Silence in the Classroom Can Be Golden

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In this study I reevaluate silence in classroom discussion in Japan. I propose that a modest amount of silence, when integrated appropriately into classroom activities, is productive for both teachers and students. Silence in the class is conventionally regarded as negative. Because active academic engagement from students is absent, silence produces an awkward atmosphere; it brings a bad rhythm to the class. With the results of this study, I attempt to reverse such images. Silence in fact can help students create a good rhythm in their discussions. It also becomes beneficial when they need time to digest what they have learnt or to organise their thoughts. A case study of my English literature seminar classes at university was done. The reevaluation of silence in the class will make a difference in our ways of designing a lesson by giving Japanese students more autonomy in classroom discussion.

本研究は、授業でのディスカション演習において生じる沈黙を再評価する試みである。適度な沈黙は授業活動に有効に取り入れられれば、教師と学生の双方にとって生産的なものとなる。従来、授業中の沈黙は否定的に受けとめられてきた。学生からの積極的なアカデミックな関与の欠如、あるいは、教室に気まずい雰囲気を作り出し、授業に悪いリズムをもたらすものと考えられてきた。本研究はこうしたイメージの転換を目指す。沈黙は、学生がディスカッションの良いリズムを作るための助けとなり、さらには、学生が受け取った情報を吸収したり、自らの考えをまとめたりするのに必要な時間になる。本研究を行うにあたって、著者は自身の英文学演習の授業をケーススタディとしている。授業中の沈黙を再評価することは、ディスカッションにおける日本の学生による主体性を促すことに繋がり、従来の授業の進め方に一石を投じるであろう。

Discussion is a meaningful academic activity. In discussion students share knowledge, ideas, and perspectives, which stimulate their further appetite for creativity and help both teachers and students to (self-)check the students' progress in and understanding of the class. Discussion also serves students as a good practice for voyaging into the academic world or making a successful performance at corporate meetings after graduation. However, one common problem teachers are often confronted with in classroom discussion in Japan is silence. Because this silence is an archenemy of teachers, discussion time is likely to become "lecture time." To fill in silence, teachers start to talk, but this act conversely results in their dominating the class. They wish for a voluntary exchange and sharing of ideas among their students, but soon find themselves continuing to talk while their students are only listening.

This urge by teachers to say something in order to fill in the silence is understandable. For a practical reason, classroom time is finite. Classes in most of the Japanese universities last 90 minutes. These 90 minutes may be long for students, but not for teachers. The time is hardly

long enough to teach satisfactorily. Teachers, new teachers in particular, often make a tight class plan: Each activity is given a 5-to-15-minute slot, aligned in as perfect an order as the teachers think they can. However, seldom does teaching go as planned. A teacher asks a question and none of his or her students dare answer. Time is ticking. The teacher says to him- or herself, "Oh dear. We have more to do today."

Our common understanding of silence in the class is negative. For many teachers and students alike, silence is rarely appreciated. Awkwardness descends when a lesson is disrupted by silence. This is because such disruption can undermine feelings of belonging and control that the smooth flow of communication is usually expected to foster (Koudenburg, Postmes, & Gordijn, 2011, p. 512). Therefore, it is generally understood that the lesson flow is not *lubricated* but *disrupted* by silence. Furthermore, silence is also regarded as an expression of students' reluctance or refusal to participate in a class activity as well as a symbol of unproductivity. Experienced teachers know how to cope with silence in a relaxed and relaxing manner, but for them too, it is best avoided.

The results of this study challenge such fixed ideas about silence in discussion classes in Japanese higher education by embracing the silence, not by preempting it. Suggestions will be made to actually integrate the silence into the discussion so that discussion will become student oriented, not teacher centred. I argue that silence provides foreign language learners with time to organise their ideas as well as the confidence to speak up. They need such thinking time or "wait time" (Rowe, 1986), because it takes longer for them to prepare answers in English than when they do the same task in their first language.

