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 HELP & FAQs

# Enabling English Students to Become Active Participants in Discussions

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*Research indicates Japanese speakers of English are often reticent in discussions with native speakers and other non-native speakers. If this is the case, they may face consequences in English speaking environments in the future. This study examines theoretical and applied research in creating a series of activities aiming to directly address the issue. The four-week unit focuses on the following: being active, getting and keeping a turn, refuting arguments, and being confident and prepared. This study also tests whether the activities would lead a group of Japanese English students to improve their participation in discussions*

*with native speakers. The results show that, though there was little difference in turns taken, the experimental group improved more than the control group in terms of words spoken.*

ある研究によると、日本人は、英語を母国語とする人々（以下、NS）やそうでない人との議論の場において、発言をしないことがよくあるようだ。もしそうであれば、将来英語を話す環境におかれたときに、影響が生じるかもしれない。この研究では、なぜ日本人が受身になりがちなのか、理論的かつ応用的に説明しようとしている。また、問題解決の為に有効的なアクティビティも数多く提案している。ここでは、(1)議論の場で、積極的(能動的)であることの重要性(2)議論の論破経験(3)発言権を得る/維持する方法(4)自信をもち、心構え十分であることの重要性に焦点をおいている。また、ここで提案されているアクティビティをすることによって、日本人が、NSとの議論の場で、より積極的に参加できるかどうか調べる。結果として、多少発言権の移動に差異はあるものの、実際に話された言語数でみると、実験を行ったグループはそうでないグループより、より積極的に議論に参加できるようになった。

Research has shown that certain groups of non-native speakers (NNSs) tend to be inactive in English discussions. Sato (1990), for example, found that East Asians participated significantly less than other NNSs. In a recent study of university students, I examined to what extent native speakers (NSs) dominated discussions with Japanese English speakers (Prichard, in press). Though matched evenly, four-on-four, in each of the seven ten-minute discussions, the NSs took seven times more turns. NNSs face several potential consequences if they are hesitant to participate in future academic, business, and social settings.

There are several methods language teachers use to encourage active discussions. However, although these steps seem to lead the students to be more active in the language classroom, Jones (1999) writes that even experience in discussions with NSs will not enable most NNSs to increase their participation. He suggests taking direct action through awareness activities and skill practice. First, this paper aims to create such a unit based on current research. Second, it tests whether this unit would actually lead a group of Japanese university students to become more active in discussions with NSs.

### **Building the discussion unit**

In order to create activities aiming to lead students to become active in discussions, it was necessary to analyze how and why NNSs, particularly Japanese, are passive. The four-week unit was based on a literature review as well as qualitative and quantitative analysis from the Japanese-NS university discussions mentioned above (Prichard, in press). In each section below, potential causes of passivity will be discussed followed by a description of the unit.

### **Expectations of participation**

Many East Asian students, including Japanese, are not expected to be active contributors in university courses. Silence often represents politeness in Japanese culture, and this is especially so in the classroom. Thus, even if aware that they are expected to actively participate in class in English-speaking countries, they are not accustomed to it and may feel uncomfortable doing so (Jones, 1999).

Thus, taking Jones' suggestion, the first part of the unit was to make the students aware that they will be expected to actively participate if they study or work in English-speaking

environments. The students were also introduced to the research mentioned above showing exactly how passive Japanese students are in discussions with NSs and other NNSs. The class also brainstormed potential consequences of not participating actively in various settings. This step was to be the key in motivating the students to increase their participation.

### **Getting a turn**

In the Japanese-NS university discussions (Prichard, in press), the NSs took an average of 7.3 turns each per ten-minute discussion compared to just 1.0 for the Japanese students. In the discourse style and turn-taking conventions of Japanese, each speaker tends to be given a turn (Yamada, 1992). In an analysis of group discussions, Watanabe (1993) noticed that Japanese participants started the discussions by deciding who should speak first by making suggestions and inviting others to lead off. On the other hand, in English-speaking cultures, the pause between turns is usually a fraction of a second, with slight overlaps common, and interlocutors often have to '*fight for the floor*' when they have something to say. Japanese who wait to be given a chance to speak will likely lose their chance to participate (Yamamoto, 1991).

