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Into the void: Re-envisioning silence in foreign language education through a socio-emotional learning lens

Historically marginalized and often misunderstood, silence has predominantly been viewed as a barrier to effective communication and engagement in educational settings. This paper argues for a re-evaluation of silence, viewing it not as an absence of speech, but as a potent tool for fostering deep learning, introspection, and emotional intelligence. By integrating social-emotional learning (SEL) principles, it is posited that silence can enhance, and is an essential element of, affective communicative competence (Pentón Herrera & Darragh, 2024), aiding the development of empathy, self-regulation, and a more profound connection to the language learning process. This conceptual paper explores the nuanced role of silence within the context of foreign language classrooms through a SEL lens. Traditional perceptions of silence are critically examined, a shift towards an asset-based view through SEL is proposed, and practical strategies for educators to incorporate silence meaningfully into their pedagogy are suggested. To conclude, perspectives on utilizing silence as a transformative element in SEL-driven language education are offered, aiming for a harmonious integration that enriches the teaching and learning experience.

Keywords: affective communicative competence, foreign language classroom, silence, social-emotional learning

Słowa kluczowe: afektywna kompetencja komunikacyjna, klasa języka obcego, cisza, społeczno-emocjonalny proces uczenia się



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1. Introduction

In 2014, while teaching Spanish at a K-8 school in Virginia, United States, I stood at the front of the classroom and posed a question I thought would spark enthusiasm and debate among my students. Instead, what followed was a palpable silence that filled the room—a silence that weighed heavily on my shoulders, marking what I initially perceived as a failure in my teaching approach. This was not the reflective silence that teachers hope to inspire, where each student delves into their thoughts, preparing to share insightful responses. It felt more like a barrier, a collective hesitation stemming from fear of making mistakes, or the discomfort of being spotlighted. I recall feeling unprepared and unequipped to deal with my students' silence, and my mind began to spiral, wondering if I had done something wrong, or if my students did not know the information. Reflecting on that episode, I view it as a turning point in my career, because in that moment I acknowledged the power that silence has in foreign language classrooms.

In my teacher preparation programs, I was instilled with the belief that silence was something undesired or something to avoid, especially in the context of language teaching and learning. Looking back, it seems as if my preparation as a foreign language educator was built around expecting students to produce language repeatedly (i.e., in speech and writing) during instruction, with little space for reflection or critical thinking. While writing this article, I recognize that to this day, silence continues to be a “belittled construct” (Bao, 2023: 1) that continues to be widely under-researched, misunderstood, and “extremely rare” in language education (Bao, 2020: 4). For this reason, teachers continue to struggle with, and often do not know how to react to, silence and silent students (Svaricek, 2024), being unable to decide whether silence “is part of communication, mental processing, or low engagement” (Bao, 2023: 3). The uncertainty surrounding silence, whether it signifies thoughtfulness, or lack of engagement, (dis)interest, or even (dis)respect (Liu, 2002), perpetuates a cycle of tension within foreign language classrooms, thereby complicating the teaching and learning process.

Many years have passed since my young teacher-self acknowledged the weight that silence carries in the classroom. I have grown to understand silence not as something to be afraid of, but as a vital element of language teaching and learning that needs to be valued and embraced. Nevertheless, I am aware that silence is hardly explored or talked about in language teacher education, “apart from the discourse which recognizes the roles of the silent period and inner speech in relation to learning” (Bao, 2014: 3). The complexity and evasion of silence within the language learning environment leads me to propose a re-envisioning through the lens of social-emotional learning

(SEL). By doing so, I hope to illuminate how silence can be understood as an element of affective communicative competence (see Pentón Herrera & Darragh, 2024), thereby contributing to the enhancement of emotional intelligence and well-being.

