

The Case for Silence

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Welcome! Something to think about (in silence) while you wait.

Please turn off your phones ...

- ***Music is the space between notes. Claude Debussy.***
- ***We are building a world in which silence is a crime; a waste of something. An empty thing to be filled. Paul Kingsnorth.***
- ***...the media, bizarrely called ‘social’, cause the individual finally to end up alone while being connected to a lot of other people. Matthieu Ricard.***
- ***Wise men talk because they have something to say; fools because they have to say something. Plato.***
- ***Don't just play the notes – play the music. Arturo Toscanini.***
- ***If you want to walk on water, you've got to get out of the boat. John Ortberg.***

Please do not speak until I give the word

- ***Sit erect. (Eyes closed – optional) Hands on knees. Breathe in to a count of 5.***

Hold breath for a few seconds.

Breathe out to a count of 10.

Repeat this 5 times.

- ***Focus all your attention on the breath, nothing else.***

Listen to the bell
until it fades away
completely

Now listen to this poem
in silence

Just Listen

Thinking about nothing

*Try thinking
without thinking about something.*

*Let your thoughts
think you.*

*Stop the vain effort
to capture them.*

*Look at the river's flow,
the slow eddying of the current,
the muscular water -
green weeds tasselling
below the surface.
Go with the flow.*

Why silence?

- *Existential reasons*
- *Pedagogical reasons*

Existential reasons

We live in a society of near-absolute distraction:

- *Proliferation of social media – FOMO, IWIN*
- *Infoglut – drowning in the flood of information*
- *Advertising/Consumerist pressure*
- *‘Noise’ to cover fear of silence*

Hence loss of space for thinking, reflection, creativity.

Ironically, we are more together than ever, yet never more alone.

Pedagogical reasons

- *Learners need time to process input, yet many teachers fear silence. And the system pushes them to ‘cover’ the syllabus, the course-book unit, etc. for measurable, instant results.*
- *The alternative methods of the 70’s and 80’s recognized the need for learners to develop their own ‘inner criteria’ (Silent Way, Suggestopedia, TPR, Counselling learning, etc)*
- *Adrian Underhill – the Inner Workbench.*
- *Plus the need for a ‘silent period’ in language acquisition.*

Existential/personal. What can we do?

- *Set aside daily quiet time / Meditation*
- *Walk – in natural surroundings*
- *Read (In the Cool of the House etc. ...)*
- *Write – journal, poems, reflections/memoirs etc.*
- *Music: The Mozart effect, Toning, Hand Pan music, etc.*
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uwEaQk5VeS4>
- *Screen out the torrent of garbage: reduce dependence on i-phone, social media, switch off ads. (The Art of Solitude...)*

The Art of Solitude

*The art of solitude is hard to master: Prefers emoji's to emotions,
The world so full of sound and fury, Contact rather than engagement,
Where everything moves ever faster, Things to people.
And cash acts as both judge and jury.*

*Where a majority
Prefers noise to silence,
Communication to reflection,
Being in touch with others
Rather than with ourselves,*

*Where 'friendship' is a calculus
Of 'like' / 'don't like',
And being alone fills us with dread –
Almost worse than being dead.*

Silence in language teaching: readying and steadying

- *Breathing: 5 in, hold, 10 out.*
- *Eyes closed, focus on all the sounds around and inside them.*
- *Tingsha bells or Tibetan singing bowl – listen till it fades completely*
- *Quotation for silent reflection/ memorisation.*
- *Soft music – morning rag, Mozart, Chopin, etc Just listen.*
- *Body check: tense then relax each body part from top to bottom.*

Silence in language teaching: Activities for retention – the Inner workbench (Adrian Underhill)

- *Project an array of about 20 words printed in different colours. Learners look at them for just one minute. Then close the slide. They try to recall as many words as possible by silently visualising them.*
- *Speak a single word or sound - once only. They hold the word or sound in their minds, try to hear it in their mind's ear, then repeat it silently. Finally, they speak it aloud when you give the word.*
- *Each student prepares a sentence of about 5 words which is true of them. They rehearse ways of speaking their sentence internally in silence. They experiment with different ways of saying their sentence. For example, by varying speed, volume, stress, intonation etc. – all silently. After about 5 minutes of silent rehearsal, they speak their sentences out loud to a partner.*

Silence in language teaching: Activities for in-depth attention

- ***Dictation activities. (Rinvoluceri) eg McCaig - Smuggler.***
- ***Observation activities. (leaf, stone, etc.)***
- ***Extensive reading. (Bamford and Day, Krashen)***
- ***Creative writing. (Metaphor poems; Hello-goodbye poems etc.)***

