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Adaptation of silence and language: Crossing cultural boundaries

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ABSTRACT

This article introduces silence and language adaptation as a novel concept that provides a framework for examining how individuals mediate intercultural dialogue through nonverbal resources. Inspired by Rampton's (2017) idea of language crossing and Giles's (2016) communication adaptation theory, this work defines silence adaptation and language adaptation as conscious or unconscious processes that modulate one's rhythm of conversation, silence, and nonverbal responsiveness to attune it to the recipient's culture. Employing a combinatory approach, the novel notion suggested in this study reveals the subversive experience of behavioural adaptation when it undermines national, ethnocultural, or other temporal demarcations. The study demonstrates that both silence and speech can be expressions of empathy, resistance, or imagination; therefore, it critiques the speech paradigm, which elevates speaking to the level of personal creativity and frequently engages in participation with speech. The paper concludes with a pedagogy that respects the vital line between consideration and responsibility in the classroom. In class, one can anticipate encountering diversity and silence. The work further claims that just as materially embodied persons are constantly situated in a sequence of spatial orientations and bodily postural and outfit options, so are human speakers symbolically embodied in a flow of 'silence as part of speech,' which is concealment, presence or absence, acknowledgment or denial, reception or assertion.

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1. Opening vignette

When Brian, a British scholar, conducted a teacher-training workshop in Tokyo, he confessed that something thought-provoking happened to him. 'I didn't know how to react,' said Brian of his experience with the Japanese during that workshop. Halfway through a demonstration of an activity, he paused reflectively, and the room grew quiet with him.

No one shifted. No one jumped in. It was so quiet that Brian felt a little anxious.

Fearing that he had lost the audience, Brian s scrambled to fill the silence with extra explanations, bits of banter, and reassurances. But his Japanese companions were sitting calmly and serenely, eyes open, hands together, waiting, with a kind of peaceful alertness that he did not quite comprehend.

All of a sudden, it dawned on him that nothing was 'wrong.' Here, by contrast, silence was not a hole to be patched. It was a moment of calm and mutual respect. It was a brief time for reflection and engagement.

Moreover, when Brian slowed his pace and allowed those quiet intervals to breathe, something in his own rhythm shifted. Observing the audience's comfortable faces, he began to experience silence as part of the conversation — another form of communication and acceptance, a subtler one.

Brian internalized this instant of cultural exchange with a clear message and a different significance: thoughtfulness, politeness, emotional serenity, and ethical reflection. It was understood that, while British culture prizes the flow of speech, participants in this Japanese context cherish the silence between words. One thing is clear: when we cross cultures, we exchange words, but we also cross silences. Moreover, learning to pay attention to that silence can transform the way we teach.

2. Research approach

Informed by a qualitative, interpretive methodology grounded in phenomenological sensibilities and interactional sociolinguistics, the research seeks to illuminate how people modify their silence across different cultural contexts. Without the use of experimental manipulations or quantified behavioural observations, the analysis is based on vignettes to focus on how speakers orient themselves within novel communication practices. These vignettes — based on intercultural experiences in both Japanese and Australian educational contexts — provide experiential micro-cases that foreground the temporal, affective, and relational dimensions of silence. Reading these cases closely, we theorize "silence adaptation" as an emergent communicative practice influenced by context-bound expectations, identity work, and implicit power relations. From this interpretive stance, the data collected enable the study to reconceptualise silence and absence as culturally meaningful action, whereby timing, pausing, and quiet presence are shown as forms of boundary negotiation in intercultural communication.

3. Defining silence adaptation

This is not an established concept in the current discourse, but it has been developed particularly for this article. Silence adaptation is a process best conceptualised not as an object or an absence, but as a communicative form capable of motion and variation.

