The Context

The Pedagogy of Hesitation: Why Pauses, Silence, and Broken Speech Matter in ELT

Ms. Codagandla Sanjana

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Keshav Memorial Institute of Commerce & Sciences, Hyderabad, India;
sanjanaofficialkm@gmail.com

Abstract: This paper examines the overlooked yet important phenomenon of hesitation, silence, and fragmented speech in English Language Teaching (ELT). While traditional pedagogy in the field of ELT considers fluency to imply seamless, quick, and error-free speech, any kind of hesitation and silence is taken as evidence of the learner's deficiency. The need of the hour is a comprehensive paradigm shift in ELT. Through the use of discourse analysis in the classroom, the cognitive principles of linguistics, as well as the sociolinguistic perspective of the discipline, this paper seeks to introduce the concept of "The Pedagogy of Hesitation." This concept recognises the important aspects of language acquisition, including silence and fragmented speech. This paper aims to recognise the important role of hesitation in ELT and to use this phenomenon as a positive means of enhancing learner confidence and students' linguistic competence.

Keywords: silence; ELT; fluency; classroom discourse; second language learning

Introduction

"Fluency is usually considered to be characterised by various measurable attributes such as speed, smoothness, and grammatical accuracy. Students are commonly taught to speak fluently and to avoid speech pauses and fillers such as "uh," "um," or self-corrections. In this approach to teaching fluency, any hesitation, pause, repetition, or incomplete sentence is cast as a weakness and interpreted as a marker of non-proficiency. Teachers commonly interrupt students when they hesitate, completing sentences, supplying vocabulary, and correcting grammatical errors before students have fully articulated their thoughts. Although this is usually helpful and intended to help students, this practice implicitly conveys to students the message that there is something to be ashamed of about unphonetic speech or the process of thinking when communicating."

An approach like this is flawed because it runs counter to the nature of human communication. Even fluent native speakers pause during conversation, reorganise their thoughts, and revise their statements mid-sentence. This contrasts with the assumption that conversations are the smooth delivery of prepared sentences. However, in second-language contexts, this can be even more pronounced. A second-language speaker must search for words in the new language, assess their grammatical form, interpret their native-language thoughts, and perceive the reactions of those around them simultaneously. Pausing in conversation is more than the absence of words; pausing is the manifestation of intellectual activity, emotional work, and the construction of identity through communication.

The issue of hesitation in the ELT classroom is closely linked to the affective domain, including fear of making mistakes, fear of evaluation, and lack of confidence. This is because many students in the classroom do not contribute to the discussion, even when they have something to say. However, they wait for the precise way in which the message should be conveyed, even though their language skills in the classroom have not yet developed. When this occurs, the teacher's intervention during moments of silence disrupts the cognitive process.

The purpose of this paper is to propose that instead of understanding hesitation in terms of the absence of language, we should consider it in terms of the presence of thinking. Moments in an utterance that are silent, interrupted, and corrected are signs that the learner is actively processing, organising, and experimenting with language. The ELT field could shift from a performance-based model of fluency to a cognition-based model of communication. The classroom can be made into a space where students are not forced to perform but rather to think, test, and develop through their flawed yet sincere use of English.

Literature Review

Fluency-Based Models in EL

Traditional ELT ideas, particularly communicative language learning, emphasise the value of fluent, unbroken speech, which is a key indicator of language proficiency (Skehan, 1998; Bygate, 2001). This focus on fluency draws particular

attention to automaticity and rapid production (Skehan, 1998; Bygate, 2001). Although it enhanced fluency in conversing, it resulted in the de-emphasis of students with

Classroom Discourse and Teacher Control

In the classroom discourse analysis proposed by Sinclair and Coulthard (1975), the teacher's dominance is evident, with students afforded minimal time to think, and silence often interpreted as a lack of knowledge. Walsh (2011) reports that teachers fill pauses to deprive learners of cognitive space.

Silence in Language Learning

Research by Nakane (2007) and King (2013) illustrates that silence has meaning in both cultural and cognitive contexts. In most situations, silence indicates that one is thinking before speaking.

Cognitive Processing and Speech Production

Levelt's (1989) speech production model posits that speech is produced through the conceptualisation, formulation, and articulation of speech acts. The interaction between these steps brings a pause during speech production. The pause during speech production will be slower in L2 speakers than in native speakers due to effortful processing. Despite this study, the ELT classroom continues to regard hesitation as a sign of failure in learning.

Theoretical Framework

This research is grounded in three theoretical approaches: cognitive linguistics, sociolinguistics with a focus on interaction, and Krashen's Affective Filter Theory. These theories, when combined, provide an understanding of hesitation pauses, silence, and interrupted speech as not communicative breakdowns but as informative processes in language acquisition.

