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Why are Japanese Students Reluctant to Express Their Opinions in the Classroom?

Junko Shimizu

Almost all the teachers from abroad in Japan become stressed because of their Japanese students' silence or reticence in English-language classes. Although the students like to talk idly in Japanese, which disrupts the smooth progress of the class, they are unwilling to express their opinions in English concerning the topic being studied. In the United States, every student is expected to speak and converse in a casual and relaxed way, and we find no stiffness, no formality, no self-conscious reticence caused by an awareness of differences in social rank or age. For an American student to attend class without expressing an opinion indicates laziness or a lack of intelligence. A clash between the different conventions of the two countries may be the reason for misunderstanding or miscommunication in a Japanese English-language classroom. In Japan, a person's identity basically lies in his or her "group harmony and on having smooth relations" (Lo Castro: 110) and social status; thus in Japan, "the use of English is highly restricted as to range, and so it has not attained a similar degree of depth" (Kachru and Nelson, "World Englishes" 81) as it has in India or Singapore. In contrast, Americans believe in their identities in terms of their individualities. As a result, they prefer to express their personal opinions in public, but Japanese hesitate to do so even when they must.

In this paper, I will first present the actual conditions of English-language classrooms at Japanese universities. Second, I will analyze the reasons why Japanese students are unwilling to speak out in a classroom because of the nature of Japanese conventions in communication and in the Japanese language. Third, I would like to suggest some possible solutions to the problem that results in unfavorable miscommunication between foreign teachers and Japanese students.

(1) The present condition of English classes at Japanese Universities

When I was a student at Tokyo Woman's Christian University more than 20 years ago, my American professor of English lamented that his Japanese students never voluntarily expressed their opinions in class. As he lectured, he became embarrassed because he felt that no one was listening or was even interested in his opinion; so he became dejected. He felt that his presence was unnoticed, or that he was talking to a wall of no reactions. Yet little by little, he came to understand that the situation was not what he had suspected. Most students were very industrious in preparing for his class. Some had stayed up all night preparing for the lesson, and their textbooks or notebooks were filled with scribbling and notes. This became evident to him as he began to realize that hardly a student came to class with a clean text or notebook. Obviously they had nearly all thoroughly prepared themselves for every class. So he tried to look carefully into the faces in his class, and by doing so he ultimately could begin to recognize their faint expressions of recognition and understanding of what he said. Yet in spite of their zeal for his class, the students sat silently, listening to his words and saying nothing. If anyone had a question, she seldom raised a hand to ask it during class. But after the lesson, the students would come up to him with an obvious lack of self-confidence, asking many questions about his lecture. He had tried hard

to let them speak and express their opinions during class, but his efforts had been in vain. If students act this way in America, however, they will often be assumed to be "stupid" or "lazy" because American people value "being original" and "having a personal opinion" on every possible subject the professor presents, and their active involvement in class is highly appreciated. Contrary to what most Japanese students fear, Americans aren't so much interested in how good or bad their English is, or whether their opinion is right or wrong; what is most expected of American students is that they express their thoughts about the subject, revealing their personal opinions. Expressing no opinions or attitudes with an "I don't know" or "I have no opinion" can be considered the worst conduct in an American classroom. Thus the embarrassment and disillusion of the American professor at a Japanese university were quite natural because students in the United States react very differently from students in Japan.

But now I am an English teacher at various universities in Japan and have the same problem my American professor had. Some students are not interested in English, and it is natural that they cannot express their opinions during the class for want of adequate preparation. However, students who are interested in English don't want to reveal their opinions in my class: they just wait to be called on, and once they open their mouths, the right and perfect answers can be heard. This Japanese-style conversation is just like "conversational bowling," as Sakamoto and Naotsuka effectively call it. They explain that "(a) Japanese-style conversation, however, is not at all like tennis or volleyball. It's like bowling. You wait for your turn. And you always know your place in line. It depends on such things as whether you are older or younger, a close friend or a relative stranger to the previous speaker, in a senior or junior position, and so on" (Sakamoto, Nancy, and Naotsuka, Reiko. *Polite Fictions:* 83). Such a typically