Despite all these aspects in which silence has been treated as a communicative practice in sociolinguistics, pragmatics, and intercultural communication, the concept of adaptation is not explicitly addressed in the literature. The former research has explored the role of silence within specific cultures (Bao, 2014; 2015; 2024; 2025), in classroom interaction (Bao, 2013, 2019, 2020, 2021; Bao & Thanh-My, 2020; Harumi, 2011; Nakane, 2007), and on how patterns of talk and pausing reveal cultural norms (King & Harumi, 2020; Shachter et al., 2025). Accordingly, the communication accommodation theory (Giles, 2016) has demonstrated how speakers alter accents, pitch, or lexical items, and Rampton's (2017) work on language crossing has highlighted how people do identity by adopting another group's linguistic code. However, none of this literature focuses on how people alter the temporal rhythm of silence itself—turn-taking (which includes the length of pauses and the timing/proportionality/level of quietness—if that is considered part of turn-taking)—when they cross cultural divides.

This article provides an introduction to silence adaptation as a concept and theoretical treatment. Silence adaptation shifts accommodation theory from an understanding of speech to that of stillness, timing, and embodied attentiveness. It also expands language crossing by treating silence not as an absence but as a semiotic practice that people enter, borrow from, or reshape. In the process, it brings into relief a mode of intercultural attunement that has so far gone untheorized:

how people modulate their silences and quiet presence to work with or against another culture's silence norms.

This study contributes to the discourse by introducing silence adaptation as a new perspective. It gives us language to understand the small but powerful adaptations people make when their pacing and rhythm of thought, pauses, or listening do not align with the cultural expectations of the communicative environment. It also theorizes silence as a locus of movement, agency, and boundary-working—an embodied mode of intercultural transaction that has historically circulated under the rubric of no name. In this sense, silence adaptation is more than just a descriptive label; it is also a theoretical contribution: one that paves the way for further investigation of the ethics, power relations, and affective labour involved in cross-cultural communication.

4. Discourse on silence and adaptation

4.1. Silence as communicative practice

Silence has been increasingly recognized as a mode of communication. Multiple studies have highlighted that silence is structured, interpretable, and socially produced. Classic ethnographic studies by Edward T. Hall (1973) and Keith Basso (1970; 2013) first revealed that the management of silence and talk is profoundly different across cultures: among the Western Apache, silence can mean respect, caution, or closeness, depending on the setting. For example, the scholars of cross-cultural pragmatics such as Nakane and Harumi have demonstrated that silence in Japanese and in the pan-Asian classroom is not a failure of communication but a discourse strategy.

Similarly, Bao (2023) argues that silence can be pedagogical, serving as cognitive space, emotional containment, or aesthetic distance between students, driving learning away from speaking towards reflection. These studies share the same insight: silence is patterned social action, organized and disciplined by cultural norms around time and timing, pacing, and chesting. People learn when to pause before answering, how to cope with polite gaps in turn-taking, and when to remain silent because it shows respect or affiliation. Thus, silence is never an amorphous blank; it has the form of time and expression, a long or short way to hear someone else, to negotiate power, and to be someone. Seen from this perspective, learning to maintain the patterns of silence of another culture is not just nonverbal behavior; it is a form of participation that crosses semiotic worlds.

4.2 From language crossing to silence adaptation

The idea of language crossing, as discussed by Ben Rampton (2017), has spawned a series exploring how specific languages, such as Jamaican Creole (a mix of English and West African dialects), can be expertly mobilized in multilingual Britain. Crossing is the closed boundary performance: brief deliberation in another gathering's code and signal that crossing is a permanent change in it. It could live to illustrate a relationship: uneducated solidarity, humour, a parachute, or an objection. It is forever a marked cultural enactment, a sociopolitical expansion into the other's semiotic meditative space. Silence adaptation extends Rampton's idea into the anecdotal domain. While linguistic kinds discuss the use of another group's oral system, silence adaptation incorporates their unspoken mores.

