# LANGUAGE, SILENCE AND EMOTIONAL WELL-BEING IN CONTEMPORARY CLASSROOMS

## AN APPEAL FOR A MEANINGFUL PEDAGOGIC SHIFT IN FAVOUR OF EQ FACTOR IN CURRICULUM

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**Abstract**

For centuries, literature through poetry and prose has served as a mirror to reflect the emotional experiences of learners, which is often shaped by the education system. William Blake's "The School Boy" (1789) happens to be one of the earliest poems that indicts traditional schooling. The speaker, who is a young school boy, wails about the loss of happiness and interest in learning. This resonates with our contemporary classrooms built with a toxic learning environment that inhibits individuality, coherent expression of thoughts, and authentic emotions.

This paper highlights how such a learning environment impacts learners' emotions and thereby their learning. Tracing literary sources from William Blake to Ocean Vuong and Warsan Shire, the paper explores how the modern educational system has reduced learners' use of language to mere obedience and performance. Language serves as a space where humans express and repress their emotions, and the emotional well-being of learners is closely related to their linguistic environment. Yet, the modern education system continues to value correctness over connectedness. The conventional education system fails to consider the psychological aspect of the overwhelmed student and misjudges them to be disengaged. When thoughts are silenced due to pressure, the scope for articulation is limited. In such a lifeless situation no real learning shall ever happen and no development is possible. The research calls for a pedagogical shift: from performance to presence. When a trainer listens to the learner, they do more than teach; they participate in a growing adult's emotional well-being.

**Keywords**: Emotional well-being, language-aware pedagogy, student silence, educational psychology, poetry and education, Barrett, Vygotsky, Bonnie Badenoch.

## INTRODUCTION

In modern classrooms, the learners' performance often overshadows their personal development and emotional growth. While the curriculum focuses on the subject competence of the students, it undermines their mental health, causing an imbalance between academic aspiration and academic achievements. This causes a substrate upon which cognition, attention, and language processing occur. As Bonnie Badenoch (2008) rightly notes, "When the emotional climate of a space is dysregulated, learning becomes unsafe." Modern practices, especially in English Language Teaching (ELT), stress upon fluency and accuracy and disregard the silence of the learner. Silence, especially when it comes to a

foreign language, is a psychological reaction signaling distress, linguistic hesitation, or a coping mechanism in the face of overwhelming stimuli, and yet it is considered as passivity or disengagement.

A 2023 UNESCO report on learners' emotional well-being across South Asia reflects how 62% of students reported feeling emotionally unsupported in classroom settings, and many described language-based assessments as tiring, as it causes unmanageable anxiety.

Lisa Feldman Barrett's Theory of Constructed Emotion highlights the conventional view of emotions as biologically solid responses. Barrett (2017) asserts, "Emotions are predictions made by your brain using your past experiences." Under this context, the learners' silence in an interactive classroom reflects their emotional state that is deficient in articulation rather than their disinterest. It is not possible to detach emotions from linguistic expressions available to the students' language; it becomes both the medium of instruction and the mirror of the learner's effect. "Every function in the child's cultural development appears twice: first, at the social level, and later, at the individual level." This quote highlights the role of a teacher not just as an academic trainer but also as an emotional co-regulator. In emotionally intense situations, students not only fail to internalize the curriculum but also the tone, language, gesture, and affective presence of their teachers.

The concept of the classroom itself is a toss, as it is a space designed with power, language, and emotion intersecting with people from different backgrounds with different caliber. When put in such a heterogeneous situation, one can either become empowered or silenced. Writers like Ocean Vuong and Warsan Shire poetically reveal the linguistic snippet of trauma, echoing how students often carry emotional histories that influence their coherent expression. This paper urges that the silence that a teacher hears is not void of the learner nor indifference, but their tangled emotions and language. Especially in an ELT setting in a multilingual society like India, where the educator has to deal with people from underprivileged or emotionally vulnerable backgrounds, an emotion-aware pedagogy becomes a basic need for the mental health of the students.

This paper argues that contemporary educational design, which is completely based on correctness but not fairness, must be reconsidered. Emotional Quotient of the learners will have to be given its due in the process of teaching and learning. With the growing awareness of mental health and psychology in society, the institution that teaches it should also be fully aware and adhere to it through its practice, beliefs and functioning.