Japanese phenomenon as this holds true of Scollons' "inside relationship" being "governed by culturally established hierarchical relationships or *jen* ('benevolence' or 'authoritative person'). This has major implications in determining who speaks first as well as implications for when topics are introduced" (Ron Scollon and Suzanne Wong-Scollon, *Topic confusion in English-Asian discourse*: 119). In my classroom, I am the oldest and the most powerful, so my students "know their places in line" and wait for the teacher's call. "It's your turn, so you are allowed to speak." This is a typical example of Conlan's "role-relationships," which are "delineated primarily in terms of Power and Distance differentials" (Christopher J. Conlan, *Politeness, Paradigms of family and the Japanese ESL Speaker*: 729). This phenomenon, he states, can be explained in "the nature of the role-relationships which define the Japanese conception of family" (729), and in this case, I, as a teacher, represent "symbolic/idealized familial structure" (735) of both "Father" and "Mother" who govern, direct and nurture, and take care of their children, that is, the students. I sometimes feel that such Japanese-style conversation can be an obstacle to their progress in learning English; however, the brighter the students are, the more faithful they are to their convention. Students' behavior in my classroom may reflect the "familial model," which "provides a culturally inscribed point of reference for the self and for the self's social orientation toward others which, in turn, serves as a social blueprint for interaction with others." (Conlan: 735).

I recently found some exceptions to this kind of Japanese conventional class in a few students who willingly and actively expressed their opinions in the classroom. I was glad to find that the attitude of Japanese students has begun to change, but my deduction had been too hasty. Although the university at which I have been teaching is among the best in Japan, the seemingly active students did express their opinions during classroom

lessons as their previous make-up test; that is, they tried to upgrade their term marks by classroom activities, because some clever students knew their English was not good and that they could not pass the final written exam without showing active participation. Thus such active participation is rare in Japanese classrooms, but in America it is usual and is taken for granted. Although a Japanese-style conversation is compared to bowling, a conversation in English is like tennis or volleyball (*Polite Fictions*: 83). Thus Japanese students do not talk until they have their turn, whereas American students must voluntarily express their opinions for fear of dropping their communicative ball. Sakamoto claims that in contrast to the "waiting-in-line" Japanese attitude of conversation, the principal of "you and I are equals" is "one of the most fundamental of American cultures." (*Polite Fictions*: 5.) Therefore the superior in rank or social status is expected to ignore status differences and will use "please," "thank you," and similar courtesies when speaking to someone of lesser rank, such as a teacher speaking to a student. If a speaker lays heavy emphasis on another's superiority, the emphasis may be regarded as "fawning" or "dishonest" (*Polite Fictions*: 7–8).

(2) Analyses of the reasons why Japanese students do not express their opinions in class, which results from the nature of Japanese convention in communication and the nature of the Japanese language

Concerning English lessons, I believe that poor English is the first reason for the passive attitude of Japanese students studying the English language. The Japanese language is linguistically quite different from English. Honna and Takeshita claim that "(a)ctually, the conventional objective of Japan's English teaching program is unrealistic. It calls for students to acquire native-like proficiency in English regardless of the

extremely limited roles allocated to the language in Japanese society. Behavioral acculturation is also presupposed as a must. This 'nativist' goal should be held largely accountable for the present low achievement. It also causes Japanese students' passive attitudes in using this language as a means of international and intercultural communication. They are ashamed if they do not speak English the way native speakers do." (Honna, Nobuyuki, and Takeshita, Yuko. *On Japan's propensity for Native Speaker English: A Change in Sight*: 118–119). I basically agree with them. However, their opinion can be applied only to the advanced learners in Japan. Some Japanese students cannot understand or construct simple English sentences because of their lack of earnest, solid English studies or because they did not properly study English in high school; that is, they were poor students and paid little attention to their study of English. Because of this, I would say that their goal was not to speak in "the way native speakers do" but that they had to take remedial lessons of high–school English grammar. In my opinion, their inability to communicate in English was not their being "given an anglophile goal as their guiding lights," (Honna 119) but their lack of basic knowledge and training in English. Thus I must admit that the English-language abilities of average Japanese university students fall far short of normal communication by native speakers. Because of their very limited English knowledge, they are unprepared for communication in English. This situation is typical of all Japanese schools. As an example, in high school my native-English teacher from the United States gave each student a few minutes to speak during class. A friend of mine, Hiroko, hesitated and stammered before she could say, "I...I....I...want...want to ...be...a..a...an architect." This was evidently the only sentence she could say, and saying it was extremely difficult for her. The teacher seemed disappointed, but kindly said, "I know you need a lot more practice." Hiroko was fairly talented, so most

of my classmates, including me, had the same consequence. We weren't lazy or stupid, but our miserable performance was due to the different structures of English and Japanese. The Japanese language has no articles, no difference between simple and plural nouns, and no changes of verb forms. Moreover, the order of parts of speech in Japanese is quite different from that in English.

