

# FÓKUSZBAN

*Egyensúlyok, eszmények, képzetek*

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## **“Always listen to what they don’t say”**

### **The Role of Silence as a Strategy to Transmit Meaning**

沉默是金<sup>1</sup>

#### **Introduction**

Is silence a sign of romanticised wisdom or humility, occasional teenage sulk, a product of a fight in recess, some kind of resistance to pedagogy or simply not having a clue for an answer? Can I compare my experiences with silence in an English classroom at a Shanghai bilingual school’s 10th grade class with those in my childhood culture back in Hungary? How can cultural relativism help me understand the field and the silences within, between its members of the community and with me during interviews? Could I adopt similar strategies of silences so that my ethnographic methods may become better? Would I risk being scholarly anachronistic to apply Franz Boas’s “pre-classic” (Bennett 1998: 951) concepts of relativism in today’s empirical research? For the sake of this exercise, this paper will have a limited, focused scope on cultural relativism while examining selected examples collected in my field to argue that Boas’ assumptions, “while his influence has been greatly attenuated in the last two decades” (Stocking 1974: 1) are still relevant in today’s “post-Classic” (Bennett 1998: 951) anthropological discourse.

#### **The Approach**

Cultural Relativism studies the ways people learn to understand and interact with the world in their cultural environment. It is the “view that no culture is superior to any other culture when comparing systems of morality, law, politics, etc. It’s the philosophical notion that all cultural beliefs are equally valid and that truth itself is relative, depending on the cultural environment.” Although contested within the anthropology canon from 1990s onward (Brown 2008: 363), due to conflicts with human rights concepts, I believe some of the foundational aspects of cultural relativism are applicable, and should always be a part of, empirical research today. As Brown argues, cultural relativism is to be viewed

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<sup>1</sup> Literally translates as “silence is golden” but in Chinese it refers to modesty, when someone, who is successful, doesn’t need to say anything to prove himself. “There’s no need to show off. Your actions will show how able you are” as one of my informants explained.

“not as a comprehensive theory or doctrine but as a rule of thumb that, when used prudently, serves the limited but indispensable function of keeping anthropology attentive to perspectives that challenge received truth.” (ibid)

## **Fieldwork research**

I arrived in Shanghai in September, 2010 for the first time in my life. I got a job at a private start-up training school as a curriculum designer and English teacher for Chinese kids aged 5-8. The regular lunches with my boss, the owner and principal of the school, were long conversation about cultural differences. During these lunch meetings, he enjoyed learning about lifestyle in Europe (finding it fascinating that I moved to a city alone without any kind of network or connections and I don't need my parents' approval to make such decisions). He told me he felt it his responsibility to prepare me for my new life in Shanghai. At one of the first lunch meetings he explained how the local Chinese communicated and I should never expect direct, straightforward answers, instead “codes” which I will learn to read successfully in time. First and foremost, silence carries more meaning than actual words. “Always try and listen to what people don't say, when they hesitate and say “maybe”, what they hide or what they keep to themselves. You'll find the answer to your questions there.” Mark, as a foreigner (Singaporean with a Chinese ethnic and linguistic background) lived in the city for 5 years already, which made him feel like a more objective observer. He was always keen to share some of his impressions.

A cultural relativist approach helped in understanding students' behaviour and in improving my pedagogical methods. Boas argues that the “activities of the individual are determined to a great extent by his social environment, but in turn his own activities influence society in which he lives, and may bring about modifications in its form.” (Boas 2004: 125). So here I was, as a teacher and anthropologist, not only representing a different cultural background but also employed and assigned to actively influence those I was communicating with. If I wanted to better understand the cultural practices, and the individuals' behaviour in my new environment (students, parents and colleagues), I needed to reflect on the cultural context and processes of enculturation in which they occurred, showing the role of silence in the everyday life and how it is influenced by complex power relations between members of a community.

Oftentimes I attributed silence and failing communication to lack of the others' (my informants: students, parents and teachers) English skills and my very poor level of

Mandarin. Silence was the answer when my students didn't know how to respond to a question, or if they did, they could not adequately express themselves in English or, coming back from PE class, their fatigue resulted in apathy toward any activity that required the slightest energy input. Yet, silence constitutes a more complex system of meaning in a community as it manifests in power relations, educational philosophy and self-protection.

In literatures on education in China, Confucianist ideology frequently discussed as a strongly influencing factor. Confucius was a common reference among local Chinese teachers, curriculum designers and policy makers I worked with. The following description echoes what my informants explained as the reason for silence in communication. Silence can be used to cultivate human beings along the Confucius path, firstly, silence indicates restraint, reservation and efforts to maintain human relationship; secondly, Confucius often uses silence as a strategy to speak as little as possible in order to allow others to discover [...] by herself/himself. Silence nourishes human dialogues and actions; people can make sense of the unsaid as much their own as possible and moral lessons can be learned by oneself." (Pakdeerat 2018: 1)

As a result, local Chinese teachers face challenges in their classes since communicative teaching methods of ESL (English as a Second Language) require a more dynamic and democratic way of communication, as many of my informants call it "Western style" of communication and student-teacher relationship than the otherwise customary school discourse in all other lessons, where the authority of the teacher is unquestionable and students are discouraged from speaking up.

