

Understanding Wait-Time from a Learner's Perspective

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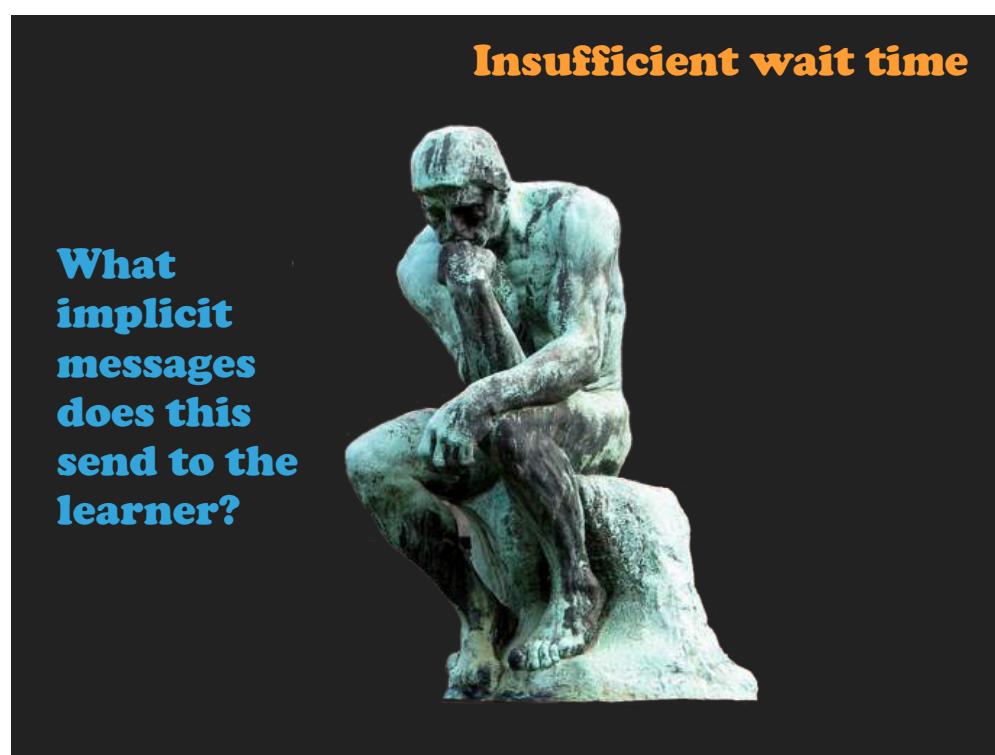
Three years ago, while pursuing my Masters degree in TESOL (Teaching English as a Second/Other Language), I noticed a recurrent theme in one of my professor's lectures. That theme was wait-time, or the period a teacher waits after asking a learner a question. One reason he mentioned wait-time was to highlight a statistic: in EFL classrooms, teachers typically give learners three seconds to respond to questions. In my professor's opinion, three seconds was too short an interval to be using, especially with low to intermediate-level learners.

When I first heard about wait-time, I had only been teaching for a couple of years. During that period, I hadn't considered the amount of wait-time I should be giving learners. In fact, I didn't even know the amount of wait-time I was currently giving them. Due to this hole in my knowledge, I decided to do a thought experiment. This involved visualizing myself as a learner facing an expectant teacher for three seconds. After noticing how the duration felt, I repeated the experiment, this time imagining the teacher asking me a question in Japanese. After a couple more variations on this theme, it dawned on me that regardless of the number of scenarios I played out in my mind, I would never truly be able to understand how learners experience wait-time under classroom conditions.

One year later, in the midst of teaching an EFL class, I realized that I was becoming distracted by one of the learners. Over the course of the semester, he hadn't uttered a single word in response to anything I had said to him. Although I was used to learners occasionally getting flustered, this seemed different. As his silence stretched over the semester, I began to conjecture

on its origins. Did he simply dislike me? Maybe he had a developmental challenge preventing him from speaking English. Perhaps his silence was a protest against compulsory language education.

Noticing the negative arc of my thoughts, I began to worry I would inadvertently treat the learner unfairly. With this in mind, I instituted countermeasures. When asking him questions, I pretended his silence was just as acceptable to me as the other learners' utterances. However, this strategy was only effective up to a point. On one occasion, after asking him a question and receiving silence, I found myself overtaken by irritation. Instead of moving on, I sat rigidly in my seat and stared at him, oozing vitriol. Our standoff lasted an interminable 20 seconds, whereupon he spoke, answering my initial question. His response surprised me, especially because he delivered it calmly and matter-of-factly. As a result of our encounter, my antipathy towards him dissolved. However,



it did little to clear up the question of why he had suddenly decided to speak.

Three months later, my wife persuaded me to start taking Japanese classes. After researching several schools in the area, I found that they were more expensive than I had anticipated. A friend suggested that I take classes taught by retirees at a local community center. The only downside of this was that the retirees had no prior teaching experience.

After surveying classes at the center, I found one that fit my schedule. Furthermore, the teacher was welcoming and enthusiastic. In spite of these positives, I identified a problem with the class on the first day. When the teacher asked me questions, she would interrupt my responses if I paused at anytime. I found this jarring, and asked her in Japanese for more time. She agreed, but started interrupting me again within a week.

After a couple weeks, I began to consider quitting the class. Language learning had become frustrating and anxiety-producing. In the midst of my deliberations, I suddenly had an insight: my negative emotions were a result of insufficient wait-time. Following this I had another, less pleasant insight: maybe my own use of wait-time had discouraged learners in the past. In particular, I thought about the learner who had been silent for most of the semester.

In honor of the learners who I may have discouraged in the past, I resolved to continue the class. Moreover, I realized that now I could study insufficient wait-time from the learner's perspective. Over the course of one month, I wrote my thoughts about wait-time in a journal after each class. The following are a couple selections from that period.

When the teacher doesn't give me enough wait-time, I perceive her as not understanding my educational needs. This lowers my opinion of her teaching abilities.

The more she interrupts, the less I think she cares if I ultimately answer her questions. I am also less motivated to respond.

When she interrupts and supplies me with the correct answer, I perceive her as valuing the correct answer over the quality of our interaction. Due to this, I feel less rapport between us.

When I returned to teaching, I found myself filled with a renewed sense of enthusiasm and direction. Now when I asked learners questions, I waited for verbal responses before continuing. This approach was not without its hitches. Sometimes, extended uncomfortable silences followed my questions. However, these instances exposed one of the reasons I hadn't given learners sufficient wait-time in the first place: my own fear. I suddenly realized that wait-time entails unpredictability. By shortening it, I was protecting against the possibility that I or the learner might do something unexpected. After a couple weeks of giving learners adequate wait-time, I realized that there was nothing that needed protecting.

Bio: Soren Leaver has been teaching in Japan since 2008 and is currently a lecturer at Fukuoka University. He has an MA in TESOL from Anaheim University. His areas of interest include learner autonomy and small-group work.

