

SILENCE AND BREAKS IN SPEECH IN THE ONLINE TEACHING OF FOREIGN LANGUAGES IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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Abstract: *The paper analyzes an aspect of online teaching of foreign languages to students pertaining to paralinguage, namely the use of silence and breaks in speech in the academic class activity. The study consists in two main parts, the first introducing the various contexts in which breaks in speech ensue, discussing the nature of these moments of silence and some of their characteristics along with their perception and management by both teacher and students. The second part of the paper looks at a short survey made up of two questions, which reveal relevant aspects regarding the students' perception of these breaks in speech, how it relates to their level of English and how it makes them feel, i.e. the reactions that it triggers and what these rely on. The quantitative method was mainly used for the survey, but there is a qualitative component as well, in the students' provision of details as to the cause of the main reactions triggered in them by the occurrence of long(er) instances of silence, so in the second part of the second question. The conclusions point out that silence and breaks in speech are relevant paralinguistic elements in online didactic communication.*

Keywords: *online teaching, higher education, paralinguage, breaks in speech, survey*

1. Introduction

The times of online teaching, prolonged and furthered as a result of the special context of the pandemic, have brought about changes not only in teacher-student interaction *per se*, but in our awareness as people engaged in processes of communication, in terms of the *how* of communication in general, *helping us realize aspects and facets previously unknown or deemed as unimportant*. Together with awareness regarding these, there came a tendency to perfect this imperfect communication that happens online – and we call it like this because it deprives us of a lot of elements that used to be available contextually unconditionally, such as unmediated access to the non-verbal component – determining us, willy-nilly, to, ultimately, without meaning to lack modesty, get good at it despite its disadvantages.

The things that we noticed at some point in our online interactions have become as many areas that demanded solutions, innovation, novelty, development – all of

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which urged brainstorming or just a push of intuition that ultimately turned out to give plus value to the way in which we ended up communicating. Some of the skills came along as we went in the process, as no course can really teach online empathy, which is essential – “empathy and sympathy are essential elements of an effective online learning environment in this pandemic” [1] – the creation of momentum or presence, or capturing the audience and putting everyone on the same metaphorical or virtual page – and here we do not mean the online application list of attendants.

The visual component needed not be missing from the regular online classes that we have held, at least theoretically, but it actually has been, by choice, most of the times, for the sake of the smooth running of the application (as pointed elsewhere). Hence, *the voice became paramount*, and suddenly it was not enough to envisage it merely as a support tool for the visual. *All aspects related to it increased their relevance and importance, and required more awareness and control.*

One of them was, for instance, diction. Pronouncing the words clearly and up until the very last phoneme became significant. Otherwise, the last syllable may not be heard in the virtual environment. *The electronic medium modifies the way one sounds. Recorded voice sounds even more different from what the person hears in one's head.* Sometimes, the difference is significant enough to be shocking to the individual, and there have been countless studies showing that occasionally one does not even recognize one's own recorded voice. Even if one does, the difference may create shock or even trauma, a feeling of profound dissatisfaction with how one sounds: “not liking the sound of your own voice is so common that there's a term for it: voice confrontation” [2]. This dissimilarity comes mainly from the anatomy of the skull as a resonance case, the pitch is higher when unmediated by the low frequencies created inside the bone structure of the head – i.e. the “‘Mickey Mouse' quality” of the voice [3]. Even when trauma or shock is not exactly what the person witnessing his/her own voice on a recording is what (s)he is going through, some amount of surprise may be there, most of the times: “because our recorded voice does not sound how we expect it to, we don't like it” [4]. Individuals hearing themselves in such instances have the opportunity of correcting the features that they are not happy with or which create discontent, visible in what is known as the “extra-linguistic cues” present in a recorded voice, which “include aspects such as your anxiety level, indecision, sadness, anger, and so on” [5]. *The online events pertaining to higher education, such as taking a test or participating in a students' session of communications created the unique opportunity for all participants to see and hear themselves, to witness how they look and sound like while recorded.* Had the pandemic not produced this kind of context, they may never have had the opportunity to access this type of mirror in their regular existences, or not repeatedly, as it was the case in the academic online environment. Thus, this situation has fostered the perfect occasion for self-

improvement. Seeing and hearing oneself gave the individual the chance to ameliorate the aspects that one was dissatisfied – or not completely satisfied – with.

In reference to one's voice, almost all its qualities and characteristics can be adjusted or worked with. Leaving out the timber, which is innate, the rest – volume, pitch, the placement of the voice while speaking (in the palate, the throat, the chest, which modify gravity), and pace can be consciously influenced. One enjoys, due to the online teaching and learning programs, to attune and tailor one's voice to better suit one's intended message, personality and eventually identity.

