

Silence In Schools

Ms Nita

M.Ed Final, Department of Education, University of Delhi

Abstract

“.....sometimes, silence is very violent” this is the statement one of my professors gave while talking about silence in her classroom with me. We all have experienced silence in our classrooms; sometimes, when a difficult question is posed by someone, other times, its presence signifies the listener's focus on the speaker. Have you ever heard something which has no sound? Have you heard silence? The sounds which don't seem audible aren't always inaudible. Sometimes, silence is too loud, and other times, it is so subtle that it becomes natural. Moreover, there are many forms and types of silence we have experienced in our daily lives, which we will discuss further in this article. Silence is a very common phenomenon in our classrooms. There are multiple examples of people being silent in the classroom. But this silence doesn't mean the same thing in all contexts. There is a very popular phrase in English, “talk is silver, but silence is golden”. There could be multiple interpretations of this phrase, but critical theorists might question it by asking – is “silence” always golden? Do we really think “talk” is silver? We will be discussing similar questions in this article. However, this article itself is a question for the reader to reflect upon.

Keywords: *silence, culture of silence, speech, schooling*

Introduction

“Silence is so freaking loud.” I found this quote, by Sarah Dessen (2006), on the internet a few weeks back. This quote made me curious about the concept of silence and its meaning in different contexts. Is silence really that loud? Does this mean silence talks? Or does this mean silence also communicates? My mind was full of questions. So, I decided to explore silence in our daily lives and especially in schools. But first, I searched for its syntactical meaning.

In the Oxford Dictionary (2008), *silence* is categorized both as a noun and a verb, meaning- “quietness” and “saying nothing about something”. For example, a silence punctuated only by the occasional sniff from the children. In this way, silence is complete soundlessness or an absence of any sound. But “silence” and “quiet” are often used interchangeably, then how could one be used to define another? In the Oxford Dictionary (2008), *quiet* is also labelled into two categories, a noun and an adjective, meaning- “with little or no noise”, “no talking”, and “without much activity”. For example, “I'm going home for a bit of peace and quiet”. In this example, it doesn't mean that the house would be soundless or soundproof, but it means that even when various sounds would be hearable,

one won't be listening to them. In other words, silence is seen as soundless-ness or actionless-ness, whereas quietness would allow a bit of sound and activity but not “much”. Hence, silence and quiet aren't equal. Although they are used interchangeably.

As a result, to understand the meaning of “silence” or “quiet”, one has to emphasize the experience of the experiencer who's in the specific situation. It is also important to note that in the above given example, silence is seen in two forms – one, in the form of soundlessness and two, in the form of actionless-ness. Moreover, with these meanings, the understanding of sound is not restricted to its physical aspect. In other words, sound is not just the vibration of atoms of the medium; it could also be one's unarticulated thoughts or ideas.

Now that we are equipped with a basic understanding of *silence*, we can look at it in the context of our daily experiences. We often stay silent while talking. These “silences” are of many for in our everyday speech. Sometimes, they come in the shape of a small pause between two phrases to assert something. Some other times, the silence provides shelter to the speaker in the inability to express themselves. There are times when speakers stay silent to let others join

in the speech. On other occasions, we take small moments of silence to think. There are also incidents where we choose prolonged silence to communicate; for example, a lot of people use silent treatment on others. These are the types of silence we experience in our daily lives. They have the same form, i.e. absence of sound, but they are used in different contexts. Evidently, ‘silence’ is situated in multiple dimensions of our lives and in different forms; sometimes, it is individual, and other times it is in social form. Silence is a part of our everyday speech, indeed, in many shapes and sizes.

Commonly, silence is not conceptualized in multiple forms, and if it is, as it has been categorised earlier, its understanding remains in the physical aspect of it. It is commonly understood that when one is silent, either they are struggling with collecting their thoughts and can’t articulate, or they don’t have anything to say and therefore aren’t talking. If we look closely, both of the examples are indicating towards the absence of sound. But, we have established earlier that the lack of sound isn’t the only meaning of silence. Merleau-Ponty (1996) pointed out that “being unable to speak or make one’s voice heard is not the same as being silent; a person is silent only when they are able to talk – that is when they have something to say”. Having considered the above-mentioned argument, silence is clearly not one’s inability to articulate. Probably, silence signifies something much beyond the dimensions of evidence of sounds. Thus, one needs to think about the connoted meaning of “silence”.

