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Challenging Assumptions  
Looking In, Looking Out

# Interaction in the Japanese classroom - moving toward common ground

Jennifer Claro

*Kitami Institute of Technology*

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Zimbardo (1977) found that shyness is more prevalent in Japan than in any other culture surveyed. In university English conversation classes, the shyness of students makes conversation difficult. The desire of Japanese students to avoid making mistakes in order to avoid embarrassment means that they are reluctant to speak unless they know the exact way to say what they want to say. In this paper, the reasons for this typical shyness will be explored. The Japanese possess a high level of a trait labeled uncertainty avoidance by Hofstede (1991), which means that Japanese are less likely to take risks than most other nationalities. Because interaction with foreigners means taking risks with language, students must be encouraged to interact in low and medium risk activities and move along the Continuum of Interaction Expectation toward common ground, which they share with their foreign teacher.

Zimbardo (1977)は、「内気さ」が、他に調査した文化に比べ、日本で広く行き渡っていることを指摘した。大学の英会話の授業では、学生の内気さが原因で会話が難しくなっている。日本人学生は、恥をかかないためにミスをしなないようにするので、言いたいことをどういふか正確に分からない限り、積極的に話そうとしない。本論文では、こういった典型的な内気さの理由を探る。日本人は、Hofstede (1991)が「不確実性回避 (Uncertainty Avoidance)」と呼ぶ特性の度合いが高い。つまり、日本人は他の大多数の国々の人に比べて、危険を冒そうとしない。外国人との対話というのは言葉の間違いをする危険を伴うことなので、学生は、間違いをする可能性の低いアクティビティを通じて対話し、対話期待の連続体(Continuum of Interaction Expectation)に沿って外国人教師と共有する共通性を見出すように促される必要がある。

I am an English lecturer at the Kitami Institute of Technology in Kitami, Hokkaido. I teach Spoken English to about 450 first- and second-year students, most of whom are male, and all of whom are technology majors (engineering, information technology, chemistry, material science, etc.). According to a recent survey (July 2007), 81% of my students want to improve their spoken English, and I find this greatly encouraging. If my students actually want to improve their spoken English, it should not be difficult to engage them in activities designed to get them speaking. After all, they are motivated, bright, and have 6 years of English study behind them. So, what's the problem?

The problem is that many of my students cannot answer even simple questions that I ask them in class. For example, I might ask, “What did you do on the weekend?” and get responses ranging from one- and two-word answers like “watch TV” and “sleep” to nothing at all. When asked to participate in open-ended speaking activities (activities in which answers come mainly from the student and are not predictable) with their fellow students, many students find speaking difficult or impossible. Why is this? Why can’t Japanese students who want to speak English, speak English?

### Reasons for Japanese reluctance/inability to speak English

#### *Little or no practice speaking English*

Japanese university students, although they have studied English for six years in junior and senior high school, have rarely had the chance to speak English. As the focus is on reading, writing, and grammar, many Japanese students have a much higher proficiency in reading and writing English than they do in speaking it. Since they have rarely spoken English before, it is understandable that many find it difficult.

#### *Japanese classroom culture*

University students have spent 12 years in the Japanese education system, which encourages passivity. Students listen and take notes in classes which are delivered mostly in lectures, and are rarely or never asked to contribute. “In Japan, the role of the student is to listen, absorb, and retain

information” (McVeigh, 2002). As a result of the classroom culture they have grown up in, students expect that the teacher will do the speaking, and that they will do the listening. When asked by their foreign instructor to speak, many students become flustered and are unable to contribute.

#### *The Japanese are shy*

Zimbardo (1977) found that over 90% of Japanese described themselves as shy (shy now or shy in the past) and 75% see shyness as a problem. Shyness can be defined as:

“A mental attitude that predisposes people to be extremely concerned about the social evaluation of them by others. As such, it creates a keen sensitivity to cues of being rejected. There is a readiness to avoid people and situations that hold any potential for criticism of the shy person’s appearance or conduct. It involves keeping a low profile by holding back from initiating actions that might call attention to one’s self” (Zimbardo, 1977, p. 9, cited in Doyon, 2000).