Silence and breaks in speech are a voice element that may seem inconsequential at first, or at least less significant. However, with experience coming with more hours of online teaching, its importance gets revealed. In what follows, this is the element that we shall look into, trying to analyze its relevance in context and get into the matter more thoroughly. The analysis below consists, in its first part, in some comments on aspects that I have come up with as a result of personal observation in the process of online teaching. The second taps into the perspective of some of the students, and is based on questionnaires that I have asked them to complete from my role as their class seminar tutor. I used two groups of 2nd year students as my main focus for the inquiry, but the observations in the first part are based on a wider and more general student audience. The students in one group have an intermediate level of English, while the others are advanced. For this second part of the study, the fact that they have different levels becomes relevant, as we shall see.

2. Situations that involve silence and breaks in speech in online teaching

In this first part of the paper, I will make evident some situations that involve silence and breaks in speech and try to differentiate between them and perhaps even classify this absence of sound according to the respective situation. What needs to be mentioned here is that we shall not be looking into the kind of context in which the person is silent because they are not actually in front of the computer while appearing online. Also, we shall be discussing the contexts that involve intentional breaks made by the teacher, as it is the teacher's vantage point that we have in mind at this point – as opposed to the second section, where the students' perspective is mainly outlined.

2.1 The teacher's explanations

One circumstance involves the actual *teaching of new aspects, theoretical revisions, or explanations provided by the teacher*, when the students are meant to mainly listen, try to take in what is being said or presented, as well as write down the explanations, which means that the pace of talking should be slower, especially for the aspects that the teacher considers to be important. Hence, with this awareness in mind, I make short breaks after certain concepts, phrases or sentence bits in order to give them a chance to note what I am saying. Co-presence and

access to the non-verbal would provide the necessary feedback to pace my speech according to the needs of the student audience, but, in its absence, I use these *short breaks which I call estimative breaks*, i.e. pauses that I make based on an estimation of the time needed to them to write down the information. It is worth mentioning that the estimation comes with a certain anxiety caused by the obvious awareness that it cannot be as exact or accurate as it would have been in co-presence and availability of the non-verbal component. To compensate for this absence, I sometimes resort to eliciting auditory confirmation of the fact that the students have understood and had time to put down the respective data. Another observation here would be that such questions may represent disturbances of the normal flow of information and actually disrupt attention and thus somewhat defeat their very purpose of ensuring comprehension from the part of the students, which represents a disadvantage. Plus, they can be annoying. I must admit that I have also always used my memory of the students' level and personalities, in case there was such knowledge available from pre-pandemic face-to-face interaction, in order to establish just how long these short breaks needed to be. However, since such information was not always there, a certain uniformity of the breaks ensued, which did not take into account the students' personality and even, sometimes, level of English, which would obviously have had a say in deciding how long these short breaks needed to be. In principle, advanced level groups would need less time, although how well one takes notes is also about the actual speed of writing, not only about how much English one knows. Also, I could add that, overall, the breaks tended to be, on average, longer than the ones I would have made in a face-to-face context, just to cover for potential estimation errors, and to grant extra time in case it was needed rather than less, i.e. not enough, time. It can be argued that this may generally make the class less productive than if it had taken place in co-presence, face-to-face, but the difference is perhaps not that significant or worrisome.

2.2. Breaks related to solving tasks

Tasks soliciting students to apply or learn specific vocabulary through match, fill in or multiple choice exercises, as well as reading comprehension exercises based on the scanning and skimming of a (previously-read) text sometimes require, to begin with, a time given to the students to solve the exercise at their own pace, so that all of them get a chance to have a go to give their input in class even though their rhythms of work may differ. This initial individual work time was usually around five minutes. We are not considering here the investigation of this interval, as it is not relevant for our research. Once this time is over, then *students take turns to answer*, one by one, so that, ideally, most or all of them participate in giving their contribution for the respective activity. Theoretically, students offer to answer, rather than the teacher naming them, but in some cases this approach is also resorted to, especially if the students are less (pro)active, with those students who are less willing to participate, or to avoid some very active students monopolizing the seminar. One student may be indicated to give one or two answers, and then

another is invited to do the same. *There is, naturally, a short break between students*, and it is this break that is relevant for us here. Normally students know what they have to do or what is expected of them and either raise hands or start talking directly or ask whether they can be next, depending on the case and on the instructions given by the teacher. I sometimes encourage them to give up using the “raise hand” option in order to save time, if the pace is the right one. In other cases, namely if the number of the students is greater – for instance, over twenty – and they overlap in taking the floor – then the available option mentioned above is necessary to order interaction and the taking of turns. The interesting aspect is how long this short break between people actually is.