To understand these connoted meanings of “silence”, let’s contextualize it in Indian schools. Indian schools have been subject to multiple research studies, especially post-independence. With changing research approaches, the ways of looking at the school and its constituents changed. In popular conception, schools in India are considered the shrine of knowledge. Teachers, students, and curriculum are integral parts of this shrine. But, like many other shrines, schools aren’t always silent and peaceful. Schools are filled with many noises – students talking, playing, repeating something after their

teachers etc. However, there are instances when the whole school remain silent, especially during exams. We will be discussing these instances of silence and noise in detail in the following part of this article. We will explore this presence of silence in the school and how it travels back and forth from home to school.

Silenced at School

Indian classrooms are full of sounds; students often play around in the room itself, chat, shout, share their ideas or thoughts, question, and do a lot of other things. One of the significant means of expression for them is their voice. We know the use of sound is a significant factor in communication. But are all forms of sound acceptable in our schools?

When a child enters school, he/she becomes a student there. This new identity is attained by the child while going through certain schooling processes, for example, wearing school uniforms daily, following the timetable etc. Discipline is one of the major aspects of these schooling processes. Most schools consider discipline as a very important part of the school curriculum. Nevertheless, this discipline is manifested in various forms; one of these forms is maintaining silence. This silence is desired in two forms – as a lack of physical sound and silence as the absence of thoughts or absence of mental sound. Often, it is expected that the learners speak less and listen more. Very common commands that all of us have heard in our school lives from our teachers are “keep quiet” or, with a higher tone, “silence!!” It is a conceptual error that we use “quiet” and “silence” interchangeably, while they mean different things. Although students are expected to majorly stay silent and follow what is told, in case of doubt, they are sometimes allowed to ask questions after raising their hands but not without it. The discipline here is manifested in two forms – one, physical, as the students stay silent till they are allowed to speak, and two, they silence their thoughts till they are allowed to do so.

There are also instances when teachers sometimes desire silence or lack of physical sound in the class just for the sake of maintaining discipline. In other words, learners

have to maintain a silent environment in the class, which would let them focus on the concepts better, and hence they will learn more. Moreover, silence or even being a silent student is also emphasised greatly in schools. The value of being a good listener is always understood in equivalence with a good learner. Only those classes which are quiet and get good results are considered good ones. But, one might question what the connection of this silence with learning is. Some researchers (Liu, 2005; Tatar, 2005) suggest that a silent classroom allows the learners to be more focused on what is being said, which helps them in retaining the knowledge and provides more space for reflection. Hence it caters to the learning of the students. The presence of silence here signifies the reflective phase of the learners, where they stay silent for the outer world, but their mind is full of sounds. This means the presence of sound inside our head is independent of the sounds created in the outer environment. Then, where does this thin line between the two gets blurred? Let's pause for a moment and think.

All of us have heard the phrase, “Silence speaks louder than words”. The idea that even while one is staying silent, they are communicating; is so bold that we acknowledge that silence also speaks. But do we listen to this silence? And even if we do, how do we listen to it? As it is established earlier, silence is soundless-ness then how, in a practical sense, would our sensory organs be able to catch sound waves when there are none? If I simplify the question, I would say, in the absence of any sound, how is this silence being heard? The assumption is that even when one is silent, the communication that is happening probably needs other modes. A common example is when the teacher wants the class to be silent, they often stop speaking themselves. This silent gesture by the teacher often makes the class silent too. This gesture still takes me back to the days of the sudden silence which would follow this action of the teachers. In this example, the teacher is not speaking but is communicating her voice through her gestures. An incredible way to communicate without producing any sounds, isn't it?

Silence in schools indicates different things. On some occasions, it works as a shield one uses to protect themselves from the consequences of the speech. A lot of students hesitate to answer the questions raised in the class when they know they don't have the linguistic proficiency in expressing themselves effectively. On the contrary, there are times when students take shelter in silence when they think they don't know the right answer and sharing a wrong answer might shame them. In both of these cases, students are using silence to keep themselves in a safe position.

