

Japanese Learners' Reactions To Communicative English Lessons

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Active student oral participation, a cornerstone of communicative approaches to language instruction, runs counter to certain Japanese cultural norms. A summary of pertinent findings in the literature on Japanese and American classroom interactional styles is presented. An exploratory investigation of Japanese students' reactions to communicative English lessons taught by a Western teacher revealed: (a) that students perceived Western and Japanese teaching approaches to differ in fundamental ways, (b) that students wanted to become more active class participants but felt inhibited about doing so, and (c) that students reported making progress in overcoming their inhibitions after a month of communicative lessons. Factors contributing to these gains may have been: (a) students' belief that Japanese people need to become more expressive; (b) the teacher's sensitivity to the interaction styles of his students; (c) explicit descriptions concerning sociopragmatic norm differences; and (d) positive reinforcement of students' attempts at speaking.

学習者による積極的な発言という言語教育へのコミュニカティブなアプローチの基本は、日本の文化的規範に反している。この論文では、日本とアメリカの文化差に関する研究の中から、この問題に直接関係のある知見を紹介したのち、西洋人の教師が教えるコミュニカティブな英語の授業に対しての日本人学生の反応を検討する。その結果、学生は西洋と日本の教授スタイルは根本的に異なると認識していること、学生はもっと積極的に授業に参加したいと思っているにもかかわらず、そうしてはいけないように感じていること、そうした抑制はコミュニカティブな授業を受け始めて一月たつと克服され始めることがわかった。こうした変化に貢献しているのは、学生が日本人はもっと自己表現ができるようになる必要があると信じていること、学生のインターアクションのスタイルへの教師の感受性、社会・語用論的規範の違いについての明確な記述、学生の話そうとする試みへの肯定的な強化であったかもしれない。

Classroom researcher Fred Anderson (1993), in identifying the classroom behaviors Western teachers often find disturbing, says Japanese students are unlikely to initiate discussion, bring up new topics, challenge the instructor, ask questions for clarification, or volunteer answers. "Most Japanese students," reports Anderson, "will talk only if specifically called upon, and only then if there is a clear-cut answer." Even if the answer is obvious, he continues, "it may be preceded by a pause so long that the instructor is tempted to supply the answer first" (p. 102).

To the Western¹ mind, such passivity implies a negligent attitude toward learning. American and European schools generally encourage a lively exchange of ideas in the classroom, the goal of which is the stimulated student—attentive, intelligent, and expressive (Rohlen, 1983, p. 245). Rohlen (1983) found American and Japanese high schools to differ greatly in their pedagogical goals and approaches. He reports that Japanese tradition emphasizes the lecture format in high school, rather than a discussion format, because information loading—not the development of critical thinking skills or facility in self-expression—is the central goal of instruction (p. 245). Western teachers new to Japan quickly come to realize the extent to which Japanese cultural norms are indeed at variance with Western norms where classroom interaction patterns are concerned. This variance is the primary subject of this paper.

A survey of the extensive literature documenting differential interpersonal communication styles in Japan and the West and the socialization practices that shape these styles can help Western teachers better understand the culture-based dispositions of their Japanese students. Newcomers to Japan may be surprised to learn that a student's reluctance to respond quickly is a deeply ingrained response which accords with sociocultural norms; it is more an act of politeness than one of recalcitrance. As Wolfson points out, one problem is that "norms of interaction are both culture-specific and largely unconscious" (1989, p. 37). In practice, this means that the same humanistic teacher who would overlook certain linguistic errors to bolster a learner's self-confidence may chastise the same learner for "poor class participation." As Thomas puts it, "While grammatical error may reveal a speaker to be a less than proficient language-user, pragmatic failure reflects badly on him/her as a *person*" (1983, p. 97). The point is that teachers who are culturally aware (see Wajnryb, 1988) are likely to be more tolerant and more realistic in their expectations regarding the classroom participation of their students than teachers who rigidly apply standards that stem from an ethnocentric perspective. By studying the sociopragmatic rules of

Japanese and Western cultures, students may learn how and when to assimilate certain Western norms and thus to minimize instances of "sociopragmatic failure" (Thomas, 1983). Lessons in how to express oneself actively in ways that would please a Western teacher would seem to be particularly valuable to Japanese learners of English—even more useful, say, than lessons in proper bank, hotel, or restaurant talk, especially as the classroom is often the sole setting in which many EFL students have occasion to use English.² The literature review that follows, then, may have both practical and pedagogical value.

This article also reports on an exploratory study of the reactions of a group of Japanese students to their Western instructor's approach to teaching English, an approach which places primary emphasis on active oral communication. Examining learning from the learner's perspective has gained prominence among second language acquisition researchers (see, for example, Tarone & Yule, 1989), yet this perspective has not been adequately explored in regard to the issue of differing communication styles of learners and their teachers. This issue is particularly timely as it concerns English education in Japan, where educators have been urged by the Ministry of Education to make classes more communicative. The term "communicative," however, is culturally-laden because ways of being communicative vary across cultures. In this respect, discussion about the proposed shift toward incorporating communicative teaching approaches is itself an exercise in cross-cultural communication. This study attempts to inform that discussion.