Both resolution and non-verbal dialects are mobility types, indicating self-undo and liaison lineament. However, the performance of silence carries precise epistemic and passionate reverberations. For some cultures, the boundaries between copying and feigning become momentous, since transgression does not occur in obvious conversations but in juggling the clock, appearance, and practice. Using another's deafness is to again their attention-based gesture of acceptance – a greater, awkward gesture of link to make. Silence adaptation centers on listening and clocking, distinct from sounding like silence and quieter than arousal. On the other hand, silence adaptation suppresses speaking but supports the personality of listening, enabling the inquiry to be prepared quickly in an idiomatic, trans-disciplinary sense. Oscillatory inflection combines and defines the emigration of the nominal judgment.

4.3 Communication, accommodation, and attunement

Another theoretical cornerstone is communication accommodation theory (CAT), developed by Howard Giles (2016). CAT explains how speakers adjust the background rate of speech, its pitch, and the recurring and specialized vocabulary to align with the ‘common denominator’ or, conversely,

to distance themselves from one of the interlocutors for the sake of social approval or identity preservation/detection. Although CAT has always been aimed at verbal phenomena, its logical reasoning can be transferred to silence. A large number of intercultural interactions involve people being unconscious, which can change the length of a pause, the alternation in the rhythm of the answer, or the response to their non-verbal cues, correlating with the 'communicative pace' of others. Such changes are made for the sake of the relationship: show compassion, reduce social distance, or try to change the balance of power. However, the well-known CAT considers alignment a driving mechanism in interactional psychology and almost fails to account for silence.

Adaptation of silence re-reads accommodation through a sociocultural prism. It reconstructs the postulate of the original theory: alignment in silence is not only functional but also moral and aesthetic: it can be pretense, respect, or even a statement. Furthermore, even adaptation can be unequal: one participant feels greater pressure. For example, international students may be obligated to make shorter pauses to fit Western expectations of assertive participation, while local teachers do not extend conversational silences to them. Recognizing this precarious problem returns adaptation as a cognitive model of convergence to a question on communicative practice and justice. Since silence adaptation thus combines CAT's interactional sense and sociolinguistic consciousness of symbolic limits, it shifts the focus from 'how people control speech' to 'how they control quietness,' translating silence from an absence of politeness into an interactive medium.

4.4 Silence as boundary work: cultural and identity dimensions

Boundary theories of culture view group identities as boundlessly negotiated, always in the process of being made and unmade. From this standpoint, silence adaptation may be conceived of as boundary work through non-speech. When people adjust their silence to another group's norms, they do so by committing a symbolic transgression: setting foot in the foreign rhythm while keeping their identity bearers on. This form of boundary work calls into question ethnocentric assumptions about what counts as appropriate talk and opens the door to more pluralistic understandings of communicative legitimacy. From a phenomenological perspective, adjustment of silence is also an act of attunement.

To adjust silence is to attune oneself to other people's temporal and affective frequencies, to enter into a shared aurora of meaning. This attunement is both somatic and affective, encompassing changes in breath, gaze, and muscular tension. Thus, adjustment of silence produces an embodied experience of cultural otherness – one does not learn about silence through verbal explication but through stillness. Identity implications are multifaceted. Just as in linguistic code-switching, silence adaptation may function as an index of identification, resistance, or irony. However, it may also be suspect as inauthentic. In this case, authenticity is not an inherent quality in a dyadic interaction. Instead, it is interactionally achieved – the validity of the quiet alignment action depends on how the participants read it. Thus, the same silence might be interpreted as empathetic in one place and insincere in another.

4.5 From adaptation to transgression

Using this high-stakes concept of silencing to define silence adaptation as a transgressive movement accentuates its potential for disruption. In many contexts, adaptation seems synonymous with conformity or pleasantries; in contrast, here I am outlining it as a movement that entails transgressing symbolic boundaries that demarcate who is allowed to be silent, when, and how. Every culture has silent rules — who has the right to pause and who can get interrupted, whose silence should be respected and ignored. To align oneself with a local rhythm of quietness, minding not to align too much or too little, especially temporarily unsettles those boundaries. For this reason, the adaptation I am presenting is far from accommodation, which can, of course, also bear critical force and is always deeply significant, but does not entail transgression per se. That is because it involves no violation but the inhabitation of the difference, ensuring participant observation. One is both the part of and apart from, inside and out, in that stillness.