Students do not want to speak English in front of their peers because they are afraid that they will look bad by doing so. They might make a mistake, or say something that will not be accepted by other students. Simply making any reply at all, no matter how short the reply is, calls attention to oneself, and this is something that many Japanese students wish to avoid at all costs, even if it means remaining completely silent.

The following are the results of my own survey (July 2007); 442 first and second year students replied. I asked 14

questions on this survey, but I have included only the results relevant to this paper.

1. Are you a shy person?
  - a) Yes, very shy 41%
  - b) Yes, a little shy 47%
  - c) No, not shy 12%
2. Are you shy when you speak English?
  - d) Yes, very shy 39%
  - e) Yes, a little shy 48%
  - f) No, not shy 13%

It is interesting to note that my students are slightly less shy when speaking English than they are otherwise. Still, 87% find themselves shy (very shy or a little shy). In university English conversation classes, the shyness of students makes conversation difficult. The desire of Japanese students to avoid making mistakes in order to avoid embarrassment means that they are reluctant to speak unless they know the exact way to say what they want to say.

### Reasons for Japanese shyness

There are two main reasons for the tendency of Japanese towards shyness:

1. Japanese culture, which values modesty, group harmony, and not speaking one's true opinion openly (Shimizu, 2006). In Japan, it is considered impolite to express what you truly think, especially if it goes against what others think.

Thus, when students are asked to say what they think, they are often at a loss as to how to respond.

2. The high level of uncertainty avoidance found by Hofstede (1991).

### Uncertainty Avoidance

Hofstede (1991) devised five categories which he used to compare cultural groups. These five dimensions are:

**Table 1. Hofstede's five cultural dimensions**

Power Distance	The extent to which a group accepts inequality of power among its members.
Uncertainty Avoidance	The extent to which a group is willing to accept ambiguity and take risks.
Individualism vs. Collectivism	The extent to which a group prioritizes the individual over the group, and vice-versa.
Masculinity vs. Femininity	The extent to which a group prioritizes assertiveness and achievement vs. relationships and caring, and vice-versa.
Long vs. Short Term Orientation	The extent to which a group attaches importance to the future versus the past and present.

It is the second group, uncertainty avoidance (UA), which relates most to Japanese shyness.

“A high Uncertainty Avoidance ranking indicates the country has a low tolerance for uncertainty and ambiguity. This creates a rule-oriented society that institutes laws, rules, regulations, and controls in order to reduce the amount of uncertainty” (Hofstede, online document).

**Table 2. A selection of countries with associated levels of Uncertainty Avoidance**

Country	Level of Uncertainty Avoidance
Japan	+110
Spain	+85
Arab countries	+11
Australia	-60
Canada	-72
The USA	-81
Great Britain	-126

Japan scored +110 in Hofstede’s uncertainty avoidance category, indicating a very high level of desire to avoid uncertainty. Japan is a very rule-oriented society, and group harmony is the result of everyone following the rules. Speaking English (or any other foreign language) is an unclear, unpredictable activity, especially for those who have not done much of it before and is therefore not only a challenge, but a huge risk. The student has to not only come up with the right answer to the question, but the right grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation. So often, students search for the *right answer* when a wide variety of answers

would do. But the student will pause and consider and finally say a word or two, or nothing at all, rather than risk making a mistake, either in the form of a technical error or getting the answer “wrong.”

This preoccupation with accuracy is representative of Japanese culture, in which accuracy is valued and rewarded. Certainly, being accurate is a valuable trait in many aspects of life. But in situations where communication is the goal, accuracy (focus on form) must take a backseat to fluency (focus on making oneself understood). As teachers, we must point out the differences between accuracy and fluency and when each can be used appropriately. For example, on written tests, accuracy is graded, and therefore concern over accuracy is appropriate. But in communicative acts, while not abandoning accuracy completely, the focus must necessarily shift to fluency. To succeed in speaking, learners need to take risks with language, to not hesitate too much over wording and grammar. Japanese, with their high level of uncertainty avoidance, do not naturally fall into the category of risk-takers.

### Teachers with weak uncertainty avoidance

Most English teachers in Japan come from countries where the level of UA is weak (see table above). While this means that we teachers ourselves will be willing to take risks in learning language, a positive aspect of a low level of UA, it also creates a mismatch in expectations between students and teachers (see table 3).