Literature Review on Classroom Silence

Silence in discussion means a situation where no participant is speaking (Schmitz, 1990). This definition is a truism, but scholars and educators have struggled to find out what causes silence. A silent student may be just shy; she or he does not know the answer and feels hesitant to say so; the atmosphere of the class may not be conducive to talking. On the other hand, the cause could be rooted more deeply, for example, a trauma or wish to avoid a sensitive issue such as race or religion. A number of attempts have been made to grapple with the last point mentioned above, especially in the US where race, class, gender, and ethnicity have been important issues for national construction (Ladson-Billings, 1996; Rogers, 2006; Taylor, Gilligan, & Sullivan, 1995; Weis & Fine, 1993). Rather than identifying the cause of each silence in the class and trying to get rid of it, some of these attempts focus on the effects of silence and indicate that "the absence of talk does not mean the absence of learning" (Schultz, 2009, p. 5). Some students prefer to absorb knowledge and think further through listening or "silent participation" (Schultz, 2009, p. 61). Scholars also argue that silence is not necessarily attributed to individuals, but to the interactions among students and between the teacher and students. In other words, silence is contextual and it is therefore essential to create a classroom atmosphere that allows silence to be taken positively by both teachers and students (Bosacki, 2005; Schultz, 2009; Shuttleworth, 1990).

In Japanese schools, students are notorious for being "too quiet." Researchers attribute this cultural tendency to various factors: Japanese preference to be perfect; their respect for listening to others rather than for speaking for themselves; the traditional one-way teaching style in Japan where the teacher speaks and the students listen; Confucianism that used to be taught intensively at school from the Edo period (Finkelstein, Imamura, & Tobin, 1991; Harumi, 1999; Lebra, 1987). In Confucianism, for example, respect for social order and seniority is highly valued. This top-down teaching style, scholars argue, still remains to be the norm in Japan (Zembylas, 2004).

While it is agreed that this stereotype has some validity in examining the general tendency for Japanese students to be silent in the classroom, it is also a fact that there are a few students who are exceptionally talkative. They like taking a leadership role and willingly contribute to discussion. It is also undeniable that there are students all over the world who are quiet in the classroom. While the focus of this article is the particular context of Japanese schools, some of the suggestions here would potentially be applicable to other cultural contexts.

Methodology

These experiments were conducted in two classes. Both were English literature discussion classes at university. The languages used for the discussions were English and occasionally Japanese. The texts used were a Nigerian novel, *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006) by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, in one of the classes, and an English novel, *A Pale View of Hills* (1982) by Kazuo Ishiguro, in the other. The English levels of these novels were appropriate for the students. The majority of my students agreed that the books were manageable to read. The progress in both classes was to read one chapter (normally about 15 pages) every week. The students were given discussion topics in advance for the following week so that they could roughly prepare what to say for the next class. Discussion topics were, for example, character analysis ("Read this chapter and tell us anything that you know or can guess about the characters") or comparison ("Compare this scene and that one").

The students who took these classes were 3rd-year and final-year undergraduates, whose TOEIC scores ranged from 450 to 800, except for one student whose father was a Filipino and for whom English was one of his first languages. Because of their low English abilities, students sometimes misunderstood the plot. Therefore, in discussions. students also aimed to self-check their understanding of the plot through listening to other students' remarks as well as to improve their skills in examining the text.

The class reading the Nigerian novel was taught in the winter term of 2011. It consisted of 41 students. Due to its large size, the discussions took place in small groups (four to seven students each). In each group the students decided who would chair the discussion. While they were discussing, the teacher walked around the classroom and joined in their discussions when appropriate. The other class, which had 11 students, was taught in the summer term of 2012. With this class size, sometimes all the students sat at one table so that the teacher could supervise them all at one time, and sometimes they sat at two tables in order to create a more comfortable atmosphere for discussion.

The research employed the following three methods: a questionnaire at the beginning of each term (see Appendix), observation of the classes, and interviews. The main focus of the questionnaire was the students' perspectives on silence in the class so that the class could be designed to satisfy both the teacher and as many students as possible. Therefore some of the questions asked for *their* (the students') suggestions about silence. Common questions concerning why they become silent were also included. Other questions were designed to see if there is any difference in terms of the frequency of silence between discussions in English and in Japanese.

The interviews were intended to endorse or clarify the findings in the questionnaire and in the classroom observation. 36 students in the 2011 class and 7 students in the 2012 class were interviewed. The period during which the interviews were done spanned one term, following the interviewees' schedules. Each interview lasted about 10-20 minutes. All of the interviewees were asked both common and individual questions. In common, they were asked the reasons for their answers to the questionnaire, whereas individual questions were asked about their own attitude in the discussions (this also served as feedback

to the students to improve their discussion skills) and about certain phenomena noticed in the class observation.