The transgressive quality of silence adaptation sets it apart from the accommodation we deal with daily. It acknowledges that one's quiet sleeping beside others' silencing can be potent: by echoing or amplifying others' silent tuning, one can unsettle communicative binaries. For instance, such forms of silence adaptation can unsettle deeply embedded regimes of communicative power, as the teacher who spaces out longer before repeating questions that make students talk to point to the centrality of speech in pedagogy, or the migrant worker who exerts her worth at the table by her

respectful muteness, is unbearable. In other words, adaptation per se cannot be merely acquiescence as it can also entail restabilizing oneself in the new ways. Integrative Summary. Combining these three theoretical corners, I define adaptation of silence as situated at the center of sociolinguistic and intercultural science and the philosophy of interaction, specifically, the adaptation of silence. Indeed, silent negotiation is not a neutral territory.

5. The silence adaptation model: visualizing the process

To better define how silence adaptation unfolds in intercultural interaction, one can use a conceptual model. Take two circles that overlap, representing Culture A and Culture B, and embody their unique silence norms, including the length of pause, gaps between turns, and meanings of quietness. The overlapping space is what Ashby (2013) conceptualizes as the brain's adaptive behaviour. Within this adaptive zone, the following processes occur: perceptual awareness, rhythmic adjustment, and interpretive negotiation. All three can be graphically visualized as a loop, rather than a one-time shift: awareness → adjustment → negotiation → renewed awareness. Adaptation is thus not a discrete process that moves from one step to another; instead, it is dialogic and iterative. It may result in accommodation or performance failure due to misrepresentation, but it also marks participants' willingness to engage. Silence adaptation can result in a range of communicative and symbolic outcomes that include but are not limited to:

Affiliative: expressing solidarity or respect by actively mirroring others' quietness;

Resistant: refusing to further develop the topic of conversation in an act of questioning the rightness of your conversational partner;

Performative: expressing a critical view of the given culture by mocking topics of quietness they consider central or by stylizing such topics. Each of these functions can be seen as a continuum and is dependent on the context, the position of conversation partners in relation to each other, and the perceived sincerity of the behavior.

Verdonik (2010) emphasizes that some of them can serve as the subject of misunderstanding. Conceptualizing silence adaptation is important. By defining silence adaptation as a cognitive phenomenon that shapes participants' interactions, SAMS reveals the subtle work of intercultural communication beyond language. It recognizes that humans do not translate languages but pause, re-pattern the rhythm of time and space, and respond to them, address each other, and do so in ways that are not merely linguistic.

By reframing adaptation from the traditional view of conformity to an understanding of silence as communicative adjustment conducted in transgressive empathy, this thesis invites researchers and educators to see silence not as a vacuum but as a site of lively negotiation where identities, relationships, and power are meekly rewritten.

6. Second vignette: stepping away from silence

Lin, a young lecturer from Taiwan, arrived in Australia full of excitement. As a visiting scholar, she expected lively seminars and open discussion—just not this lively. In this Australian university, people spoke so fast; they challenged each other, and jumped into the conversation before the previous sentence even landed. Lin thought to herself: 'Why do people keep interrupting each other like this?'

At her first seminar, Lin did what she had always done: she paused before speaking, letting her thoughts form. However, in this new setting, her pauses were pierced instantly. Someone else would jump in. Her thoughtful silence was misread as hesitation, or worse, skepticism.

Slowly, Lin realised her style was being interpreted in ways she never intended. So she made a deliberate shift. She cut her pauses down to almost nothing. She started speaking more quickly, layering her voice over others', tossing in short markers such as 'well, you see,' 'what I want to highlight is…' and 'I would like to emphasize one thing.' The three-second silences she once used for thinking evaporated into half-breaths.