**Table 3. Uncertainty Avoidance and classroom interactions**

(adapted from Umemoto, 2001, p.4)

Weak UA (English teachers)	Strong UA (Japanese students)
Students are active participants.	Students are passive recipients.
Teachers expect interaction.	Teachers do not expect interaction.
Students are eager to speak.	Students are reluctant to speak.
Teachers expect to be questioned.	Teachers do not expect to be questioned.
Risks are confronted.	Risks are avoided.
Creativity is valued.	Accuracy is valued.

When we look at the expectations of the student versus the expectations of the teacher, we can see that they are diametrically opposed. Teachers expect what students simply cannot give them (at least, not at first)—active interaction.

Teachers who have tried to silence a class in order to get the attention of students know that Japanese students, in fact all Japanese, are not always silent. With friends, family, co-workers, Japanese are relaxed, and the words flow with ease. While this certainly relates to the fact that in such situations Japanese are speaking their own native language, we must also take into account the situation that the speakers are interacting in.

### Three interactional domains

Lebra (1976) proposes three interactional domains for the Japanese. The situation described above, where Japanese are actively enjoying discussion with members of their inner

circle, is called the intimate domain. Here, speakers worry little about the reaction of their listeners, knowing that they will not be harshly judged.

A second domain is the ritual domain, in which behavior is guarded, bounded by social rules and etiquette. Speakers are careful not to say anything which would not be well-received by others. Usual classroom behavior in Japan, especially between teacher and student, falls into this category. The third domain is the anomic domain, in which people are anonymous and not interacting at all, for example on a subway, or shopping.

What English teachers are faced with is the natural tendency of their Japanese students to view the classroom as belonging to the ritual domain, while the behavior belonging to the intimate domain is much more appropriate for speaking English. What we must try to do is to move students out of the ritual domain and into the intimate domain, to decrease student anxiety over how they will be perceived, and to help them relax and feel more comfortable with speaking English. “To the extent that Japanese students view the EFL class as belonging to the ritual domain, they will continue to be reluctant to speak” (Umemoto, 2001, p. 7).

### Reducing shyness in the Japanese classroom

#### *The intimate teacher*

There exists in the Japanese classroom a continuum of behavior with the teacher expecting interaction on one end and the student avoiding it on the other, which we can call the interaction expectations continuum. In Figure 1 below,

the differences in expectations of students and teacher, caused by cultural differences and quite opposite levels of uncertainty avoidance, have caused a huge gap between students and teacher. In this classroom, students cannot interact with each other in English, except at a low level. The teacher asks questions to individual students and the majority of students reply poorly. The teacher expects what students simply cannot give him/her.



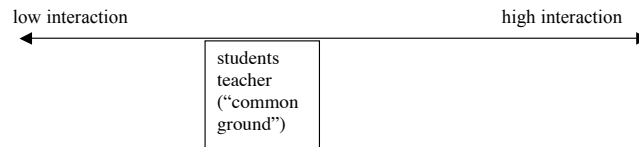
**Figure 1. Opposing expectations of interaction**

In the following dream scenario, the teacher has succeeded in drawing his/her students over to an area of interaction expectation we might expect to see in the west, in a classroom where both teacher and students are expecting a great deal of interaction. Although such a situation is theoretically possible, in practice it would be unrealistic to hope for with our Japanese students. To reach such a level, students would have to spend some time overseas, in a country with low UA (see Table 2), or spend a great deal of time with low UA foreigners here in Japan. I have noticed that students of mine (at a former university) who spent close to a year studying in the USA had much higher levels of expectation of interaction. I believe that their degree of uncertainty avoidance became lower as a direct result of immersion in a foreign culture with a low level of UA. This would be an interesting area for further research.



**Figure 2. Common expectations of interaction—unrealistic**

In Figure 3 below, much progress has been made from Figure 1. The teacher has moved toward the students, and the students have moved towards the teacher. Teacher and students now occupy common ground, where expectations of interaction are similar. In this classroom, the teacher expects what the students can give him/her.



**Figure 3. Common expectations of interaction—realistic**

What is necessary, then, is to move from Figure 1 to Figure 3. Common ground between teacher and students must be reached. But how?