The *normal duration* for it would be, when we refer to the kind of exercises mentioned above, *between one and three seconds*, most often one or two. This interval tends to be bigger with 1st year groups in the first few seminars until they get accustomed to this type of interaction and recognize it when it is elicited from them (as there are, of course, other kinds of tasks and interactions as well, since seminar activity, when it comes to the teaching and learning of foreign languages, relies on various manners of communication). The interval also tends to be shorter with senior-year groups, who have already worked in this specific way countless times.

When students disrupt this flow of alternate talking and short breaks, the teacher must investigate why this occurs. It can be just a minor disruption with no apparent reason behind it. In this case, a formal encouragement from the teacher to move on to the next item suffices. The class manager/teacher could say something like: ‘Come on, who wants to go next?’, ‘Who’s next?’, ‘Who would like to continue?’ or remind the students the number of the item that follows. This is usually enough to restart the flow of alternative inputs and short silences.

This flow may also get interrupted due to the difficulty of some item that requires a solution. In other words, students may stop because they have not managed to find an answer for it. The teacher can usually sense these situations based on knowledge of the material and of the group level of English etc. In this case, the teacher should try to give extra clues, rather than provide the answer.

2.3 Long(er) breaks in speaking activities – lead-in tasks and debates

One other type of activity in the teaching of foreign languages is speaking, and it can take various forms. For instance, it can be organized as a debate, in which students discuss a certain aspect or point of view providing arguments for and against the respective matter. Also, it can take the form of questions that the students need to answer, either by giving examples or bringing arguments to support their claims. Also, starting from a quote, they may need to explain the statement in their own words, in which case paraphrasing and synonymy are needed.

In the case of speaking activities, I either allow the students to read the requirement – the question, quote etc., or I read it myself, also sometimes explaining further what is expected of them. After the requirement is read aloud, a break ensues, to give them time to think of an answer or comment. In comparison with the breaks discussed above, this one is longer, because it is of a different nature. Unlike the breaks above, for the length of which the estimation is more facile, this break is to allow the students to think of arguments. For the previously discussed short breaks it is easier to guess how much time it is needed, as they are more of a quantifiable nature, so to speak; it is not so difficult to determine how long a person needs to write down a string of words, or to allow a little room for the previous person to finish speaking before they speak themselves so as not to seem that one interrupts. The first type of short breaks, the estimative ones, are reasonably measurable by imagining and taking into account an average speed of writing, whereas the second type involves common sense and politeness in speaking interactions which are more or less intuitive as well as basic common knowledge. With this third type, of longer breaks, however, it is impossible to predict the time needed to – basically – get an idea, or be inspired. There are so many variables involved in this process that it is not one that can be measured, *if* it were possible to measure it. Some of these may be argued to be the following: the students' overall IQ, the group members' extrovert-introvert type of personality, willingness to cooperate, active-passive general attitude, how well-rested the students are and thus prone to get ideas, general knowledge or/and knowledge about a certain topic, level of attention and English etc.

If the break becomes too long, the teacher may assume that the students have not understood exactly what the task is about or that they simply do not have any ideas, rather than presume unwillingness to get involved in feedback. Hence, the teacher should or could try to paraphrase and explain the task with other words, as well as attempt to provide hints to press certain buttons in the students' minds in order to stimulate the thinking process. Also, if this does not work, the teacher may think of asking other, simpler questions related to a certain aspect which, once elucidated, leads to a deduction that is connected with the main topic of the task. In other words, the teacher, acting as a fosterer, may try to lead the students towards partial conclusions before the main one is reached. Through inference, or a set of corollaries and implications, the main idea can be arrived at.

We shall now draw some conclusions based on what we have said so far. We can say that breaks are necessary in online interaction. Besides the rationale related to politeness and the taking of turns and thus efficiency in conversation mentioned above, short breaks are needed for people to get the impression that their message is received, understood and acknowledged. In this respect, *short breaks appear to be the equivalents of regulators in non-verbal communication*. Regulators are those gestures and expressions that ensure the taking of turns and show the fact that the message is being received by the person one has a conversation with [6], [7]. They