It was a kind of reverse silence adaptation*—compressing her silence to fit a culture that prizes rapid talk. It worked professionally; colleagues took her more seriously. However, it came with a cost.*

'I was so stressed out,' she later revealed. 'I had to be constantly ready. I have never had to explain anything so quickly in my life.' She described the experience simply: 'I was trying to talk faster than my thinking.'

Lin's story shows that silence is far from neutral. People from quieter communication cultures often feel pressure to adjust in talk-driven environments. However, her adaptation also shows strength. She found ways to navigate group discussions while reserving her fuller, more reflective style for one-on-one mentoring, where she could engage on her own terms.

In the end, Lin discovered both the strain and the skill of reshaping silence and speech across cultures.

Lin's story underscores how powerful — yet often unnoticed — cultural norms can be in shaping conversational behavior, leaving Taiwan, where pauses are mental space, a sign of respect, and an Australian academic culture where speed, overlay, and continuous interjection have become signs of involvement rather than rudeness. Her meditative silence (discursively reasonable in her home situation) is suddenly read as reluctance or withdrawal. This discrepancy reveals that silence is not neutral: it is culturally marked and easily misunderstood across communicative worlds.

Her account is indicative of the pressure faced by those from silencer-averse communication contexts (where silence is treated as problematic) when they move into speaker-oriented environments. To be taken seriously, Lin veers away from her natural rhythm, cuts her reflective pauses, and appropriates conversational techniques that align with the expectations of her new educational context. This reverse-silence adaptation is rational and strategic, but also emotionally demanding. She explains the effort of having to think faster than she could talk, which represents cognitive load and affective stress due to the constant need to conform to another norm. The adaptation serves as a means for her to attain professional legitimacy, but it also creates internal conflict between authenticity and assimilation.

Lin's story reveals a critical insight: Communication styles are not merely personal preferences; they reflect deeper power dynamics and cultural values regarding thinking, politeness, participant norms, and the nature of authority. As teachers or researchers shift between cultures, the handling of silences is part of their identity work. The previously slow talker might be, by sheer comparison, more deliberate and rational in your mind; that fast speaker who seemed to know what he was doing, again as per the measurements determined in your culture fraught with bipolarizations, would then seem hurried or forceful. Realizing this helps us understand that communication involves not only what we say, but also how we time our speech and occupy conversational space, and how we read the spaces between words.

The result, the story also indicates, is that accommodation does not necessarily entail complete adaptation of one's style. Lin seeks ways to return to her reflective mode in one-on-one teaching, where deeper thinking and more time are prized. This demonstrates that rather than a binary of assimilating or not, cross-cultural communication is about attuned flexibility — knowing when to match rhythm and when to maintain one's communicative self. This kind of agility is a form of cultural intelligence and resilience.

Ultimately, Lin's story is a reminder that passing between places (i.e., adapting to another culture) means passing between silences as well as languages. The researcher would like to call on teachers, colleagues, and institutions to acknowledge the emotional labor required to adapt skills to fast-paced, competitive talk. It also suggests a broader kind of attention to invite: establishing spaces where multiple communication rhythms can coexist might not just alleviate stress for people like Lin but also deepen and diversify academic communication.

7. Third vignette: Sayo's quiet thinking

The quiet Japanese undergraduate sat in the front row of her lecture in educational Australia, notebook open, pen hovering. However, when the lecturer asked about classroom management, Sayo did what she used to do back home: She took a moment to replay the question in her head and organize her thoughts before she started speaking.

However, before she could complete her sentence, the lecturer was off to something else.

'Sayo? No thoughts yet? Well, somebody else we're going to hear from.'

He beamed, thinking she was unsure. Sayo blinked. She did have thoughts. She was not ready to fling them into the air as fast as her peers.

