

# Thought Experiments: Raising Awareness of Classroom Culture

**Stephen Paton**

*Fukuoka University*

English language education in Japanese schools is often criticised for being too-heavily geared towards university entrance tests rather than communicative competence. As university English teachers, many of us are charged with teaching and facilitating interactive, communicative speaking classes, but find our students remarkably reluctant to participate actively. Teachers can be disappointed, disillusioned, and confused when even those students who express an interest in improving their English skills don't take advantage of the communicative opportunities that we design and provide in class, opting instead for reticence. Brown (2004) called this phenomenon "bafflingly counterproductive learning behavior" (p. 15). What factors compel so many of our students to be uncommunicative in the classroom, and what can be done to help them feel more comfortable interacting? I have found that simply raising students' awareness of the usually-unspoken cultural rules that sanction silence and passivity within classrooms is often enough to facilitate adjustments towards greater communicability. Bringing usually-unexamined automatic classroom behaviours to light, tactfully and critically, can lead students towards questioning the appropriateness of those behaviours, and can lead students to opt for more active and communicative participation.

## **Classroom silence**

A culture of classroom silence is a significant impediment to the success of Japan's foreign-language education. A tacit expectation that communication within classrooms will be largely unidirectional (teacher to students) is at odds with not only the most effective methods of teaching, but also the objectives of policymakers. Efforts and initiatives intended to make language education more communicative meet with resistance when they are applied, as they can differ greatly from what students are accustomed to. Most teachers will know from experience that simply requesting or requiring that classrooms suddenly become lively interactive spaces is, most often, not effective.

The work of Hofstede, Hofstede and Minkov (2010), which examined various aspects of national cultures the world over, has striking explanatory power when it comes to the aspects of Japanese classroom culture that can impede communicative approaches. Amongst their six dimensions of national culture is Collective vs. Individual, which looks at how members of certain cultures see themselves less as individuals than as members of groups in which everyone shares responsibility for cohesiveness and uniformity. This sheds light onto the tendency of Japanese students to rarely if ever volunteer answers, to

rarely ask clarifying questions, and to object to being singled out with questions from the teacher. In a speaking class, when each student might be expected to contribute comments and answers from their own viewpoint, often about themselves, students can feel 'put on the spot', and opt to remain silent rather than stand out or be the center of the attention even briefly. The dimension of *Power Distance*, which looks at the degree of inequality between authority figures (such as teachers) and regular citizens (such as students), explains why students can tend to be so deferential to teachers, rarely voicing comments or disagreements and instead expecting the teacher to act as the sole source of knowledge and information throughout the class. In cultures with a high degree of power distance, students are typically receptive rather than proactive, and can feel unable to ask for repetition or clarification (Banks, 2016).

## **Conflicting intentions**

Obviously there are far more, and more complicated cultural and historical factors that account for the broader classroom culture of Japan. Questions about cultural imperialism aside (Kumaravadivelu, 2006), when the goals of our communicative classes are incongruous with the cultural environment in which we're charged to bring them about, decisions need to be made. Either the culture of classroom silence or the goal of communicative competence has to defer to the other. To over-respect, accommodate, and accept non-communicative behaviours on the grounds that they are based in culture and therefore ought to be respected and side-stepped is to perform a disservice to our students. Surely, there is little point teaching or encouraging our students to communicate in a foreign language in a manner that comports with the norms and confines of a silent, teacher-centered classroom culture. The students will soon be leaving that unique environment, and once they do we want to have equipped them with knowledge, skills, and strategies that they can use for real-world communication with people from vastly different cultures. Future foreign-language interlocutors are sure to bring with them vastly different communicative expectations to those of the Japanese classroom environment, and there is likely to be a price to pay for long drawn-out silences, terse answers, and non-responsiveness.

It is our duty as language educators to direct our students *past* classroom silence, and to do so in a way that students can understand and agree to on their own terms. Whereas some researchers have prescribed an increased understanding of the culture of classroom silence as an end in itself, and as something of its own solution to the problems that classroom silence causes (Harumi, 2011), others go beyond that and instead recommend concerted action to overcome it (Banks, 2016). Given the goals I have for my students, based on my awareness of their potential as English speakers, I have come to view Japan's

culture of classroom silence as a problem that needs to be overcome with some urgency. I have long been testing ways to help students recognise and break through some of the impediments to effective participation that they, through no fault of their own, bring along with them into the language classroom.

### Leveraging students' beliefs

Decades of teachers' frustration (Miller, 1995) and ineffectual educational reforms attest that the culture of classroom silence is a heavy weight to lift. Perhaps, however, we can lead our students towards perceiving *for themselves* that behaving the way they ordinarily might in a classroom would possibly be aberrant, peculiar, and potentially embarrassing in a communicative English speaking class. Can classroom silence and avoidance strategies be effectively stigmatised on the students' terms, rather than only by means of rules dictated and enforced by their teacher (which might meet resistance)? How can a teacher leverage the students' own beliefs, values, and motivations so as to have the students themselves re-frame what has always been *appropriate* classroom behaviour as instead being inappropriate, undesirable, and even *weird*? Can a teacher foster beliefs and ideals in the students that establish active participation and communicability as the easier and more desirable path forward? If so, students might be positioned to observe for the first time that communicative competence in English is perhaps far easier to attain than what they've ever previously believed.

