prefer to focus on the more verbal aspects of classroom discourse.

METHODOLOGY

In an attempt to answer my research questions, a qualitative method was followed to collect data from high school teachers of English in Oujda, Morocco. Employing qualitative methods is essential to the study, as it allows for a deeper analysis of students' silence to be carried out at the level of the individual- something that is not really possible in the quantitative paradigm. The approach is the collection, analysis, and interpretation of comprehensive narrative and visual data to gain insights into a particular phenomenon of interest.

Sampling and Instrument

The non-probability sampling was a reasonable choice for this study, mainly convenience and snowball sampling. In convenience sampling, “the researcher selects participants because they are willing and available to be studied.” (Creswell J. W., 2012, p. 145). In snowball sampling, “the researcher asks participants to identify others to become members of the sample.” (Creswell J. W., 2012, p. 146). (n=32) participants were

selected since they were available and willing to participate under the condition that they are High school teachers of English in Oujda, Morocco. The majority (n=19) (59%) are males. The rest (n=13) (41%) are females. From 32 participants, 15 (47%) are between the age of 21 and 29 years old; 10 (31%) are over 40 years old; and 7 (22%) are between the age of 30 and 39 years old. As teachers of English, the participants were asked about their years of experience teaching English. Out of 32 participants, 20 (62.5%) have been teaching English for 1 to 10 years. Four participants (12.5%) have been teaching English for 10 to 20 years. Another four (12.5%) participants have been teaching English for 20 to 30 years. Finally, four other participants have over 30 years of experience teaching English in Moroccan High schools. Although the number of participants was relatively small, which is not unusual in qualitative studies, the study gave the participants a voice about their experiences. The teachers were selected to explain their attitudes towards students' silence and how it affects their students' learning journey.

The aim of this qualitative study is to understand and interpret how various participants (teachers of English) in a social setting (the classroom) understand students' silence. To achieve this, I had to use an exploratory open-mind in order to gain access to participants' often multiple perspectives of silence. Data collection utilised semi-structured in-depth interviews of consenting participants. They mostly focus on the interviewee's opinion and experience, aiming to get rich and in-depth data (Bryman, 2008). Just as any other method, interviews have their limitations. One may argue that interviews are socially constructed and therefore constrained by the particular interview situation. According to Pole and Lampard, interviews are of an artificial character and can therefore not be expected to "uncover the truth or the essence of individual belief, experience or opinion" (Pole & Lampard, 2002, p. 127). However, some researchers believe that semi-structured interviews have high validity since they allow for an open relaxed approach to interviewing, where the participant can talk in detail and can explain meanings behind actions with little or no input from the interviewer.

Before conducting the interviews, existing literature and qualitative findings were studied intensively. The gained insights were used as an inspiration for open questions in order to understand the concept of students' silence. Relevant theories or related themes were collected and to each of them several questions were developed. Based on these questions, an interview guide was developed. The semi-structured interviews' structuring through an interview guide made it possible to keep orientation during the interview. Furthermore, the structuring made sure that important theoretical issues were covered in the conversation and it facilitated the analysis according to categories. On the other hand, the fact that the interview was not completely structured permitted us to talk about the individual opinions and experiences of the teachers in a non-constraining way.

Data Collection

An informed consent email, which explains the whole research and interview procedure was sent to the participants. Being aware of the purpose of the study, 32 teachers agreed to be interviewed. These interviews took place online using video/audio call technology, namely WhatsApp or Google meet. The interview questions were sent prior to the interview, which gave the participants the time and space to read and think about the topics to be discussed. The interviews were conducted in English and each one concluded before thirty minutes had passed with a majority completed in the 22-25 minutes range. In order to prepare fluent interviews, the questions were distributed into different categories. However, during the interviews, the order of questions in the guide was not strictly followed. Due to the open and semi-structured character of the study, it seemed to make more sense to let the interviewees answer the questions in an unconstrained way, mentioning everything that came into their mind. Many interviewees brought up themes that were planned for a later part of the interview in the beginning so that it seemed appropriate to advance the questions regarding that certain topic. The interview guide was, thus, much more used as a tool to support orientation during the interview and to make sure that all areas of the research are covered. All interviews were audio recorded and audio files were saved and later transcribed. In addition to audio recordings, I kept written notes to later help in analysing and integrating the data.