Thus, following this introduction, I divide this manuscript into several key sections. First, I explore traditional perceptions of silence in foreign language classrooms and the cultural contexts that shape these views. Then, I review recent literature, highlighting key themes such as context, social communication, emotions, self-regulation and self-reflection, voices and power, options and decision-making, and support and awareness. I move forward to propose a framework for re-envisioning silence through the lenses of social-emotional learning (SEL) and affective communicative competence, highlighting the role of silence in enhancing emotional intelligence and linguistic proficiency. Then, I provide practical SEL strategies for educators to integrate silence into their teaching practices. I conclude by discussing the transformative potential of silence in SEL-driven language education and its implications for fostering a more inclusive and supportive learning environment.

2. Silence in the Foreign Language Classroom

The discourse on silence within foreign language education is rich and varied, yet historically, it has often been imbued with a negative cast. Earlier discussions in the literature predominantly framed silence as something to be avoided or overcome. Gouin (1892) initially highlighted silence as a condition imposed on students, with other scholars hinting at a negative undertone linked to embarrassment or mistrust (Applegate, 1975; Wolfgang, 1977). Further compounding this perspective, more contemporary research has, at times, associated silence with psychological discomfort, suggesting a phase that learners must overcome, especially during the initial stages of language acquisition (Le Pichon & de Jonge, 2016). Such viewpoints underscore a pedagogical inclination to perceive silence as a void needing to be filled to avoid discomfort, or as an indicator of an individual's educational or intellectual deficits (Applegate, 1975; Bao, 2020). This framing situates silence as a barrier to effective language learning and classroom interaction, portraying it as something that educators and learners should actively work to minimize or eliminate.

Contrary to the often negative connotations attached to silence in Western pedagogical narratives, its role and interpretation can differ greatly in other cultural contexts. The conceptualization of silence as merely

a lack of speech overlooks its potential as a powerful learning, communicative, and reflective tool that allows learners to engage in deep thought (Kim, 2002). Silence can serve multifunctional roles in the learning process, from providing students with the space to process and internalize new information, to serving as a respectful pause, giving others the opportunity to articulate their thoughts while being attentively heard (i.e., active listening). Deep learning and personal introspection can occur within these moments of non-verbal reflection, suggesting that silence, when acknowledged and integrated thoughtfully into teaching methodologies, can enhance the foreign language learning experience, rather than detract from it (Bosacki, 2005; Deans, 2013). Furthermore, it is important to recognize that for many language learners, silence is a vital requisite and their preferred method of engagement in the classroom (Bao, 2020; Pentón Herrera, 2024a).

Moving forward, we, as a field, need to transcend the view of silence as a classroom hindrance and embrace silence's inherent value in fostering a conducive learning environment. Recognizing silence as a potent pedagogical tool and a helpful learner resource involves making a paradigmatic shift towards viewing it as an active element of communicative competence that enhances emotional intelligence, empathy, and critical thinking skills. Viewing silence through a SEL lens redefines this concept not just as an absence of speech, but as a strategic classroom dynamic that enriches teaching and learning. A SEL perspective underscores the importance of silence in the development of affective communicative competence, transforming it into a scaffold for nuanced thought and emotional expression. By valuing both verbal and non-verbal modes of expression, educators can foster resilience, understanding, and connection among students, thereby converting silence from a perceived obstacle into a pivotal resource for holistic learning experiences that bolster learners' emotional well-being and intellectual growth.

3. Related Research and Theoretical Foundations

Before I venture to re-envision silence through a SEL lens in the next section, I would like to situate my article within ongoing scholarly discussions. Thus, in this section, I provide a brief review of current literature on silence as it relates to the major points discussed in this paper, as well as the major and most salient points in recent publications about silence in education. By examining the latest research on the topics of: (a) context, (b) social communication, (c) emotions, (d) self-regulation and self-reflection, (e) voices and power, (f) options, choices, and decision-making, and (g) support and aware-

ness, we can better understand how silence functions in educational settings and its implications for foreign language education.