Literature Review: Communication Styles in Japan and the U.S.

Interlocutors from different cultures face barriers to understanding which go beyond language. Asian and Western cultures exhibit a particularly high degree of sociocultural variation (see Samovar and Porter, 1991, p. 77, for a discussion of this point). It is not surprising that researchers familiar with communication styles in Japan and the U.S. point to contrasting cultural assumptions, behaviors, and patterns as major sources of misunderstanding and conflict.

Low versus High Self-disclosure. Barnlund (1975) generalizes that Japanese and Americans have differing attitudes about the extent to which the "private self" should be exposed in interpersonal encounters, the Japanese tending to expose less and Americans tending to expose more (p. 30). Based on this assumption, which is consistent with the findings of Doi (1991) and Tobin (1991), Barnlund lists certain predictions about

Japanese communication-related characteristics. Among them are that the Japanese, relative to Americans, are likely to interact more selectively and with fewer persons; to prefer more regulated and less spontaneous forms of communication; to communicate less of themselves verbally, preferring a lower degree of personal involvement; and to be less well known to themselves (pp. 33-35). Bowers, concurring with Barnlund's observations, cites Nakanishi's 1986 study which found that Japanese, unlike Americans, consider "moderate and high self-disclosers to be communicatively less attractive than low self-disclosers" (Bowers, 1988, p. 20). Barnlund (1975) also reports on a survey of how Japanese and American college students perceive themselves as communicators. The Japanese described themselves as reserved, formal, silent, cautious, and evasive, but the Americans saw themselves as self-assertive, informal, talkative, spontaneous, and frank. Barnlund observes, "The qualities that one society nurtures—reserve, formality, and silence in one case, and self assertion, informality, and talkativeness in the other—are the same qualities the other society discourages" (1975, p. 59). Commentaries on the socialization of Japanese children by mothers (Clancy, 1986), and by teachers at the preschool level (Lewis, 1991; and Peak, 1991), the elementary school level (White, 1987; and Anderson, 1993), and the high school level (Rohlen, 1983) lend support to Barnlund's assertion that reserve, formality, and silence are traits that are nurtured by Japanese care-givers and educators.

Group-consciousness versus Individualism: Condon (1984), like other observers of the two cultures (see, for example, Gudykunst & San Antonio, 1993), draws attention to the value placed on group consciousness by the Japanese and the North American emphasis on individualism:

[T]he Japanese are encouraged to think first of being part of the group. "We" always comes before "I." We of the family, we of this nation, or just "we" who are together in a room talking. One is never fully independent; one must always be conscious of others. For Americans the individual, not the group, is basic. (p. 9)

White (1987) and Anderson (1993) report a much stronger emphasis on group cooperative tasks in Japanese elementary schools than in U.S. schools. Lewis (1991) and Tobin, Wu, and Davidson (1991) report the same predominance of group activities in Japanese nursery schools. In her discussion of "moral education" in Japan, White (1987) cites a 1983 official government list of goals for the elementary school syllabus. The target behaviors listed include listening to the opinions of others, admitting one's

own mistakes or faults, behaving unselfishly, reflecting always on one's words and behavior, and being sensitive to others (p. 17). White adds that one way of promoting values such as these is through the use of stories that are presented in the form of social dilemmas to be worked out by the class. "As in other such instances," she writes, "the solution [to the dilemmas] is not valued unless it is generated by the class itself—and unless it has *unanimous support* [italics added]" (p. 17).

Consensus versus Autonomous Decision Making: The value placed on unanimous support in the Japanese culture reflects a different attitude regarding decision making than is common in the United States. Condon (1984) claims that while Americans feel the individual's job in expediting the decision-making process is to "stand up and be counted," the Japanese believe people "should talk and talk until some agreement emerges" (pp. 10-11). Japanese children, notes Condon, are discouraged from being the proverbial "nail that sticks up" and are expected to preserve harmony by using "cautious and indirect speech, taking time to sense another's mood before venturing an opinion, and avoiding as much as possible public disagreement" (p. 14). Kennedy and Yaginuma (1991) concur with Condon, stating that in Japanese society,

... there is little utility in such [American] frontier social values as rugged individualism and the ability to out-argue the fellow on the other side of the table. People who seek to impress their personalities on others only serve to disrupt social harmony. The great value the Japanese put on modesty, restraint, and accommodation is in clear contrast to the Western values of self-confidence, decisiveness, and individuality. (p. 31)

Based on observations of Japanese elementary school classroom interaction, Anderson (1993) contends that the Japanese virtue of holding back one's personal views while sensing and submitting to an emerging group view is consciously fostered in school. Unlike American teachers, who usually elicit and respond to comments from individual students, the Japanese teachers observed waited until a student's ideas had been discussed and assessed by peers before providing an evaluation, which was often "a summary of whatever collective response emerged from the group interaction" (p. 105). Sakamoto and Naotsuka (1982) point to a number of culturally-derived assumptions underlying the ways people in the two cultures think and interact. One is, using their terminology, that Japanese abide by the "polite fiction" that conversation partners think and feel alike, while Americans assume that each person's ideas are original (p. 55).