Data Analysis

The primary method of analysis for the data in this study was thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is a method of identifying, analysing and reporting themes or patterns within data. (Braun & Clarke, 2006). I aimed to be reflexive during the analysis and not impose my ideas on the data. First, I listened to all the recorded interviews. Moreover, Individual transcripts were read and re-read a number of times, accompanied by a note taking process to get a “holistic sense” of the data. No sorting or coding of data occurred in this first step. Rather, this step allowed me to become familiar with the nature of the data as a whole. Then, as part of the writing process, meaning units were grouped together and eventually organised into themes and sub-themes.

FINDINGS

The data collected helped in understanding the notion of silence from the perspective of Moroccan teachers of English. The following section is divided into sub-categories, with each representing one interview question.

Student's silence and classroom communication

As a means of communication, silence is inseparable from speech in the classroom. In the first two questions of the interview, interviewees were asked about the flow of communication in their classrooms. The majority of participants feel uncomfortable and doubtful about communication and patterns of interaction in their classrooms, especially during the first weeks of the school year. They claim that they try their best to maintain good open communication with their students; however, there are always some awkward moments when students would just stare at the teacher, when asked a question or assigned a task.

Interviewees seem to agree on the fact that they constantly have some doubts about the flow of communication in the classroom, whether students will be able to understand what the teacher is saying or whether they can respond to his/her questions. The teacher tends to automatically and unconsciously interpret that something is wrong with what has been taught or drilled, or that the instruction put forward is not clear or beyond the students' level. This feeling emerges when the teacher is short of time and needs to cover a certain amount of teaching items. During this time, students' silence may be the teacher's worst enemy. Three participants said that this silence is a gap that should be bridged adequately by reformulating the question or the instructions. However, they firmly believe that responses and feedback from the students requires time and patience. Another interviewee wishes to be able to understand the students, but does not feel an urgent need to fill any gaps between himself and his students or among students. He believes that although his silent students do not speak much, they kind compensate with non-verbal cues.

Two participants feel there is little to no gap between them in their students. They find it hard to interpret students' silence; however, they were able to motivate their students to verbally participate in the classroom. Connecting with the students, though it takes time, is their strategy to get students to verbalize their needs and communicate in the classroom.

Teachers' reaction to students' silence

The question of tolerance is the second to be raised during the interviews. Teachers treat silence differently. The majority of the participants stand by the fact that they tolerate their students' silence because it is natural, part of language and communicative. Silence is very much present and inevitable in the classroom; therefore, educators and teachers should learn how to accept it and work around or with it.

One of the reasons why the participants react this way is that they are aware of the fact that they are teaching students English as a foreign language. One participant in particular said: “to be honest, I used to get frustrated when students remain silent after I ask a question, but recently I have tried to put myself in their shoes. I realized that when I was their age, I could not speak in class. I had to think a lot about my answer and I hardly gave an answer; even though I knew that it was the right one.”

Another participant added that she usually tolerates students' silence; however, in the presence of the inspector, silence becomes frustrating for her. Since the inspector comes to evaluate her teaching in less than one hour, she finds herself obliged to elicit answers from the students and have them speak and communicate in English. From the participants' answers, it seems that when teachers feel the need to invite silent students into classroom discussions with the hope to make them say something, they tend to overlook their silence.

Even though there are teachers who value students' opinions and encourage students' verbal participation, teacher-centred teaching in which the direction of communication is from the teacher to the students is still dominant in Moroccan schools. When there is interaction between the teacher and the students, it is overwhelmingly teacher-initiated interaction in which the teacher asks a question of a student; it rarely involves student-initiated interaction or questioning.

The value of students' silence

The question of the value of students' silence in the classroom was the third to be raised during the interviews. All 32 participants seem to agree on the fact that students' silence is an integral part of language learning. Every aspect of the teaching-learning experience is significant and worthy of note, from the verbal interactions to the silences. Silence in the classroom can be interpreted both negatively and positively. It may reflect lack of engagement, but it can also indicate moments of contemplation, attentiveness, and comfortableness in the classroom. They explained that when a student is silent that does not mean that s/he is a passive learner. Silence reflects the cognitive processes of thinking, decoding, encoding, and constructing sentences.