This inhibits cultural transfer and successful pedagogy since "Western style" ESL lessons are supposed to be communication based. One of my brightest students never spoke up in class when she attended a local state school. Then, after transferring to a more "Western style" international school, even though her written exams were always among the best ones, she got marked down at the final assessments for lack of classroom engagement. She was aware of what she should change but she did not want to show off her skills among others. "The others would not like me if I stood out" – she said. It was hard for her to get rid of this previously prescribed modesty but the pressure was high as she wanted to get admitted to an Ivy league school in the US.

"We are not used to this kind of active communication" – many of our students would say. Applying cultural relativism in the classroom would've helped the adaptation of my

foreign colleagues, who struggled with deciphering student behaviour, often taking it personally, feeling that students were sabotaging the lesson or didn't like their teaching methods. Besides, it was a challenging task to get any feedback on student progress on verbal skills that further hindered the quality of their work and their aims for cultural transfer through second language acquisition.

Poor listening skills was often used as an excuse to stay silent and "check out" of the lesson. Many students retreated into a quiet, passive state and did not participate. Silence was a shield to not having to follow the tasks and take a rest. Any attempt on my part to remedy the situation and encourage more communication, even with the limited vocabulary the students had, flopped. We could not find a common ground and not because of a language barrier but mainly because of two reasons: students in all other lessons were expected to keep quiet and listen to the teacher and they were also not expected to take part in group decisions or problem solving. Silence stood for: avoiding confrontation, fatigue and different enculturation whose barriers a few ESL classes could not break down. When I, or my foreign colleagues, tried to find a solution together, talking through the issue together, it did not work. The teacher is expected to lead the group, show authority and give instructions that others follow. "You're the boss" – students, parents and Chinese colleagues would say. When there were issues with student transgressions, they would often bow their heads, gaze at the floor and listened quietly. They repeated "sorry, sorry" on end but, even when pressed, did not explain the reason for their transgressions, for instance cheating at exams, disrupting the class, tardiness with homework assignments.

Uncomfortable silence came from not having the appropriate or desired vocabulary for things they wanted to express, or not being familiar with the context (i.e. teaching topic such as the Swinging Sixties in England) or I communicating differently (asking publicly for more transparent legal papers for foreign faculty). I often got answers such as "let me think" etc. meaning they don't say what they think and do not provide answers we would consider "clear" or "straightforward".

Not replying reflects social hierarchy as silence can stop communication in which confrontations or democratic discussion could occur. "Let me think about it", "I have to think about it first", or "Sure, we'll see" were the answers many times when I wanted direct answers to urgent questions, for instance if I could get an extra day off for Christmas or get a raise. We never came back to discussing the issue again.

Silence can highlight the leader's unquestionable decision. I was expected to keep silent while the boss (or someone's Chinese boyfriend) talked, especially when someone else was around. "They need to be given face in public. Whatever problem you have with them, you may talk but only in private." My colleagues, foreigners or locals alike, more familiar with the system, never spoke up. My boss often reminded us "When in Rome, act like a Roman." Be quiet, accept the rules and follow the instructions.

When the questions are asked online, through the popular social media platform called WeChat, silence always meant no. "What's up with the job I referred you to? How're you getting on with the new client?" The reason for the silence was that they already quit the job or thought about quitting soon. They felt it embarrassing to tell me stories of failures since I got them the position.

During interviews silence was a way to avoid giving concrete answers that could compromise their privacy also. When some students told me that their parents worked for the government and I asked what their job was, they either remained silent, thinking too long or said they did not know. Similarly, they often replied "I don't really know" or "I don't remember" to questions such as which area of Shanghai they live in or the name of the company their parents were running. "Giving out information about your family or yourself is inviting harm. People can hurt you with what they find out about you." – a student once told me. Silence as avoidance for self-protection is reflected in the following dialogue with my friend and colleague:

Yang (English teacher, fluent): "Pity you left China, I wanted to invite you to my school for a gig."

Me: "Oh, where do you work now?"

Yang: "Yes, I still teach English."

### **Applications and limitations of the cultural relativist approach**

A cultural relativist lens helps in understanding what role silence (including silence with words) plays in the communication between members of a community, the different meanings and avoidance strategies it carries and how power relations transpire through silence.

This approach helps in interpreting the macro level processes as well: how expectations in an increasingly modern society force a different kind of communication onto its members, rewrite behaviour patterns clashing with traditional patterns.



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