Results and Discussion

Effects of Wait Time

The results of questions 3a and 3b of the questionnaire show that if a student is not hesitant to comment or answer in classes conducted in Japanese, he or she is likely to not be hesitant in English either. On the other hand, there is a difference between English and Japanese, and it is about time. In the interviews, many students said something like, "Normally I first think in Japanese and then translate my idea into English, so it takes long to answer or comment." Admittedly, they were feeling a language barrier between English and Japanese. Some felt frustration due to their limited vocabulary or became nervous every time they spoke English because, as one of the students stated, "other students paid attention more to [his] English ability than to [his] opinion itself." Interestingly enough, however, they also said that this did not necessarily stop them from speaking. They did not think the language barriers were insurmountable even if they had difficulty expressing their ideas in English. Some even went so far as to say, "I speak more because I think more seriously in a discussion in English than in Japanese" or "I try to speak more because I think it a good English practice to discuss in English."

This hopeful and rather unexpected outcome suggests the need to give Japanese students longer wait time. In spite of the stereotype concerning Japanese students, not all of them are hesitant to speak in class. At Japanese schools, these exceptionally talkative students do not dominate their groups, nor do they deprive other students of a chance to speak. Their bravery encourages other students who would otherwise remain silent. To the question "In what kind of class do you *not* become silent?" 27 out of 52 students said yes to when "other students are actively talking" (see Appendix, Q5).

What teachers need to do is, therefore, to alleviate the difficulty that their talkative students have in stating opinions in English, as a result of which the whole group will actively begin to exchange ideas. In other words, students need longer thinking time, which normally emerges as silence. This provides them with time to translate in their minds ideas from Japanese into English and to organise their ideas. Longer wait time is suitable for Japanese students who are, though somewhat stereotypically, said to be perfectionist: they remain silent until they come up with a "perfect" answer (Harumi, 1999).

We have to be careful, however, because long wait time can become more awkward if the teacher does nothing but simply prolong the silence. On the other hand, if both teachers and students accept a certain length of silence in discussion as being beneficial for further discussion, they will come to feel more comfortable with it. To achieve this, teachers can frequently refer to the role of silence in their classes. For example, if you teach an English novel, you have ample examples of a scene where characters are being silent. One such example is a scene from Ishiguro's *A Pale View of Hills*:

> *For a moment, they fell silent again.*
>
> "I'm glad everything's going well," Ogata-San said, eventually. "Yes, we were just passing this way and I was telling Etsuko-San you lived here. . . . In fact, I was just about to tell her about a curious little thing. I happened to remember it, when I saw your house. A curious little thing."
>
> "Oh yes?"
>
> "Yes. I just happened to remember it when I saw your house, that's all. You see, I was reading something the other day. An article in a journal. The *New Education Digest*, I think it was called."

> *The young man said nothing for a moment*, then he adjusted his position on the pavement and put down his briefcase.
>
> "I see," he said. . . . *He nodded, but said nothing*. (Ishiguro, 1982, pp. 145-146. Italics added.)

Three sentences which describe silence appear in this short passage. A retired teacher, Ogata-san, visits a young one, Shigeo Matsuda. They once got on well, and Ogata-san even did Shigeo kindness by helping him to find the job. However, after the war Shigeo wrote an article and criticised the pre-war Japanese education, especially teachers such as Ogata-san and his colleagues. Having read this article and being unable to understand Shigeo's intention, Ogata-san visits him in the quoted scene. I used this scene in my class to show the students that silence does not mean there are no activities involved. In fact the two characters are thinking about the best possible action to take next. In other words, they are silent and yet engaged. We can use literary scenes like this to drive home the significance of silence as time to think for the next step (also see Appendix Q8).

Students Imitate Their Teacher

There was an interesting phenomenon observed among my students. After the first few classes did not quite work as was originally intended because they were too quiet, I chaired one of their discussion tables to lubricate their talks. Then from the next class the table leader began copying the way I had chaired, even using the same words for asking individual students for comments and the wait time spent for their thinking time. Previously, table leaders waited 7-8 seconds on average before they started to ask individuals for opinions. However, I endured from one-half to a full minute, pretending to be comfortable with the long silence. In the next class the discussion leader waited for almost as long as I did. The student acted so, as she explained later, because of a lack of experience with discussion in primary and secondary school; the students had been desperate for a model to follow. This discovery shows that teachers can create unwritten rules for discussion, and this makes it relatively easy to control wait time.