### Reaching common ground—moving the teacher

The first step is to envision what must be done, and move towards it. English teacher expectations of their Japanese students are simply too high. Why would students suddenly speak English freely when they have never done so before? It is unreasonable on the part of the teacher to expect this.

English teachers must reduce their expectations of their students. Teachers should realize that it is very difficult, if not impossible, and stressful for students to answer questions asked to them individually, in front of their peers. In this way, the teacher observes and respects the position of the students on the interaction expectations continuum, and moves a bit towards them. This means that students do not have as far to go to reach common ground.



Figure 4. Moving the teacher

### The ritual teacher

Students need to move from the ritual domain to the intimate domain, and it is the teacher's job to get them there. Teachers do not often realize how much their tone of voice and demeanor influence the class atmosphere. A teacher who is *all business* and focuses on the completion of tasks with little or no warmth or interest in the students will maintain a classroom restricted to the ritual domain. We could call this teacher the ritual teacher. Intent on getting through the class, such teachers often ignore the fact that their students are

fellow human beings with lives of their own and stories to tell. Teacher and students remain in the roles cast for them, and students make little progress in speaking English.



Figure 5. Expectations of ritual students and ritual teachers

### The intimate teacher

The intimate teacher sees his/her students as interesting individuals, and tries to interact with them on an intimate level. The intimate teacher has a sense of humor, talks about himself/herself (but not to excess), smiles a lot and speaks in a tone of voice that says to students, "I am here because I want to be. I like my job and being with you. Let's enjoy our time together." Doyon (2000, p. 8) recommends "removing the teacher's mask." To learn the names of hundreds of students is, for most teachers, impossible. But with a seating plan, or student-made ID cards with a student photo attached, teachers can call on students by name. By using students' first names, normally reserved for use with family and close friends, teachers help to draw students into the intimate domain.

Evaluation is a tool that can be used both for and against student efforts. When a student attempts to communicate but is corrected by the teacher in front of the student's peers, it is a message to the student that their English is not good



enough. If students have been encouraged to aim for fluency rather than accuracy, teachers must also accept that mistakes will occur and should pass unnoticed. Positive evaluation sends a message to the student that he/she can communicate in English, on some level, and for many students it may be the first time that they have realized this. By moving towards the students on the interaction expectations continuum and by interacting with them as an intimate teacher, the teacher sets the stage for the next step—moving the students.

### Reaching common ground—moving the students

While the teacher should adapt his/her methods to better suit student expectations, it is also necessary for the students to progress towards interaction. After all, a main goal of a conversation class or a Spoken English class is that students will be able to express themselves in spoken English and interact with other speakers.

One of the first things that the teacher must do is to encourage students to communicate western-style. Teachers should explain why students should not worry so much about making mistakes but to focus on their goal of communication. An initial explanation of why fluency is the goal of oral activities and a frequent reminder to “Just talk!” are both ways that help students to push past the barriers keeping them from communicating in English.

The teacher must take careful note of the position of the students at the other end of the interaction expectations continuum and plan to move the students slowly towards common ground. The teacher chooses activities that are not too far removed from what students have done in

the past, and slowly moves toward higher risk activities. Doyon (2001) calls this graded anxiety desensitization. For example, most students have made a speech before in Japanese or in English, so making a speech or a presentation in English is something that will be familiar to them, even if they do not find it comfortable.

In my first- and second-year university classes, students are graded on their performance in three activities which I have created for them. First of all, they make one presentation per semester, at the end of the semester, instead of a written exam. They are graded equally on the following; eye contact, voice, body language, content, and visual aids. Visual aids are a valuable aid for the shy student giving a presentation, as it gives the audience something to look at besides the student. In my students’ presentations, visual aids and content are typical strong points, as they are prepared beforehand. Eye contact, voice, and body language vary widely from student to student, with some students reading their whole presentation and making zero eye contact, and others making energetic well-rehearsed presentations with no reading at all, great eye contact, a strong clear voice with good intonation, and strong body language. I do not know why there is such a wide range of presentation ability. I hope to look into this in future research.