High versus Low Status Consciousness: A second culturally-derived assumption observed by Sakamoto and Naotsuka is that whereas Americans believe, or pretend, that all participants' views have equal worth, the Japanese tend to be more status-conscious, feeling that one should "know one's place" and speak, or not speak, accordingly. Rohlen's (1991) study of the *senpai/kobai* (senior/junior) relationships among Japanese bank employees supports this contention. Rohlen identifies numerous principles of verticality adhered to in senior/junior relationships throughout Japanese society, including that between teachers and students. According to these principles, says Rohlen, *senpai* are supposed to "advise, console, teach, and discipline" while the role of the *kobai* is to "confide in, listen to, depend upon, follow, and respect their *senpai*" (p. 23). Rohlen stresses that, unlike Americans, who may downplay differences in age and status to foster closeness, the Japanese make much of hierarchical relationships based on age and view them in a positive light, as "a matter of intimacy and emotional involvement" (p. 21).

The Listener's Role—Self-restraint versus Attentive Feedback: Related to the issue of attention or non-attention to status is that of the varying cultural roles assigned to listeners. Bowers (1988) claims that Aristotelian tradition places the primary burden for communication on the speaker, that the listener's job in mainstream Western cultures is to let the speaker know whether and to what degree a message has been understood. American students, therefore, generally "give feedback concerning content by rewording, amplifying, and asking questions" (p. 19). Bowers says listeners in Japan, following Confucian and Buddhist traditions, are under a greater burden to interpret a message for themselves, to fill in the relationships between ideas when they are not explicitly stated. Anderson (1993) concurs, adding that Japanese students are unlikely to request clarification because of embarrassment about being unable to understand (p. 106). Bowers (1988) points out that feedback mechanisms used in the West, such as repetition or rephrasing, may be considered discourteous in Japanese contexts. The listener traits that the Japanese admire most, he says, are *sasshi*, the ability to glean messages from a minimum number of explicit cues, and *enryo*, which he defines as "self-restraint vis-a-vis explicit verbal responses out of consideration for the source and/or presence of other receivers" (p. 19). Though questioning and back channel cues, or *aizuchi* (see LoCastro, 1987), are not uncommon in informal conversations, the virtues of *sasshi* and *enryo* are called for in public communication settings such as classrooms: "In particular, questions will probably not be asked and com-

ments will be made primarily to show respect for the source rather than give feedback regarding the message" (Bowers, 1988, p. 19). Providing a student's perspective on participation patterns in secondary and tertiary schools, Kobayashi (1989) confirms that the silent Japanese pupil is considered the virtuous one. Students in Japan, she explains, "are expected to listen to lectures respectfully without expressing disagreement" (p. 27). Asking questions during class, she says, is tantamount to using up others' valuable time since "others may not be interested in the questions or may already know the answer" (p. 27). She also states that self-assertion in classroom settings tends to be equated with "exhibitionism or presumption," and is thus generally frowned upon.

Orderly Turn Taking versus Floor Competition: The conversation styles of Japanese and Americans also differ in terms of topic management and turn-taking patterns. Sakamoto and Naotsuka (1982) offer a useful pair of analogies. They compare Western-style exchanges to a game of tennis or volleyball in which a ball, the conversational topic, is excitedly hit back and forth by two or more interlocutors: "Whoever is nearest and quickest hits the ball, and if you step back, someone else will hit it. No one stops to give you a turn. You're responsible for taking your own turn" (p. 82). A Japanese conversation, they say, is more like bowling in the sense that each interlocutor patiently awaits a turn and then carefully rolls a different ball from the one just rolled (i.e., each speaker initiates a new topic): "There is no rush, no excitement, no scramble for the ball" (p. 83). Sakamoto and Naotsuka insist that the teacher who tries to get Western-style discussions going among Japanese students is doomed to failure because those students are "playing the wrong game" (p. 84).

If Japanese conversational style, particularly in the public setting of the classroom, involves little competition for the floor, then one would expect Japanese students in multi-ethnic classes to have comparatively low levels of participation during discussions. Reports from 40 Japanese students at Soka University indicated that this was precisely the scenario when they studied English with other international students at an American university in 1993 and 1994. While participants from various countries were able to engage in lively debate, the Japanese students—whose English proficiency scores approximated those of their classmates—had great difficulty in joining class discussions. Sato (1990), studying whether patterns of turn taking among Asian students differed from those of non-Asian students in two ESL classes in the United States, found that the Asian students took significantly fewer self-selected and overall turns than non-Asians. In a similar study of Chinese and Japanese students,

Shimura (1988) reported that among these two Asian groups, the Japanese participated less.