It was also observed that my students tended to fall silent on the following two occasions in particular. First, silence descended on them when they felt that reaching a conclusion by themselves was beyond their knowledge and that they needed help from their teacher. In this situation they were at a loss as to whether they should carry on with the current topic or move on to a new one with the topic at hand unsolved. Second, students were not good at responding to remarks made by other students. Consequently, there usually occurred a considerable length of silence between remarks.

On occasions such as the first one, what I took advantage of was my students' tendency to copy their teacher's style. They were shown some examples of words that are useful for changing a topic as well as a timing to do so. They first struggled to imitate, but in the end learnt how to proceed on their own.

This educational policy to allow students to grope for their own discussion style through imitating their teacher's not only encourages their initiative to learn and teaches them the joy of learning, but also helps resolve the second occasion in which they are likely to become silent. As the term went on, my students gradually developed a good rhythm in their discussions, and their effective use of silence played a role of accent in making this rhythm. In this rhythm, first one or two students stated something as an icebreaker. Soon the discussion table had a long wait time that lasted up to one minute, followed by an intensive exchange of ideas. Then there was another long wait time for digesting what they had just discussed and organising ideas for further discussion. Then the second round started. Intervention in their talks by the teacher became less necessary.

As a result of our attempt to become accustomed to longer thinking time, we saw not only improvement in the quality of opinions from the students, but also the number of opinions raised during each discussion. At the beginning of the term, only one or two students commented, feeling, as they described in the interviews, either "unbearable towards silence" or responsible to say something because they were labelled as good students. On the other hand, many others chose to remain silent. Those who did comment made facile comments. In character analyses they only managed to say, for example, "She seemed nice" or "I don't understand why he behaved like this." Towards the end of the term, more and more students began to contribute to discussions by stating their ideas and commenting on their classmates' comments. Their opinions became more insightful, logical, and convincing. For example, they began adding "because" to their remarks, which was a sign of developing logic. They became aware, for example, of the symbolic use of the river in the climax of *A Pale View of Hills*. One of the students referred to the Styx and the prevalence of death in the scene (Ishiguro, 1982, pp. 172-173). Then the students stated their own understandings of the significance of the river in this passage and inspired each other through sharing ideas.

Multiple Ways of Assessment

The premise of the points raised and suggested so far is that after a wait time students are expected to express the ideas that they were pondering upon during the silence. However, some students prefer to remain silent or simply like listening to their classmates throughout the discussion. We have to acknowledge such intended silence as a way of participating in discussion. As Schultz (2009) said, "a singular focus on talk as successful participation obscures the myriad ways that students might also participate through silence" (p. 3). In silence they are actually learning. It is only that their ideas or what they learn through listening is not audible to others. Of course, we can encourage them to talk, but such an act could end up intimidating them.

Discussion classes should, therefore, combine discussion and other modes of learning. Multiple ways of stating opinions are, for example, writing or occasional tests. Drawing is also enjoyable for both teachers and students, and a creative method to check students' comprehension. It illustrates their (mis-)understanding, which they are not always good at explaining verbally. Drawing is educationally effective especially when the teaching material is set in a culture or place unfamiliar to the students. For example, in the 2011 class about the African literature, my students were given an assignment to draw a slum in Nairobi. Some of them drew in their pictures what is around their own everyday life: a clock, plastic bottles, water, and electricity (see Figure 1). This exercise helped them notice the cultural gap between the world in the text that they were reading and their own world. Alternative ways such as these allow students to have an opportunity to express their ideas so that they do not feel neglected. With consent by the students, teachers can also show their writings or drawings on the classroom TV monitor to share the ideas with the other students. These alternative ways are important, too, for checking students' progress and understanding of the text, especially when the class is large and the teacher cannot pay attention to the whole class throughout the lesson.

Figure 1. One Student's Drawing of a Slum in Nairobi

Note. In the centre at the bottom of this picture, we can see a tap from which water is flowing into a bucket.