3.1. Context

Silence is inherently situational and deeply embedded within cultural and social contexts. Petkova (2021), for example, highlights how the silence of individuals can reflect the status and reactions of their communities, offering a nuanced understanding of what silence signifies in various social settings. Further, Bao and Ye (2020) emphasize that the use of silence is influenced by communicators' personalities, the sociocultural climate, and the cognitive load of communicative content. Findings by Petkova (2021) and Bao and Ye (2020) underscore the complexity of silence and its varied meanings across different contexts, suggesting that educators need to consider these factors when addressing silence in the classroom. Understanding the contextual nature of silence can help teachers create environments that are both responsive and adaptive to the diverse backgrounds of their students. Recognizing silence as a meaningful aspect of communication ensures it is seen not merely as a void but as an integral part of social and cultural interactions.

3.2. Social Communication

Silence serves as a critical component in the internal dialogue between listeners and speakers. Bao and Thanh-My (2020) argue that focusing solely on speech production limits our understanding of social communication, which is heavily influenced by silent, internal formulations. Bao (2020) extends this notion, suggesting that the integration of silence in communication reflects a complex interplay between spoken and unspoken interactions. Recognizing silence as part of the communicative process, which also includes body language, helps educators appreciate the full spectrum of student engagement and participation. By acknowledging the role of silence in social communication, teachers can foster a more holistic approach to language instruction that values both spoken and unspoken contributions. This perspective allows for a richer understanding of classroom dynamics, ultimately enhancing the overall learning experience for students.

3.3. Emotions

The emotional dimensions of silence are significant, particularly in relation to anxiety and interpersonal relationships. For instance, Maher (2021) discusses how silence can result from social anxiety, affecting individuals' engagement in communication. Similarly, Karas and Uchihara (2021) note that online communication can provide a safer space for those with anxiety, allowing them to participate more actively. Furthermore, Turnbull (2021) provides a case study of an adult immigrant navigating social contexts in the U.S., revealing how silence intersects with anxiety, isolation, and power dynamics. Additionally, Zebdi and Monsillion (2023), researching child mutism, explore how social anxiety can manifest as psychosomatic symptoms in children (e.g., headache, stomachache), highlighting the importance of addressing emotional well-being in educational settings. Collectively, these studies emphasize the need for educators to be sensitive to, and knowledgeable about, the emotional underpinnings of silence and to create supportive environments that address these challenges.

A final point I would like to highlight in this section is that, as one of the peer reviewers pointed out, silence can be the symptom of a problem. While the aim of this article is to push beyond our current understanding of silence in the foreign language classroom, it is important not to romanticize silence. Educators and educational staff should recognize that silence can also indicate that students are experiencing emotional distress, withdrawal, or other types of difficulties. It is crucial for educators to discern the context and causes in which silence takes place in order to address the underlying issues effectively. By doing so, they can provide the necessary support and interventions to help students overcome the challenges they are experiencing.

3.4. Self-Regulation and Self-Reflection

Silence is often a deliberate choice for self-regulation and reflection. Bao (2014) and Huynh and Adams (2022) find that individuals use silence to exercise self-control and cautiousness. Shachter and Haswell (2022) observe that in culturally complex settings, such as among Japanese learners, silence can serve as a protective mechanism. Umino (2023) explores how silence can hinder self-expression, particularly among Japanese students studying abroad. Liu and Martino (2022) highlight that children often use non-verbal methods to express their preferences and opinions, which reflects their agency in early childhood education. Choosing to remain silent allows individuals to preserve their privacy, or avoid possible conflicts or adverse

outcomes. In some cases, silence is strategically used to send a message or indicate disagreement. When people refrain from speaking, they might be signaling their dissent or disapproval, compelling others to consider their stance or presence in a new light. These observations underline the twofold function of silence: it not only promotes self-regulation and reflection, but also serves as a tool that educators can utilize to enhance students' emotional and cognitive growth.