The Study

There is reason to believe that though they may occupy the same classroom, Western teachers and their Japanese students may be worlds apart in their views concerning classroom interaction. Condon's (1979) descriptions of what constitutes ideal student behavior in Japan and in America support this belief. The model Japanese student, he says "never interrupts the class to ask the teacher a question. During discussion times even when he has an opinion he is careful to keep it to himself" (pp. 22-23). The model American classroom, says Condon, "is a place for discussion, for expressing opinions, even at times calling for a student to interrupt a lecture to question some point or to ask for clarification" (p. 23).

This study investigates what happens, from the perspective of the learners, when these "two worlds" converge. Specifically, it explores the perceptions, attitudes, and patterns of interaction of a group of Japanese university students in an English conversation course with a Western teacher. Drawing on observational and survey data, the study seeks to address these questions:

1. (a) What do the Japanese students perceive to be the major differences between their English class taught by a foreigner and English classes taught by Japanese teachers?
(b) Which style of class do they prefer?
2. (a) How do the Japanese students feel when they are called upon to express themselves publicly in an English class taught by a Westerner?
(b) Are there times when students have something to say in class but refrain from speaking? If so, what are their reasons for staying silent?
3. What changes in participatory behavior and attitudes toward participation do the students report after a month or more of English instruction by a Western teacher?
4. What factors seem to have effected change in student behaviors and/or attitudes?

Method

Subjects: This study was conducted at a medium-sized private Japanese university which offers 50 sections of English conversation—divided

into elementary, intermediate, and advanced levels—and limits enrollment to 17 students per class. The number of students wanting to take English conversation each year is double the number of openings; only those with the highest proficiency scores are enrolled. Those allowed to enroll probably feel somewhat privileged to have been selected and motivated to improve their English. The class under investigation in this study is not considered by the researcher to be a “typical” Japanese university class, and the perspectives of this group of learners are not considered to represent the views of any larger student population.

The subjects included 17 Japanese students in an English conversation course and their instructor, who received his Ph.D. and taught for one year in the United States before coming to the Japanese university. The students were placed into the elementary level according to their scores on the Michigan Test of English Language Proficiency. This was these students’ first university English course, an elective, taught by a foreign instructor. I felt it appropriate in a study such as this one, designed to investigate perceptions and interactions in a cross-cultural setting, that the participating instructor hold a generally positive view of the students and their culture. If the teacher disliked either, then the picture presented might be based more on interpersonal clashes than on issues pertaining to specific cultural tendencies. The instructor had been living in Japan for four years at the time, displayed a fondness for Japanese culture, and had a good rapport with students. In this respect, his class seemed suitable for the purposes of this study.

Data Collection. The English conversation class met for 90 minutes twice a week for 14 weeks. During the seventh class meeting, students completed a questionnaire, in Japanese, consisting of seven open-ended questions concerning teacher/student interaction and a request for biographical information. A Japanese graduate student translated the questionnaire into Japanese, administered it, and provided an oral interpretation of the responses which were tape recorded and transcribed. During the seventh week, a 90-minute lesson was video taped. Short sessions of the class had been video taped on two prior occasions to accustom the class to the presence of the camera. Two days after the video taping, two female students and, subsequently, two male students were interviewed.³ The graduate student acted as interpreter and assistant interviewer. After the course ended, the instructor was interviewed. The focus was on the instructor’s teaching philosophy and his impressions of the students’ participation patterns throughout the course.

Results and Discussion

The first research question posed was, "What do the Japanese students perceive to be the major differences between English classes taught by their foreign teacher and English classes they have had with Japanese teachers?" Students were asked to describe these differences and to tell which style they preferred in questions 1a and 1b of the student questionnaire (see Appendix). The students interviewed elaborated on their written answers to these questions.

In this discussion, the Western instructor's class is referred to as the communicative class because it seeks to foster EFL communication skills by having learners communicate in English. The Japanese instructors' classes are referred to as traditional classes. These labels merely conserve words. Remarks made about this teacher's class are not considered to apply to communicative classes in general. The researcher recognizes that the teaching approaches of a great many Japanese EFL teachers are nontraditional and/or communicative in nature. A few other caveats regarding students' comparisons of this "communicative class" and "traditional classes" must be mentioned. One is that the Western teacher, as stated earlier, was particularly likable: he was young, enthusiastic, and talented. The class itself, moreover, was designed to be attractive to students—enrollment was kept small and the teacher determined the course contents and materials. In addition, he was near at hand and identifiable when the survey was conducted while the Japanese teachers commented on were not; this fact may have influenced responses considerably. The traditional classes students wrote about were typically large, and their teachers probably had little control over course content or materials. Clearly, the scales were tipped in favor of the communicative class, and the data should be interpreted in this light.

The responses to questions 1a and 1b convey the general perception among respondents that traditional and communicative classes had different foci of and approaches to instruction. (Responses referred to but not quoted here are included in the appendix. Students are identified by number, S1 through S17, so the reference "1a: S2" indicates the response made to question 1a by student 2.) Students remarked that traditional classes focused mainly on grammar and translation (1a: S2, S7, S9, S12). The Japanese instructors of those classes were reported to employ a more teacher-centered approach (1b: S16), mainly giving lectures (1b: S1) but occasionally asking students to read their written translations to check their grammatical accuracy (1a: S14). One learner commented that Japanese instructors "sometimes scold students when they cannot understand or cannot answer" (1a: S11).