Conclusion and Further Suggestions

The results of these experimental discussion classes in Japan show the importance of encouraging students' initiative to create their own rhythm of discussion. Accepted silence plays an important role in this rhythm. It gives students time to process knowledge, new information, and comments from other group members as well as to prepare their own comments. This is especially applicable to language learners. They need longer time to think and prepare comments. On the other hand, teachers should focus on facilitating such student-oriented discussions. Of course teachers' intervention is necessary if the silence is prolonged and an expression of asking for help from the teacher clearly appears on the students' faces or in their gestures and attitudes. However, such intervention has to be minimal as the purpose of it is to induce the next cycle of talk among the students, not to remove the teacher's fear towards silence.

Teachers are also expected to create a classroom environment to encourage comments. Friendly atmosphere is vital in creating such an environment. However, this does not deny the importance of silence because no matter how talkative students are in discussion there always comes silence, and it is to this silence that both teachers and students should give a positive value. On the other hand, even in a friendly atmosphere some students choose to remain silent. For those students, multiple ways of stating opinions need to be provided in order to give all the students an equal opportunity to express ideas.

This paper also suggests further possibilities for study and reform. First, there is a numerical limitation in the design of this study. The number of the students involved is not enough to provide a comprehensive picture of classroom silence in Japanese higher education, and further studies will be necessary. Second, Japanese students should be given more opportunity to experience discussion in whatever language in primary and secondary schools. This will require systematic as well as curricular changes. Because of lack of experience, for example, my students at first did not know how far they could deviate from the given discussion topics. A scene was frequently observed in which only a handful of students brought up opinions strictly sticking to the main topic, while the others only agreed or added little to the stated opinions, and the whole group stopped talking altogether. Deviation from the main topics might have led to unexpectedly interesting talk. This constipated situation stemmed from their inexperience in discussion. Students are full of ideas, regardless of their nationality. Before they reach higher education, they should learn the joy of discussion.

Bio Data

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Appendix

Questionnaire

Note. The original version was in Japanese, translated here by the author.

1. Do you usually answer your teacher's questions actively?

- Yes **9**
- No **10**
- It depends **33**

2a. Relating to Q1, do you think a smaller size of the class would make you feel relaxed to answer?

- Yes **47**
- No, it would be the same **5**
- No, it would make it more difficult to answer **0**

2b. To those who answered "Yes" in Q2a, what size of the class would make so?

- 8 or fewer students **30**
- 9-15 **21**

- 16-21 **0**
- Others **1**

3a. Do you often become silent when your teacher asks a question and points out directly to you?

- Always yes **0**
- Often so **13**
- Not very often so **27**
- Seldom so **9**
- Never **3**

3b. In a class conducted in English only, do you become silent more often than in a class taught in Japanese?

- Yes **28**
- No **24**

4. In what kind of situation do you become silent in the class? (You can choose more than one of the following.)

(About Q3a)

- I do not understand the question **0**
- I do not know the answer **8**
- If I remain silent, the teacher will point to somebody else **9**
- I do not have confidence in my answer **11**
- I have fear that I may answer it wrong **1**
- I will be embarrassed if I answer incorrectly **2**
- Others **0**

(About Q3b)

- I do not understand the question **11**
- I do not know the answer **17**
- If I remain silent, the teacher will point to somebody else **14**
- I do not have confidence in my answer **17**
- I have fear that I may answer it wrong **3**
- I will be embarrassed if I answer incorrectly **3**
- Others **1**

5. In what kind of class do you *not* become silent? (You can choose more than one of the following.)

- The teacher is approachable **36**
- The number of the students is small **32**
- The students are friendly to each other **41**
- Other students are actively talking **27**
- Many questions are easy to answer **6**
- Others **2**

6. Do you like silence in discussion?

- No **0**
- Yes **2**
- Not dislike, but feel it awkward **48**
- Others **2**

7. What do you usually think in silence? Choose the most appropriate.

- Waiting for others to speak **15**
- Thinking what I will say next **37**
- Thinking nothing in particular **0**
- Others **0**

8. When instructed by your teacher that you do not feel silence awkward because it gives you meaningful time to think, do you think you will be able to make much of silence?

- Yes **32**
- No **10**

- Others **10**

9. In discussion, if the language were switched from Japanese to English, do you think you would speak less?

- Yes **26**
- No **11**
- Others **15**