

Answer, Please Answer!

A Perspective on Japanese University Students' Silent Response to Questions

Timothy J. Korst
Ryukyu University

Many EFL teachers in Japan have noticed that Japanese students seldom have the skills to answer questions appropriately. In response to questions, teachers often hear only silence. This paper examines the issue of a silent response to teacher questions in the EFL university classroom and presents three activities designed to introduce sociolinguistic skills into the communicative syllabus. Instead of avoiding this issue by ceasing to ask questions, it is suggested that teachers should attempt to address and remedy this silence directly.

日本で教える英語教師の多くは、日本の大学生が質問に適切に答えるスキルをもっていないことが多いのに気づいている。質問しても、沈黙に迎えられることもしばしばである。この論文は、大学の英語の授業での教師の質問に対する沈黙の反応を検討し、コミュニケーション的なシラバスに社会言語学的スキルを含めるための三つの学習活動を紹介する。質問するのをやめることで問題を避けるのではなく、この沈黙を直接、解決する努力をすべきであるということが示唆される。

Japanese university students pose a special problem for many EFL teachers. Due to reasons such as the Japanese cultural and educational background and the concept of saving face (Ishii & Bruneau, 1991), these students often remain silent when asked a question in English. The effects of such behavior can be twofold. First, the pace of instruction may be slowed while the teacher waits for an answer. Second, because this behavior is not normal within the Western classroom context, foreign EFL teachers may become frustrated by the silence. Confronted with this problem, I suspect that teachers often deal with it by avoidance, by adjusting their teaching techniques to avoid eliciting such behavior. Indeed, Mutch (1995, p. 14) seems to recommend avoidance of questions in front of the class, noting that teachers can create a more "relaxed and intimate atmosphere" through, for example, pair work.

However, silence in response to a question is seldom an appropriate response in English communication (see Savignon, 1983). Answering questions is a basic skill to be mastered in learning a foreign language. This paper recommends dealing directly with the issue. It presents three activities designed to solve the problem of a silent response to questions and to promote the development of sociolinguistic skills.

Research on Classroom Interaction

Although student silence in response to teacher questions in the classroom has not been the focus of much EFL classroom research (Larsen-Freeman & Long, 1991), Miller's 1995 investigation indicates that students usually remain silent out of fear of limitations in their English speaking ability (also see Ishii & Bruneau, 1991). Investigating students' attitudes towards misbehavior in the classroom, Ryan (1995) found that both Japanese and Australian university students rated silent responses as relatively minor infractions. On the other hand, considerable interaction research has focused on teacher talk and teacher questions (see Chaudron, 1988). Turn-taking in the classroom (Sinclair and Coulthard, 1975) and comprehensible input (Ellis, 1994) have also been important concerns for researchers. Moreover, error correction and teacher feedback are common topics in the literature (see reviews in Chaudron, 1988 and Ellis, 1994). Such research focuses indicate that teacher questioning and giving feedback is a common activity. Therefore, when the teacher asks a question and the students do not respond, this indicates the need for promoting greater communicative competence (Savignon, 1983).

Research on wait-time in ESL classes suggests that students may be able to produce answers if teachers wait slightly longer than usual. Studies in the ESL setting (see Shrum and Tech, 1985) suggest that the mean wait-time for ESL students is under two seconds. However, Holley and King (1971) found that teachers of German who waited at least five seconds obtained an increase in student responses. White and Lightbown (1984) and Long, Brock, Crookes, Deicke, Potter, and Zhang (1984) recommend that teachers should therefore allow a longer wait-time. However, while this approach may be beneficial with some students, allowing a longer wait-time with Japanese students may only compound the problem since an answer may not be forthcoming regardless of the interval (Ishii & Bruneau, 1991).

Other research (see Sato 1981, Long and Sato 1983, and Tsui, 1987) has investigated the type of teacher-student interaction which occurs in ESL classrooms. Using constructs similar to Long and Sato's (1983) "dis-

play" and "referential" questions, Tsui (1987), compared "social" and "classroom discourse." Social discourse differs from classroom discourse in that more negotiation of meaning occurs. Tsui (1987, p. 337) argues that interlocutors bring with them a set of "assumed shared beliefs which are constantly tested against, revised or added onto in the course of the interaction." Karttunen (1973, cited in Tsui 1987, p. 337) speaks of the "common ground" that is achieved among the interlocutors, while Tsui speaks of the "social convergence" which is achieved by social discourse.