Students claimed the communicative class focused on developing oral skills by engaging them in discussion (1a: S7, S9, S13). The Westerner's style of teaching was said to involve creating a lively, enjoyable atmosphere (1a: S12; 1b: S4, S10), encouraging active participation (1b: S8, S14 and S15), and occasionally overlooking mistakes (1a: S17). Other statements included: (a) that Japanese is the predominant language used in traditional classes while English predominates in communicative classes (1a: S4 and S8; 1b: S2); (b) that students are passive in traditional classes and more active in communicative classes (1a: S1; 1b: S5, S8, S13); and (c) that student talk is solicited more frequently in the communicative class than in traditional classes: "Japanese English teachers usually call on just one or two students, but [this teacher] always calls on everyone so each person can answer twice or three times in a class" (from interview transcripts).

The student perceptions are reminiscent of Condon's (1979) observation that Japanese classrooms differ from American classrooms in the degree to which discussion and self-expression are encouraged. The question to turn to is whether this group of learners expressed a preference for the communicative class or for the classes they had taken previously. In response to question 1b, 15 of the 17 declared a preference for a communicative approach. Though many variables could account for this, as discussed earlier, this statistic makes it clear that the communicative focus was not rejected. In fact, two students interviewed claimed that it was traditional classes they disliked. One said, "Now I'm taking a required English class and I feel it's the same as my high school and junior high English classes—just sitting there and doing translation work. I wish the class were the same style as the English conversation class" (interview transcripts).

The second research question addresses the Japanese learners' reactions to being "called upon to express themselves publicly." The video taped lesson was examined with this question in mind. The interaction patterns observed were consistent with the descriptions of Japanese communication styles. The learners seemed shy, restrained, and circumspect. They did not compete for the floor, but rather waited patiently for their turn. The pace was slow, pauses were long, and much of the talk, including questions, was solicited by the teacher. The observational data, then, indicate that these students did not respond to the call for active participation by participating actively.

Questions 2a and 2b of the questionnaire were intended to determine the extent to which behavior was a reflection of underlying attitudes. Significantly, and surprisingly, all 17 of these learners reported positive feelings. Five said they liked having to speak out in class because doing so

improved their general English skills (2a: S2, S4, S5, S9, S15). Ambivalent feelings about being called on were also expressed (2a: S3, S14, S17). S3 stated, "I feel nervous, but also excited." S14 explained, "Because of my lack of English ability, I feel nervous. But my foreign teacher is very kind, so I soon started to enjoy [speaking activities]."

Asked whether there are times when they have things to say but do not raise their hands or say anything, 15 of the 17 respondents answered yes, indicating inner tension between the urge to speak out in class and the urge not to. Asked what their reasons were for staying silent at those times, 11 students said they feared that their English would be flawed or misunderstood. S11 admitted worrying "about people's eyes [on him or her]." S3 wanted to "hear the other people's opinion" before speaking out. S12 stated, "I lacked courage. Also, during the time I was battling with myself over whether or not to raise my hand, the time quickly ran out."

Survey question 3, an open-ended one designed to address research question 3, asked students whether, and in what ways, their attitudes about speaking out in class had changed [in the four weeks] since the course had begun. 12 of the 17 learners answered that their attitudes had changed. The other five said they had not, one indicating, "It's too early to see any difference" (S7). The most commonly reported change was overcoming the reluctance to speak, becoming less cowardly (S1) and more determined to "at least say something" (S9). S8 wrote, "I attend class thinking, 'I will challenge myself.'" Two students explained that their participation had increased as they became less worried about committing grammatical errors (S5, S12). Other responses point to a growing excitement in the exchange of ideas taking place and a tendency to work harder at formulating and asserting opinions (3: S14, S15, S16). S10 commented, "At first, I felt little enthusiasm, but now I'm beginning to enjoy communicating with others. Little by little, I'm becoming excited about English."

Finally, I shall draw on the survey and interview data to speculate about factors that may have helped bring about the changes in behavior and attitude that the students claim to have undergone. Key factors seem to have been (a) a belief among some students that Japanese people are not expressive enough; (b) the teacher's sensitivity to the students' communication styles; (c) the explicit explanations and training provided concerning comparative communication styles; and (d) the teacher's consistent praise of attempts at speaking and repeated assurances that imperfect English was acceptable.

The sentiment that Japanese people are not expressive enough was conveyed in several students' answers to question 4. S2 responded,

"There's nothing I want [him] to understand. Japanese people are the ones who need to change. They should fix up their bad points." S8 wrote, "We Japanese people are not active in raising our hands. Silence is a good thing for us. However, in international society, it's not good and we need to overcome these ways of thinking, so English conversation activities are good training for us." One male interviewee remarked that his way of thinking had changed during the two months of the English course and added that he hoped to emulate some of the personality traits of the teacher. He said, "Compared with Japanese people, [the teacher] is very open and frank and positive. I think Japanese people are too sensitive, pessimistic, serious, nervous, naive, etc. That kind of open-hearted personality [i.e., that of the teacher] is good" (interview transcripts).

