

Silence is Golden?*

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According to a familiar adage used to reprimand noisy children, silence is golden. However, when two people are trying to converse, silence is anything but golden. A more appropriate expression might be "Silence is lead!"

In a study of response latency, d'Urso and Zammuner (1990) found questioners tended to take an additional turn after as little as 12 seconds when faced with a silent response. This poses a dilemma for EFL students who are inclined to conceive each statement in full before uttering it. Their latency is apt to be misunderstood by native speakers as a breakdown in communication or opportunity for interruption. Several interdisciplinary studies indicate various strategies interlocutors employ to avoid silence. For instance, in Smith and Clark (1993), filled pauses (*uh*, *um*) were used to signal a delay in response.

In order to encourage my Japanese EFL junior college students to employ such strategies to avoid silence, I use the following lesson about once a month. The response is very positive. After each game I find students leaving less silence in their speech, hence demonstrating an increase in (apparent) fluency. The lesson is also often cited on anonymous course evaluations as a favorite.

Procedure

The lesson is based on a quiz game show format. Organize students into two teams with

the teacher in the center as the quiz master. Alternating between teams, ask each student in turn a random question from a prepared list. Once given a question, the student has 5 seconds to begin a response. The student must continue to speak fluently (i.e., without silence) until the answer is complete. There is no time limit. Furthermore, the response may employ such stalling devices as *just a second*, *please*, *let me see*, *well*, *hmm*, *uh*, and *um*.

Students earn points for their team as follows. If a student gives a fluent response concluding with a correct answer the team is awarded 2 points. If a student gives a fluent response concluding with an incorrect answer or a concession (e.g., *I don't know*, *I'm not sure*) the team is awarded 1 point. However, if a student fails to give a fluent response the team is awarded 0 points. The team that accumulates the most points is the winner.

Following is a hypothetical extract from one game. Silent pause durations in seconds are indicated in brackets.

T: What is the capital of Australia?

S1: [3.0] Uh- well- Sydney?

T: Sorry, that's not correct. (T gives S1's team 1 point) All right. Next. (to S2) What is the capital of Australia?

S2: [6.0]

T: Sorry, time is up. (T gives S2's team 0 points) Next. (to S3) What is the capital of

*Published 1999 in *TESOL Journal*, 8: 35.

Australia?
S3: [2.0] Uh, let me see- It's
Canberra.
T: Yes, that's right. (T gives
S3's team 2 points)

Variations

Give incorrectly answered questions to subsequent students (illustrated in above extract). This encourages students to listen extra carefully one or two turns before their own.

Recycle used questions later in the quiz by random selection. This encourages students to listen to all questions, not merely when it is their turn.

Permit students to ask for clarification (*What do you mean by...?*) or repetition (*Could you say that again please?*). This variation removes the interaction a step from the quiz game genre, but encourages interaction closer to that of daily conversation.

Design questions to revise past material, rehearse the current target structure(s), or even introduce upcoming material. For more advanced students reduce the allowed latency time (5 sec.) to encourage speedier responses.

Follow-up

Because the quiz game format is familiar and inherently motivational, most students catch on quickly and avoid silence aptly. However, like many highly stimulating activities, there remains the risk that performance improvements are transient; that learners will revert to their silent latency habits when "normal" lessons resume. Thus, the influence of this quiz game may be reinforced in later lessons with the following simple technique. During classroom interaction, either teacher-student or student-student, when a student's silent pause is prolonged, the teacher may fill the pause, sotto voce, with a hesitation device.

This draws the student's attention to their silence and the need to say something.

Using these teaching strategies, you may find that silence becomes as rare as gold.

References

- d'Urso, V. and Zammuner, V. (1990). The perception of pause in question-answer pairs. *Bulletin of the Psychonomic Society*, 28:41-43.
- Smith, V. and Clark, H. (1993). On the course of answering questions. *Journal of Memory and Language*, 32:25-38.