Ian Thompson says that "Japanese and English speakers find each other's languages hard to learn." According to Thompson, "One reason for this is that the broad constituents of sentence structure are ordered very differently in the two languages... In addition to the difficulties posed by great grammatical, lexical and phonetic disparity, Japanese speakers' attitudes to language in general are heavily coloured by two aspects of their own tongue" (Ian Thompson. *Japanese Speakers' in Learner English*, eds, Swan, M., and Smith, B., CUP, Cambridge: 212). For example, when a Japanese says "We eat rice in Japan," some native English speakers may mistakenly hear it as "We eat lice in Japan" and may feel what awful people the Japanese are. The reason for this miscommunication is because Japanese cannot pronounce the "*r*" sound well because we have no such sound in our language. Yano also cites several obvious examples of Japanese linguistic and sociocultural characteristics reflected in Japanese English. Yano claims that "Japanese doesn't have (v), which is replaced by (b), and (ou) is not distinguished with (O:), making *vote* and *bought* homophones, so during the US Presidential voting in Florida, *the vote was bought*. The language has an open syllable structure and vowels are inserted to break up English consonant clusters... Japanese people don't discuss a matter, they *discuss about* a matter. Japanese prefer to use the passive structure and 'We decided on the plan' is usually 'The plan was decided on.' And the response of 'yes' and 'no" corresponds not to the content but to the form of the question. So

when asked, 'Don't you want another drink?' the answer is most likely, 'Yes, I don't." (Yano. *World Englishes in 2000 and beyond*: 127).

Thompson and Yano elaborately show a linkage of language and culture, and we should follow Lo Castro's advice that "To further amplify the semantic dimension of language, it seems advisable to include social and/or cultural knowledge in one's analysis and not separate such knowledge from linguistic signals" (Virginia Lo Castro. "*Aizuchi:* A Japanese Conversational Routine": 106). Lo Castro claims that socio-cultural norms and all levels of linguistic production and interpretation are interdependent, and "(t)aking the transformational generative model of language, we would claim that socio-cultural variables influence deep-structure level choices of such elements as verb forms..." (106).

Next we will probe how socio-cultural norms are closely linked with linguistic production, that is, speech and interpretation. According to Ian Thompson, the existence of "respect language"—finely graded out-of-context fragment of dialogue heavily related to age, sex, relationship, and relative status of both speakers—makes Japanese speakers extremely self-conscious, whether they are polite or not, making it difficult for them to say "you" to strangers. In America, it is impolite to emphasize status. The slight difference in the way Americans talk is that although persons in a socially higher status may call a minor by his or her first name, the minor may call the superior by the last name. However, there are no definite rules reflecting status differences such as those prevalent in Japanese "respect language."

Furthermore, because the Japanese language has many words pronounced the same but written differently, a Japanese speaker tends to trust writing, not speaking. Thus in Japanese culture, eloquent speaking is not trustworthy. It is, in fact, distrustful. More than 20 years ago, the popular catch phrase for a Japanese TV commercial was this: "Man should

drink beer without words." On screen, we saw Mifune Toshiro, a famous Japanese macho-type actor, get relaxed to drink a glass of beer, and we heard only the announcer's words, "Man should drink beer without words." Most Japanese audiences of those days found this to be the supreme ideal of a Japanese man's lifestyle. In contrast to the silent Japanese actor, however, I find it difficult to see a similar setting in Western media. We rarely find a scene in which an American actor remains silent, whether in a commercial, a movie, or a soap opera, uttering not a word. In my opinion this is because a scene of this kind is not preferred in Western culture.

Japanese people even prefer "tentativeness" and "hesitancy" as the speaker's modesty (Ian Thompson, 'Japanese Speakers' in *Learner English*: 212–13). Thompson concludes that the "traditional Japanese regard for authority and formality is in tune with teacher-dominated lessons where much heed is paid to the 'correct' answer, learning of grammar rules and item-by-item (rather than contextualised) vocabulary....The Japanese do not care to be 'put on the spot' in public; getting it wrong can be a cause of real shame, especially in front of classmates who are younger or socially inferior (in the Japanese sense). A spontaneous answer is rare; long thought or a discreetly whispered conference with a compatriot usually precedes the student's response. The Japanese tend not to air their private opinions in public, which means that 'What do you think of...?' topics of discussion can be full of long and painful silences. The non-Japanese teacher easily misinterprets embarrassment as inability to speak. The uninhibited, even aggressive participation in multi-national discussions by many Europeans may affront the Japanese sense of propriety, yet the student will often bottle up this unease for weeks, giving away no hint of it" (Thompson: 223). This Japanese cultural tendency of not speaking openly much may cause international troubles, because Westerners consider conversation to be a

