Talk, silence and anxiety: An international comparative study of undergraduates’ tolerance of silence during one-to-one tutorials

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In previous research (King, 2014, 2016) I have demonstrated how anxiety within the highly social setting of a language class can contribute significantly to the silent behaviour of L2 learners who feel inhibited and under constant scrutiny from peers. After providing a brief overview of this research, the current presentation focuses on anxiety and silence from a converse perspective by considering how the presence of silence during an interaction can itself become an anxiety-inducing phenomenon for participants. I will describe a project which used a mixed methods, quasi-experimental approach to measure the length of silent pause which individual students from samples in Japan and the UK tolerated during a one-to-one staged encounter with their instructor. During this encounter, which took the form of a tutorial meeting, the instructor refrained from speech and all overt non-verbal communication (adopting a neutral facial expression, gaze direction, posture, and so on) from a set point in the meeting. The student participant’s reaction to the period of silence which ensued was examined in detail using a nonverbal/paralinguistic coding and their length of silence tolerance was measured precisely. In addition to quantitative data focusing on the nature of silent pause lengths, the study garnered qualitative data from retrospective interviews examining what participants were actually thinking and feeling whilst the silent encounter was in progress. Testimony which illustrated acute feelings of anxiety on the part of students from both UK and Japanese samples was the primary theme to emerge in this phase of data collection. The project’s findings have potentially significant implications for staff and students who operate in cross-cultural settings, and could help inform the strategies that individuals from both the UK and Japan might adopt to facilitate more successful cross-cultural interactions.

Keywords: anxiety, silence.