3.5. Voices and Power

The power dynamics associated with silence in educational settings are profound, and educators hold a power that we may not be aware of. Alerby and Brown (2021) discuss how teachers can influence who speaks and who remains silent, affecting visibility and inclusion. Petkova (2021) examines the silencing of Roma minorities, illustrating how societal prejudices can suppress voices inside and outside learning spaces. Umino (2023) indicates that when students hold back and do not express themselves, it frequently leads to a problematic form of silence, while Takahashi (2023) reports how silence can be a response to shyness and internalized shame among students. Bosacki and Talwar (2023) discovered that adolescents commonly experience unhappiness and stress when they perceive that their peers and family are not attentive to them. This emotional strain is often triggered by critical behaviors and a perceived absence of support, which can lead to isolation and diminished self-esteem in young people. Such conditions can significantly impact their sense of identity and life trajectory. These studies underscore the importance of recognizing and addressing the power dynamics that influence silence both inside and outside learning spaces, thereby advocating for equitable classroom practices that amplify all voices.

3.6. Options, Choices, and Decision-Making

Silence can also reflect personal choices and the need for solitude. Harumi (2023) suggests that allowing students to write rather than speak can reduce tension and facilitate expression. Harumi's (2023) study was supported by Pentón Herrera's (2024a) findings, who recorded a student's preference for silence instead of working in groups because it was too loud, which affected the student's focus and ability to perform. Dubas (2022) explores how individuals learn to value solitude, finding solace and learning in silence. Musaio (2022: 34) observes that, although the digital age allows contact with

anyone anywhere on the planet instantly, humans continue to live in a time of loneliness and complex human relationships. Despite being in close contact with others, “we defend our spaces for fear of being invaded by others, and we place limits on the relationship”.

Bosacki et al. (2022) highlight the significant role that solitude serves in the lives of adolescents. It offers a secure environment for various activities, and the manner in which adolescents utilize their alone time can influence their overall well-being. Additionally, social withdrawal is recognized as a crucial aspect of typical adolescent development. This perspective is relatively recent in academic discussions, as solitude has traditionally been viewed negatively during adolescence, with previous research concentrating primarily on adverse outcomes such as loneliness or social exclusion. These insights suggest that educators should provide opportunities for students to choose silence, in this way fostering autonomy and supporting individual learning preferences and emotional needs.

3.7. Support and Awareness

Building supportive environments that recognize the value of silence is crucial. Shachter (2023) advocates for social networks and support systems to boost self-esteem and combat depression. Lees (2022) notes the rising popularity of mindfulness and meditation in education, which incorporates silence as a social-emotional learning practice, as also pointed out by Pentón Herrera and Martínez-Alba (2021). Wałęjko and Stern (2022) argue that silence allows one to explore one’s inner world and discover potentials that one might not have known before. Webster (2022) finds that guided reading during the pandemic facilitated meta-social immersion through isolation, demonstrating the productive possibilities of silence in learning. These publications highlight the importance of creating supportive educational environments that leverage silence for emotional well-being and deeper learning.

4. Re-envisioning Silence Through a SEL Lens

Before we begin to re-envision silence through a SEL lens, it is necessary to clearly define and introduce the concept. The term *social-emotional learning*, as we understand it and operationalize it in the field today, was introduced in 1994 by Elias et al. (1997) to describe the process in which learners acquire and develop skills (sometimes referred to as competencies), necessary for success in the classroom and beyond. Although a multitude

of definitions exist, most agree that, at its core, SEL is concerned with the successful improvement of individuals and with the vision of inculcating practices and values that will contribute to a better world (Pentón Herrera, 2020; Pentón Herrera & Martínez-Alba, 2021). Although scant and sparse, emerging research in foreign language education shows the benefits of SEL for students and teachers alike (Bai et al., 2021; Pentón Herrera, 2024b; Yeh et al., 2022). Equally important, SEL is concerned with the flourishing of the *whole* student, which challenges pervasive educational practices that solely prioritize cognitive prowess and academic production.