control the flow of the conversation, having a reassurance quality, letting the interlocutor know that the communication process is collaborative and runs two-way. However, the break should be short enough, and then followed by *a reply that takes into account the initial message, containing feedback, relating to the other's words*. This response that contains a bit of the initial message or something that connects with it should be done especially when the video component is missing in online interaction, to compensate precisely for this absence of the visual which, in face-to-face interaction allows one to let the other know, through regulators, that the message is being taken in. Once the visual ingredient is gone, the verbal has to take over this relating function. That is why the verbal and the paralinguistic need to be carefully composed by the actor involved in the process of communication. This is even more important when a teacher is involved, as a teacher fulfils the roles of expert and/or facilitator, and is thus not only supposed to give feedback, but her/his feedback is deemed as essential. All the more, the teacher needs to pay attention to the way in which his verbal and paralinguistic messages are composed and make sure that this feedback component is present enough in them. Once the teacher is able to capture it in her/his speech, trust is established with the student that is involved in the speaking task, as a type of glue of the communication act, which will function as an encouragement for further involvement in the discussion. Hence, the presence of this feedback in the verbal and paralinguistic elements in satisfactory quantity, as it were, is a pre-condition and fuel for further interaction.

We need to also explain how this proof that the teacher listens and understands can be present in the teacher's paralinguistic. The tone of voice needs to be more reassuring than it is in co-present interactions, when the non-verbal component is available. The student needs to sense from the teacher's voice that what (s)he says is accepted and understood. Also, the teacher's tone needs to be calm at all times, as well as kind, and the pace should not be rushed, so as to transmit the notion of acceptance and allowance of expression of self. This may sound strange, but I have personally tested this aspect in the online interaction when the visual component was absent and I can say that a rushed tone determines most often a retreat from conversation from the part of the student(s). They already feel, when they start giving their input, that they need to overcome the linguistic barrier – even the ones with a good command of English – as well as feel somehow exposed when they provide for the group and teacher personal views on something. If they feel judged in any way, even in the slightest manner, most of them will shut in – out of shyness, rebellion or boredom in the context in which they feel that they should no longer make the effort of talking, especially in a foreign language, once they are not understood. A normal or even combative tone in face-to-face conversations seems less aggressive than in an online one, because the presence of the visual somehow diminishes the so-called threat coming from the interlocutor. In the online environment, this absence of the visual image of your partner in the discussion comes with a sort of threat or danger that the person/student perceives as occurring in context, which exacerbates perception of the faintest rejection reaction in tone or

in the verbal feedback. Analyzing silence in various contexts as meaningful, Poyatos gives an interesting explanation that seems to be rooted in archetypal, psychoanalytical causes: “just as we perceive light and sound as activities, as something alive, darkness and silence evoke for us the emptiness of what is dead or, at most, asleep and inactive, as if life had been arrested” and “negative feelings seem to dominate over the positive ones in such situations” [8]. In Poyatos’ view, silence finds a much deeper and instinctive association with our greatest fears, namely extinction and loneliness. That is why, in online verbal interaction deprived of the visual, what seems an exaggeratedly benevolent tone may be necessary and ensures the success of the respective communication.

Also, *interruptions are not a good idea in online communication*. They create the opposite effect of what I have mentioned in the paragraph above as positive outcomes of short breaks. Interruptions are perceived as more aggressive than in face-to-face interactions. Also, we can add that the nature of the online environment, more precisely the sound quality and/or slight delay in the sound transmission causes more annoyance and exacerbates the impression that the other is not listening or does not understand what one is saying, thus functioning as a barrier in communication.

Nevertheless, a longer or too long break can cause anxiety. It may make the sender of the message think that something has happened to the connection, or that the other person is not listening anymore, or trigger the feelings that Poyatos mentions. The teacher needs to prevent silence from becoming “*oppressive*” [9] or cause “solitude and isolation” [10]. Also, (s)he has to correctly manage the “*filled*” or “interactive pauses” [11]. The conclusion that ensues is that breaks are both crucial, on the one hand, and need to be calculated or measured, along with tone and pace in online conversations, as we have already mentioned, on the other. Some of these observations that I have been making here derive from both personal experience, what I have noticed during my classes online, and an inquiry that I conducted to verify and support my assumptions, which constitutes the focus of the second part of this research paper and which we shall look into below.

3. Inquiry into the effects of silence and breaks in speech

I used for the quiz two groups of 2nd-year students, i.e. more senior students, avoiding 1st-year ones, as I did not want aspects such as being unaccustomed to the manner of work in the foreign language seminar or in the online environment in general, or the novelty of the academic environment overall to be factored in in this research. Also, the first group, which we shall call Group 1, was made up of intermediate students, out of whom 10 were present online in the seminar at the time of the inquiry, whereas the second, Group 2, consisted of advanced-level students, and 12 of them were attending when I addressed the questions. I had made this choice of different levels to see whether there was a difference in student

perception of silence and breaks in speech depending on the students’ level of English.