A second factor that may have promoted change was the teacher's sensitivity to the communication styles of his students. Most students were able to identify, in response to question 4, things they wanted their teacher to understand about Japanese culture or ways of communicating. For example, some felt the Western teacher should know that Japanese people are reserved (S16), modest (S7), and silent even when they have something to say (S1). S1 hoped the teacher would realize that Japanese students "want to confer with other people [in forming opinions]" and S5 pointed out that "Japanese people respect harmony and want to avoid conflict."

During our discussion, the instructor made reference to many of the cultural traits the students listed, as well as others. In his four years of teaching at a Japanese university, he had acquired firsthand knowledge of many of the tendencies of Japanese students referred to above, such as the aversion to being the "nail that sticks up." The following is part of his response to a question about whether the students in his class behaved as he had expected:

I expect Japanese people to be like Japanese people. And they are supposed to be group-oriented, so they really like to feel a sense of harmony in their group, and that's very important, to have a sense of togetherness. So if you ask an open question, you say, "Does anybody want to say something?" whoever would say something would disrupt the harmony of the group. [Secondly,] whoever speaks would have to say something personal, without the consent of the group. That hasn't been done in Japan up till now. (from interview transcripts³)

Rather than bemoan the students' culture-laden tendencies, the instructor adjusted his method. Asking an open question to the group, the instructor felt, was "a tactical mistake." His strategy was to call each

student by name. Though this made them feel "picked on" at first, he said, they soon came to realize that "everybody is going to have to go through this anyway." In other words, "It becomes a group thing again, so that's fine" (interview transcripts).

Another way in which the instructor showed sensitivity to the students' communication style preferences was in his use of student speeches as a central class activity. Each class member, on a rotating basis, was required to make an oral presentation. Students knew when their turn was, so they prepared a short talk and delivered it, without interruption. A short discussion followed the presentations, but this was generally slow-moving and had to be moderated by the teacher. Though Western students might consider this format overly formalized and lacking in spontaneity, the procedure seemed well-suited to Japanese sensibilities.

A female student mentioned in an interview that the teacher had helped her reduce her apprehension by watching for signs that she was ready to speak: "[This teacher] watches our facial expressions, so sometimes when I want to say something, he notices and asks me if I want to say something. I'm happy about that." This shows that the instructor was keenly aware of his students' predilection to "stay silent even though they have something to say" (4: S1).

A third factor affecting change may have been the explicit explanations provided concerning comparative communication styles. The teacher regularly discussed the difference between Western and Japanese attitudes toward silence. He demonstrated the contrasting ways in which he would respond to two friends, one Japanese and the other a Westerner, asking the same question. If asked by a Japanese, he said, he would pause to convey the sense that "I'm making sure I really feel deeply what I'm going to say." But if the friend were a Westerner, he said he would have to respond immediately because in that situation, "there can be no silence."

The instructor explained that he presented to his classes a set of stock expressions for students to use when, for whatever reason, they were unable to quickly answer. The expressions were drilled frequently to provide training in avoiding silence. The method seems to have met with some success, judging from one learner's comment about what she would do when she did not have an answer to the teacher's question: "I immediately try to say 'I don't know. I try not to be silent,'" she explained. "[The teacher] encourages us to say something, no matter what—for example, 'I couldn't catch that,' or 'I don't know the answer,' and so on. It's kind of a rule in the class" (interview transcripts).

The final factor affecting students' attitudes was the instructor's insis-

tence that students speak out without worrying about errors. Because they were not held to a standard of grammatical correctness and pragmatic appropriateness beyond their means, students seemed to find the class atmosphere enjoyable and liberating. S1 explained the impact this accepting atmosphere had on her by saying:

When I started, I wasn't sure whether I would be able to continue because [speaking in English] was so challenging. The teacher really emphasized that it's okay to make mistakes and we should just speak out. The mood among the class members is relaxed and the other students really don't worry about making mistakes, so I became comfortable and started trying to speak out. (interview transcripts)

Conclusion

Impediments to Reform. Ellis (1990) draws on findings in second language acquisition research to suggest that the following conditions, among others, are conducive to classroom language learning: (a) a clear separation exists between use of the native language and the target language so that students feel the need to communicate in the target language; (b) students are involved and interested in what is being talked about; (c) both teacher and students make efforts to be understood; (d) students are encouraged to produce utterances which tax their linguistic resources (pp. 126-7). These conditions are generally implied in the notion of communicative language teaching as it is understood among Westerners.

To the extent that the Ministry of Education's mandate to incorporate communicative approaches promotes the establishment of these conditions, EFL programs in Japanese schools might be expected to become more effective in producing proficient speakers of English. The point stressed here, however, is that such practices run counter to Japan's educational traditions based on fact learning rather than skill development and its classroom culture that generally discourages student talk. This may be a fundamental reason why the new policy, which took effect in April, 1994, has not led to a major shift in instructional practices.