very important part of communication. For example, Americans "politely" ask Japanese many questions at the dinner table; yet Japanese get confused when answering because in Japanese manners it is extremely "rude" to talk with one's mouth full. Because Japanese do not talk a lot and eat at the same time, Japanese look like unsociable and unpleasant persons, and we may therefore hurt the feelings of people native to the West.

Thompson succeeds in elaborately explaining Michael Agar's "LANGUACULTURE" (1995), "...the intimate relationship between language and culture," and "which has shaped the learner's values, belief system, and to a large extent, behaviors". The coinage of language and culture shows "the Janus-faced character of language and culture" (Li, D. *Incorporating L1 Pragmatic Norms and Cultural Values in L2: Developing English Language Curriculum for EIL in the Asia-Pacific Region*: 32–33). Let me introduce my teaching experience, which can testify to the righteousness of the Thompson theory and the notion of Agar's "languaculture." At a certain junior college when I asked a female student to write an English composition on the blackboard in the next lesson, she asked me to check her English composition beforehand. She was anxious to know whether her composition was right because she did not prefer the "put-on-the-spot" system. She made me promise to remark to the class that her writing on the board was excellent and not to point out that anything in the composition was wrong, emphasizing that she would not write on the blackboard without this agreement between us. I smiled and accepted her too-shy offer because I am a Japanese. I understood that it was based on the so-called Japanese sense of propriety, one of the characteristics of young Japanese female students. If she were an American, her shy and cautious attitude would be regarded as a negative factor of timidity, cowardice, and backward spirituality.

The unwillingness of Japanese students to express their opinions in class can be concluded as the transfer of pragmatic norms from their L1 (Japanese) to L2 (English). Along with Japanese linguistic traits, which are quite different from those of English, Japanese cultural values of self-restraint and respect for elders and seniority restrain Japanese students from speaking freely. These cultural characteristics are in sharp contrast to those of American culture, which value aggressiveness, verbal eloquence, and human equality. Another sociolinguistic characteristic of Japanese students' unwillingness to use English in class is that we can live without English in Japan. Yano says, "Unlike Europe, Japan is a typical country where English is and will certainly stay a foreign language in that it will function only as a means of communication with non-Japanese in international settings. It will probably never be used within the Japanese community and form part of the speaker's identity repertoire. There will not be a distinctly local model of English, established and recognizable as Japanese English, reflecting the Japanese culture and language" (Yano, Yasukata. "World Englishes in 2000 and beyond": 127). Apart from the righteousness of Yano's future prospect of Japanese English, we must say that he depicts the exact condition and situation of Japanese users of English in Japan. I personally feel that such a sociolinguistic element that allows us Japanese to communicate with one another without English in Japan deeply influences my students' reluctance to speak English in the classroom.

(3) Some useful prescriptions for Japanese students' "closed–mouth syndrome" in class

We English teachers at Japanese universities need to find a prescription that will readily and freely open the mouths of students, compelling them to

use English according to their conditions and proficiency in that language. For a student at an advanced level, the teacher merely needs to offer a relaxed and sociable atmosphere in which the student can easily express his or her opinion. Teachers can sometimes help students by providing a hint or a cue for answering; this will thus help to motivate students to gradually open their mouths and speak. If they fail to recover from closed-mouth syndrome, writing English can be a strong medicine for them. Because Japanese people trust the eyes more than the mouth or ears, they tend to be better writers than fluent speakers. On the other hand, a teacher should help a student whose English is not prepared for constructing English sentences. This could be done by offering remedial lessons or by reviewing the student's English knowledge of phonology, orthography, writing, grammar, and vocabulary.

In every instance, we must bear in mind that the unwillingness of Japanese students to speak English in class is the transfer of pragmatic norms from their mother tongue to English. Japanese speech styles of culturally determined ways of speaking keep students' mouths closed in their English classrooms. Thus English teachers in Japan from other countries should know and be aware of these cultural characteristics of Japanese students and use such communicative ways as I have described above, inventing others along the way.

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