Pentón Herrera and Darragh (2024) make a case for the importance of situating SEL in foreign language education, suggesting that emotional literacy, emotional development, and emotional intelligence are central to elevating the linguistic proficiencies of learners, while also preparing them for the intricate emotional complexities of real-world communication (Pentón Herrera & Darragh, 2024: 21). Concluding that to be successful communicators in today's world individuals must have the skill set to understand, deploy, and engage with the emotions captured in all forms of language (including silence!), we propose the term affective communicative competence, which we define as a vital life skill and as:

an individual's ability to recognize, understand, and convey emotions and feelings within the context of communication. It encompasses the skills to interpret and produce language that accurately reflects emotional nuances, as well as the capability to respond empathetically and appropriately to the emotional content in others' communication. This form of competence goes beyond the mere structural and functional aspects of language, emphasizing the importance of emotional resonance and understanding in authentic communication (p. 21).

4.1. Silence as Affective Communicative Competence

Re-imagining silence through a SEL lens offers an innovative perspective in foreign language education, highlighting silence not as an absence but as a present component of (affective) communicative competence. This approach aligns with the broader goals of SEL by fostering introspection, empathy, and deeper connections in learning environments. Silence, as a nuanced form of communication, invites learners to engage in reflective practices, thereby enhancing their ability to interpret and respond to the emotional content in communication (Kim Pham et al., 2023). Recognizing silence as an integral aspect of affective communicative competence, educators can encourage students to explore their own and others' emotions in a con-

templative manner, thereby cultivating a more welcoming and understanding classroom atmosphere. Further, it gives both teachers and learners in the foreign language classroom the opportunity to explore their connection and response to silence, allowing them to build a relationship with, and a healthy response to, silence in a safe environment.

Re-examining silence through a SEL lens in the foreign language classroom also means acknowledging its role in social engagement that extends beyond verbal expression. In real-world scenarios, from professional interactions to social gatherings, silence punctuates our communications, carrying meanings that words alone cannot convey (Bao, 2023). For language learners, grasping how silence functions within the target culture's communicative practices is crucial. It equips them with the skills to navigate, respect, and engage with moments of silence effectively, ensuring they are prepared not only linguistically, but also culturally and emotionally, for the complexities of real-world communication. This holistic approach to language learning—where verbal and non-verbal elements are equally valued—underscores the importance of silence as a tool for fostering emotional intelligence and resilience among learners (Pentón Herrera & Darragh, 2024; Szymańska, 2021).

As a final point, revisiting silence through a SEL lens in the language classroom offers a pathway to enhancing students' emotional literacy. Identified by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) as a 21st-century skill (Chatterjee Singh & Duraiappah, 2020), emotional literacy is described as the ability to recognize, understand, and express one's emotions and to interpret those of others (Steiner & Perry, 1997). By creating spaces for silence, educators can facilitate moments where students reflect on their feelings, empathize with others, and gain a deeper understanding of themselves and their peers. This reflective practice is beneficial for personal growth and also enhances learners' communicative competencies (Szymańska, 2021), preparing them to engage more meaningfully in a multilingual and multicultural world. Through this reimagined perspective, silence has the potential to become a bridge to understanding, an opportunity for development, and a vital component of a comprehensive foreign language education that champions emotional well-being alongside linguistic proficiency (Pentón Herrera & Martínez-Alba, 2021).

5. Implementing Silence as a SEL Practice in the Foreign Language Classroom

How, then, can silence be successfully implemented as a SEL practice in the foreign language classroom? In this section, I suggest six practical techniques

for teachers to incorporate silence into their classrooms. While navigating these examples, I recommend that practitioners take into consideration (a) their context, and (b) the culture of the language they are teaching. Silence cannot be divorced from cultural contexts, neither in society nor in educational settings. For this reason, it is important to modify the examples shared below to best align with the teachers' and their students' settings. Similarly, when employing silence as a SEL practice, cultural sensitivity and individual differences must be at the forefront of educators' planning and execution. A SEL approach to silence acknowledges and leverages the diverse norms, values, and preferences regarding silence and speech across different cultures and individuals. It is crucial for teachers to understand that students come from varied backgrounds, where the meanings attached to silence can significantly differ. By respecting these differences and integrating them into the curriculum, educators can create an inclusive environment that honors and utilizes silence in ways that are meaningful and beneficial to all learners.