3.1 Question 1

The first question asked to the two groups was:

Q1) “Do you perceive as undesirable/something to be avoided: a) silence and short breaks in speech; b) silence and long(er) breaks in speech; c) neither; d) silence and both short breaks and long(er) breaks in speech?”

I introduced the third option, c), in order to allow for a negative answer, starting from the assumption that, even though I had definitely noticed this lack of comfort in the situation of breaks and silence in various contexts, I should not have automatically eliminated the possibility of denial for them as far as the discomfort of silence and breaks in speech was concerned. The results are synthesized in Table 1 and Charts 1, 2 and 3 below.

Table 1. Results concerning students’ perception of silence and breaks as undesirable in online communication (Q1) per groups

	a) short breaks	b) long(er) breaks	c) neither	d) both
Group 1 (intermediate)	0	3	0	7
Group 2 (advanced)	0	10	2	0

Chart 1. Group 1 – Students’ perception of silence and breaks as undesirable

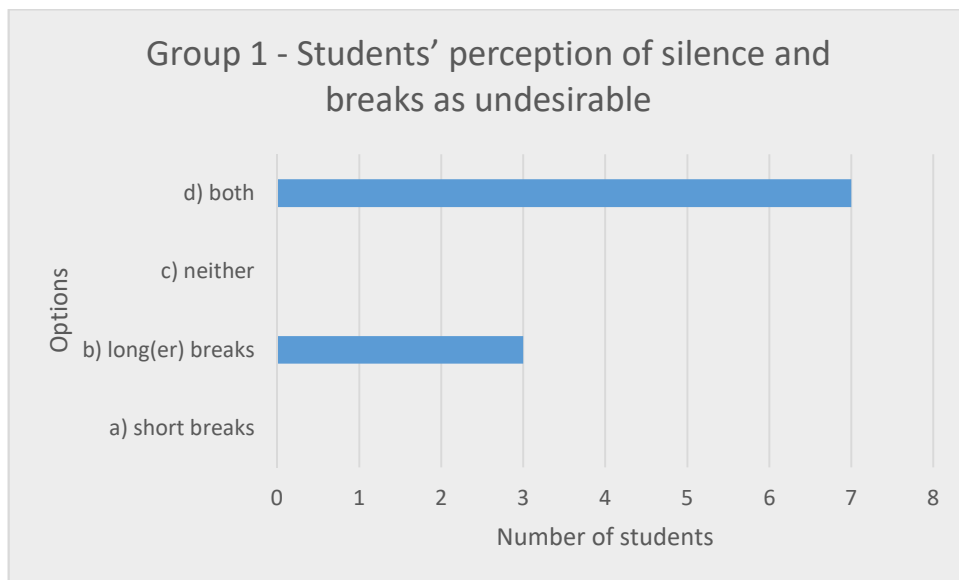


Chart 2. Group 2 – Students’ perception of silence and breaks as undesirable

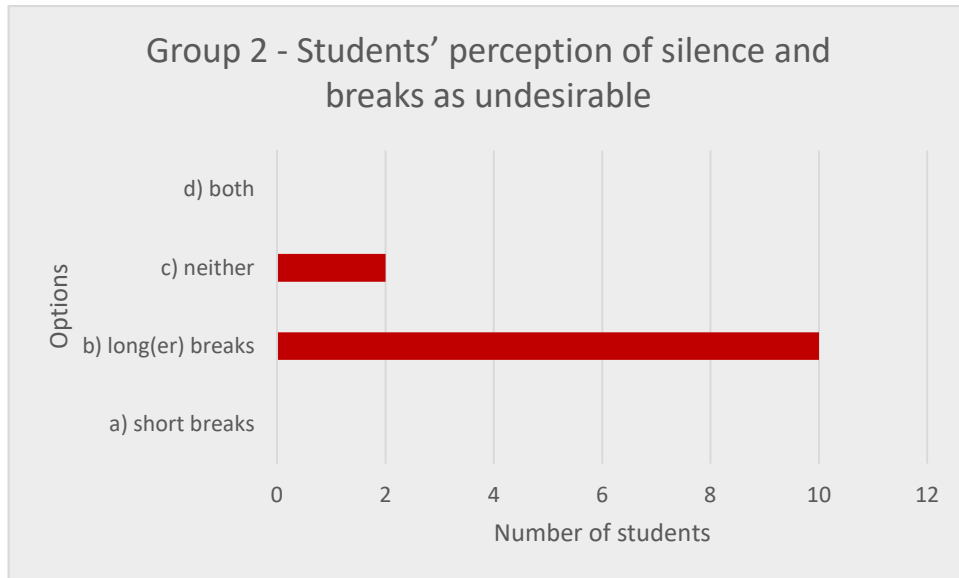
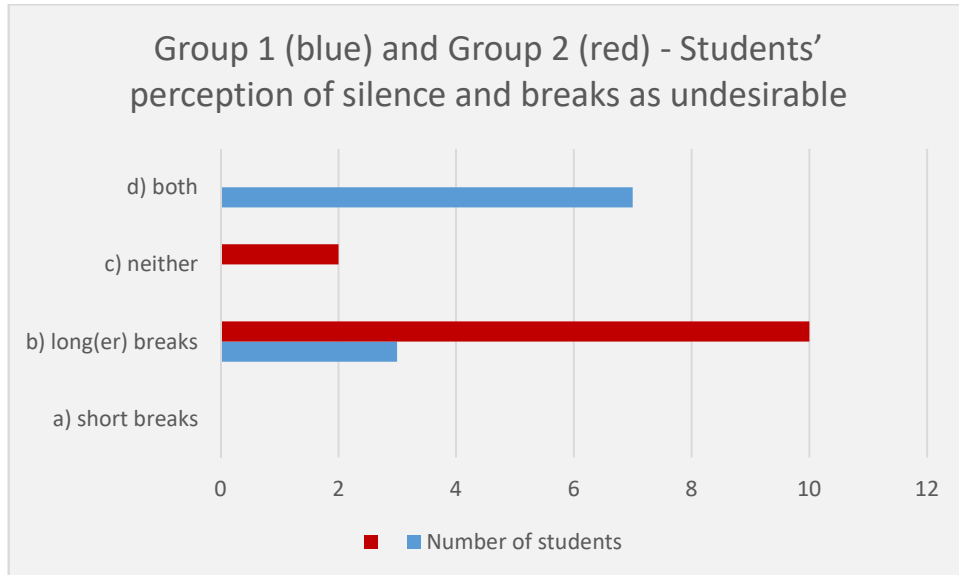


Chart 3. Group 1 (blue) and Group 2 (red) – Students’ perception of silence and breaks as undesirable



In Group 1, no student gave the answer “c) neither”, which means that all students perceive breaks as undesirable, most of them not differentiating between longer and short breaks, in the sense that even short breaks are to be avoided. That is why

7 students out of 10, meaning 70%, said that both types of breaks in speech are unwanted in online communication. Even the boldest ones in terms of uncomfortableness when it comes to breaks in speech, i.e. 3 of the students, are still disturbed by longer silence.

In Group 2, of advanced students, nobody seems to mind short breaks in speech, but 10 out of 12 students dislike longer breaks. Also, there is representativeness when it comes to option c), 2 students daring to claim that they are not bothered by any kind of silence, tolerating both short and longer pauses in speech.

