Silence remains, inescapably, a form of speech.

– Susan Sontag

Not all silences are the same. Some are reflective and peaceful; others are stubborn, fearful, gripping. As with the spoken word, silence has its nuances and shadings of context and emotion. An instructor of English as a Second Language, I have come to accept the protracted pauses and unforeseen stretches of quiet that can occur in my communication skills classes. Unhurried, these may lead to self-reflection and change, as happened several years ago in one of my high-intermediate ESL classes. On that morning, during a lesson on sexual orientation discrimination, a young gay man’s abrupt coming out at first startled, and then stopped the discussion. The brief essay that follows offers my recollection of that morning, addresses the possible transforming effects of silence in a communication skills classroom, and raises a broader question about social identity among our international students.

Differences among languages and communication styles, geographies, politics, or religions can separate cultures from each other, sometimes resulting in conflicting perceptions of race, gender, class, age, appearance, and sexual orientation. For the ESL teacher and learner at LaGuardia, exposure to this unusually wide range of cultural perspectives is particularly relevant. Fortunately, a variety of workshops, common readings, and professional development seminars at our campus continue to support examination of social diversity as it relates to disciplinary teaching and learning. In my case, these opportunities have led to the development of ESL lessons that integrate two primary learning goals: increased competency in the English language and heightened awareness of perceptions of social identity. Topics on diversity can allow critical reflection upon commonly held cultural assumptions, enliven class discussion, and accelerate language acquisition. Equally significant is the sense of authenticity of communication, especially for those students who speak less openly about ideas and values foreign to their native cultures. Speaking is obviously essential to communication skills; however, silence is as evocative and, at times, as instructive as speech.

In my class, more than any other activity falling under the heading of diversity, the one that introduces the concept of bias based on sexual orientation has aroused the most intense reaction. When presented with information about the pivotal Cracker Barrel 1991 dismissal of employees “whose sexual preferences fail to demonstrate normal heterosexual values” (US Today), students have typically responded in several ways. Some have engaged heatedly with students whose positions are contrary to their own. Others have refused to even consider opposing opinions; and still other students have slipped into a perplexing silence. In exceptional cases, a single response has been a revelation that has altered the class dynamic in ways for which there is no preparation and, perhaps, no words.

My lesson on sexual orientation discrimination follows a simple structure. Groups of students discuss perceptions of homosexuality, considering, for example, the status of homosexuals in their native countries; whether knowledge of someone’s homosexuality would change their behavior toward that individual; and if there are occupations that homosexuals should not have. Afterwards, students view a taped segment of 20/20 that presents emotional interviews with the dismissed employees, as well as information about laws concerned with discriminatory hiring practices.

When I have presented the lesson, responses to the preliminary questions have reflected a range of attitudes: “There are no
homosexuals in my country;” “Many people in New York City are gay;” “It’s against my religion;” “Homosexuals should not be allowed to teach young children or to be religious leaders;” “My hairdresser is gay;” “I found out that one of my friends is homosexual.” As I see it, my role as a facilitator is not to express my opinions, but to provide a forum for students to communicate with one another. Expressing views and listening to the views of others should lead to an examination, or re-examination, of personal beliefs.

On this particular morning, many of the students were, as usual, emphatic that homosexuals could be identified by effeminate body language, or distinctive ways of talking and walking. Impatiently, they explained why all homosexuals should be avoided. After enumerating the characteristics of homosexuals, the majority of the class settled into satisfied mutual agreement.

One student, however, sat silently and rigidly among his classmates. Sam was an affable and verbal person who had often socialized with his classmates; many had enjoyed his warmth, humor and ability to draw out even the most reticent individuals. After his initial silence, Sam expressed amazement at his classmates’ certainty that visual cues could definitively identify a homosexual. He wondered if any of those so facile with stereotyping had ever known anyone who was gay. Slightly ashen, his eyes fixed straight ahead, Sam nervously said, “I wonder if any of you ever thought that I am gay.” To barely audible grumbles, whispers, and gasps, Sam continued, “Because I am gay.” His words silenced everyone.

Sam talked non-stop for several minutes longer, stiffly upright and looking only at me. His admission was clearly irrevocable, but I remember only snippets of what he said. Distraught, I thought about what to do next. The students seemed restless and began to whisper again, “What did he say?” “Was he joking?” Sam’s interruption was significant for several reasons. First, Sam revealed a covert aspect of his social identity and he did so in English, a language that was not yet natural to him. But equally significant and authentic was the students’ silence. Whether speaking or not, the language learners were attempting to achieve balance between their cultural identities and a non-native communication style.

As foreign language teachers and students come to recognize, linguistic competency is only part of language acquisition; paralinguistic, or non-verbal, elements of communication are integral to understanding and interpreting the spoken word. For some students, silence is an indication of respect for the teacher/speaker. These groups of learners may respond only when asked to, and even then, from a Western perspective, there is often a considerable period of silence during which the student may be searching for the appropriate words and also trying to comprehend the situation before commenting. Utterances are brief since offering a lengthy or unsolicited opinion could be considered inappropriate. Similarly, whispering among students from shared cultures can be an essential part of forming an opinion and a way to confirm that their views are held in common. Finally, a style of communication considered the norm in the target language may create discomfort among non-native speakers which, if not overcome, may distance them from the target language and force them to rely on more familiar modes of communication.