It occurred again the following week. And again. Each time she hesitated, the lecturer interpreted it as confusion or a lack of confidence. He started in, well-meaning and anxious: 'Are you taking readings? Do you need support?' Sayo felt a little sting with each one. She was not struggling. She was thinking.

One afternoon, following a group discussion in which her ideas had once more been discussed, Sayo walked home feeling oddly deflated. Her reserve — something that was carefully considered, at least in Japan — had become, in this new academic world, a vulnerability she had not seen within herself.

So she tweaked it a bit. Not the theatrical kind that Lin had been making, but an understated one. She began to raise her hand before she was completely prepared. She started her sentences with an easygoing 'I'm still thinking, but…' — a tack to seize the floor while hanging on to her process of reflection. The lecturer's face broke into a smile of surprise. 'Great insight, Sayo!' he said, suddenly hearing her clearly for the first time.

Sayo had never let go of her reasoning. She had just learned to signal it differently in a rushed environment. Moreover, when her teacher learned that she was pausing for presence, not absence, he started slowing it down—and asking fewer questions at a time.

In the end, the teacher and student adjusted. Sayo had discovered a voice that could travel across cultures without abandoning the quiet roots of her past. Moreover, her teacher discovered that silence can do even more work: it is a form of participation, held at another tempo.

Sayo's story highlights an alternative—yet as significant—type of silence accommodation. Where Brian's silence was strange in Japan or made Lin feel she must shorten her pauses in Australia, Sayo faces a more subtle problem: her reflective silences are seen as a sign of mental dullness. Her reflective space, which is based on a Japanese communicative philosophy that values more carefully laid-out sequences of thought, begins to be recoded in an Australian academic setting as a loss of confidence, disinterest, or disorganisation.

This discord demonstrates how silence is culturally encoded: attention and intellectual presence in one setting are read as hesitation or a deficit in another. Sayo is not refusing to participate; she is participating—but on another temporality regime where thinking precedes speaking, where pauses = sense. However, the lecturer's high-speed, talk-centric demands frame her silence as an issue to be solved.

The labour behind her response and how students from quieter communication cultures often do such work. If Lin is strategically compressing silence, Sayo is making a lighter modification: she starts signaling her desire to speak before her thinking is complete ('I'm still thinking but…'). It's a small but telling move to bridge silence norms—preserving her cognitive style while attuning to the regional tempo of turn-taking. Her revision is not assimilation or resistance, but an intercultural communicative structure informed by linguistic sensibility.

Also important is what happens with the lecturer's eventual shift. Once he realizes that Sayo's pauses are full and rich, not mere pauses at all, he rethinks the pace of his own narration. This negotiated silence adaptation reveals an important truth: the burden of accommodation does not rest solely on the culturally quieter partner. Instead, it can be a site of negotiation where teachers come to discover that silence is about presence, not absence.

Finally, Sayo's vignette provides evidence that intercultural communication is not only about speech styles, but also about the pace of thinking when one learns in a classroom. Her story reveals the power dynamics underlying conversation speed, making it clear that normative assumptions about rapid verbal response can override alternative modes of entry. At the same time, her subtle recalibration also prompts one to see that one's reflective identity can survive while still yielding some room for cross-cultural intelligibility.

8. Cross-case analysis

Through Brian, Lin, and Sayo's experiences, it is apparent that silence adaptation is neither a single approach to behaviour nor one taken up in any singular manner, but rather an ensemble of communicative practices influenced by context, power, and cultural norms. Each scene demonstrates ways that silence may be borrowed, reshaped, confined, or strategically signaled, revealing a range of adaptation s that dial between affirmation and criticism; comfort and resistance; accommodativeness and existentiation. What unites these cases is their successful navigation of communicative boundaries through timing. In all three, silence emerges as a means by which participants come to terms with the meaning difference between cultures.