If we compare and interpret the results, we can say that the *intermediate students, the ones in the first group, are more intolerant to breaks in speech than the advanced ones* in the second group. Also, we could say that Group 1 tends towards the extreme or pole of zero-tolerance for silence during online didactic activities, while Group 2 has a penchant for the other pole, of maximum tolerance for silence, or comfortableness with it, although we can witness that the tendency towards a radical attitude is more marked in the case of Group 1, i.e. students would overall rather have low tolerance for silence than not mind it. We can perhaps pair this with more self-assuredness manifested in terms of linguistic ability by students in Group 2, which would trigger coping with the stress of not receiving immediate feedback from the teacher better. Advanced students seem to do well on their own for a while, manifesting heightened psychological comfort and less distress. For the others, nevertheless, poorer command of English couples with the need to belong, to feel that they are in company, attended or catered for. Advanced students are more self-reliant and panic less while left to themselves and/or in uncertain situations, whereas the others need more guidance, and need it in an ongoing manner. If we were to analyze students' reactions through a cultural lens, at the micro level of this situation, we could say that advanced ones are more uncertainty tolerant than the others, whose *level of uncertainty avoidance* is high [12], if we realize that absence (through silence) means uncertainty.

The only answer that was not picked by students in either group is “a) silence and short breaks in speech”. This means that all students see or unconsciously sense the need for and usefulness of breaks. This further points out the paralinguistic value of breaks in speech, and their meaningfulness.

3.2 Question 2

Question 2 of the inquiry bore on the causes of the discomfort provoked by long(er) silence and breaks in speech, enumerating a few potential sources for it:

Q2) “How do silence and longer breaks in speech make you feel?

a) uncomfortable; b) irritated; c) nothing

Describe in more detail after choosing the answer.”