I did not know if Sam had ever planned to tell his classmates about this part of his life, or if it was his frustration upon hearing their comments that prompted him. No one had ever come out in any of my classes before and I was uncertain about Sam’s ability – or mine – to deal with his classmates’ reactions. Potential repercussions zigzagged through my mind, and I realized that I was worried. Perhaps some of the students would be abusive or threatening, and I wondered if I needed to protect him in some way, or if I could.

The class seemed to fracture into two factions: Sam, who continued talking to me, and his silent classmates. In the hope that Sam’s nervousness would lessen, I gave the class a short break; once resumed, perhaps our discussion could continue in a more inclusive way.
Some students bolted from the room, others lingered, but everything they did, no matter how mundane, assumed a heightened significance. I did not know if the whispered exchanges between those who had remained in the room related to Sam’s declaration of identity, or if they were the friendly sharing of stories about life outside the classroom. Nor did I know if students who hurried from the room merely wanted to smoke, get coffee, or create distance between Sam and themselves. In fact, I wasn’t entirely sure if Sam’s classmates had actually understood what he’d said, or how they had interpreted my silence when he spoke.

In the hallway, I asked Sam how he felt about his classmates’ comments and if he was ready to go back to class. Almost too cavalierly, he said their comments had been predictable and that he wasn’t very bothered by them. Once the break was over, we returned to our room with the rest of the students, most of whom took their usual seats. But a group of men moved their chairs, jamming them into a part of the room far from Sam. Their silence was impenetrable and ambiguous. I considered asking this separate group about their migration, thereby extending to the whole class an opportunity to discuss any discomfort caused by Sam’s revelation, and I thought about asking these men to return to their original positions. But I did neither. I chose instead to accept their silence as I had accepted Sam’s coming out, deciding to interpret the gap in communication as passing, one that might eventually be bridged. In the fifty minutes that remained, I opted to say nothing about the repositioned chairs, and simply returned to the lesson. Reticent at first, the class gradually became involved in the exercises related to the 20/20 video.

For me, this incident initiated a spiraling of questions about how students, particularly foreign students like Sam, identify themselves. When asked to identify ourselves, what information do we consider important? A self-description might include information about gender, race, ethnicity, nationality, age, occupation, education, language(s), religion, marital status, political affiliation, social circle, income, family background, or sexual orientation.

However, context influences identity, and what we emphasize in ourselves varies according to the situation. This variation is particularly true for international students who, in the setting of a new country, may begin to question their identity. As a result, they may adopt new social parameters by which to classify themselves and others. For example, students who enjoyed certain privileges or suffered punishment in their native countries because of family background, marital status, or religion might find that particular aspect of their identity irrelevant in another country. On the other hand, international students who perceive acceptance in the United States of persons belonging to social groups marginalized in their native countries can be confused or angered.

International students need to gain an awareness of the differences in values accorded to the various aspects of social identity by native and non-native cultures if they hope for a successful transition between both. But how do foreign students gain this awareness in the United States? Mass media presents images that my students believe to be accurate until their time spent in the United States proves these images to be exaggerated or false. For many ESL students, their teachers are the only contact they have with someone who is representative of the new culture. As a result, the classroom may be the sole forum in which students are exposed to and can discuss new concepts of socially relevant or irrelevant values, behavior, and beliefs. It was my hope that by presenting an activity on employment discrimination, I could introduce and clarify some of the many variations in cultural perceptions. However, it was apparent that the design and presentation of the lesson needed improvement.

In order to enhance classroom reception of previously unfamiliar variants in social and cultural identity, certain pedagogical choices can be considered. In “Sexual Identity in the ESL Classroom” Cynthia Nelson observes, “In terms of engaging learners and teachers whose experiences and viewpoints are diverse, a focus
on analysis may be more effective than a focus
on advocacy” (337). Seen from Nelson’s per-
spective, my lesson on sexual orientation bias
could have been designed as a subset of a
broader inquiry-based approach to employ-
ment discrimination. In this way, our activity
on sexual orientation discrimination may have
more readily encouraged greater social sensi-
tivity among students who might recognize
that, if perceived as belonging to marginalized
ethnic, racial or religious groups, they could
also be discriminated against. In addition, guest
speakers who promise the immediate “personal
contact and interaction” most crucial for behav-
ioral change could have been invited to discuss
this topic with the class (Een, 2006). Sam’s rev-
elation provided immediacy, and the uninter-
rupted silence that followed allowed students
time to reflect on their feelings and beliefs –
both pivotal to this lesson.

Somewhat tentatively, I entered our next
class to see a very relaxed Sam sitting and talk-
ing with a small group of classmates. Scattered
throughout the room in their regular places
were those students who had literally distanced
themselves the day before. For the rest of the
semester, Sam and his classmates worked
together on projects, discussing various topics
without any apparent discord or aversive behav-
ior. It was not clear if they had accepted his
homosexuality, or simply compartmentalized
this piece of information to avoid contradictory
daily interactions with a person they liked.

Possibly students empathized with Sam,
sensing his separation from self imposed by his
native country, an alienation perhaps familiar
to them as they tried to understand cultural
norms in New York.

In the end, the evidence that a new sensitiv-
ity to diversity had been heightened and social
identities recategorized was simple and persua-
sive. On the final day of class, there was a party
celebrating all that had been learned that quar-
ter. The party was given in a small Elmhurst
apartment; Sam was the host, and every stu-
dent in the class was there.

Works Cited


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