Listeners watch for turn-yielding signals to predict when the speaker is going to finish the turn. Linguists have suggested that a language's turn signals have a big effect on NS-NNS discourse (Richards, 1980; Scarcella, 1983; Tarone, 1989; Hatch 1992) and that English turn-yielding signals may have other connotations to people of other cultures (Gumperz & Roberts, 1980; Hattori, 1987; Strevens, 1987). In English, speakers signal that their turn will soon end by one or more of the following measures: relaxing their hands, looking back at their interlocutor, changing their intonation, decreasing

the pitch, or drawing out the final syllable (Duncan & Fiske, 1977; Schaffer, 1983). Graham found that American business people gaze into their interlocutor's face more than Japanese business people (1991). Perhaps, this indicates that Japanese speakers tend to wait for silence (since they are more common in Japanese discourse) instead of watching for turn signals to take the floor.

Indeed, thirteen of the fifteen Japanese who took just one turn in the Japanese- NS university discussions did so only after there was a rare silence of more than three seconds (Prichard, in press). One student said she "didn't know when to speak" and another said a NS always spoke first when he was ready to participate. Again, different turn taking conventions between the two languages may be a factor. Seven students took their only turn of the discussion after another Japanese participant spoke. Thus, perhaps they were not able to recognize when a NS had given a turn-yielding signal. This could have led to them either losing a chance to speak or a NS directly soliciting a response with a question. Four of the Japanese had their only turn after a NS solicited a general response from the group.

In the discussion unit, the English turn-yielding signals mentioned above were reviewed. In one activity, the teacher spoke about a topic and the students had to practice recognizing when a turn signal was given. To encourage the competitive spirit often needed to be able to actively contribute in discussions with NSs, participation points were given to the students who could recognize the signal first. The students were also introduced to ways of showing that they wanted a turn such as leaning in slightly with an open mouth or simply saying 'hmm'. The students were then put into groups. The teacher gave an opinion about a topic to each group and each member

was required to respond just once. The students had to look actively for turn-yielding signals, and whoever spoke first and second were awarded participation points.

### **Having longer turns**

It seems long monologues are more acceptable to NSs than to Japanese. Yamada (1992) analyzed Japanese and American business meetings and found that long monologues were more common in American meetings. In the Japanese-NS university discussions (Prichard, in press), though the NS average turn was only slightly longer than the Japanese students', the NSs had significantly more long monologues. A possibility as to why Japanese participants do not have long turns when speaking with NSs is that they may unknowingly give an English turn-yielding signal in the middle of their utterance. If they do this, a NS may jump in and 'interrupt' them.

English speakers also use a variety of strategies to keep their turn, including gesturing, looking away, and avoiding silence by using repeated words, fillers, and elongated vowel sounds. Japanese use some of these same strategies, but in English, they tend to use the Japanese *eto* and to add a vowel syllable after the last consonant sound, as in '*butoh*' for *but*.

Since the Japanese did not have long monologues in their discussion with NSs, a major focus of the discussion unit was on keeping a turn. The above-mentioned strategies were introduced and practiced. In one activity, the students tried to say a sentence written on the board for thirty seconds using fillers, repetition, and elongated vowel sounds but no silences. Another activity involved having an entire argument written on a series of cue cards. An 'incompetent assistant' showed the cards to the speaker, pausing as if

daydreaming for five to ten seconds before showing the next one. The speaker could not have silence between cards but use turn-keeping strategies instead.

### ***Disagreeing with the group***

In one study, many Japanese students reported being uncomfortable expressing their opinions as openly as a NS would (Yamamoto, 1991). Japanese may sometimes hide their opinions because they reserve “frankness” for in-group interactions (Yamada, 1992). In the Japanese-NS university discussions, if a NS disagreed with what they said, the Japanese students never once countered or clarified their point (Prichard, in press).