What I wanted to illustrate initially, in the first part of the question, by asking students to tick one option, were two broad categories, which reflect whether aggression and apprehension were directed, in the respondents' case, inwardly, as mirrored by the first answer, or outwardly, as in the second. The third answer needed to be used to cover for the possibility of students being indifferent to breaks in speech.

The answers could then be outlined more or further, i.e. the descriptions becoming more accurate, reflecting what exactly the respondents feel in detail. Hence, the students were required to explain their choice as well. Irritation, for instance, may be fueled by various things, and it is relevant which these are. Here, the qualitative aspect of the survey comes into the picture, as the previous answers relied on quantitative aspects.

Table 2. Results detailing students' reaction to the unpleasantness of silence and long(er) breaks (as: a) uncomfortable; b) irritated; c) nothing) (Q2), per groups

	a) uncomfortable	b) irritated	c) nothing
Group 1 (intermediate)	8	2	0
Group 2 (advanced)	1	9	2

Chart 4. Results detailing students' reaction to the unpleasantness of silence and long(er) breaks (as: a) uncomfortable; b) irritated; c) nothing) (Q2) – Group 1

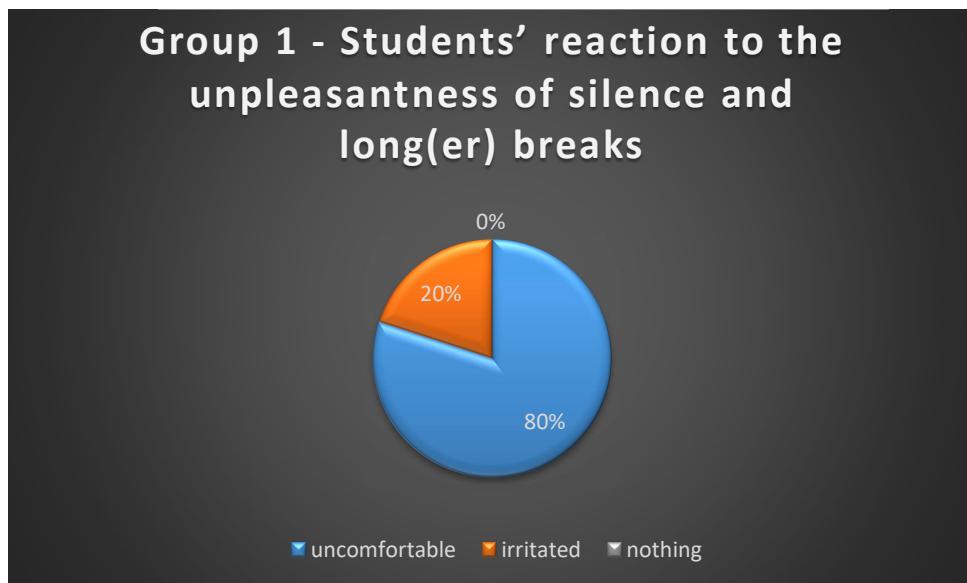
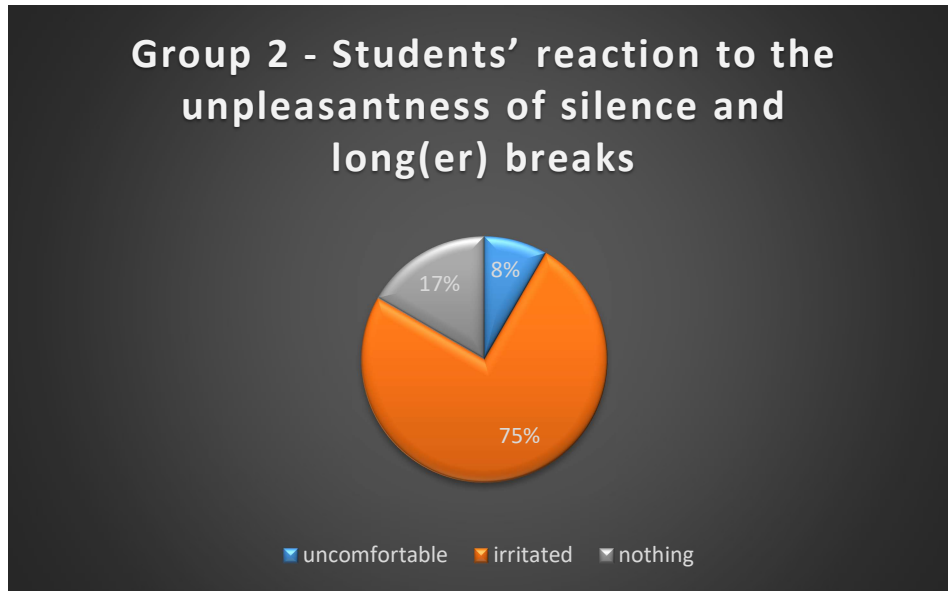


