

Colette A. Granger (2004), *Silence in Second Language Learning*. Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters LTD, Series: Second Language Acquisition 6. 142pages

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The fundamental question that the author attempts to elucidate is: “What is the significance of silence in the process of learning to speak” (p. 5) in a second language? This puzzling question sits uneasily within the common sense view that speaking a language is helpful for learning it, and within the more theoretical view of the second language learning process as an apprenticeship into new discourse practices. This title may even seem unsettling, if not downright paradoxical, from a language pedagogy perspective entrenched in a Western tradition that requires classroom participants to engage in some kind of dialogic exchange. A further difficulty rests with the methodological issue of how to analyse the meaning of silence when the content is absent. Finally, one might question the usefulness of such an exploration. The author genuinely acknowledges these conflicting issues from the start and clearly states her intention to address them systematically. To this effect, she adopts a psychoanalytic theory as an interpretive framework for her study.

Chapter one starts with an attempt to define silence, or the silent period in the second language acquisition (SLA) process, which the author admits is itself problematic. SLA research’s main contention is based on the view that comprehension precedes production and, consequently, that silence reflects an inability to express oneself because of a lack of competence in the foreign/second language. In an attempt to discover further meaningful hints on this topic, Granger reviews the work of key SLA researchers such as Brown, Larsen-Freeman and Long, Lightbown and Spada, Skehan, Ellis, Gibbons. Apart from a consensus on the issue of anxiety as a factor that influences the individual’s acquisition of a second language, and the conclusion that silence is associated with the difficulties related not only to competence but also to performance, she finds that SLA research, on the whole, fails to provide conclusive evidence which would explain the existence of a silent period and how it relates to differentiated success in second language learning. She then turns to an examination of the works of social theorists such as Haré, Vygostsky, Riley, Lemke and Levi-Strauss for whom the mutually informing relation between the individual and the social self is woven through language and culture. This leads her to conclude that similarly to first language learners for whom these complex processes of identity formation occur during a pre-speech period, second language learners need a

period during which they reinterpret the world and their place within it through the structures and functions of the new language. This suggests then that there is much more to silence than the absence of speech, and bringing the “inner dialogue” to the surface could explain the significance of the silent period.

In chapter two, Granger broadens the scope of her exploration by adopting a psychoanalytical framework which allows her to address the problem of how the discovery of the self might be understood within the SLA process and how silence is part of this process. Firstly, she draws on Britzman’s work on conflict in learning which argues that the self is pulled between the desire to learn and at the same time the desire to resist learning because of the feeling of anxiety and loss of the familiar. Secondly, by drawing inferences from the Freudian concepts of melancholia and mourning about the experience of the language learner, she suggests that the silent period in some second language learners is symptomatic of “the loss, ambivalence, and conflict that accompany a transition between two languages, a psychological suspension between two selves” (62).

In chapter 3, the author engages in the interpretation of autobiographical language-learning narratives in her effort to track down the experience of silence in the interrelated process of identity construction and second language acquisition. As a research methodology, she is aware that narratives are interpretive events, and that such an analysis might be impossible to validate. However, the author contends that psychoanalytic thought, SLA research and autobiographical writing can collaborate to provide insight into the individual, learning, and the richness of silence. Hoffman’s loss in a kind of “no place” between two worlds, Rodriguez’s division between the private (first) and the public (second) language, and Chamoiseau’s desire to hide the self as well as to communicate it, all reflect conflict that is frequently narrated in second language learners’ memoirs. In the following chapter, Granger uses second language learners’ diaries as a research tool in her study to track the real and remembered affective experiences of individuals who live between two languages. Their interest lies in the fact that journals or diaries reveal “the concept of the self as other to itself” or “becoming other to itself” (98). She speculates that affect and its expression may be silenced though speech goes on, and searches for “the richness of silent spaces between those pieces” (68).

The last chapter takes up the question of pedagogical practice. Several teaching approaches, such as TPR, the Natural approach, and other comprehension-based approaches to second language learning all insist on an initial period of silence. However, they do not explicitly acknowledge the aspects of identity re-construction that consciously or unconsciously affect a learner’s psychological readiness to speak. The author recognises that this direct knowledge is impossible. At this point, the reader might register some feeling of disappointment after the intellectual rigor of the preceding discussion. The author concludes by offering possibilities rather than a definite program of classroom strategies. She suggests namely that teachers must get to know their students better, and that developing a learner-centered approach might be useful. She recommends the practice of writing personal journals or diaries, and patient waiting from a ‘good-enough teacher’ (121).

Colette Granger offers an innovative approach which illuminates the introspective phase in second language learning. Her adoption of a pluri-disciplinary framework to analyse the silent period in the SLA process is richly suggestive for other researchers and teaching professionals who may wish to follow suit. By drawing attention to the affective dimensions of the learner moving between languages, this small book complements other contemporary incursions into socio-cultural theories of language learning, and the increasing interest within research on the self and issues of identity in narratives and intercultural communication.

The following references are the three autobiographies mentioned in this review:

Hoffman, E. (1989). *Lost in Translation: A life in a New Language*. New York: Penguin Books.

Rodriguez, R. (1988). *Hunger of Memory: The Education of Richard Rodriguez*. New York: Bentam.

Chamoiseau, P. (1997). *School Days*. Translated by L. Coverdale from the French *Chemin d'Ecole*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.