Taking into account this conviction, the teacher should deduce when the silence is healthy and conducive to thinking and learning, and when it should be interrupted by softly encouraging shy students to take part in classroom oral communication.

One participant in particular explained the need to understand that silence contributes to students' learning. It gives them the opportunity to reflect, think, and process the language. Moreover, it allows students to translate what they are learning in English into their mother tongue. However, there are no rules or strategies that dictate how educators should deal with silence in the classroom.

Another participant shared with the researcher his student experience. He mentioned that he was once a silent student. His silence had a deeper meaning and background to it. Teachers may have interpreted his silence as his unwillingness to verbally participate in class. While other students were speaking out loud and answering questions enthusiastically, he was internally arguing about a certain answer or exercise. Therefore, there is a need to observe student's silence to know their personality and learning needs.

Students' silence and listening

During the interview, the interviewee asked the participant to comment on this quote: "Students should have listening periods of silence before they are expected to communicate in English". All participants agreed that silence fosters autonomy and promotes active listening.

The majority raised the fact that silence is a lapse of time that enables the learner to "digest" what s/he has internalized in terms of ideas, suppositions, rules, vocabulary items, etc. However, the teacher should monitor this silence, by setting some suitable activities, or tasks to make the silence beneficial. Students need to be exposed to the target language as much as possible before they can be able to produce it. They need to build their vocabulary to express their thoughts. There is a need to listen to others and native speakers through authentic materials. Just like native speakers of English, students have the right to experience and enjoy the silent period of language acquisition.

Listening to students' silence

The interviews ended with the interviewer asking the participants to react to another quote: "When teachers genuinely listen to students, their silences and speeches, students are freed to listen to one another and the

overall learning process is expanded and deepened”. Participants could not agree more that teachers should be good role models, people worthy of imitation, to their students.

Participants stated that listening is very important in communication outside and inside the classroom. When a teacher genuinely listens to his/her students, s/he shows that s/he cares about them and does his/her best for their best. Such an action is welcomed in communicative classrooms, where students are motivated, engaged and happy to learn. Without the teacher's willingness to properly listen to learners' answers, comments, and explanations, communication cannot take place in the classroom, hence why learners may not take the habit of actively listening to each other.

Participants show the need to learn while teaching, through reflection. Teaching techniques and strategies are effective when adopted to the classroom environment. Improving one's teaching experience is through considering students' needs and characteristics. Teachers can find out about students' needs through observations, questionnaires or discussions. When teachers show good attention, the relationships within the classroom are likely to be stronger and deeper.

One participant raised the idea of culture, and how it is reflected in the interactions of the students. He mentioned as an observation that Moroccans are not known for being good listeners. They tend to interrupt whomever they are talking to. He explains that such behaviour may surface in the classroom, where culture is deeply integrated. Teachers have to educate students on how to take turns talking, how to listen and respect each other. Another idea he mentioned is over-correction. Over-correction can result in students not wanting to say anything in class because they are afraid of making mistakes; therefore, teachers should choose carefully what to correct and what to ignore. To avoid confusing and demotivating students, it is preferable to rarely correct their mistakes.

Some participants believe that listening and connecting with students is idealistic. They firmly believe that that is the way teaching sessions should be arranged; however, teachers are asked to teach a certain content and rarely when they have time to listen to their students' thoughts or silence. Obviously, not all communication is verbal; sometimes what is unsaid is way more interesting than what is uttered. They believe this method needs teachers who are aware, first of all, of this and second, teachers who are willing and have the qualifications to listen to what their students are not saying.

DISCUSSION

“Students should have ‘listening periods’ of silence before they are expected to communicate in English.”