Chart 5. Results detailing students' reaction to the unpleasantness of silence and long(er) breaks (as: a) uncomfortable; b) irritated; c) nothing) (Q2) – Group 2



The immediately noticeable aspect is the way the two groups' majority of students reflect the two main reactions introduced as answer options in opposition. The *intermediate students feel uncomfortable* in a proportion of 80%, and none of them feels indifferent towards long(er) breaks, *whereas most of the advanced ones, 75%, feel irritated* by long(er) intervals of silence, a small percentage showing indifference to it. The greatest percentages in both cases – more than three quarters of the participants – are dedicated to the two contrasting features provided as options. Let us explain further *a hidden layer of contrast in the nature of the answers, which makes them not merely different, but opposite from that point of view*. We could say that for Group 1 the reaction caused by silence is self-scrutiny or inwardly directed aggression, whereas for Group 2 there is an outwardly directed aggression. While students in the first group feel put on the spot, inadequate, apprehensive, the others are on a bolder mode, of looking for an answer for the why of the situation, of placing some kind of blame on something or someone other than themselves. It is, in a simplified interpretation, *a difference between flight mode, for Group 1, and fight mode for Group 2*. We can assert this based on the qualitative, detailed answers or additional explanations provided by the students.

Uncomfortableness was described by members of Group 1 as caused by: feeling uneasy about the answers they could give and about the actual possibility of being nominated directly by the teacher because of a fear of being ridiculous or ridiculed

by the colleagues and/or due to incapacity to express themselves in English very well; desire not to be mocked at; feeling that they may misunderstand the requirement caused by not having enough English. Irritation came from feeling inadequate for not knowing English well. We notice that irritation is also directed inwards under the form of a certain aggressiveness to the self.

In Group 2, irritation came from: blaming colleagues for not offering to answer (or even the teacher for not naming someone, instead of waiting for the students to have the initiative) for time being wasted; wondering whether the application is not malfunctioning or the connection dropping; getting bored because nothing is happening, or because of the pace at which things are occurring; not being allowed to answer because they have already given their input and the teacher wants to make room for others to speak as well. Uncomfortableness came from having to share personal opinions and sometimes feeling awkward in doing so. Feeling “nothing” is actually assuming that glitches or pauses are unavoidable in, and part of online interaction, and taking this for granted without attaching any emotion to it. Students in this group, we notice, tend to direct a certain amount of aggressiveness, or responsibility – to put things in a milder form – to something outside themselves.

Overall, we realize that the intermediate students in Group 1 scrutinize themselves out of a fear of inadequacy that goes hand in hand with their lower level of English. A better level of the foreign language, on the other hand, determines students in Group 2 to scrutinize others or something exterior to themselves and look for accountability elsewhere than in their own person. They feel self-assured and secure, unlike the students in Group 1. Thus, for them silence and breaks may also be unpleasant, but cause a different type of unpleasantness, which does not go hand in hand with questioning oneself or fear, as it happens with intermediate students. Students in Group 2 could be said to “own” their breaks better because of the superior confidence that they possess in terms of language skills.

4. Conclusions

The paper starts from the opportunity that didactic activities in the online environment provide to the actors engaged in them to observe additional facets of communication and see some elements that would otherwise go unnoticed in normal face-to-face interaction. Our focus has been here the voice and voice-related aspects. The background discussed in the Introduction sees online interaction as both an impaired one and a rare chance to detect and address various minute issues intervening in the process of communication. It thus reveals and starts from the assumption of this kind of interaction being a blessing in disguise and supports it with the example of voice confrontation, which serves well the smooth passage towards the main focus of the paper, namely the voice-specific aspects of silence and breaks in speech.

There are two main parts in this study. The first is dedicated to observations made in the online interaction by the teacher, and a classification and characterization of silence and breaks in speech. The second is a short survey portraying the students' perception on the issue under analysis. This latter part also relates some of the findings with the students' level of foreign language knowledge. The two questions of the inquiry prove that long(er) breaks seem more threatening, and rely mainly on a quantitative analysis, but also include a qualitative, descriptive component that further reveals the exact feelings fueling a certain reaction. As a general conclusion, we may say that silence is more and differently weighty in online interactions that lack a visual image of the interlocutor, involving more anxiety, and that it can be capitalized upon as a paralinguistic tool.

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