Brian's experience in Japan is a case of affiliative adaptation: he moves more slowly. He takes longer pauses to find a rhythmic empathy with an audience whose silence indicates engagement and respect. Lin's story presents nearly the reverse flow of adaptation, a kind of self-strangulation to the demands of an academic culture driven by speech, in which Lin has had to shorten her reflective pauses to continue living up to them, suggesting some strain that emerges from internalising a communicative rhythm not wholly hers. Sayo's take adds a third layer: when she is silent, it is seen as a weakness. Unlike Lin, she does not completely surrender to her slower processing rhythm; instead, she hybridizes strategies such as ('I'm thinking but…') to mitigate the difference between her reflective beat and the lecturer's immediate responsiveness. Taken together, these cases illustrate that adaptation does not entail a loss of identity; instead, it often results in the derivation of hybrid forms of participation from two silence cultures.

Hybridity—such practices of hybridisation—are widespread in the Australian classroom I teach in. What the teacher sees as a thoughtful pause for internal processing, he or she interprets as uncertainty and/or poor speaking skills. On the other hand, some students might perceive the instructor's rapid, dense speech as intruding on their cognitive workspace. These mismatches expose silence and speech as sites of negotiation, compartments within which intercultural knowledge is forged less by utterance than through listening, waiting, and recalibrating one's temporal positioning.

Collectively, the vignettes demonstrate that silence is not merely a conversational by-product, but an active resource for navigating across cultures. Whether turning down (Brian), speeding up (Lin), or giving notice to speak (Sayo), each individual does this temporal boundary work – traversing the divide of another culture's norms of silence while still including some of one's own. Silence — or the absence of sound, or attention to it, since we know that silence is actually complete of noise — thus becomes a technique for becoming: an embodied filter through which people learn to occupy new forms of quiet and air out their pauses with foreign accents.

As a group, these cases clearly show that the process of silence adaptation is not a neutral communicative accommodation. It is a border practice, both symbolic and relational, produced by the asymmetries of culture, power, and perception translated into space. In these environments, silence is semiotically thick: it indexes who should speak and who can afford to listen, who may be silent yet recognised for their presence rather than scanned for an absence. Conceiving of such silence adaptation as boundary work also helps illuminate the delicate negotiations characterizing cross-cultural communication, wherein silence is not so much an emptiness as a space in which identities, expectations, and rhythms collide.

9. Implications for teaching and research

In combination, the three cases show that silence is not an absence but a communicative resource that is culturally patterned through timing, rhythm, and interpretive norms. They also reveal that when silence expectations are mismatched, unintended consequences—stress (Brian), stress on emotions (Lin), and a false evaluation of ability (Sayo)—result. These cross-cultural interactions have numerous implications for pedagogical practice and future research.

9.1 Silence as interpretive space

Brian's sojourn in Japan shows that silence can mean respect, attention , and reflection rather than puzzled incomprehension. Sayo's situation, on the other hand, illustrates the dangers of teachers thinking that quick verbal answers necessarily indicate competence. Educators working in such multicultural classrooms must develop a more flexible framework of interpretation, one that can view silence as a possible participatory mode, not merely the opposite of sound and energy. This shift is made explicit in dialogue over communication norms, cultural pacing variation, and pedagogical decisions that allow for multiple temporalities of thinking.

9.2 Institutional values around participation

Lin's reverse-silence feature in an Australian context suggests a bias/text penalty against more pensive responses or quieter sociolinguistic locales, favoring fast talk, flat rebuttals, and overlapping turns. Our teaching practices could be redesigned to prize the quality of participation over speed. Structured wait time, reflective writing prior to discussion, and multimodal participation (written chat, think-pair-share, and silent discussions) align with 10 legitimate asynchronous communication rhythms. These strategies also remove the burden on students to 'think faster than they can talk,' thereby lowering cognitive load and promoting greater equity in classroom participation.