The findings have suggested that silence within foreign language learning contexts is a complex phenomenon and is not something to which teachers apply simplistic generalisations. There is a commonly held view that learners tend not to speak in their language classes simply because they lack L2 ability. Moroccan students are particularly concerned about accuracy. They cannot allow themselves to commit mistakes when speaking. They are hurt when laughed at by other students or criticised by the teacher. This reflects the pressure put on students to perform accurately and teachers' intolerance of mistakes. While it is true that deficiencies in students' comprehension and language production skills contribute to some extent to the reticence commonly observed in foreign language classes, classroom silence may also occur when students have consciously chosen to refrain from speech. This point was demonstrated by a particular interviewee who revealed how her students chose not to orally participate in classroom activities, even though they were capable of doing so. It is worth mentioning that a brilliant silent student exists in every classroom. In contrast to the students' who spoke often and sometimes without thought, his/her silence brought attention to the moments when s/he chose to speak, causing others to listen.

Without silence, speech would be nothing but endless noise and could not perform any of the functions of language. Indeed, in situations where speakers do not take a breath, engage in simultaneous discourse, or fail to take a time out from heated arguments, speech can actually be disruptive of communication. One interviewee in particular stated: “one student's silence creates space for other students to respond”. Students

contribute to classroom silence so that others can talk; thus, enrich classroom discussions. Therefore, adding silence and periods of reflection to teaching provides a wider range of students with the opportunity to participate in classroom discussions. Silence bears a capacity to speak and listen at the same time and to do so both within and without language. This is not a weakness or absence; there is no deficit or vacuum to be filled. Silences can speak and give others freedom to speak. Students use silence as a form of communication and classroom participation. For instance, a student may silently agree with a question or thoughtfully write notes.

It is known that the active participation of students can promote the development of the students' language competence and proficiency. The role of learners' participation in classroom interactive communication is providing various opportunities for communicative language use and, therefore, for second language learning and acquisition. Strategies and techniques for increasing student participation focus on increasing the number of students who speak in class; however, they may not draw in those students who choose to remain silent in a constant manner. Moreover, they do not address the conditions that prompts them to participate through silence. An interviewee strongly believes that "every student has the opportunity to participate in each class through modes other than talk". For example, auditory-oriented learners rely on listening/silence to learn and remember. They tend to convert material into sounds, such as sounding out words in their heads while reading. In class, they learn faster by listening to tapes. The findings suggested that Moroccan students use silence in learning and task solving. They generally prefer acquiring the language through listening or reading and comprehension tasks. Activities concerned with listening, reading and answering comprehension questions were moderately appreciated by students. The reason may be that they appeared challenging for them, and did not meet their concern for conscious learning and accuracy.

"When teachers genuinely listen to students, speeches and silences, students are freed to listen to one another and the overall learning process is expanded and deepened."

The findings revealed that Moroccan teachers view silence as part of language, but hardly consider it as "a form of participation", worthy of investigation alongside speech. However, if a significant number of students in a classroom are frequently silent, the teacher should ask him/herself how often s/he provides his/her students with the authentic moments for talk.

Reasons behind a students' silence are numerous. A student, who is not interested in the learning process, not comprehending, overwhelmed, and self- or other isolated from the learning community may choose to remain silent. "Except in certain contexts, the meaning of any silence is inherently ambiguous and therefore subject to misinterpretation and misevaluation" (Saville-Troike, 1985). This highlights the need for careful and sensitive handling by teachers of student silences in the classroom.

The first step to understanding students' silence is to listen. Listening to silences can be just as instructive as listening to voices, maybe more so. (Losey 1997: 191 as cited in Nakane, 2003). If teachers know how a student uses and views his/her silence, they will help enrich that student's learning experience. Listening in silence is a useful strategy that teachers can use to pay attention to students' silence. They may view it as a stance that students consciously choose or as a situation that's produced by classroom dynamics and structures. Once a teacher unlocks the ability to listen, s/he is capable of formulating solutions and strategies to improve his/her teaching method. For example, since students feel more relaxed to speak in a group, the teacher may choose to group students heterogeneously.

Teachers' belief in the value of silence goes on trial. They are conditioned to interpret silence as a symptom of something gone wrong. They carry the responsibility to teach and improve students' learning experience. However, in silent classrooms, their sense of competence and worth are at stake. They choose to speak to break the silence, which usually leaves students either dumbfounded or bored. Instead of being stressed by the "deafening silence" of the learners, teachers should consider accepting it and working with it, not against it. In short, teachers should keep in mind that in-class silence is not always an indicator of disengagement, even in case it is, there could be some hard-to-control factors leading to that reticence like students' personality, their own workload, and student-student conflicts. Therefore, a calm and accepting attitude that students first need to shape their personal identity in EFL classes, feel confident, listen, comprehend and start talking and get over silence when they feel ready should be essential for the teachers to create a positive classroom environment.