Therefore, a step of the discussion unit involved refuting and disagreeing with each other. It was pointed out that disagreeing with others is not considered a way of showing disrespect. On the contrary, those who share their viewpoint vocally will usually be respected, and playing 'the devil's advocate' can even make a discussion livelier. The students were also introduced to ways of disagreeing politely, so that they would feel less concerned about sounding rude or offensive. In one activity, a student had to give his or her opinion on a certain issue, and the other students had to argue against it, even if they agreed. The person in the ‘hot seat’ had to continue refuting the counterarguments for a period of five minutes. The students said they felt “lonely,” “scared,” and “sad” arguing against the group, but most seemed to enjoy the activity.

### ***Being confident and ready***

Another reason NNSs may be passive in the mainstream classroom is that they are still not comfortable with their fluency (Jones, 1999). Japanese students are particularly afraid of losing face with a grammar mistake. Research shows that

Japanese contribute less in terms of length of utterance when they feel their interlocutor has a higher proficiency (Takahashi, 1989; Yamamoto, 1991). In Yamamoto's study, many reported that they always took time before they spoke in order to think over exactly what they were going to say. This hesitation will obviously lead to them losing their chance to speak. In questioning Japanese students as to why they were not more active in group activities, Yamamoto found that the Japanese students felt an ‘inferiority complex’ in speaking English with other NNSs. When paired with NSs, Japanese may be even more insecure. After the Japanese-NS university discussions, one mentioned she had been “very nervous” and was surprised how “fluently” the NSs gave their “very good” opinions. Another wrote she “was overwhelmed by [the NSs’] clear thinking” (Prichard, in press).

In the discussion unit, the students were encouraged not to worry about mistakes. Aiming to build their confidence, I also reminded them that they were ‘advanced’ English speakers. Realizing that they would still probably be unconfident and hesitant to speak, I informed the students that if they are prepared for a discussion, they could preview the vocabulary and ideas they wanted to use (without memorizing exactly what they wanted to say). They were also told to try to think of what to say before a speaker finished so that they could be ready to speak as soon as a turn-yielding signal was shown.

## **Methods**

Data from the Japanese-NS university discussions (Prichard, in press) were used as a pretest in an experimental study aiming to determine whether the unit would lead the Japanese students to become more active in posttest discussions. As



in the pretest, the seven posttest discussions consisted of four Japanese and four NS students. One group of Japanese students, the experimental group, was taught discussion skills immediately following the pretest in a four-week unit meeting twice a week for 1 hr 30 min classes. The other Japanese students, the control group, also had a discussion unit for the same duration but were not taught any specific discussion skills. The discussions were transcribed and certain features were counted to determine whether the experimental group improved significantly compared to the control group.

## Participants

The participants consisted of twenty-three Japanese ESL students and seventeen NSs of English currently studying at Kwansai Gakuin University during the spring semester of 2003. The ESL students were enrolled in two advanced speaking classes taught by the instructor. Both classes were equal in content, save the discussion unit, and both required a TOEFL score of 500. The students of the larger class, which consisted of fifteen students, were assigned to the experimental group. Eight students of the smaller class were assigned to the control group. (The control group had included twelve students, but four missed one of the discussions and were thus excluded from the study.) Fifteen of the Japanese students were female and eight were male, and all were sophomores or juniors.

Ten of the NSs were from the United Kingdom, three were from the United States, three were from Canada, and one was from Australia. Eight of the British students had been in Japan for only three weeks, and each of the rest of the students had spent less than a year and a half in the country. Eight were male and nine were female.

