

## Silence in English Language Pedagogy: From Research to Practice

*Dat Bao*

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Often book reviews in the field of English language teaching pedagogy open by establishing the importance of a particular arena (e.g., vocabulary, motivation), imply that the book fills a gap in the current discourse, and then follow by detailing how the work may be beneficial in helping educators overcome obstacles that impede student goals. However, when reviewing Dat Bao's *Silence in English Language Pedagogy: From Research to Practice*, it is perhaps better to first highlight Bao's assertion that silence is an extremely flexible, dynamic, context-dependent construct and not necessarily an impediment toward language learner development.

Indeed, Bao opens the book by challenging the reader to consider how silence is framed in the greater research consciousness by showcasing the disproportionate number of recent studies (2019–23) between “verbal participation in education” (13,136) and “silence in education” (281). To segue into this statistic, Bao shares a reaction he received at a conference when he suggested starting a research journal devoted to silent studies in education: “Why devote a whole journal to a negative theme?” (p. 1). Using these stats and anecdote as a launching point to his discussions on the challenges of defining silence, in Chapter 1 Bao cleverly positions silence in English language pedagogy as a topic worthy of exploring with an open mind.

In Chapter 2, Bao presents his systematic review findings regarding the distribution of understandings of silence in 32 second-language acquisition (SLA) books published from 2001–22 and how there is substantial progress to be made in understanding the role of silence in SLA. Readers may be particularly interested in the degree to which Bao envisions the potential for growth in the field. This optimism is informed by the seemingly narrow scope and lack of creativity thus far regarding silence dimensionality evident in the systematic review. Chapter 3 continues with an in-depth analysis of five research trends stemming from the 1970s. Here Bao explicitly argues that he “has not simply reviewed the literature on silence but has critically systematised the essence of silence research and weighed its impact on language education” (p. 52).

In Chapter 4, Bao highlights how silence has been ignored in the language-learning pedagogical discourse and at times treated by stakeholders as something that should be eradicated from the classroom. This chapter stands out to me as a reviewer because Bao presents silence as an essential step in the language-learning process. Here he outlines five principles of productive silence, six learner strategies in productive silence, a proposed model for classroom activities, and recommendations for teacher development. Due to the depth of perspective and practical advice offered, this chapter is a must-read for both language teachers and policy makers who struggle to accommodate silence in the classroom. In his concluding insights Bao writes the following: “If we stop seeing silence as an obstacle to be overcome, we might start seeing it as a resource to be utilised” (p. 72).

While silence has been mainly defended to this point, in Chapter 5, Bao acquiesces that indeed there are instances where silence can be problematic in the classroom. Drawn from scholarly research, eight scenarios are provided where silence fails to function productively. Moreover, Bao offers recommendations on how to deal with each scenario. When reviewing the eight scenarios it is clear that Bao remains on the side of silence, which is commendable. For example, scenario seven (silence as resistance to poor pedagogy) highlights how teachers can directly exacerbate silence. While it is true that students may remain silent in the face of poor pedagogy, Bao could have listed specific scenarios where language students purposely use silence as resistance (see L. Smith & King, 2018). Bao does, however, close the chapter by grouping a wide range of silent incidences as “demotivational dilemmas” (p. 85). While advice is given (e.g., peer support), as a classroom teacher who faces learner silence on a consistent basis in Japan, I would have enjoyed a longer discussion on this topic.

Interestingly, in Chapter 6, Bao seems to have predicted the preceding critique by acknowledging that many language teachers are interested in a “solution” to learner silence. Bao tactfully avoids this perceived

one-dimensional request and instead guides the reader toward knowledge needed to understand learner silence. Informed by a critical review of nearly 80 studies, Bao provides a variety of silent-learner perspectives by organizing them into nine groups. The reader is thus again encouraged to view silence on a case-by-case basis and with an open mind. By providing teachers with deep insights on learner perspectives, Bao aims to equip readers with the knowledge necessary to view silence through an objective lens. For those teachers looking for strategies to use in the classroom, the chapter ends with “Eight Dimensions of Support for Undesirable Silence” (pp. 98–103). While Bao admits that there is no one-size-fits-all “solution,” readers of this book may find certain strategies provided in this chapter effective in their teaching context.

In response to the COVID era, Chapters 7 and 8 cover how silence can emerge while teaching online and how teachers can deal with the inherent challenges presented in this context. In Chapter 9 Bao offers advice to stakeholders on how to incorporate silence in English language teaching task design. By incorporating silence into ELT task design, Bao showcases how the additive qualities of silence can benefit all learners. This chapter was informed by a series of personal research projects. In Chapter 10, the book closes with a discussion of the future of research in the field. Interested researchers are encouraged to publish in the new *Journal of Silence Studies in Education*.

Although student silence has often been maligned as a challenge that must be overcome in the language classroom (e.g., Canary & MacGregor, 2008; K. A. Smith et al., 2005); throughout this book, Bao implores language teachers to interact with silence on a case-by-case basis and attempt to do so without a negative bias. Through this lens, Bao encourages readers to embrace the challenges that silence presents through a recalibration of thought. While this book will certainly be insightful to language teachers and researchers who interact with silence across the globe, it might be of greater interest to those individuals who view the inherent murkiness of classroom silence as something negative.

### *The Reviewer*

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