Cognitive linguistics regards language use as a complex process of the human mind involving conceptualisation, word selection, grammar, and sound articulation. When a person pauses during learning, they are actually carrying out these processes. Pauses indicate points where lexical retrieval, grammar exploration, or idea restructuring is being done. Silence, therefore, is a thinking space in which thoughts are developed, including language development. This is a slower process as the linguistic structures are being developed. Cognitive linguistics views silence as deep processing rather than a lack of competence.

An interactional approach to sociolinguistics recognises that conversation is an interactive process in which speakers procedurally modify their utterances in accordance with the other speaker's utterances. It recognises that phenomena such as repetition, self-repair, self-cancellation, and pauses in speech are neither exceptional nor aberrational but constitute essential tools that the speaker uses for interaction and communication. When learners pause or reformulate what they want to say, for instance, in the classroom, they are actually engaging in the interactional process of

communication. According to this approach, pause becomes a means of communication rather than a communication aid.

Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis offers further insight regarding why pauses and emotions are so closely linked. This theory posits that when people experience anxiety, embarrassment, or fear of error during an activity, especially in communication, this creates a high level of Affective Filter, which impedes the input/output process in the target language. Soon after the pause is corrected or punished, people become more self-conscious when speaking; consequently, the Affective Filter rises, further restricting target-language output. These three theories strengthen the paper's central point: that hesitation is not a communication breakdown but a stage in the development of a second language, shaped by cognition, interaction, and emotion.

Methodology

The present study proposes a qualitative conceptual research design, based on classroom observations and discourse analysis. Rather than assessing numerical fluency, this research examines the role of hesitation in real-classroom discourse. All the analysis is done based on three primary data sources:

• Patterns of classroom interaction between teachers and learners

• Excerpts of learner speech that are recorded or transcribed

• Existing empirical and theoretical work in ELT & second language acquisition

These sources facilitate a close analysis of how learners pause, reformulate, or remain silent, as well as how teachers respond to learners' pauses, reformulations, or silences.

Discourse analysis is employed to examine learners' speech, particularly when signs of hesitation, self-correction, and silence are evident. These phenomena are identified to determine their cognitive and interactional purposes. Meanwhile, teacher interventions, such as interruptions, corrections, and sentence completion, are examined to assess how the learning process affects cognitive processing. This method is significant because it integrates theoretical knowledge with observations of classroom learning to provide a comprehensive view of pausing as both a linguistic and a learning phenomenon. This method could enable a study to move beyond mere impressions of fluency toward an understanding of how learners use language.

Hesitation as Cognitive Work:

Hesitation is a pause before speaking, indicating that the brain is not resting but is actively engaged in processing language. At the point of pausing, students are trying to identify the precise vocabulary to use, evaluate language structures, connect their thoughts to language, and determine their audience's reaction to their speech. In second-language learning, several processes are involved in speech production, including conceptualisation of meaning, word identification, syntactic construction, and articulation. The pause typically occurs at the point in these processes. Hesitation is anything but a sign of failure; rather, it is a sign of cognitive effort. For instance, a

learner who hesitates before answering a question is likely engaging in deeper processing than a learner who answers quickly. This is because pauses provide cognitive space for learners to construct language.

Broken Speech and Meaning Construction

When second-language acquirers speak, they often use segmented speech, repeating words or making self-corrections while switching between ideas and correcting their ideas as they express them. This segmented speech is considered flawed or inadequately articulated in normative ELT practice. However, segmented speech can be an excellent way to measure the learner's moment-by-moment construction of meaning as they start, rethink, and refine their ideas as they express them through speech or gesture. Self-correction is even more important because it demonstrates the student's awareness of metalanguage. When a student says "He goes to school," it does not mean that he/she is failing; on the contrary, it is evidence of success in noticing and correcting errors. Speech with errors should therefore be seen as evidence of involvement in language use and development rather than as something to be corrected.

Silence as Emotional Negotiation

In the classroom, silence is not only cognitively based but also emotional. Students are hesitant as they weigh their fear, confidence, image, and possible evaluation. Using a second language puts students at risk of vulnerability as errors are observable, pronunciation is foreign, and utterances are likely to deserve criticism. When students pause, it is because they are emotionally grappling with the task of communication. Allowing silence fosters a safe psychological environment. When teachers wait for students to respond and do not rush them, they feel valued and respected. If teachers interpret silence as a lack of ability, it could further pull students back and make them fearful of participating in class.

Teacher Interruption and Cognitive Disruption

One of the worst practices in the classroom is immediately interrupting learners who hesitate. When teachers complete learners' sentences, find the words they are looking for, or point out grammatical errors during speaking, they disrupt learners' cognitive processes. This leads to a kind of dependence. Learners rely on the teacher to come to their rescue. They stop depending on their own linguistic capabilities. Teachers should allow learners to struggle productively through pause states. This helps the learners build confidence in their learning. They develop self-repair capabilities and language control.