PowerPoint presentations would be an option as well, although this introduces to students the additional work of learning to use a new program, as well as the possible problems of computer access. Because of these potential problems, as well as time restraints, I have not yet investigated the possibilities of students doing PowerPoint presentations.



Another activity my students do is called *Conversation in Action*. Students are asked to memorize a short dialogue, based on what we have been learning in class, and perform it in front of the class. Students are given three points for each of memorization, voice, and body language (including action), with one possible extra bonus point for “*Gambarimashita!*” Students are graded immediately afterward and given some brief feedback and advice on how to improve. Students seem to appreciate the instant feedback very much and generally perform well. The biggest obstacle for students to overcome in this activity is their reluctance to use body language to convey meaning. Students with low scores for body language typically stand stiffly and may not make eye contact with their partner. On the other hand, some students get a perfect score for facial expression, gestures, and action and have a good time doing it, hamming it up for their friends.

According to my survey (July 2007), 90% of students thought that Conversation in Action helped them to be less shy about speaking English, with 28% thinking that it helped a lot and 62% thinking that it helped them a little. As well, 91% of students thought that Conversation in Action helped them to be more confident about speaking English, with 22% thinking that it helped them a lot and 69% thinking that it helped them a little. While the majority thought that it helped only a little, any perceived reduction in shyness and increase in confidence must be welcomed.

Conversation in Action is another activity which is low to medium risk for students because they have had a chance to practice what they will say. The level of uncertainty is low, any uncertainty at all being due to the possible effects of performance anxiety.

The previous two activities, making a presentation and conversation in action, are both graded activities. By assigning grades, the teacher provides an additional source of motivation for the student to perform well. I have not tried it, but I suspect that student performance in both activities would suffer if it were not graded.

Another activity that my students do is group discussion. Students are put into groups of four and given a selection of topics to choose from. When they are ready I say, “Don’t stop talking in English for five minutes. English only. Ready, set, go!” I walk around the room and enforce the English only rule. At the end of five minutes I ask how many groups could stay in English the whole time. Usually at least half of the groups have spoken English only, and even the other groups have not spoken much Japanese. Students seem to enjoy the challenge of speaking in English, and when everyone is doing it, individual risk is lessened. Students practice group discussion every week at the end of class and are graded on it twice per semester. I am currently working on a game format of group discussion that seems promising. By following the rules of the game, discussions are balanced so that there is no chance for shy students to be passed over. Students who speak Japanese get a yellow warning card, and a red card if they use Japanese twice. There is a system of getting points for each contribution that students seem to enjoy. I hope to report on the results of using this game with my students in the near future if all goes well.

Group discussion differs from the two previous activities in that it is unrehearsed, and therefore most similar to a natural conversation. While the level of uncertainty is high because students are producing their own English, the level

of stress is not high. According to my survey, students find group discussion fun (a lot or a little totaling 84%) and a good way to practice speaking English (92%), and that it helps them to improve their spoken English (89%), as well as getting to know their classmates (89%).

### Conclusion

In this article, we have looked at the reasons for Japanese reluctance to speak English, focusing on shyness. Hofstede's (1986) uncertainty avoidance measure helps us to identify the Japanese as a people who wish to avoid uncertainty, and therefore risk. By avoiding high risk activities but providing low and medium risk activities, the teacher helps his/her students move along the interaction expectation continuum from low to medium expectations of interaction.

Drawing on work done by Lebra (1976), teachers can help their students move from the ritual domain, where behavior is guarded and students unwilling to risk making mistakes, to the intimate domain, where students are relaxed and fear of making mistakes subsides. It is important for the teacher to stress the importance of fluency over accuracy in oral activities, and to encourage students to speak freely without fear of making mistakes. Finally, while the activities I have described have been thus far well received by my students, according to my survey, it is worth noting that there is room for improvement. To start with, although most students found that Conversation in Action and Group Discussion helped them, the majority of students reported that they helped "a little". It would be worthwhile attempting to find out why it only helped a little, and what would help them a lot.

**Jennifer Claro** teaches English at Kitami Institute of Technology in Kitami, Hokkaido. Her current research interests are virtual learning environments, online intercultural student exchanges, and how Japanese culture affects student ability to speak English. <claro1@mail.kitami-it.ac.jp>

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