Implications and Applications of the Study. Spotlighting points of cross-cultural variation illuminates some of the issues impeding reform. Clearly, gaps exist, and one purpose of this article has been to clarify the nature and sources of some of these gaps. Another purpose has been to determine whether, and in what ways, gaps can be narrowed. The study found that students' reports of differences between Western and Japa-

nese teaching styles paralleled the described differences in communication styles. In the minds of these students, a sharp contrast exists. Secondly, a discrepancy between the learners' professed attitudes toward speaking English (enthusiastic) and their actual performance (halting) was noted. Clearly, wanting to be outgoing and expressive did not make it happen to any striking degree. Certain restraints and inhibitions seem to be carried over from the students' social upbringing and prior English study experiences.

Did these inhibitions cause them to reject communicative classroom procedures or cause the procedures to be ineffective? No. On the contrary, the students enjoyed the Western flavor of the class and relished opportunities to challenge and overcome apprehensions about speaking. For this enthusiastic group of learners, the pertinent question was not whether to encourage more active participation, but how to do so. The instructor seemed to have given considerable thought to this question, for his approaches were well received and relatively effective. Factors that may have weighed in favor of the instructor's success were his knowledge of Japanese culture; his tolerance of Japanese patterns of behavior; his realistic expectation that any assimilation of Western norms would be selective and gradual; and the explicit, ongoing training he gave to help students adapt to such Western norms as avoiding silence. This teacher consciously designed classroom activities to accommodate Japanese communication styles.

Japan-Friendly Communicative Approaches to Language Teaching: The notion of finding ways to promote communication in EFL classes while accommodating Japanese styles is compelling and may even be a key to advancing EFL instruction reform. If teachers identified communicative styles and tendencies prevalent among Japanese learners and viewed them as a "point of origin," and then identified aspects of Western communicative style that they would like learners to assimilate and viewed those as a "target destination," then steps could be designed to help learners gradually move from one point toward the other during their study.⁴ Course design, according to this model, would call for accommodation of Japanese styles in early lessons and assimilation of Western styles in later ones.

Some examples may serve to illustrate the concept. Topics of discussion early in a course might be noncontroversial and non-personal, while later topics might be more heated ones about which students would be asked to express opinions. In early classes, students might prepare speech notes and have the teacher check their grammar before they made oral

presentations. Giving learners rehearsal time and pointers on delivery might help to assuage students' initial fears about doing poorly. As time passed, opportunities for more spontaneous and unrehearsed talk could be introduced. At first, there might be a predictable speaking order and participation might have to be solicited, whereas volunteer participation, including questions and feedback about remarks made by the teacher or other students, could be encouraged in later sessions. Groups might discuss issues and report a consensus in early classes, whereas open class discussion might become possible through training and practice.

Many instructors already use such "Japan-friendly" approaches. Their classes are evidence that communicative approaches can be attractive and beneficial to Japanese students. As Anderson (1993) points out, even though some Western teachers continue to "unwittingly pit their own culture against that of their students," there are plenty of others "who are able—often by trial and error—to build on the Japanese styles of communication rather than striking out against them" (p. 107). Many Japanese teachers of English are making efforts along these lines as well, and in some cases, Japanese and Western teachers cooperate by bringing their respective cultural viewpoints to bear in designing communicative activities for Japanese students. More descriptive studies of classrooms in Japan in which such trial-and-error efforts are being made would constitute a valuable addition to the literature, for they may help to narrow the cultural gap that sometimes creates confusion and frustration in oral English communication classes.

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Notes

1. There is awkwardness in the term "Western" because there are obviously numerous cultures and subcultures within the Western world. References in this article to Western patterns of classroom behavior, or Western interaction styles, are to those that are evident in mainstream North American society and have much in common with those evident in several European cultures.

2. Such lessons may be more critical for Japanese learners living in English speaking countries than for EFL learners in Japan since success in the classroom may be essential for successful integration into the local English-speaking community.

3. Transcripts from student and teacher interviews are quoted in the Results

section but are not appended because of space limitations.

4. The desired outcome of such an approach would be for learners to communicate appropriately in situations which require familiarity with Western sociocultural norms, such as when speaking with native speakers of English from Western countries. Of course, Western norms do not always go hand-in-hand with the use of English. When English is spoken as a *lingua franca* between non-Westerners, for example, Western norms may be inappropriate.

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Appendix: Responses to Open-ended Questions

(Note: Particularly interesting or representative remarks are presented. Some responses, including ones quoted, have been omitted to conserve space.)

1a. What are some of the major differences between your foreign instructor's teaching style and the teaching style traditionally used by Japanese instructors?

