

ELOQUENCE OF SILENCE IN ROLE-PLAY

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ABSTRACT

While teaching in an engineering college situated in the rural West Bengal, India, I have experienced that, for the students who come from different backgrounds (barring the ones coming from English medium background), speaking in English is probably the toughest situation that they face. Role-play is an obvious choice of a language teacher to improve the speaking skills of the students. In most of the cases, I found they prefer resorting to silence. Thus, I found a way out and used their silence to boost up their confidence. My paper would guide to the use of body language in an ESL classroom to facilitate the students in gaining confidence to speak English. It would show how silence or various uses of silence by the students, can assist the teacher in understanding the subtleties behind student behaviour.

KEYWORDS: Classroom Communication, Body Language, Silence, Role-Play, Learning Process, Personal Development, Confidence

INTRODUCTION

According to Dale Carnegie, the famous American writer and lecturer, “there are four ways and only four ways in which we have contact with the world. We are evaluated and classified by these four contacts: what we do, how we look, what we say and how we say it.” In today’s world, effective communication is of utmost importance in every sphere. Communication is conveying information to others through words – written or said- and through gestures. We are successful in communicating with others only when we can express our feelings, messages, information, thoughts to some other person in the manner in which we desire to. To ensure carrying out a successful communication, it is not only important to say the right words but also the attitude with which we say those words matter. Henceforth lays the importance of body language. Studies have shown that the words we use to express our feelings, hold only 7% importance whereas 38% importance lies in the tone of the voice and the rest 55% lies in the body language.

As a teacher of ESP you not only need to follow the traditional method of language teaching to teach the rules of a language – grammar, vocabulary but also need to make your students industry ready. In our country, English is taught as ESP in almost all the engineering and management institutes. Here the learners are taught to use this language to help them facilitate their success in their professional life. Therefore, ESP is widely different from EGP. In ESP, the concentration is more on context and vocabulary whereas in EGP it is on the structures of language and grammar. In other words, here the learners are taught that particular type of language that matches with their domain or occupation. Since the learners of ESP are mostly from high schools, colleges and universities, you expect a certain level of proficiency from them.

What came as a surprise to me was a class taken by me in an engineering college in the initial days of my job. The surprise continues till date every time I start with a new batch. My college is situated in rural Bengal and therefore most of the students that take admission in this college is either from the surrounding small towns and villages or mostly

from villages of Bihar. Though they have had a paper on English in their higher secondary examinations, that was not sufficient to make them proficient enough. As a teacher of ESP, I like most of the others in my domain resort to role play as the first activity to be conducted in my class. However, to my utter surprise what I find is there are students in my class, who instead of shedding their inhibitions while doing such a fun activity, resort to complete silence. They are more conscious of the fact that if they fumble, they might be criticized or laughed at by their peers and so they prefer resorting to silence. This paper of mine sheds light on the role of silence in the role-play.

What is Silence?

Keith Basso (Basso,1970) was one of the first cultural and linguistic anthropologists who investigated the study of silence. Silence, to many of us is a disruption in the smooth conversational flow. However, if we look around us minutely, we would find silence being practiced in very important situations in our culture, in our life. Let us take for example, a couple getting married, in Indian ritual, when the bride and groom look at each other's eyes for the first time or when the groom puts the vermilion on the bride's forehead, both does not utter any word. We show respect in the form of silence. We show our condolences and bereavement of a lost one in silence. We offer our prayer in silence. If silence can be observed in such grave situations then why do we make a fuss out of it if our students go silent for a while? Instead, we should read their silence and help them grow as a better speaker.

As an ESP teacher, initially I was intolerant towards silence in the classroom. I always wanted my students to speak in a flow without any pause but as days passed by, I slowly became tolerant towards silence. I started exploring the usage of silence by my students. Earlier words were considered communicator only whereas silence was labeled as non-communicator. But with the progress of research works on this field, silence is now seen as communicative. Though it is still defined as the absence of speech, but silence can have meaning. Yan Zuo (Zuo,2002) defined silence as "periods of non-speech or non-vocalization in conversation".

Functions of Silence

Silence has different functions – prosodic, cognitive, social, stylistic, interactive, politeness functions.

When we speak, we do not really go on and on. Apart from changing tones, pitches and intonation we take pauses, we take breath in between. This silence in form of pauses and breath are boundaries of utterances. These can be labeled as prosodic features of discourse. Silence now has many other functions beyond the prosodic function, which is believed to be one of the earliest functions of silence.