Dictation activity

- *I shall read a text at normal speed. Just listen. Do not write.*
- *Then write whatever you can recall. In silence.*
- *I will read the text again as many times as is necessary. Between readings, you add to and correct what you have written until it is 'perfect'... Do not speak yet.*
- *I will then show the text. You may then speak to your neighbours.*

The Smuggler. Norman McCaig

*Watch him when he opens
his bulging words—justice,
fraternity, freedom, internationalism, peace,
peace, peace. Make it your custom
to pay no heed
to his frank look, his visas, his stamps
and signatures. Make it
your duty to spread out their contents
in a clear light.*

*Nobody with such luggage
has nothing to declare.*

Observation activity

- *Distribute an object to each student. eg. a stone, a leaf, a flower ...*
- *They observe their object closely for 5 minutes – size, shape, colour, feel/texture, weight, smell, condition, etc.*
- *Collect the objects and mix them up on a table – they must now find their original object – in silence.*
- *They write a brief description of their object – size, shape etc.*
- *Only then do they share their observations with a partner.*

NB With more advanced students, they write a short poem describing their object.

Creative writing activity: Metaphor poems (from Jane Spiro)

Two columns of nouns – one abstract, one concrete

Write 3 metaphors by combining any word from column 1 with any from column 2. Exchange with a partner. Choose 1 metaphor and write a 3 line poem to explain it.

<i>Hope</i>	<i>a spoon</i>
<i>Life</i>	<i>a knife</i>
<i>Marriage</i>	<i>an egg</i>
<i>Love</i>	<i>a brush</i>
<i>Anger</i>	<i>a window</i>
<i>Disappointment</i>	<i>a mirror</i>
<i>Work</i>	<i>a banana</i>
<i>Happiness</i>	<i>a rope</i>

Creative writing: Hello/Goodbye poems

Examples:

- *Hello rain.*
- *Goodbye sun.*
- *Hello smoking.*
- *Goodbye health.*
- *Hello lawyer.*
- *Goodbye justice.*

Students work alone, and in silence try to come up with at least two new poems. Allow about 10 minutes for this. Students can then share their poems with the class.

Some books about silence and solitude

- **Harris, M. (2017) *Solitude: The pursuit of a Singular Life in a Crowded World*. New York: Random House.**
- **Maitland, S. (2008) *A Book of Silence*. Cambridge: Granta.**
- **Maitland, S. (2014) *How to be Alone*. London: Macmillan.**
- **Turner, G. (2012) *The Power of Silence*. London: Bloomsbury**

Some books critiquing the society of distraction

- Carr, N. (2010) *The Shallows: How the Internet is changing the way we think, read and remember*. London: Atlantic Books.
- Cain, S. (2012) *Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World that can't stop Talking*. London: Viking/Penguin
- Haidt, J. (2024) *The Anxious Generation*. London: Penguin.
- Gleick, J. (1999) *Faster: The Acceleration of Just About Everything*. London: Vintage Books.
- Rosen, C. (2025) *The Extinction of Experience: Reclaiming our Humanity in a Digital World*. London: Bodley Head.
- The Friends of Attention (2026) *Attensity: A Manifesto of the Attention Liberation Movement*. Penguin Random House.

Language Teaching Resource books

- **Dat Bao (2023)** *Silence in English Language Pedagogy: from Research to Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- **Dat Bao, Maley. A, Hadfield.C (eds) (Forthcoming 2026)** *The Art of Silence: Creative and Critical Practices of Quietude*. London: Bloomsbury)
- **Maley, A. (2024)** *Wisdom Stories in Language Teacher Education*. London: Pavilion.
- **Maley. A, Dat B, Hadfield, C (eds) (forthcoming 2026)** *On Silence and Solitude: Creative activities for the English classroom*. Peachey Pubs.
- **Stevick, E. (1980)** *Teaching Languages: A Way and Ways*. London: Longman ELT.

Metaphors for the Silence of Creation

A leaf unfurling in the dark.

Apples ripening in a winter cellar.

Still chrysalis dreaming the butterfly.

Roots stirring under snow.

Fish circling under ice.

Wine fermenting in the vat.

Mushrooms probing towards the light.

Dawn mist clearing from the lake.

Ocean filtering thoughts from the silt of sleep.

Morning silence after the night's snowfall.

If you would like the slides

simply

mail me and ask:

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Thank you

for

Coming

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