In classroom discourse, on the other hand, less negotiation usually takes place. The roles of the interlocutors (here, the teacher and student) are more clearly defined. The teacher is the "primary knower" (Berry 1981, cited in Tsui 1987, p. 339) who asks questions and the one who stands in judgment of the student's response. Transfer of knowledge is assumed to be unidirectional, from the teacher to the student. The student's role is usually to answer the teacher's question; she in turn evaluates the student's answer. The following is an example of classroom discourse given by Tsui (1987, p. 339):

- | | | |
|-----|---|----|
| (A) | T: Who can tell me what the two kinds of verbs are? | I |
| | Ange | I? |
| | S: Verbs of action and verbs of being. | R |
| | T: Right | F |

Here, the labels I, R, and F refer to the "initiating move" (I move), "responding move" (R move) and "follow-up move" (F move).

Surely this pattern is common in EFL classrooms as well. By asking questions of this sort, the teacher seeks feedback from the students. If the students answer correctly, the teacher has achieved her objective and then can proceed. But what happens when the students do not answer? Tsui notes that a refusal to answer would be out of order; inability to do so would very likely be negatively evaluated by the teacher. Yet this is a common occurrence in the Japanese EFL classroom, and the teacher is left with the problem of how to evaluate the silence.

Types of Questions in Japanese College EFL Classrooms

In content-based college EFL classes, some of the classroom questions asked by the teacher comprise social discourse. This may include questions which deal with the content of the course as well as questions which are more personal in nature. Examples of such questions include:

- (B) How was your weekend?
 How are you today?
 What's new?

It is through such questions that the EFL teacher hopes to create an atmosphere conducive to language learning. Though these questions are brief, they are not meant rhetorically and, in asking them, the teacher briefly steps out of her role as teacher and allows the students to view her in a different light. The questions may be asked privately to an individual student or to the entire class. Theoretically (see Krashen, 1987), such questions are intended to lower the students' affective filters, thereby creating a more relaxed learning environment. If the teacher is a native English speaker, the questions also allow the students to interact socially and give them the opportunity to realize that English can be used outside of the parameters of the lesson.

Teachers may also ask questions about the content of the lesson. For example, in a content-based English conversation class discussing the concept of the Third World, the following dialogue may take place (T is the teacher and S is the student).

- | | | |
|-----|---|---|
| (C) | T: Have you ever been to the Third World? | I |
| | S: Yes. | R |
| | T: Where did you go? | I |
| | S: Thailand. | R |
| | T: Uh huh. | F |

This dialogue may be seen as two exchanges, again using the labels I, R, and F to refer to the "initiating move" (I), "responding move" (R) and "follow-up move" (F). Both exchanges represent social discourse.

But what happens when the following type of exchange occurs?

- | | | |
|-----|---|---|
| (D) | T: Have you ever been to the Third World? | I |
| | S: Yes. | R |
| | T: Where did you go? | I |
| | S: Canada. | R |
| | T: Canada is not in the Third World. | F |

Here, the student has not answered according to the teacher's expectations, so the teacher has corrected the student. Perhaps in this case we could classify the first I and R moves as being social discourse and the latter I, R, and F moves as being the more formal classroom discourse (McCarthy, 1991). It is not so clear from Tsui's account whether teacher evaluation alone denotes classroom discourse.

In both C and D above the student is shown as responding to the teacher's questions. However, more realistically, the conversation might go like this:

- (E) T: Have you ever been to the Third World?
S: (silence)
T: (more slowly) Have you ever been to the Third World?
S: (confers with neighbor, but does not reply)
T: Do you understand me?
S: (silence)

The following section describes three activities for avoiding this type of response and, instead, promoting the development of student communicative competence in answering both social and classroom questions.

Activities for Overcoming Classroom Silence

The activities presented below are designed to remedy the problem of silence in response to questions, to train students in answering within an acceptable amount of time and to give them practice in asking for clarification.

The activities were performed during a first year university content-based EFL conversation course during the last three months of the Spring, 1995 semester. The course met for two 90-minute periods per week. Of the 28 students, 22 were women. Although no proficiency test was given, the students' English proficiency was considered to be at the low-intermediate level by the author. Because of the nature of Activity 1, it was performed only once. The other two activities were regularly performed for 30 minutes per class period.