## Procedure

Each Japanese participant attended one pretest and one posttest discussion, while most of the NSs participated in two of each. The discussions included different scenarios where the students needed to make some kind of moral decision. Several possible choices were given and the participants were to choose one and try to persuade the others that it was the best choice. Topics were selected so that neither of the groups would have more knowledge of the topic, since research has shown that content-knowledge affects participation patterns (Zuengler, 1991). The topics were given by email two or three days before the discussion date because part of the unit dealt with being prepared. On the discussion dates, the participants sat in a circle, introduced themselves, and discussed the topic all in ten minutes. The discussions were video taped and transcribed.

To determine how active the students were in the discussions, the following measures were counted: turns taken, words spoken, and words per turn. In this study, 'turns taken' refers to self-selections, or the number of times the participants voluntarily took the floor to give a statement or an opinion. If there was a personal solicit, the response was not counted as a turn taken because the purpose of this measure was to determine how active the participants were in choosing to take the floor and being able to get it. However, words were counted regardless of whether the participant took the turn or answered a question.

The small sample size prevented a parametric analysis from being used. The Mann-Whitney test was used instead to determine whether the experimental group improved significantly more than the control group. The Japanese students also completed a free write on their thoughts about their participation.

## Results

Overall, the students in the experimental group improved more in words and words per turn, though there was little difference in terms of turns taken.

### **Turns taken**

Both the control group and experimental group took about the same number of turns in the posttest as they did in the pretest. The control group improved by an average of .25 turns while the experimental group improved by .13. In the posttest, the experimental group did take more turns (1.4 versus 0.9), but the difference was not significant ( $z=.90$ ).

### **Words per turn**

The experimental group had an average turn of 40.8 words in the posttest while the control group average was 33.1 words. Though it was not so at the standard.05 level, this difference was statistically significant at the .10 probability level ( $z=1.42$ ) using the Mann-Whitney test. The experimental group improved by 12.4 words from the pretest, and the control group improved by 2.1 words. Though the experimental group members improved more than the control group, the results were not significant ( $z = .75$ ).

### **Total words**

Although the control group had more words per turn and took more turns in the posttest than they did in the pretest, the number of words spoken per discussion declined because they were asked fewer questions in the posttest. Overall, the control group had an average 9.3 fewer words per discussion than they did in the pretest, while the experimental group had 22.4 more words. This

difference is significant ( $z = 1.68$ ,  $p < .05$ , directional). Thus, it could be said that the experimental group improved more than the control group in the amount of overall participation.

## Discussion and limitations

The fact that the experimental group had longer turns and were asked more questions may indicate why they did not improve on the number of turns. Perhaps, because they spoke more overall, they had no reason to take more turns. However, their participation was still much less than the NSs. As in the pretest, the Japanese participants did not counter when a NS argued against their idea. In the words of one Japanese student after the posttest, perhaps they “needed to be more tough.”

Another reason the experimental group did not take more turns is that most said they often could not follow what the NSs, particularly the British, were saying. Because of scheduling limitations, the experimental group was matched exclusively with students from Britain. Also, these NSs had lived in Japan for just two months, compared to at least a year for the NSs matched with the control group. Therefore, the NSs having discussion with the experimental group used comparatively less ‘foreigner talk’ and had nearly four times fewer clarifications. Obviously, if the students could not understand much of the discussion, they would reply to fewer NS statements. It is possible that the experimental group was prepared enough to take more turns, but could not do so due to comprehension difficulties.

In addition to the matching limitations, the study included a small number of participants. Thus, it was difficult to get significant results or to generalize them. Any future studies

on the topic would hopefully include a larger number of participants and include follow-up discussions a few months later to further validate the results.

## Conclusion

It cannot be determined whether the discussion activities used in this research will lead other groups of students to be more active in discussions with NSs. However, since the experimental group improved in terms of overall words spoken and the control group showed little improvement at all despite more discussion practice, it seems that the unit was helpful. Because the unit was created based on both theoretical and applied research, it is very likely that, in combination with more discussion practice with NSs, these activities would help students be more active in the long term. I would suggest trying these activities with advanced English students who have serious plans to work or study abroad.

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