Another form of silence in school is when students want to show their disagreement. Students often remain silent in response to some order or request from their teachers. For example, teachers often ask after teaching a lesson if everybody understands what is being taught. If students say “yes”, it means they understood, but silence in the class shows their disagreement with the assumption of the teacher that whatever is being taught is understood by them. This silence signifies disagreement between the student and the assumption of teacher. On the contrary, if we change the question from “have you all understood” to “if you have not understood please ask your doubts,” then the silence would signify the agreement of the students with the assumption of the teacher. Another example in which silence seems to signify agreement is that in Japanese culture, to show respect and agreement, it is common for people to remain silent while talking with others. In this way, silence signifies agreement or disagreement of one person with another.

In some cases, silence also signifies that the person is thinking. Here, silence provides a space to cater to thinking. It is a manifestation of one's analytical processes. Many of us stay silent when we are thinking, analysing, or reflecting on something. In school, this form of silence is quite evident. Another form of silence that is very much visible in schools is when we take a moment or two to reflect on each side of the problem in front of us. This type of silence could be categorized as problem-solving silence.

It is critical to notice how all these silences had similar basic structure i.e. soundless-ness, which categorises all of these under the same form. However, silence in school is not limited to this one form. Sometimes, silence is a part of the socializing process and is so deeply ingrained in our behaviour that it remains almost invisible. In other words, silence is a part of our daily lives, and it is not at all noticeable unless and until it is used strongly.

It is said that teaching is an art and science. It not only includes the art of pedagogy but also the science of content and, above all, a mixture of both. But sometimes, these pedagogical activities include harmful gestures which induce a repeated behaviour of remaining silent. In a lot of cases, students even silence their thoughts and questions. Consider, for example, in a science class, the teacher is only concerned with completing the syllabus, which could result from systemic pressure. In the process of completing the target, she tends to overlook or ignore the general doubts students have about the world, like – why the rainbow is only visible after rain. Why does the sky turn into so many colours throughout the day? Now, the teacher keeps on ignoring such questions, which results in repeated actions leading to a culture of silencing one's questions because they would eventually get ignored or overlooked. Moreover, it is an essential criterion for a good student to remain silent. Thus, students learn to shut themselves in order to fit into the idea of a good student.

The term “culture of silence” was given by Brazilian educator, philosopher, and prominent advocate of critical pedagogy Paulo Freire. According to him, in the state of oppression, the oppressed suppress their identity, culture, or ideas to follow the mainstream or oppressor's culture because they don't find any value in their own ideas, identity, or culture. This social process creates anaesthetised individuals with very less connect with their own selves, and this disconnect is manifested in the form of a culture of silence. These individuals are so much alienated from their own reality that they are not conscious of their life situations and eventually become a part of the mass oppressed by the

dominant class (Freire worked in the context of class-based hegemonic social structure). Freire suggested that a problem-posing and liberating education might break this culture of silence and allow individuals to speak their reality in their own voices. But the education system in India itself is creating a culture of silence among young individuals.

In school, right from the beginning of the day till the end, we follow a curriculum. From morning prayer to the last period, we follow the rules and regulations set in the school. Schools are agents of socialisation, and sometimes they become miniature societies themselves. As a consequence of this, the rules and regulations of the school are guided by societal forces. At the same time, students find themselves in an oppressive structure defined and curated by the forces outside the school. In this system, a lot of students start to feel a disconnect from their own selves, this disconnect later turns into an emotional numbness, which is an essential factor in creating the culture of silence. The students often sub-consciously silence their own thoughts, questions, and disagreements to remain safe and sound in this miniature society called school. This leads to an internalised behaviour of not raising a voice. The thin line between the mind and the mouth gets dissolved in the air, leading to individuals who neither think nor speak.

The content taught in the classroom plays a very important role here. Cognitively, it is beneficial for the students if whatever is being taught is connected with their life outside the school. Correspondingly, the content of the textbooks should be in alignment with the child's (who is playing the role of a student in school) reality. When this alignment doesn't happen, a state of disconnect follows. The example given above of the science teacher substantiates this argument. This disconnect is later converted into a forced muteness on the students, who have to shut their questions in order to “learn” what is important for exams. Moreover, they follow what is being said to them because they never consider themselves to be competent enough to do anything on their own. Here, the two classes

defined by Freire translate into the education system in new forms but with the same basic structure.

