# The Use of Silence by Japanese EFL learners

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This paper is a study of the use of silence by Japanese learners of English in cross-cultural communication during a transitional time of globalization. It has frequently been pointed out that Japanese learners of English tend to show a passive attitude and remain silent in class. On the other hand, in the EFL field, for several years now, this phenomenon has been linked to the impact of globalization. It, therefore, has been pointed out that Japanese learners at present are more outgoing and express themselves more in communication. This study looks at the use of silence by Japanese EFL students in relation to their cultural values and also at its relationship to globalization. It also considers how cross-cultural misunderstandings can be avoided in a pedagogic context. To this end, this study draws on insights from the interpretation of the use of silence by learners from a socio-cultural perspective.

本研究は、グローバル化時代の異文化コミュニケーションにおける日本人英語学習者による沈黙に関する研究分析である。一般的に日本人英語学習者は、言語学習字に沈黙する傾向があると頻繁に指摘されることが多い。一方で、ここ数年グローバル化により学習者の言語行動にも何らかの変化があるのではないかとの見方もある。よって、本研究では、グローバル化時代において日本人英語学習者が沈黙という言語行動をどう捉えているのかを文化的価値観と関連づけて考察してみたい。また、実際に教育現場においてより円滑な異文化コミュニケーションを図るための教育的示唆についてもふれてみたい。

Due to the rapidly expanding internationalization of various sectors, such as business, science, and technology, the need for cross-cultural communication at an individual, national, and global level has been increasing. This social situation naturally provides individual language learners with tremendous opportunities to interact cross-culturally and to raise their awareness of the value of English in cross-cultural communication. What follows is primarily concerned with the teaching situation and the learning environment of Japanese students of English, both in monolingual and multilingual settings. Firstly, in the monolingual setting in Japan, traditionally the methods, curriculum, and examination system have emphasized knowledge of the language and paid scant attention to communicative ability or to the strategies required by speakers in social contexts. As a result, in spite of several years of learning experience, most Japanese learners of English are not sufficiently confident to place themselves in authentic cross-cultural communicative contexts. As a result of increasing polarization between what are held to be westernizing influences, and the reassertion of traditional Japanese values, the gulf between what students are taught and what they acquire, which is required for effective cross-cultural communication is, if anything, widening.

During this transitional period for the internal educational system in Japan, a growing number of Japanese learners have been studying English outside Japan. According to a survey conducted between 1996 and 2001 of nearly 200 subjects for each year (Harumi 1999, 2001), about 25% of English major undergraduates in their second grade (age 20) have studied English abroad. The length of study varied from 1 month to 2 years. Learning in this context seems to be more practical and successful as it provides learners with opportunities for genuine cross-cultural communication. However, the fact that there is still a key issue which is common to both settings should not be forgotten. That is, whatever the learning circumstances are, as has been frequently pointed out, Japanese learners of English show a passive attitude and remain silent in class, especially during the very early stages of the learning process. Due to this phenomenon, language teachers find it difficult to facilitate active learning and explore ways of breaking the *great wall of silence*.

Most language teachers have encountered uncomfortable silences in interaction with students and have naturally sought an explanation. However, such explanations are rarely simple and often rely on stereotypical characteristics of passivity of lack of cooperation. While this should be conceded, it may, however, be possible to identify some common factors leading to the prevalence of what are often considered to be agonizingly prolonged silences. There are several possible explanations for this; for example: peer group

pressure and individual differences due to gender, age, and learning strategy. The learning environment, its methodology, and the tasks which are set can also be influential. However, it is also important to know that students may remain silent as a result of socio-cultural differences between the target culture and that of the learner. In order to investigate the use of silence by Japanese EFL learners, considerable understanding and analysis is essential.

## Research Background

In spite of the fact that many Japanese EFL learners tend to be silent in comparison with learners from Western backgrounds, there are, of course, individual differences as previously mentioned. Nevertheless, I believe that Japanese students' use of silence is pertinent to the pedagogy of foreign language teaching including curriculum design and the method of teaching in relation to learners' identity. This research therefore, led to the following important pedagogical questions:

1. How do Japanese learners of English use silence in their own social context and in cross-cultural communication?
2. To what extent do Japanese socio-cultural norms or beliefs which are linked to the use of silence affect learners' language performance in class? Does the process of globalization have any influence upon Japanese learners' use of classroom silence and their attitudes towards the use of silence?
3. Is it desirable for students to adopt a more western style or is it desirable for teachers to adopt their teaching style to the learning style of their students? If so, to what extent and how?