- S1 Japanese people are usually quiet in class. Even if they have some questions, they don't raise their hands, and they miss the chance to respond.
- S2 Classes taught by Japanese teachers always focus on doing translations and learning grammar; there are no speaking activities.
- S4 In Japanese-teachers classes (JTC), students only use Japanese. Even if the teacher said, "Don't speak Japanese," they would do it anyways.
- S7 In the JTC, we do only grammar activities. In the foreign teacher's class (FTC), we do discussion activities. Also Japanese teachers' (JTs') pronunciation is bad and the foreign teacher's (FTs') pronunciation is good.
- S8 In the FTC, no Japanese is used; students can hear native pronunciation and also learn the way of thinking of native English speakers.
- S9 The FTC is a real English class—speaking only English. The teacher does activities talking to the individual. In JTC, students can understand the explanations [of English grammatical points] but they cannot improve their [conversation] skills.
- S12 The FTC is more interesting and more fun. It feels more like a club or hobby than study. JTC are boring because we have to do grammar and translation.
- S13 In the FTC, we can become familiar with English by communicating with FTs.
- S14 The differences are pronunciation and teacher methods. JTC stress getting the perfect translation. If we already know that (through books, etc.), then going to the class is meaningless.
- S17 In the FTC, we can learn the culture of a foreign country. FTs don't point out every minor mistake.

1b. Which style of class (Western or Japanese) do you prefer, and why?

- S1 W (Western style). It's not good to have one-way communication in class. However, that's what I'm accustomed to.
- S2 W. We can learn living native English, especially in hearing and speaking. We can develop courage. Because we don't use Japanese at all, we can begin to think in English.
- S4 W. It's more enjoyable.
- S5 W. The Japanese style is passive in general—very little student participation. Therefore, I am often uncertain whether I understand what's going on in the Japanese class.
- S8 The Japanese style is passive; it's geared for passing the exam. The FTC is more active: people gain courage and confidence.
- S10 W. People are always laughing and cheerful. [My teacher] is fun.

- S11 W. I can tell my opinion without feeling ashamed.
- S13 Japanese people are shy and always worry what others are thinking. That's not good for learning English.
- S14 W. There is a lot of discussion. This is really enjoyable. In the Japanese style, students become passive, and it's not enjoyable.
- S15 W. By focusing on discussion, students can become more active.
- S16 W. In the Japanese style, the teacher is always the center. The students can't participate.

Note: 15 students out of 17 indicated a preference for Western teaching style.

2a. How do you feel when your foreign teacher asks your opinion or tries to make you speak English?

- S1 If I can give a good answer, I feel happy. If I can't answer even though I have an opinion, or if the teacher moves on to the next person because I am too slow in forming an answer, then I feel sad.
- S2 It's really a good thing for the teacher to make me speak English. In addition, I think it's good to practice speaking rather than using a text.
- S4 It's good. Through this type of activity, I can feel the teacher's passion for us students to improve our English.
- S5 It's good, because in everyday life, we don't think in English and don't speak in English, so it's really good practice for improving speaking skills.
- S8 It's good. Because of these [discussion] activities, I tend to read a lot to gather a lot of information so I can give a good opinion. I feel I'm treated as a human being rather than just a student.
- S9 It's good because it's hard and makes us suffer [the challenge of] thinking in English, making use of our knowledge of grammar and everything.
- S15 I really want to improve my English skills. [Implies that being called on is beneficial.]
- S17 It's good. The teacher is trying to help students get accustomed to speaking, to make them practice. I feel a little scared, but it's all right.

2b. Are there times when you can think of something to say but you don't raise your hand or say anything? (Yes/ No) If so, what are some reasons for staying silent?

Note: 15 students out of 17 replied affirmatively.

3. Has your attitude about speaking out in class changed as a result of being in this English class? (Yes/ No) If so, in what ways?

- S5 Yes. I'm trying to speak out actively without worrying about mistakes.
- S12 Yes. I'm beginning to express myself, not worrying about grammar but trying to use what vocabulary I know, using body language, etc.
- S14 Yes. I still feel I am passive, but I'm beginning to make efforts to express my opinions.
- S15 Yes. Gradually, I am beginning to understand English communication style. I'm trying to become more assertive and make more effort to express

myself.

S16 Yes. In the beginning, I couldn't speak or express myself at all. Little by little, I am becoming more expressive.

Note: 12 out of 17 students responded affirmatively to the question.

4. *What would you like your teacher to understand about Japanese culture or Japanese ways of communicating? (For example, that Japanese don't usually say "no" directly.)*

S1 Japanese people stay silent even though they have something to say. Japanese people tend to want to confer with other people [in forming opinions].

S3 If we don't raise our hands, it doesn't mean we aren't interested in the class.

S4 Nothing. I hope foreign people will just be themselves.

S5 Japanese people respect harmony and want to avoid conflict. We tend to use ambiguous expressions like "maybe" or "so-so."

S7 Japanese people think it's good to be shy, modest, or ashamed. Japanese answers are sometimes ambiguous.

S10 Japanese answers are sometimes ambiguous.

S12 Japanese people don't say things directly; we use indirect expressions. Also, sometimes what we say is different from what we actually feel.

S14 We sometimes escape a situation by laughing.

S16 We sometimes laugh to avoid answering. Japanese people are hesitant to speak out. Very few of us are willing to speak out.