**Objectives of Educationists and Academicians**

There are several factors contributing to the yawning gap we find between the Educationists and Academicians. While Educationists worry over factors like Individual differences, Teaching Methodologies, Psychological effects of Punishments and Rewards, Designing an inclusive curriculum so on and so forth, the Academicians stay glued to Syllabus completion, Examinations, Evaluation, Disciplinary issues, Placement record etc. These two should go hand in hand if anything good were to happen.

**Textual Analysis of Educational and Literary Material:**

The study holds primary and secondary sources ranging from classroom dialogues, teacher training modules, and UNESCO and NCERT reports to selected literary texts such as the poems of Ocean Vuong and Warsan Shire. These texts are not treated only as artistic expressions but also as cultural documents reflecting the emotional and linguistic reality of students, particularly those affected by trauma or systemic neglect. Their inclusion allows

for a blended approach where pedagogy is seen through both a poetic and psychological lens.

**Theoretical Integration:**

Lisa Feldman Barrett's Theory of Constructed Emotion is used to study how learners verbally and linguistically express mental states.

Vygotsky's sociocultural theory frames classroom language as co-constructed and developmental. Bonnie Badenoch's Interpersonal Neurobiology (IPNB) and Dan Siegel's work on the "Window of Tolerance" interpret emotional regulation as a prerequisite to language processing.

Reflective Pedagogical Inquiry:

Drawing from personal and peer experiences in Indian higher education classrooms, this paper studies elements of auto ethnographic reflection and teacher-researcher observation.

This methodology hence validates lived emotional data over statistical abstraction. Treating language as both cognitive and affective domains supports the paper's central argument: that emotionally responsive pedagogy, which is informed by neurolinguistics and trauma theory, is not a want but a necessity in inclusive classrooms.

**Language as Emotional Topography in the Modern Classroom:**

In a contemporary classroom, especially in countries filled with multilingual learners, linguistic functions are not just a medium of teaching but a landscape where the students' feelings are negotiated, concealed or exaggerated. In an ELT setup, where learners are not confident and coherent with the second language, modern classrooms consider them inferior to those who are comfortable. The fact may be in reverse. Thus, the ones who cannot express themselves easily in the second language choose silence as a coping mechanism. Emotional discomfort often manifests through silence, disfluency, or code-switching. These linguistic shifts are often dismissed as hesitation or disengagement but are actually markers of their helpless emotional turbulence.

Rendering from Lisa Feldman Barrett's Theory of Constructed Emotion, this research paper argues that students not only express their emotions but also build them linguistically. When the medium of instruction is unclear, the learners' emotional world remains suppressed and unarticulated. This contributes to what Dan Siegel terms students falling outside their "window of tolerance", thus impairing cognitive engagement. Considering this, a monolingual, test-oriented curriculum becomes emotionally exclusionary. The insistence on grammatical correctness or performative speech ignores affective fragility. Ocean Vuong's poetic line, "I remember the sound of my mother's voice more than the words", becomes pedagogically relevant, reminding us that affective and cognitive domains are inseparable in linguistics.

**Poetry, Linguistic Numbness and Students' Mental Health**

A classroom is an emotionally dense environment where language is not only a medium of instruction but also a mirror that reflects the learner's mental state. In William Blake's poem titled The School Boy, the speaker, who is a schoolboy, says, "How can the bird that is born for joy / Sit in a cage and sing?" The metaphor where a school is compared to a cage or a prison clearly captures the emotional turmoil of students in a modern classroom where their linguistic competence is under conditions that suppress the emotional autonomy of young minds. The cage doesn't only signify educational space like a classroom, but also the

unrealistic rules it imposes on the students. Especially in the ELT setup, students are instructed in an alien language and expected to express themselves fluently too in it.

Consider A, a 15-year-old Tamil-speaking student in a metropolitan English-speaking school. Though she is fluent and coherent in her native language, A seldom interacts or answers in class, making her look 'disengaged' to the teacher. Similarly, a postgraduate student, B, excels in written assignments filled with grandiose metaphors, vocabulary and arguments but hardly speaks up in seminars. This makes him look underprepared and weak in the subject.

In the case of A and B, although the situation is different, their reactions are very similar and involve silence. Student A shows signs of affective dissonance, where her emotional world does not align with the linguistic world of the classroom. According to Barrett, A's silence is a form of emotional regulation, shaped by her linguistic insecurity. With student B, Vygotsky would identify this as a lack of social-linguistic scaffolding in emotionally charged environments. His affective fluency is present, but not in the sanctioned oral register of English academia.