The three activities followed the same general format. The students paired off by forming an inner and outer circle and partnered the student in the opposing circle. They performed the activity then rotated in opposite directions, enabling the students to repeat the activity with a new partner from the opposing circle. This is illustrated in Figure 1.

Setting up the circles

The teacher can easily arrange the students into two circles by having them stand in alternation—inside, outside, inside, etc. An unpartnered student can form a triad with two others. After the students have formed the circles and performed the activity with their first partner, the teacher should tell those on the outside of the circle to turn to their right and find their partner two positions along the circle. Changing two positions to find new

partners gives the students a sense of progressing around the circle, and also prevents them from looking ahead to their next partner.

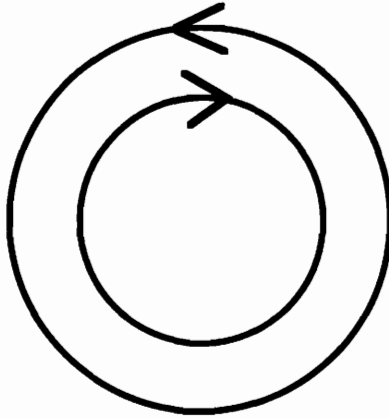


Figure 1: Students form inside and outside circles, pair up, and after doing the activity rotate to the right.

Activity 1

Purpose: To give the students the experience of asking someone a question and receiving no response. By performing this activity, the students may develop empathy with their teachers.

Giving Directions: After dividing the class into “inside” and “outside” groups, the teacher gives instructions to the two groups separately. While the inside students are still seated, the teacher tells them to put their heads down so that they cannot see. The teacher then writes the following instructions for the outsiders on the board.

1. Think of a question to ask your partner in the circle
2. Ask each partner the same question
3. Make sure you receive an answer from your partner

At this point the teacher may want to ask the students verbally if they understand the task. If students have questions, they can ask the teacher privately.

Once the teacher has given the instructions to the outsiders, she gives the following instructions to the insiders. At this time, the outside

students have their heads down so that they cannot see the instructions. The teacher writes the following instructions on the board.

1. In the circle your partner will ask you a question
2. Don't answer it
3. Don't say anything

Once the instructions to both groups are clear, the students form their respective circles and perform the activity. Teachers can ask the students to change partners as often as they like.

Post-activity: The teacher tells the students to write a minimum of five sentences about this activity. Afterwards, the students discuss their ideas in groups and/or as a class. The teacher can write the students' comments on the board.

Activity 2

Purpose: To teach the students how to ask for clarification. Often the reason for silence is lack of linguistic knowledge, so the students must learn how to negotiate meaning and how repair a conversation when it breaks down. This activity allows the students to practice various ways of asking the questioner to repeat or explain the question.

Pre-activity: The teacher should explain what asking for clarification means. She can solicit various patterns from students and write them on the board. Some examples are:

- (F) What did you say?
I don't understand.
Huh?
Could you explain that?
I'm sorry, what was that?
What do you mean?
Excuse me?/ Pardon me?

The teacher illustrates these techniques by asking the students questions that they cannot understand (i.e., by speaking too fast, using difficult vocabulary items and grammar structures, or mumbling), thereby soliciting the sentences given in Example F.

In performing this activity, the students must have a reason for asking for clarification. To insure this, the teacher can instruct students how to mumble (the other ways mentioned above may be too difficult for most students). The teacher should model mumbling a question, and have the students repeat as a class. Then the teacher should articulate

the question clearly, and again have the students repeat. Once the students are adept mumblers, they should prepare questions to ask their partners and form their circles.

Activity: The students are paired up in inside and outside circles. Taking turns, the students ask each other questions while mumbling. Their partners then ask for clarification. The first student repeats the question clearly, and the second gives an answer. For example:

- (G) A: (mumbles a question unintelligibly)
B: I'm sorry, what did you say?
A: What are you going to do on the weekend?
B: Go shopping.

The teacher can decide how many times the students should change partners.

Activity 3

Purpose: To teach the students to answer questions within an appropriate time period.

Pre-activity: The students prepare questions which they will ask their teacher. After a student asks a question, the teacher raises one hand and puts up a finger for each passing second, answering the question within five seconds. In this way the teacher demonstrates that it is appropriate to answer within a certain time limit. The teacher can also demonstrate that verbal responses such as fillers are also appropriate, but must be uttered within the same time limit. Some possibilities include:

- (H) Uh . . .
 Hmm
 Well, let me see . . .