## The Study

The research data was analyzed and interpreted in order to understand use of silence by Japanese EFL learners from a socio-cultural perspective. This data was gathered by means of a questionnaire survey which was conducted in 1996, 2000, and 2001, and also by video-recording EFL lessons in Japan. Although the central focus of the research was on learners' use of silence, the interrelationship between the existence of silence and students' difficulties in expressing themselves was also examined.

## The Questionnaires

The questionnaire survey on the use of silence by Japanese EFL learners was conducted in 1996, 2000 and 2001. The questionnaires served a number of purposes. The first aim was to elicit the learners' own interpretations of the use of silence in the EFL class and their use of non-verbal communication when having difficulties in expressing themselves. Second,

information regarding student notions or beliefs concerning the role of teachers in easing student anxiety in class was also sought. Finally, it was also intended to provide information on how perceptions of silence may differ between teachers (particularly native English teachers) and students. The research led to three interesting findings, linking the use of silence in EFL classes and the impact of globalization.

## Method
The subjects of the questionnaire were 189 (71 male, 118 female) in 1996, 141 (68 male, 73 female) and 139 (66 male, 73 female) Japanese undergraduate students in 2001 who majored in English. They were in the first and the second year at a University in Tokyo and their attitudes towards English study was quite positive.

## The Results
### · The experience of studying abroad
As far as their experience of studying abroad is concerned, about 25% of students each year have studied English abroad before, usually for a short stay, varying in length from 1 month to 2 years. This tendency did not change significantly between the years 1996, 2000, and 2001. It can be assumed that students have opportunities to study abroad more frequently after they enter university. One of the main differences over the last five years, however, is that in recent years, more students from the first year already had experienced studying abroad at an earlier age (mainly at high school) than in 1996. This might imply that students, and also their parents, have become more aware of the advantage of studying' languages abroad at an early age.

### · Students' silence and its frequency
The second interesting point to be mentioned here is the use of silence in EFL class by Japanese students. The results depict how frequently they use silence in EFL class. In a multiple-choice question, students were asked 'How often do you remain silent because of lack of confidence?' Four answers were suggested: always, frequently, sometimes, or not at all. Each year, nearly 30% of them chose 'always', 25% to 36% of them chose 'frequently' and 30% to 42% of them chose 'sometimes'. Most of the students chose to remain silent although this silence depended on the individual. According to the results obtained, there seems to have been no dramatic changes in the frequency of the use of silence in class over the last 5 years. It was also found that a slightly higher number of students are not silent at all and a slightly reduced number of students are always silent. However, this evidence is too weak to suggest that students' use of silence has diminished as an immediate result of globalization. Nevertheless, it will be very interesting to explore the continuation of this linguistic

and social behaviour among young Japanese people as they grow older.

## · Reasons for remaining silent

Although possible causes such as low-proficiency, general anxiety, shyness, and unfamiliar methods or approaches can be reasons for being silent, there are other factors which students expressed in relation to their cultural value and identity. The question, 'Why do you choose to remain silent?' is open-ended. Learners provided many possible reasons for their use of silence. However, most could be divided into four groups.

### Linguistic problems
- problems with vocabulary
- problems with expressing myself in English
- problems with understanding
- problems with translation
- problems in listening
- doubts about accuracy of grammar

### Problem with time
- lack of time to digest information and answer

### Psychological problem: confidence
- lack of confidence, nervousness, shyness
- feeling desperately in a hurry
- because of my level of the target language
- because of tense atmosphere
- lack of confidence with my own idea
- I say something in my mind
- lack of confidence in pronunciation
- I tend to depend on others

### Problem with turn-taking
- was not given chance to speak out, turns were not allocated
- missed timing (others speak before I do, teacher moves on to other students, difficulty in claiming turn)
- teacher did not notice my small voice
- I have spoken too much, I want to give someone else a chance