Even the pauses and breath taken in between utterances, serve a function. Certain pauses help the speaker to think of the context, whereas some others just serve as a filler. The filler kind of silence or within-turn silence helps a speaker to fill the gap when he/she hesitates during his/her speech. This kind of silence generally helps the speaker to choose vocabulary and Zuo has rightly proved this proposition by documenting the occurrence of this kind of silence just before functional words. As such, it reflects the speaker's lexical decision-making process. It not only helps in syntactic planning but also in semantic planning. Therefore, silence is not an error in speech in fact it serves as the cognitive function.

Now how does it serve as social function? Well, at times what happens is we maintain a minute's silence to show respect to someone who passed away. We go for a silent march to show our discontent with some particular situation. We remain silent during mass prayers. We maintain our silence when we dislike or disagree with someone. These are

various ways how silence serves as social function. Silence therefore is responsible to create, maintain and reduce social distance between communicators.

We often have listened to our grandfather and grandmother narrating stories to us in our childhood. If we go down the memory lane, we would remember they took certain breaks while narrating those stories. That particular pause that they took enhanced our curiosity to know further and faster. In fact poets or rather one who recites maintain a certain pause and silence in between lines and before certain functional words to make the word carry more weightage than the others. Orators often while giving their speech maintains a silence in between for applause or to catch the reaction of the audience. In all these cases mentioned above silence serves as a stylistic device.

Silence is often a marker for a listener to take his turn. When one speaks, he usually pauses in between and at last. The pause at the end of the speech is more than the pause in between the lines. This longer pause helps the listener to understand that the speaker has finished his speech and now he/she can reply or give a feedback. This is not the only way where silence serves an interactive function. While serving interactive function it also communicates a lot to the audience. For e.g. a speaker/listener often resorts to silence if he/she is surprised or confused or say if he/she does not understand a particular concept. Silence can also be expressed to show anger, sadness, madness, ecstasy.

Jaworski said “it is easier to undo silence than to undo words”. Therefore, we can assume why there is an increased usage of silence when one is in conflict with one another. It simply helps us to avoid any further conflict. We generally badmouth people when we are angry, so maintaining silence during our anger, at times saves relationships from breaking as once your anger lessens down you can easily sort things out by speaking to each other. When we deal with persons of high repute and old persons, we generally remain silent during our discourse if we show disrespect to his talk. This is a polite gesture to show our disagreement with the subject. In certain cultures children are taught to maintain silence, they are taught to speak less words. For them, silence acts as a politeness.

Problems Faced in Classroom

Like any other ESP teacher, I conduct an introductory session in my initial assigned classes with any batch. My class consists of mainly people from vernacular background and therefore they are shy and afraid when it comes to speaking in English. Motivations initially to speak out did not help them much. Lectures regarding the importance of speaking English in their professional life could not also bring them back to track. That is when I started doing role-play. However, what I faced instead was a bunch of silent faces staring blank at me, or looking here and there to avoid eye contact and so on. I was worried because I felt if I could not make them speak in English within few days I might be sacked off my job. Silence is very frustrating for an ESP teacher as the only way the fluency of your learners can be developed is through continuous use of language. That is when I started analyzing their silence to boost their confidence level and improve their proficiency. Initially I struggled to understand the root cause of the sudden silence

METHODOLOGY

My classroom in which I conducted my research consisted of 30 students from different background. I divided them into groups for role-play, with six in each group. I gave them different situations to act on. While one group acted, I kept the rest five groups as an audience to decipher the meaning of silence from the participants. This was basically done to know the reaction of the audience in general.

I mostly concentrated on two questions to the audience and one to the participants/actors, which they had to answer.

The questions to my audiences were:

- What are the reasons that the audiences attribute to the participant's silence?
- Which kind of silences do they consider positive and which ones do they consider negative?

The questions to my participants were:

- What reasons will you give for your instance of silence during role-play?

OBSERVATION/STUDY

What came to me, as lifetime learning through this research is that for teachers of any language, silence remains a crucial element. Silence cannot be studied alone; it has to be associated with body language. Now what exactly is body language? It is the idea or information, which we communicate not just through words but our entire body. Body language consists of non-verbal communications including gestures, body posture, facial expressions, eye movements, touch, voice and physical space. Whenever we talk of body language, we also simultaneously talk of its advantages. Body language allows people to develop a deeper understanding of others, which in turn allows them to strengthen their relationships. Knowledge of body language can help you to persuade others better. Through the gestures and non-verbal signals, we can better understand other people's likes and dislikes. This would allow you to customize your ideas or offer something to match their needs. It increases your self-awareness which can ultimately help you improve your emotional intelligence and it also increases your confidence and self esteem as you become more aware of how others feel, how you are seen by them and how to control your interpersonal communication more effectively. Body language is nothing but nonverbal cues, which play a significant role in analyzing and interpreting the silence.