Such responses serve as a notice that the person questioned has understood that a question has been asked, but needs time to formulate an answer. The teacher can model these fillers and instruct the students to practice them through repetition.

Activity: The students prepare questions to ask their partners. If possible, the questions should be difficult, requiring some thinking time. The students again form inside and outside circles and ask their questions to their partners. After asking the question, the students should raise one hand and lift up one finger for each passing second. This serves as a visual reminder of the time limit for the second student, who should try

to give a response within five seconds. After asking and answering questions, the students change partners.

Activities 2 and 3 can be combined. In circle formation, the students ask their partners questions, and receive one point each time they mumble (giving partner a chance to ask for clarification), ask for clarification and answer within five seconds. The students tally their own points, and whoever has the highest number wins. This game format can be integrated into course material whenever partner work is called for.

Student Reactions to the Activities

The students in my classes were able to carry out the three activities without much difficulty. However, minor problems arose. At the beginning of Activity 1, some students did not understand the directions written on the board. When I asked them verbally whether they had any questions, a few raised their hands, then approached me to ask their question in a whispered voice. Most often they asked whether they had to use the same question each time, to which I responded, "No."

In carrying out this activity, some of the "silent" partners answered with a nod of the head, or used other body language. In this case, I reminded the students to remember their instructions. Upon completion of the activity, the students wrote their reactions and shared these in groups. I wrote these responses on the board in two columns: outsiders and insiders. Almost all comments were negative. The outsiders, who asked the questions, described their negative feelings with comments like, "I feel very very loney (sic). Why did they say nothing?" Another reported, "It is hard time and nurvous (sic) for me in today's class." Responses from the insiders, who kept silent, were also negative. One insider's response was, "I felt really awkward not answering the questions I think that is how foreigners feel sometimes." After the students realized that most feelings were negative, I spoke about my own feelings when students do not answer in class. "I feel the same way as you." I told the class. At this point I felt we reached a deeper level of understanding.

If most students felt uncomfortable doing Activity 1, many enjoyed learning how to mumble in Activity 2. This activity elicited much laughter and the students seemed to have no problem performing it. Activity 3, which focused on responding within a five-second time limit, proved a bit awkward. Quite a few students did not count to five. Perhaps some wanted to focus on the conversation, or possibly felt bad about imposing a limit on their partner. Likewise, the combination of Activities

2 and 3 into a game, with the tallying of points, proved difficult.

As a follow-up activity, the students wrote longer responses (about 300 words) in their journals. Some comments follow:

As a result of our discussion we knew that the circle outsiders are foreigner and insiders are Japanese, or outsiders are teacher and insiders are students. . . . Because I was outsiders, I could understand teacher's feelings well.

When I played that game, I understood foreigner's feelings. They feel lonely, irritate, nervous, impatient. And we let them feel so. I feel very sorry about this fact.

In the game, it was funny for me not to answer . . . outsiders felt uncomfortable, irritated and bored. I didn't noticed that feelings before I heard that and I felt sorry for them. . . . What I learned through this game was how Tim felt in this class.

From the students' comments, it is evident that they understood the point of Activity 1. This activity proved successful in that it gave students insight into their behavior and the effects it has on others.

Questionnaire Results

After the students performed these activities for three months, they filled out the following questionnaire (See Table 1, below) in which the three activities were called "conversation games." Because this was a preliminary evaluation of teaching materials, no attempt was made to quantitatively evaluate improvements in the students' sociolinguistic skills. The students' response are given as the average number of points from a possible ten points for each statement.

Questions 1, 2, 3, 6, and 8 asked for the students' response to the activities. Here the mean response was above 5, suggesting that the students liked the activities although they found them difficult (Question 4). In particular, students indicated that they liked asking for clarification, perhaps suggesting that they may not have focused on this during prior English instruction.

Conclusions

Although I did not collect data, it is my impression that the students improved in their ability to give a verbal response to questions within an acceptable time limit. During the final oral test, most were able to ask for clarification in response to questions which I deliberately asked rapidly. During class, however, many still had problems. Even after

Table 1: Copy of Questionnaire and Results

Please answer the questions. CIRCLE A NUMBER. Thank you.