Taken together, these factors make it clear that, rather than an obstacle to learning, ambiguity and procrastination become learning opportunities. Ambiguity, hesitancy, pauses, incompletely articulated words, and silence can be points at which cognition, emotion, and language converge. Understanding and appreciating these points can turn a class into an opportunity for genuine, effective, and meaningful communication, instead of mere rote learning or mechanical imitation.

Hesitation Pedagogy

Based on the above analysis, this study proposes a novel teaching approach named "The Pedagogy of Hesitation." This pedagogy is not intended to help learners avoid pauses, silences, and broken speech in their output; instead, it views these speech features as invaluable tools for L2 acquisition. This pedagogy encourages learners to hesitate and engage in cognitive processing rather than expecting instant, fluent output.

This teaching philosophy has four principles:

(i) Respect Silence - Think Time for Learners

The importance of silence should be acknowledged from a language learning perspective and should not be considered a failure on the learner's part. Following a question, a wait time should be allowed before a learner responds. The wait time allows learners to form concepts of what they wish to say, search for vocabulary, and organise their answers in English. Studies on class interactions have indicated that increased wait time correlates with more complex learner responses and should therefore be associated with greater silence in class. It therefore justifies silence as a description of a positive class environment and reinforces learner accomplishments.

(ii) Delay Correction – Allow Self-Repair

Intervening to correct utterances as they are produced interrupts cognitive processes, reducing the autonomy of learning. Instead, it is important to allow students to finish what they intend to say, including errors. Self-correction, which involves individuals recognising and correcting errors independently, is more effective than teacher correction. Feedback, provided after communication, is effective in both accuracy and confidence.

(iii) Model Hesitation – Teachers Should Think Aloud

Teachers can be observed using language fluently and error-free, which creates unrealistic expectations for learners. Teachers can make it more acceptable for thinking to take time by acting as think-time users of language, for example, "Let me think for a moment" and "I am not sure how to say this." By showing what they think, teachers make language use more human and alleviate learners' anxiety.

(iv) Use Pauses as Diagnosis – Silence Reveals Learning Gaps

Hesitations are important and provide helpful information about which areas learners struggle with—whether it is word knowledge, grammar knowledge, or understanding. Instead of filling a moment of silence with fillers, teachers could use this opportunity to identify the specific cause of the silence and use that information to teach more effectively. Silence is essentially a valuable teaching aid.

Implications for ELT

A pause-permissive classroom is a radical change in the culture of language learning. When pauses and reduced speech are deemed acceptable, learners can focus less on error and more on risk-taking, a key factor in the experimentation required to establish communication competence. These types of classrooms encourage deep

fluency over shallow fluency. Students learn to structure ideas, revise their own work, and communicate their intended message, even when their language skills have not yet fully developed. The result is greater fluency with confidence. Appreciating hesitation promotes autonomy among learners. Here, learners do not have to wait for answers from teachers; instead, they learn to trust and rely on their mental and linguistic capabilities. As a result, the learning space replaces the performance space in classrooms because thinkers, instead of achievers, matter. The Pedagogy of Hesitation establishes an even more inclusive, humane, and cognitive-values-driven model of ELT by recognising that actual language development is achieved not by speed but by struggling and pausing.

Conclusion

Hesitation is not the enemy of fluency; it is the foundation. The pause, the silence, and the broken speech reveal the invisible cognitive and emotional work of language learning. In moments of hesitation, language learners are not merely failing to communicate; they are actively constructing meanings, exploring linguistic options, and performing their identities in the new language. Learning occurs in these moments of uncertainty. By proposing a Pedagogy of Hesitation, this paper challenges the prevailing culture of ELT that conflates fluency with speed and perfection. Instead, it argues for a move towards a more reflection-based, learner-fronted, and cognition-based model of communication. Pauses, deferred corrections, and self-corrections foster a classroom environment in which learners feel secure enough to think aloud. The adoption of hesitation qualifies ELT as a process-oriented approach, rather than the performance-oriented methodology traditionally associated with ELT. This approach qualifies as process-oriented because it humanises learning by acknowledging the inherent struggles of language learning. This process brings back the dignity of the language learner.

Works cited

Bygate, Martin. Speaking. Oxford UP, 2001.

Krashen, Stephen D. Principles and Practice in Second Language Acquisition. Pergamon Press, 1982.

Levelt, Willem J. M. Speaking: From Intention to Articulation. MIT Press, 1989.

Nakane, Ikuko. Silence in Intercultural Communication: Perceptions and Performance. John Benjamins, 2007.

Skehan, Peter. A Cognitive Approach to Language Learning. Oxford UP, 1998.

Walsh, Steve. Exploring Classroom Discourse: Language in Action. Routledge, 2011.