5.1. Silence for empathy and social awareness

Silence plays a critical role in fostering an environment where empathy and social awareness flourish. Silence provides a reflective pause, allowing students the space to actively listen and deeply understand others' perspectives and emotions. This practice of attentive silence facilitates the development of empathy, as it encourages students to consider and appreciate diverse viewpoints without the immediate need to respond verbally (Bao & Thanh-My, 2020). Engaging with silence in this manner supports the SEL competency of social awareness by enabling learners to recognize and respect cultural nuances and emotional expressions that transcend linguistic barriers. By integrating periods of silence into classroom interactions, educators can create a more inclusive and empathetic learning environment that values and cultivates social awareness alongside linguistic skills. Three practical examples of silence for empathy and social awareness include:

- **Silent reflection activity:** Following a group discussion or presentation, allocate a few minutes of silence for students to reflect on the content discussed. Encourage them to think about how the information changes or enhances their understanding. After the silent reflection, ask students to share their insights through their preferred medium (e.g., written format, small group discussion, visuals etc.).
- **Active observation exercise:** Assign students to silently observe a video showcasing an unfamiliar practice or tradition (it could also be

a silent movie!). Instruct them to pay close attention to non-verbal cues and the emotional context of the interaction. After the observation, students can discuss or journal their perceptions and any new insights they gained about the video, highlighting the role of silence in active observation.

- **Empathy mapping:** Use silence as a tool for empathy mapping, where students silently consider a scenario from the perspective of someone from the target language culture. They should think about what that person might see, hear, think, and feel. After the silent contemplation, students can create empathy maps in groups, visually representing the insights they have gathered. This activity not only fosters empathy but also deepens students' cultural and social awareness.

5.2. Collaborative silence

In this paper, I define collaborative silence as integrating intentional quiet periods into group activities to enhance focus, foster active listening, and promote a deeper understanding of shared ideas, thereby fostering a unified and creative group dynamic. In group work, collaborative silence facilitates a space where students can develop deep listening skills, respect for peers' contemplative processes, and an appreciation for the diverse ways individuals contribute to collective learning. By consciously incorporating periods of silence, educators encourage students to internalize and reflect on the language and content being learned (Bao, 2019). This practice not only nurtures relationship skills by promoting empathy and mutual respect but also enhances responsible decision-making as students navigate the balance between silence and speech to achieve collaborative goals. Three practical examples of collaborative silence include:

- **Silent brainstorming:** Begin group projects with a silent brainstorming session, during which students individually write down their ideas without discussion. After a set period, students share their ideas with either a small group or the whole class, allowing a diverse range of thoughts to be heard and considered without the influence of dominant voices.
- **Quiet collaboration time:** Allocate specific times during group work for silent collaboration, where students work on their assigned parts quietly within the group setting. This period of silence helps students focus deeply on their contributions and gives them the opportunity to respect their and other people's silence while in a group. Quiet colla-

laboration time can then be followed by a session where they discuss their work and how it fits into the group's overall project.

- **Reflective silence after feedback:** After groups present their work and receive feedback, incorporate a moment of reflective silence. This practice of silence allows students to process the feedback individually before discussing as a group how to incorporate the suggestions, thereby fostering a collective approach to decision-making and improvement.

5.3. Silence for teacher and student well-being

Integrating moments of silence into the classroom routine offers a dual advantage for both student and teacher well-being. For teachers, these periods serve as an opportunity to engage in self-reflection and slow down for a moment, a practice that can significantly reduce feelings of burnout and enhance job satisfaction (Pentón Herrera et al., 2023). Simultaneously, for students, silence creates a calm and focused learning environment, conducive to emotional regulation and increased engagement (Pentón Herrera & Martínez-Alba, 2021). This symbiotic relationship between teacher and student well-being, facilitated through silence, underscores the importance of reflective practice as a foundational component of SEL. Three practical examples of silence for teacher and student well-being include:

- **Mindful silence start:** Begin each class with a minute of mindful silence, encouraging both ourselves (i.e., teachers) and students to center our/themselves and set intentions for the lesson ahead. This practice not only helps reduce anxiety but also improves concentration, preparing everyone to be physically and mentally present for the session.
- **Silent reflection post-learning:** After a lesson or activity, incorporate a brief period of silence for reflection. Teachers can use this time to contemplate the day's successes and areas for improvement, while students can reflect on their learning gains and challenges. Sharing reflections can be optional, promoting a sense of safety and personal growth.
- **Silent gratitude moments:** At the end of the week, dedicate a few minutes for students and teachers to silently reflect on what they are grateful for in their teaching/learning journey. This can strengthen the classroom community, enhance positivity, and foster a supportive learning environment.

5.4. Silence for cultural and individual appreciation

Cultural nuances in the perception and use of silence can deeply affect how students interact in the language learning process. In some cultures, silence is a sign of respect, contemplation, and a way to maintain harmony, whereas, in others, it may be interpreted as disengagement or disagreement (Bao, 2014). Educators can create a classroom culture that respects and validates the silent expressions of learning by teaching about, and incorporating, these diverse perspectives of silence as a form of communication. This approach not only supports the SEL competency of social awareness by fostering an appreciation for cultural diversity, but also enhances relationship skills by encouraging respectful and empathetic interactions among students. Three practical examples of silence for cultural and individual appreciation include:

- **Cultural silence gallery walk:** Create a gallery walk featuring stories, proverbs, and anecdotes from various cultures that highlight the value and meaning of silence (the gallery might be teacher- or student-created). Students silently move around the room during the walk, reflecting on these different perspectives. This activity encourages students to appreciate the depth and breadth of silence as a communicative and cultural practice.
- **Silent cultural exchange:** Pair or group students from different cultural backgrounds and ask them to share their personal and cultural experiences with ‘silence’ without using words, using only non-verbal cues or written notes. This silent exchange fosters a deeper understanding and respect for the diverse ways cultures engage with silence.
- **Reflective silence journal:** Encourage students to keep a journal where they reflect on their own cultural and personal understanding of silence before and after learning about its varied interpretations. This reflective practice can lead to greater self-awareness and appreciation for how silence is valued differently among their peers.

5.5. Silence and inner dialogue

The concept of inner dialogue, or internal speech, plays a pivotal role in cognitive development and language acquisition theories (Vygotsky, 1986). It is during moments of silence that learners can actively engage in this internal discourse, reflecting on their learning, questioning their understanding, and mentally practising language skills. This silent engagement fosters a deeper linguistic comprehension and emotional connection to the language, fa-

cilitating both cognitive and affective development (Alderson-Day & Fernyhough, 2015). By recognizing and nurturing inner dialogue in the classroom, educators can support students in developing a more nuanced understanding of the language and themselves, promoting both linguistic proficiency and emotional intelligence. Three practical examples of silence and inner dialogue include:

- **Silent role-play preparation:** Before a role-play or speaking activity, provide students with silent time to prepare their parts/speech internally. This preparation might involve mentally rehearsing phrases, anticipating conversational turns, or emotionally connecting with the character they will portray. This silent prep time enhances linguistic readiness and emotional engagement with the role-play scenario.
- **Reflective silence for goal setting:** Regularly incorporate moments of silence for students to reflect on their personal language learning goals and the emotional aspects of their journey. Encourage them to consider silently what they hope to achieve, any barriers they feel, and how their emotions intersect with their learning process. This reflective practice can be followed by journaling or sharing goals with a peer, fostering self-awareness, goal-setting, and accountability.
- **Post-speaking internal summarization:** After speaking exercises, students silently reflect on their performance, noting strengths, areas for improvement, and key vocabulary or phrases to work on. This quiet time for personal assessment encourages students to identify their own learning needs and emotional reactions, fostering both linguistic growth and emotional awareness. This practice not only aids in solidifying the language skills exercised during the speaking activity but also cultivates a long-term introspective habit in language learning.