Warsan Shire's work, particularly "what they did yesterday afternoon", highlights the tremors of war and silence, where students from conflict zones bring not just physical wounds into classrooms but ghosts of unexplainable grief.
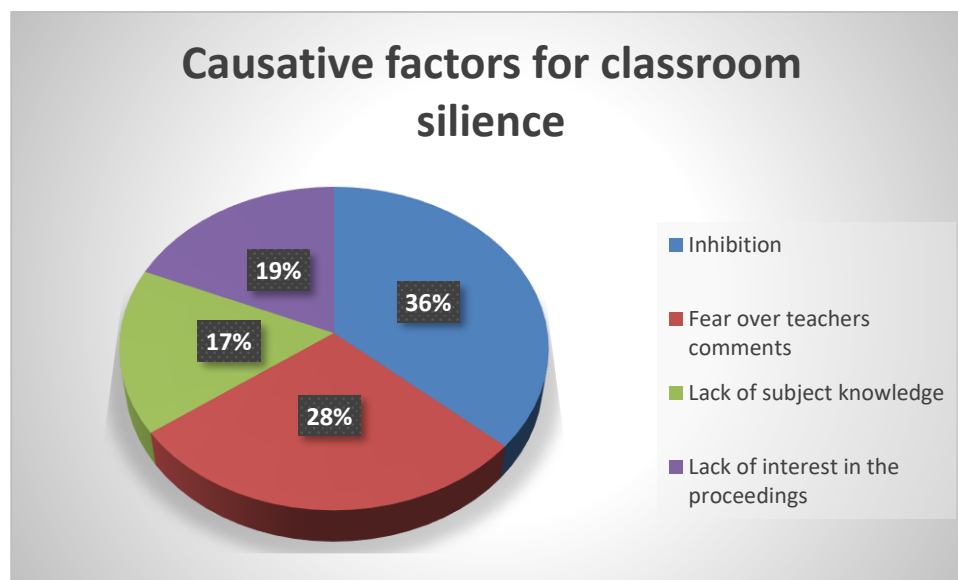
In the poetry of Ocean Vuong, trauma recurs not as a declarative confession but through syntactic fragmentation: "The most beautiful part of your body / is where it's headed. And remember, / loneliness is still time spent / with the world." Vuong's linguistic pattern consists of emotional rupture, reminding us that in both literature and classrooms, disfluency is depth. Similarly, Warsan Shire's work, particularly "what they did yesterday afternoon", highlights the tremors of war and silence, where students from conflict zones bring not just physical wounds into classrooms but ghosts of inexplicable grief.

Through these literary samples and classroom experiences, the research speaks of what is dismissed as "quietness" or "lack of coherence" as often the symptom of serious mental labour. The emotional topography of the learner is filled with silence and peaks with hesitation that requires not correction but co-regulation. Here, the teacher is not a language technician but a witness and co-traveler in the student's emotional journey.

As Technology develops, distraction grows in dimension with an intensity hitherto unseen and perhaps even unheard. What our young learners need in the context of time is that is pedagogic assurance that their safety is not under threat in the class rooms and the teachers are not qualified supervisors but caring guardians

**RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS**

A preliminary survey was conducted with 200 pre-university students from Jain PU College, Bangalore to understand how mental health, emotional well-being and silence influence classroom engagement. The findings are presented as a pie chart below.

**Causative factors for classroom silience**

- Inhibition — 36%
- Fear over teachers comments — 28%
- Lack of subject knowledge — 17%
- Lack of interest in the proceedings — 19%

**Implications and Analysis**

The data shows a haunting silence among students, not just out of disinterest, but out of emotional suppression with relation to Firenze's and Dan Siegel's theories that trauma and emotional neglect impact both expression and experience. A large number of students reported feeling unsafe or unheard in classrooms, leading to silence due to linguistic uncertainty. The 36% of Learners' silence in the class room due to inhibition proves the point.

**CONCLUSION**

Emotional well-being is thus an important part of effective linguistic expression. The research discusses how trauma and mental neglect of the student affect the learners' linguistic development. Involving trauma-informed, psychologically responsive pedagogy can create safe spaces, allowing authentic expression and healing through linguistics.

If the over- all development of Learners' personality, the very basic objective of Education were to be achieved, inclusion of emotional quotient in designing of curriculum will have to be given a serious consideration. Though the study deals with learning of English as second language, the recommendation holds good for any learning process as such.

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