Keeping the background of the students in mind, I started working on the analysis of silence. What I particularly found worth mentioning is, the answers in their worksheets differed from each other, which was mainly because of their background in which they were brought up. While most of them identified silence in the same way, the interpretation changed with each of them. The participants to show their resistance, their hesitation, their dissatisfaction, their inhibition, their confusion, and to hide their negative points have used silences as a tool.

They have showed different gestures to communicate different feelings while keeping numb. Boys mostly have fidgeted with their pockets, scratched their back of the head to show their hesitation and inhibition whereas girls on the other hand have played with their hairs, skirts, have shaken their legs unconsciously to show their hesitation and inhibition. To show surprise both the genders have had their eyes wide open and jaws wide open, whereas people from the richer section better concealed their feelings with only eyes wide open. To show their dissatisfaction they moved here and there, with concentration flying away. Dreamy boys coming mainly from villages generally looked outside the classroom whereas boys coming from towns and cities with practical elements rooted in their mind, fidgeted with their gadgets. Girls on the other hand preferred talking to their peers in their own mother language. Apart from all this, there were students who not only did not show any gestures but also were totally blank with no vision and no auditory senses working.

RESULTS

Keeping all the gestures in mind the students were asked to interpret the silences. What came as a result was very different from what I personally interpreted. The interpretation varied because of the upbringing of the students.

There was a particular boy whose father was a colonel in the army and as such he was brought up in a military background. He was very much unaffected by the silences. He felt that being silent was very normal. He was himself a very shy boy and was taught from an earlier age not to question much but to learn things by observing silently. Therefore, he did not find people not asking out of hesitation to be from different world.

Whereas a girl who was a daughter of a schoolteacher, found silence to be very irritating. She interpreted silence as wastage of time. She was taught to satisfy her curiosity from a very early age.

A boy from village who is by nature happy-go-lucky definitely found some gestures very funny, especially those that showed surprised silence. For him it was a relief from the classroom activity.

A city boy interpreted the similar surprised silence as very silly. For him gestures can portray even your character so there should not be so much of over show of expressions. It is very much evident from his interpretation that he has been brought up in a very sophisticated environment where a minimum show of emotions and concealment of emotions have been taught to him.

In most of the cases, silence has been considered positive when the learners have taken a short pause and filled it with fillers to immediately get back to the topic. It has also been considered positive when the participants of the role-play have remained silent but with gestures have tried to communicate what they wanted to say. However, silence has been considered negative when it has disrupted the smooth flow, which has disrupted the entire activity in turn.

Participants on the other hand have given various reasons for their silence. The most commons being the loss of vocabulary, the inability to express, the feeling of humiliation in front of their peers, the fear of being laughed at if they could not perform.

SOLUTION

Since silence stems out mostly from fear of speaking English in a role-play, what can be done is to allow the students to have the first role-play through nonverbal cues. The fear mainly is because of the peer groups. In almost all the cases people fumble because they are not ready to show their weakness in front of their friends. They fear that their friends might think them to be weaker and hence they resort to silence. It is the ego that works primarily for them, and so activities to shed the ego between peers and to bring coordination and cooperation should be devised.

Activities that I generally make them do strengthen their bond gradually and therefore with the passage of time they keep their egos aside and come out to help others. One such activity is a game known as killing the murderer. Sharing your dream can also be another game.

CONCLUSIONS

The content of this paper was determined by my teaching experience to students of different background with different level of proficiency. Silence of the students that has bothered me initially has now become my forte to understand the students after this research work. Silence, which has been seen as a non-communicator earlier, is now seen as one of the most important linguistic device. It is no longer seen as an absence of speech but is now seen as an integral part of

speech. Silence not only communicates but also integrates meaning in the speech. This study shows that silence plays different roles for different persons. For some it helps in advancing whereas for others it cuts short the way to success. As an ESP teacher, one needs to read the silence of the participants. He/she should act as the facilitator in the classroom and create the best ambience to open up. Instead of getting irritated with the silence, he/she should learn to take the cue from the silence and carry on with the activities. A teacher is responsible to create an amiable ambience so that instead of fearing the teacher or the peers, one opens up. This research work of mine has not only shed importance on the role of silence but also how it can be used to develop the proficiency of the learners.

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