

Cultivating Your Silence in the Classroom

Written by Daniel Clausen

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DANIEL CLAUSEN, MAY 8 2016

Perhaps it's an occupational hazard: in a discipline with direct policy relevance, the art of being heard is a valued one. When International Relations (IR) scholars are given a soapbox, it's only natural to want to preach. Or, perhaps IR naturally attracts those with robust opinions and an appetite for expressing them. It's too bad because these traits can lead to bad classroom practices.

Before I ever entered the field of IR, my undergraduate training was in literature and my professional experience was in Teaching English as a Second Language (TESOL) – both disciplines that value healthy doses of silence from their teachers. During my undergraduate education, I was blessed with a number of teachers who were skilled in the art of elicitation and orchestrating discussions. Their classroom habits were less like preachers and more like trained psychoanalysts. For me, these traits seemed unspectacular. It was only after I began taking classes in IR that I realized how undervalued these traits were.

TESOL is perhaps the most rigorous of all professions in training their teachers how to cultivate their silence. There is no shortage of journal articles that encourage teachers to re-evaluate how they can reduce teacher talk time. Some of the tips have no relevance to the field of IR. However, tips on creating classroom designs that limit the role of the teacher as an orator and increase student talk time are applicable. In short, an engaged student is a motivated student. A student that uses what he or she learns is more likely to retain basic elements of the lesson. A student who feels they have a voice in class is more likely to have a personal stake in that class.

So, how can instructor reduce teacher talk time? Here are a few simple ideas:

1. **Elicitation.** It's not always possible to elicit answers from students. But when you can, you should. Students will remember what they teach and discover on their own a lot more clearly than what they learn passively.
2. **Have stronger students correct weaker students.** After a few class periods, you will get a sense for who your strongest students are. Make them your teaching assistants and allow them to do some of the teaching and explaining. You can then clarify anything that was missed or in error by your new teaching assistants.
3. **Give students opportunities to self-correct.** Sometimes students can discover their own errors. If a student makes a mistake in class or doesn't understand a concept, sometimes the best way to address the issue is to write the mistake on the board and allow the students to fix the issue on their own. As a facilitator, you can provide hints as needed to point the students in the right direction. This practice builds student autonomy and critical thinking skills.
4. **Class presentations.** Many teachers are hesitant to make this a large part of the course. Even if you don't think your students are ready to teach large chunks of materials, there may be opportunities for mini-presentations. For example, have pairs of students explain one key concept for a particular unit with examples.
5. **Structured speaking activities and projects.** There is a wide variety of activities a teacher can assign to help make the class less teacher-centered. I won't go into too much detail, but some activities include: debates, role plays, micro-presentations, and ranking exercises.
6. **Learn when classroom silences can be useful.** Perhaps the hardest thing to learn is the difference

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between dead air and useful breaks. In my experience, small silences can be useful for giving students a chance to assimilate what has been said and formulate possible questions. For me, a good rule of thumb has been the 8-10 minute rule. Even in a lecture class, if I've been speaking for about 8 minutes, then it's time to give the students a short silence, and if possible have them interact with the material in some meaningful way. In lecture classes, this could be done in the form of a class survey, a short writing assignment, solving a conceptual problem, or asking audience inputs on questions.

7. **Find appropriate ways to keep your classroom talkers in line** . There are gestures you can use to give students subtle hints to keep their opinions to themselves, especially when you have much shier students in class who you want to participate. Usually, your own self-control serves as a model for the self-control you desire from others.

In the end, the use of silence is an art form, not a science. But it's an art form that can be useful to almost any teaching professional.

About the author:

Daniel Clausen is a full-time special lecturer at Nagasaki University of Foreign Studies. His research has been published in *Asian Politics and Policy*, *Electronic Journal of Contemporary Japanese Studies*, and *East Asia Forum*, among other publications. His teaching experience includes over seven years of experience as a TESOL instructor. He has also written several novels and short story collections. You can learn more about his work on his Amazon page here or on his Goodreads page here.