Classroom practices, on the other hand, are also very significant causes of this culture of silence adopted by the students. When school replicates society, they also adopt social norms. These norms later become a part of our classroom discourse. In this manner, the school continues the social structures and order, which pushes the marginalized people further towards the margin and never opens the door of the core community for them. For example, Krishna Kumar (1983), in one of his articles, shares the example of a classroom. The topic which is being discussed is *tantrism*, and the teacher asks questions about it from a boy who is from a reserved (tribal) background. Moreover, she also accepts responses like “the most affected areas by the *tantrism* are tribal villages”. A classroom discussion like this might make the students think stereotypically, further reproducing the social norms. When students don’t find any space for discussion in their classes, they stay silent. The repeated and generalized form of silence by a group of students creates a culture of silence, where they silence their own selves after accepting the fact that their voices won’t have any impact on their reality.

Schools, being an agent of socialisation, creates responsible (in socially acceptable ways) citizens who adapt, grow, and learn in accordance with social norms. They learn to do the jobs that social structures allow them (Althusser, 2014), and they learn to negotiate their place in society. But, to make them capable of these negotiations, schools play an important role. When these young learners enter the school, from day one, they start to learn the social norms and structures. They follow the hegemonic structures of teachers, principals, and students. For example, being present in community prayers, talking only when it is allowed to, going to washrooms after seeking permission, etc. Living in these hegemonic structures is not always easy for young students. They repeatedly struggle with social norms. Sometimes, during a class, students have to wait a really long time before

sharing their thoughts, ideas, or questions, and other times they get impatient and speak, which is not considered a good trait. Here again, the values of a good student come to limit the learner. The burden of these boundaries of the good student makes the child habitual of seeking permissions and waiting for order to begin something, while they forget to learn, which was their aim in the first place. This habit makes them disconnected from themselves. They don’t recognise their own curiosities, questions, and issues. Rather, these young students try to adapt to the system of their oppressors (in this case, the system designed by the school authorities). This disconnect leads to a culture of silence from students, whose only work is to listen and never question.

The system of school creates predictability in these young learners. On the one hand, silence is supported as soundlessness to maintain discipline. On the other, this silence gets translated into the classroom discourse, leading to the creation of silent bots who follow the instructions to learn. This predictability of the behaviour is so much internalised in the minds of these students that they don’t dare to think anything out of the box; because that might cause chaos in the system and would affect the equilibrium of this closed system of the school. This culture of silence not only brings estrangement in students from their own selves but also causes them to become desensitized towards their own reality. In this situation, students find themselves trapped in a forced muteness which controls not only their actions but also their thoughts. The question is, are we aiming towards it? Do we want the future of this nation to be mute like this? We need to reflect on it, this is why I said this article is a question in itself for the reader to think upon.

Conclusion

The presence of silence can’t be denied in schools. Silence is an integral part of our schooling processes. Indeed, the arguments given in the above paragraphs take us to the various forms and shapes of silence in the school. Nevertheless, one can’t deny the presence of a culture of silence, which is being

created from the overall systemic interaction of students, teachers, and texts.

The idea of silence at the personal level shows one being able to listen to their inner thoughts; but, when it comes to the sociological level, it shows hegemony and power structure and then silence is actually making one so soundless that you would listen to your own voice echoing from their side. The question, then, is – whether we want this echo or not.

It is important, however, not to overemphasise the positive or the negative side of silence in schools. Although the presence of silence can't be denied, sometimes silence is deafening and

unavoidable in nature, and other times it is very subtle. Therefore, it is important for us not just to hear these silences but rather listen to them, for it is said that “silence speaks louder than words”. Moreover, we need to work on minimising the silence caused by the socialising processes at school. In schools, students not only go for learning but also for growing. Thus, it is crucial for us to break this cycle of silence in schools to make schooling a healthy experience for future generations.

References

- Althusser, L. (2014). *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*. Verso.
- Merleau-Ponty, M. (1996). *Phenomenology of perceptions*. London: Routledge.
- Oxford Dictionary (2008). *Oxford Popular School Dictionary*. Oxford University Press.
- Liu, M. (2005). *Reticence in oral English language classrooms: A case study in China*.
- Tatar, S. (2005). Why keep silent? The classroom participation experiences of non-native-English-speaking students. *Language and Intercultural Communication*.
- Freire, P., & Ramos, M. B. (1997). *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (20th Anniversary). Continuum Publishing Company.
- Kumar, K. (1983). Educational Experience of Scheduled Castes and Tribes. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 18(1).