											Results		
											x		
1. I liked the conversation games.	NO	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	YES	= 6.7
2. I think the conversation games are useful for learning English.	NO	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	YES	= 7.6
3. At first, I did not like the conversation games. But now I like them more.	NO	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	YES	= 7.0
4. The conversation games are difficult because I can't speak English very well.	NO	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	YES	= 7.4
5. I don't like the conversation games because I have to talk with people I don't know.	NO	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	YES	= 4.1
6. I like the conversation games because I can make friends with my classmates.	NO	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	YES	= 8.0
7. In the conversation game, 5 seconds is too short to answer in.	NO	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	YES	= 6.2
8. I liked practicing how to ask for clarification (What did you say?).	NO	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	YES	= 7.9
9. I have trouble counting my points in the conversation game.	NO	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	YES	= 5.2

several weeks of practice, many students' first option in attempting an answer was not to ask for clarification, but rather to consult with their neighbor. This indicates the need for continued focus on making a proper response.

It should also be noted that I received considerable emotional relief by engaging my students in these activities. Previously, student silence had an adverse effect, leaving me feeling frustrated and helpless. After these activities, however, I could view the students' silence with more objectivity and humor. When a student was silent in response to a question from me, I could say in a humorous voice, "I'm getting angry." Similarly, mumbling became a running joke.

Integration of these activities into the syllabus allowed me to view the students' silent behavior as something that we, as a class, could work on together. Addressing the problem directly eased the strain felt by both the teacher and students and through these activities I was able to assist my students to become more sociolinguistically competent in English.

Timothy J. Korst teaches at Ryukyu University.

References

- Chaudron, C. (1988). *Second language classrooms: Research on teaching and learning*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Ellis, R. (1994). *The study of second language acquisition*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Holley, F., & King, J. (1971). Imitation and correction in foreign language learning. *Modern Language Journal*, 55, 494-498.
- Ishii, S. & Bruneau, T. (1991). Silence and silences in cross-cultural perspective: Japan and the United States. In Larry A. Samovar & Richard E. Porter (Eds.), *Intercultural communication* (pp.314-319). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company.
- Krashen, S. D. (1987). *Principles and practice in second language acquisition*. New York: Prentice-Hall.
- Larsen-Freeman, D. & Long, M. (Eds.), (1991). *An introduction to second language acquisition research*. New York: Longman.
- Long, M., & Sato, C. (1983). Classroom foreigner talk discourse: forms and functions of teachers' questions. In H. W. Seliger & M. H. Long (Eds.), *Classroom oriented research in language learning* (pp. 268-285). Rowley, Mass: Newbury House.
- Long, M., Brock, C., Crookes, G., Deike, C., Potter, L., & Zhang, S. (1984). *The effect of teachers' questioning patterns and wait-time on pupil participation in public high school classes in Hawaii for students of limited English proficiency*. (Technical Report No. 1). Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii at Manoa, Center for Second Language Classroom Research, Social Science Research Institute.
- McCarthy, M. (1991). *Discourse analysis for language teachers*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Miller, T. (1995). Japanese learners' reactions to communicative English lessons. *JALT Journal*, 17(1), 31-49.
- Mutch, B. M.. 1995. Motivation and cultural attitudes: Increasing language use in the classroom. *The Language Teacher*, 19(8), 14-15.
- Ryan, S.M. (1995). Misbehavior in the university classroom? A cross-cultural survey of students' perceptions and expectations. *The Language Teacher*, 19(11), 13-16.
- Sato, C. (1981). Ethnic styles in classroom discourse. In M. Hines & W. Rutherford (Eds.) *On TESOL '81* (pp. 11-24). Washington DC: TESOL.

- Savignon, S. J. (1983). *Communicative competence: Theory and classroom practice*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.
- Sinclair J. and Coulthard, M. (1975). *Towards an analysis of discourse*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Shrum, J. L., and Tech, V. (1985). Wait-time and the use of target or native languages. *Foreign Language Annals*, 18, 305-313.
- Tsui, B. A. (1987). An analysis of different types of interaction in ESL classroom discourse. *IRAL*, 25(4), 336-353.
- White, J. & Lightbown, P. (1984). Asking and answering in ESL classes. *Canadian Modern Language Review*, 40, 228-244.

(Received January 10, 1997; revised April 9, 1997)