The results show that the decision to remain silent has various causes. While linguistic problems can be one of the main causes, problems with turn-taking and lack of confidence may have a cultural significance. For example, it seems that there are individuals who have experienced difficulty in claiming a turn, and therefore, missed the chance to express themselves. In addition, some said that they were not given the chance to express themselves; that is, they thought that a turn was not allocated to them. Judging from their responses, there are learners who think that they should respond or express themselves only when they are required to do so by being addressed individually. This seems to

indicate culturally different expectations in the learning context. That is, their expected classroom behaviour differs from the Western pedagogical perspective which allows learners to compete for turns, or volunteer in order to freely express themselves and exchange ideas. The second culturally-oriented reason is students' lack of confidence in expressing themselves in class. They lack confidence in their level of English, pronunciation, and grammatical accuracy, and also in their own ideas. What is interesting here is that they lack confidence largely because of the existence of others, or because of the classroom atmosphere. That is, they tend to be silent when they are not sure whether their answers are right or if their ideas differ from those of others. It might sound strange that Japanese students are too awkward to state their opinions freely. However, this derives from the Japanese cultural norm of *wa*—meaning harmony—and the importance of consensus-decision making. In order to keep harmony, there are students who think that they should provide answers which match others' ideas. Thus, having analysed the reasons for remaining silent, it can be found that, in addition to linguistic problems, particular conceptions of a turn-taking system and group-mindedness are also reasons for being silent.

## The video recorded data

The data was video-recorded in an EFL class with sixteen Japanese learners at a Japanese University in 1996. Since this was ethnographic, qualitative research, aimed at understanding the use of silence from both the insider and outsiders' views, both students' and the teacher's feedback were obtained through interviews. In addition, video-viewing sessions for both Japanese and British informants were set up to examine the phenomena from various perspectives in order to find out what kind of culturally similar or different interpretations exist.

## The situation

A native English teacher asks the student to give an example of $X$ (noun) is the best way of $V$ (verb) + ing. The student is, therefore, supposed to give an example of the key sentences whose meaning and function had already been learned in class. The teacher is trying to elicit an answer in a complete sentence by providing an example, but the student keeps silent with a completely blank facial expression, which gives the impression that she is passive and not involved in the interaction. When she was given three options, she said, 'I don't know'. In general, very little reaction is shown verbally or non-verbally and she looks down most of the time or looks into the distance, not at the teacher.

## The Data Analysis

The following are informants' comments on the exchange between a student and a teacher.

| Japanese informants | English informants |
|---|---|
| -She doesn't want to stand out | -She finds it boring. |
| -She expects the teacher will shift his attention to other students or give up if she remains silent. | -She is rude. |
| | -She is uninterested and hopes that if she does not answer, the teacher will leave her alone. |
| -She is waiting for the teacher's help. | |
| -She keeps silent since she thinks she can't get through this situation by herself | -She appears lazy as she dies not try to understand and when she finally answers, she says 'I don't know (an easy option).' |
| She wants the teacher to understand that she doesn't understand even without saying it. | They appear not to single themselves out of the group of their own accord. |

The feedback obtained from the student and the teacher was as follows. The student interviewed was rather shy. She commented that her understanding was not one hundred percent at the beginning and that she wanted more time to digest the information given by the teacher. In this sense, the teacher's communicative style caused difficulties for the student in understanding what was asked and required. As the lesson progresses, however, she gradually understands, but does not have enough confidence to express herself in front of the class. On the other hand, the teacher regards her silence as a national characteristic, an example of student passivity. This data from different sources shows culturally different uses of silence and interpretation. The Japanese informants seem to read her silent message as a difficulty avoidance strategy, but did not regard it negatively. On the other hand, English informants including the teacher, interpret the student's silence negatively as rudeness, laziness, lack of interest, and passivity. Another finding was that Japanese students tend to rely on non-verbal cues as a means of self-expression and expect somebody to read their minds!

## Culturally sensitive approaches and the negotiation between teachers and learners

Simply knowing that difference exists does not in itself create opportunities to be fully aware of cultural differences. Even when the teacher (both Japanese and non-Japanese English teachers) has a deep understanding of Japanese culture, Japanese language proficiency and long teaching experience, there are occasions when a bridge is needed both for students and the teacher to interact more successfully. For this, I assume that there are five important aspects which need to be borne in mind in the Japanese EFL context.

1. Provide a clear aim for each task and item
2. Give clear examples of how to do each task
3. Allow a learner time to answer after asking a question
4. Take a step-by-step approach and make sure that students' readiness and confidence are being built for learning.

5. Provide enough opportunities to practice, to use and to experience different types of communication.

## Conclusion

This study shows that culturally different uses of silence exist. Also, the use of silence may be differently interpreted in an EFL context. As well as the common use of silence such as silence for deep thought, there are different uses in different cultures. The EFL class is a place where at least two different cultures always exist. The issue is how these differences or similarities can be used to enrich students' learning. The style of learning, together with the method and style of teaching should be the subject of careful negotiations between teachers and students in each learning situation.

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