CONCLUSION

This study has attempted to describe participants' perceptions of silence, and discover any emerging recurring themes. It has a number of pedagogical implications. First, it raises teachers' awareness of silence as a learning skill and teaching strategy. Second, it demonstrates the urgent need for teachers to help students learn how to gain and keep speaking opportunities, instead of interrupting or letting other students interrupt. Silence then becomes an essential tool for communication between teachers and students. Looking at the findings in a broader context, they indicate that teachers need to change how they think about silence in the classroom. Instead of focussing on silence avoidance, they should focus on avoidance of miscommunication.

Although further research is needed before most of these findings can be generalized beyond the current sample of participants, this study offers a good start in this challenging undertaking. A research focusing on students' perspectives is undergoing as I write this article. It would provide a more comprehensive and balanced understanding of the concept of silence and its role in improving learning and teaching. I suggest an observation phase paired with a conversational analysis approach which would have been appropriate to record EFL classes' oral participation aspects, code individual learners' behaviour, and measure learners' classroom micro silences. Silence's markedness value in Moroccan conversation can also be examined within a more comprehensive and focused study using a sophisticated method of silence measurement. In general, to improve communication with others, it is worthwhile to pause, keep silent, and slow down.

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APPENDICES

Appendix C: Informed Consent Email (for the teachers' interviews)

Dear Mr/Mrs/ Miss....,

Study title: Investigating Moroccan Teachers of English's Perspectives on Students' Silence in the Efl Classroom

Researcher: IKRAM DEBBOUZA

Before agreeing to participate in this research, I strongly encourage you to read the following explanation of this study. Student silence in the classroom is widely perceived as a serious problem for many educators. This is particularly so in second/foreign language learning contexts as a large body of literature has illustrated how oral interaction and production of the target language can significantly aid L2 development. However, silence's ambiguous nature pushes me as a researcher to question whether teachers can make use of this phenomenon for learning and teaching purposes. The aim of this study is to explore how Moroccan teachers perceive and understand students' silence in an EFL classroom context, and how silence can improve their students' learning experience.

I invite you to share your opinion and experience dealing with students' silence in the classroom. Participation in the study involves an online interview, which will last for approximately 20 to 25 minutes. The interviews will be conducted by the researcher, audio-taped and later transcribed for the purpose of data analysis. There are no risks or discomforts that are anticipated from your participation in the study. The anticipated benefit of participation is the opportunity to discuss perceptions, experiences and concerns related to the phenomenon of classroom silence. The information gathered during this study will remain confidential in secure premises during this project. Only the researcher will have access to the study data and information. There will not be any identifying names on the interview transcripts. Your identifying details will never be revealed in any publication of the results of this study. The records will be destroyed at the completion of the study.

Participation in this study is voluntary; refusal to participate will involve no penalty. You are free to withdraw at any time without prejudice or penalty. You are also free to refuse to answer any question I might ask you. You are welcome to ask me any questions that occur to you during the interview.

If you have any further questions once the interview is completed, you can contact me via email.

I will be waiting for your reply

Sincerely,

IKRAM DEBBOUZA

Appendix D: Teachers' Interview Questions

The interviews are planned to take around 20-25 minutes

Ask for permission to tape record the interview

Anonymity of the interviewee will be protected

There are no right or wrong answers! I am asking for experiences, opinions and feelings!

Explain briefly the topic and focus of the study

Have you ever felt uncomfortable or doubtful about communication in your classroom? Have you ever felt any gaps between yourself and your silent students that you wish you could fill? Please explain

Do you fail to tolerate your students' silence? How?

Silence is part of language. Do you think there is a need to allow and interpret students' silence? Please explain how that would be possible.

Do you agree with this quote: "Students should have 'listening periods' of silence before they are expected to communicate in English."? Please justify

What's your opinion regarding this quote: "When teachers genuinely listen to students, speeches and silences, students are freed to listen to one another and the overall learning process is expanded and deepened."