5.6. Silence as Autonomy and Agency

Offering students the autonomy to choose silence enables them to use it as a tool for concentration, reflection, and/or emotional regulation. This practice aligns with SEL principles by promoting self-awareness, agency, and responsible decision-making, as students learn to recognize their needs and make choices that support their well-being and learning. By integrating opportunities where students can choose silence in language learning, educators cultivate a classroom environment that honors each learner's individual pathway to comprehension and emotional balance. Such an approach not only enhances agency, but also empowers students to take charge of

their learning and emotional responses, recognizing the value of silence as a strategic resource for personal and academic development. Three practical examples of silence as autonomy and agency include:

- **Choice and focus sessions:** Respect students' learning preferences by offering them the option to engage in silent reading, writing, or speaking activities. During these sessions, 'focus periods' can also be introduced, where the entire class agrees to work silently on individual tasks, allowing everyone to concentrate on their work. This activity honors students' preferences and underscores the value of silence for personal and academic growth, catering to different learning styles and the collective need for focus.
- **Silent feedback exchange:** After presentations or speaking activities, use sticky notes for students to write constructive feedback or questions, facilitating anonymous exchanges. This technique respects students' preferences for expression and cultivates an environment where silent reflection and written communication are valued equally with spoken interaction, promoting a balanced approach to language learning and emotional intelligence.
- **Emotional regulation through silence:** Teach students about the use of silence as a strategy for emotional regulation. Introduce activities that encourage students to use silent moments to calm down, gather their thoughts, or prepare emotionally for participation. Activities like this one aid in managing classroom dynamics and equip students with valuable life skills for emotional self-care.

6. Final Thoughts

The discourse on silence within the realm of foreign language education and its sister fields (i.e., applied linguistics, second language acquisition, etc.) has historically oscillated between extremes: either casting silence as a discipline to be enforced, or dismissing it entirely in favor of constant verbal engagement. This binary perspective overlooks the nuanced and multifaceted role that silence can play in an educational setting. Drawing from insights in the available literature, it becomes evident that re-evaluating our approach to silence is not only beneficial, but necessary (Su et al., 2023). By stepping away from traditional dichotomies and embracing silence as a beneficial communicative and educational tool, we encourage a more holistic and balanced pedagogy. Silence, when integrated thoughtfully, can enhance the communicative competence of learners, fostering a deeper connection to the language and to each other. As educators, our ultimate goal is to facilitate ef-

fective communication, a goal that becomes unattainable if we continue to sideline silence. Embracing silence prompts us to reconsider our pedagogical philosophies and leads to the pivotal question: Are we effectively teaching communication if we overlook silence as a crucial form of expression?

As we continue to consider new approaches and paradigms in the field, adopting an asset-based perspective on silence can revolutionize how we perceive and implement it in language education. In this paper, I advocate for a shift in vocabulary and mindset, from perceiving silence as a passive absence to recognizing it as an active and strategic component of learning. Phrases such as attentive silence, reflective silence, mindful silence, and silent feedback underscore the potential of silence to serve as a medium for engagement, introspection, and collaboration. By valuing silence as a performative communicative act, alongside verbal expression, we not only enrich our pedagogical practices, but also validate the diverse communicative styles of our students, preparing them for the complexities of real-world interaction where silence speaks volumes.

Finally, the integration and acknowledgment of silence as a SEL competency within foreign language education opens new avenues for research and practice. Questions such as *How do we assess the impact of silence on learning?* and *What are the best practices for incorporating silence into SEL-driven curricula?* beckon further exploration. By investigating silence as a SEL tool, we can uncover its potential to enhance emotional literacy, linguistic development, and overall student well-being. Future research should aim to develop frameworks for the systematic incorporation and assessment of silence within language education, including language teacher preparation programs, ensuring that it is recognized, not as a gap in communication, but as a bridge to deeper understanding, connection, and learning. As I conclude this piece, it becomes clear to me that silence, far from being a void, is a vibrant space brimming with potential for teaching, learning, and connecting. I invite the readership to continue this conversation in a different space, where, through the lens of SEL, we continue to reimagine silence as an essential form of human expression.

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