

Between Speaking and Silence: A Study of Quiet Students.

Mary M. Reda. New York: SUNY Press, 2009.



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Through a precise analysis of written reflections and interviews, Mary M. Reda examines perceptions of speaking and silent students in her book *Between Speaking and Silence*. Using her first-year composition class for observation, she explores major elements of students' decisions to speak or be silent frequently depend on teachers, classroom relationships, and students' senses of identity.

Reda has organized the book into seven chapters. Chapter 1 presents contexts, participants, data analysis, and brief introductions for each chapter. Chapters 2 and 3 track the history of silence in the existing body of literature from various perspectives. She defines the contexts of silence with monologues and narratives as “the power of speech” (p. 26), and she notes the relationship of “the power of speech” between student and teacher in the context of the classroom. She acknowledges that those students not being able to speak in the class are highly affected by particular contexts of class, race, and culture. Reda believes that anxiety about student silence in any professional situation is also controlled by “difficult classroom situations and the unjust power relations” (p. 48) between teachers and students. Chapter 4 offers context for a study that took place at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, and includes profiles of five participants (American and non-Americans). Through individual case studies-- of written reflections of five students and her own journals from the first-year composition classes, Reda examines the relationship between speaking and silence in the classroom.

Chapter 5 illustrates teachers' perspectives on professionalism, and examines how teachers should engage students in discussions with regard to student-teacher relationships. Perceptions of students who choose whether to speak or to be silent in the class depend upon the student-teacher relationship and classroom pedagogy, according to Reda. Chapter 6 explores a critical reading of silent students through the lenses of “identity” and “community.” Identity refers to the types of students “seeing themselves” as naturally shy, quiet, or with confidence (or lack of it) in the classroom. Community refers to “hearing responses” from other

students so that those students who are shy or have low self-esteem can speak up in discussions. Reda bridges the gap between silent and speaking students through the concepts of identity and community. She also believes that “Silent cannot—and should not—simply be equated with not knowing” (p. 127).

Embracing silence in teaching, Reda in Chapter 7, concludes that silence in the classroom is not a problem. Instead, Reda suggests that the notion of silence is an “internal dialogue” that is a zone between speaking and silence where students develop a form of participation in the academic conversation. For this, Reda calls silence “the space of engagement.” She believes that student reflections on their experiences in the classroom depend upon a “sense of what is safe and comfortable in the classroom” (p. 173), as well as depending upon topics, number of students in groups, and teachers.

Studies show that international students do not participate in classroom discussion largely because of their cultural backgrounds, lack of written and spoken English, and lack of knowledge of academic requirements and culture (Harumi, 2010). In addition to international students, silence among American students or students in English-speaking contexts elsewhere is a normal phenomenon in the classroom and requires the attention of teachers.

One of the strengths of Reda's book, *Between Speaking and Silence*, is that she suggests several practical solutions to address the issue of silent students in classrooms, such as creating a range of speaking situations (including small groups, lower-stake real conversations), focusing on the development of the classroom-community, and providing more opportunities for reflective silence within classes. This book is important reading for not only classroom teachers of first-year college students, but also for parents and administrators, in order to better understand many firmly held beliefs about quiet students in the classrooms and possible suggestions to address this issue in institutions of higher education.

Reference

Harumi, S. (2010). Classroom silence: Voices from Japanese EFL learners. *English Language Teaching Journal*, 65(1), 1-10.

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