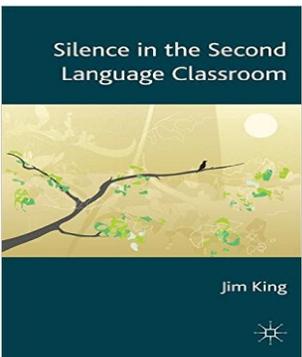




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<p><i>Silence in the Second Language Classroom (2013)</i> Jim King Palgrave Macmillan Pages: 211 ISBN: 978-1-137-30147-5 Cost: \$105</p> <p><i>Reviewed by Ronald Gray</i> Ohio University redmansion2002@yahoo.com</p>	
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For 4 years in the early 1990's, I taught EFL at several universities in the Kansai region of Japan. At that time, the most common topic of discussion among the foreign teachers was the widespread tendency of their Japanese students to be verbally unresponsive during class. (Although most teachers also mentioned that they found some students to be quite responsive outside class). Our experiences were not unusual and there exists much anecdotal evidence that the vast majority of teachers who have taught or are teaching English to Japanese university students have also encountered the same problem.

Consequently, it is quite odd, as Jim King points out in his new book, *Silence in the Second Language Classroom*, that no detailed empirical study has been done on why this puzzling phenomena occurs. King's work represents a concerted attempt to do so by trying to answer the basic question of why some learners cannot or decide not to speak in a foreign language. He does this by focusing his attention on the problem of why Japanese university second language learners are so silent in class. King acknowledges that this topic presents several immediate methodological difficulties, such as "How can silence be effectively identified and measured within classrooms? How can accurate meanings be gleaned from something so multifaceted ambiguous and highly dependent upon context for its significance?" (p. 1). To overcome these concerns, he utilizes an innovative and extensive mixed-methods research approach that relies upon student interviews, structured classroom observations, and stimulated recall studies of specific silence events. He also presents an interdisciplinary overview of the concept of silence in Japanese culture that draws upon the fields of sociolinguistics, psychology, education theory, conversational analysis, pragmatics, and anthropology, and a critical overview of the Japanese language education system.

King devotes a chapter to his use of each of these multiple data types and sources. Based upon his classroom observations of and interviews with a wide assortment of Japanese college students, he discovered that there "was a stunning lack of student-initiated talk in classrooms...Learners in the study were observed to spend up to a fifth of their time in

class disengaged from the learning process and off-task. This suggests a high level of apathy towards language learning amongst many Japanese university students” (pp. 100-101). He concludes that there is “convincing evidence that there is a strong and generalizable trend towards silence within the L2 classrooms of Japanese universities” (p. 167). King believes there are a host of cultural and socio-psychological reasons why Japanese students are so silent, among these are Japanese child rearing practices, the way Japanese view the concept of the self, politeness strategies, differences in turn-taking styles, the influence of Confucianism, and student’s excessive psychological self-monitoring and hyper sensitive concerns. He also strongly maintains that the impractical aims and character of Japanese language education system has had a negative influence upon student’s attitudes towards language learning and this has impacted upon behavior in the classroom.

In the book’s final chapter, King offers 8 pedagogical suggests for teachers and discusses the implications of his study for L2 language planning in Japan. He also raises a very important and rarely expressed point about the Japanese educational system that deserves to be quoted in full: “The epidemic levels of learner disengagement uncovered in this study raise some serious concerns which educational policy planners at Japanese universities need to address. While English as a compulsory subject for all undergraduates is wonderful news for foreign language practitioners who have a vested interested in maintaining as broad a student base as possible, one has to question whether student’s interests might not be better served by making the subject an elective. As the system stands as present, it would appear that too many L2 classes for non-language majors are at best an irrelevance and at worse an elaborate intuitional exercise in killing time” (p. 169).

Silence in the Second Language Classroom is an excellent book that should be read by anyone who teaches English to Japanese students (although it is a pity that the work is so expensive). King is to be commended for focusing on a frequently discussed but little studied phenomenon and for the rigorous and refreshingly interdisciplinary way he conducted his research. It is hoped that other scholars will treat this book as a model for doing more studies of the impact of concepts like silence on the language learning process in other countries.

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