9.3 Silence adaptation as didactic obligation

These three vignettes encourage us to appreciate how much adaptation is the responsibility of more culturally quiet students and participants. Though people like Lin and Sayo may strategically adjust to meet local standards, teachers must also reset their conversational odometer. Brian's eagerness to move slowly in Japan demonstrates how attunement can be mutual. This mutuality of adaptation is an ethical position that educators need to claim, in which we learn our students' speech norms rather than demanding that they adapt to the conventions of privileged speech cultures.

9.4 Cultural research as a locus of intercultural negotiation

The cases demonstrate a dynamic, context-dependent, and relational adaptation. Future research should examine:

- how listeners perceive and interpret pauses as they are produced;
- the affective labour of translating silence and speech between cultures;
- what the power structures that determine who may be silent and who we expect to speak;
- the issue of silence adaptation and identity negotiation;
- The impact of digital learning Spaces on silence norms (e.g., muted microphones, chat participation).

By studying silence, using ethnographic, phenomenological, or interactional sociolinguistic approaches, we may be able to learn how people make meaning through timing, waiting, and nonverbal cues—not only through words.

9.5 Silence-communicated pedagogy

In all three cases, significant learning took place when the participants developed an appreciation of silence as a communication tool, with Brian finding "peaceful alertness", Lin embodying reflective depths in mentoring, and Sayo using new signals to gear up her thinking. These thoughts imply that teachers employ silence purposefully: as pauses for thinking, mindful breathing before discussion, silent group work, or strategic wait-time after questions. Asking students to reflect on their own history of silence could also foster empathy among them across cultural differences.

Together, these three cases illustrate how adaptations of silence become a powerful device in the subtle humor found in intercultural communication. They advocate for a pedagogical reorientation: instead of treating silence as absence, to perceive it as a meaningful practice imbued with culture, emotion, and identity. To scholars, silence is a rich analytic site — one that sheds light on how individuals transgress borders not just through language but also through the rhythms of speechlessness and quietness they carry with them.

10. Concluding remarks

This study has explored how silence adaptation represents an important but understudied aspect of intercultural communication—a leveraging—across temporal, affective, and ethical divides that cannot be explained as simply not speaking. Using the three cases as illustrations, we observed how silence functions as a form of agency that mediates how one navigates meaning, identity, and legitimacy as one enters an alternative communicative world. Brian's experience in Japan unveiled silence as an embodied form of listening that unsettles Western assumptions regarding participation.

Lin's pressured transformation in Australia demonstrated the emotional and cognitive labour of compressing reflective time in speech-driven arenas. What it made Sayo realize was how the language of silence is so easily misconstrued as weakness, and how small acts of signaling can bridge cultures.

Overall, these cases reveal silence as a patterned activity, underwritten by norms of pacing, turn-taking, relational sensitivity, and cultural appeals to thoughtfulness. That which I have theorised as silence adaptation is more than simple adjustment: it is a transgressive mode of symbolic boundary work in which subjects are encouraged to take on the timing of another culture while marching, not stepping, out of step with their own. It reveals how people violate communicative boundaries not just through speech but also through listening, waiting, withholding, and expanding or curtailing pauses, in ways that express both vulnerability and agency.

Pedagogically, the cases invite educators to question a hidden bias towards speed, fluency, and ceaseless verbalization —biases that threaten to perpetuate marginality for those whose communicative identities cohere around slower, more reflective rhythms—seeing silence as a resource for interaction enables teachers to foster classrooms in which not one but rather many temporalities of thought are honoured, rather than pathologised. Silence adaptation constitutes a promising research site, offering new opportunities to explore the ethics of listening, the emotional effects of cross-cultural pacing, and the embodied nature of communicative attunement.

After all, silence is not just the sound we wait for between words; it is itself a delicate grammar of presence. When people cross cultures, they also cross not just language systems, but the very threshold of pause and pace that lines the walls of comprehension. By attending to silence — its cadences, caverns, and misrecognitions — we can begin to think of intercultural communication as an exchange involving timing as much as talk. Silence adaptation, then, provides a potent lens through which to reenvision how we listen, teach, and respond across differences.

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Declaration

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