### Juxtapositions

As a means of reframing certain problematic tendencies as humorous rather than directly as negative, I try to portray a funny juxtaposition of familiar reticent behaviours *onto* the kinds of interactions the students likely have every day in non-classroom contexts. The communication lags, the drawn-out silences, the discomfort of being called upon for an answer, the reluctance to admit to not knowing, ... how would such behaviours look if they were transplanted into ordinary, day-to-day communicative contexts?

I've created some resources and techniques, some of which I display on the projector screen and others which are more verbal, which are designed to re-package and re-present accepted and comfortable non-communicative behaviours as instead being uncomfortable, awkward, and difficult. Watching the students coming to view non-communicative classroom silences in potentially negative terms is satisfying and exciting, as it can be a first step in their opting for more communicative participation in class.

### Thought experiments

When called upon by a teacher to give an answer or even a simple response, students can often spend a long time planning an answer, rehearsing it mentally, even checking it first with neighbours and partners before finally delivering it. Accuracy is more of a concern than timely interaction. Many teachers have had the experience of asking a student a simple, conversational question, and

despite there being no reason to expect anything other than a simple, informative answer, being met first with a drawn-out period of silence and nervousness.

I experienced such a situation in a class of English majors some years ago, whilst sitting amongst a group of five or six students. I asked one student a simple question, and she gave her short, simple answer only after a very, very prolonged silence. What occurred to me to do was not to instruct the student that she ought to have answered more quickly, or to ask why she had made everyone in the group wait for so long for her answer, but instead to abruptly ask her what country she wanted to travel to with the English she was learning. After clarifying my meaning, which may indeed have seemed to have taken the conversation off on an irrelevant tangent, she answered that she wanted to go to Canada. I then asked her how long she thought the Canadians that she would meet there would wait for an answer to such a question as the one I had just asked her, without becoming confused or concerned. In other words, how many seconds of complete silence did she imagine her Canadian friends would wait through after asking her a simple question? Within a second or two her face lit into a slightly-embarrassed smile as she realised the strangeness of making someone wait upwards of twenty seconds for a reply to a simple question in the context of a friendly conversation. When I saw her realisation, I somewhat sarcastically suggested that the answer was perhaps somewhere between 0.4 and 1.3 seconds, whereas she had made me wait something like twenty! *Naruhodo!* Shifting her mental context out of the classroom, where a carefully-arrived-at and accurate answer is allowed to take as long as it takes, and having her juxtapose the very same interaction onto a non-classroom context, suddenly reframed her silence as strange, confusing, and potentially embarrassing. Performing this mental juxtaposition was a great way for her and the members of her group to understand the kind of natural, everyday communication that I was inviting them to engage in in the class.

The effectiveness and good-natured acceptance of my intervention here led me to use such an approach again and again when met with similar silences and evasions. I eventually came up with a slide to display whenever such an exchange occurred in subsequent classes (See Figure 1) asking students to imagine, "What if a friend asked you exactly the same question?" Flashing this up on the projector screen brings to students' minds the incongruity of long, drawn-out pauses, hedging, avoidance, or a concern with providing an accurate or correct answer, with what their own friends or associates might expect and accept in any number of non-classroom contexts. This mental re-situating has been like a panacea for helping students realise which personal beliefs had caused classroom interactions to become uncomfortable, stressful, or awkward. It wasn't the question itself that was *difficult*, but the belief that it must be addressed and answered in a particular *classroom-appropriate* way. Bringing such beliefs to light is especially effective in helping students identify where they had unknowingly mis-assigned difficulty, gravity, or importance to actually simple conversation topics or questions.

Figure 1

“What if a friend asked you exactly the same question?”



This consciousness-raising question (“What if a friend asked you exactly the same question?”) has been especially effective in a recent semester when using a textbook that contained group discussion questions that I noticed my students were taking too seriously: “*What do you think are the best ways to combat global warming?*”, “*What factors make a city a good choice to host the Olympic games?*” Concern with not knowing the correct answer was leaving groups of students staring at their textbooks not saying a word for minutes at a time despite being competent speakers. I have been able to reframe those questions *out* of a classroom/textbook context by simply asking: “What if your friend asked you about your thoughts on global warming? You might say that you didn’t know, but maybe it has something to do with reducing air pollution, or certain types of fuel, or something. What if your friend asked you?” Time and time again this kind of simple intervention was the necessary spark that set off long, natural, enjoyable conversations, free of any pressure to give academic, *classroom-appropriate* answers.

I’ve even jokingly set classes the homework task of, when interacting with friends at lunchtime, staring at the ceiling or the floor for ten to fifteen seconds silently before answering any question their friend asks. The very thought of doing so amongst friends is ridiculously awkward and usually raises a laugh, and I’m instantly in a better position to suggest that such silence is equally out-of-place in a communicative classroom.

### Parodies of awkwardness

As teachers, we often want to gauge the understanding of our students by asking questions, and an “I don’t know” or an “I don’t understand” is a very useful indication that we might not have been effective in getting our teaching point across. Many teachers will have seen students’ awkwardness when asked a question to which they don’t know an answer. It’s very difficult to gauge the understanding of the students when the silence that means “I don’t know” is indistinguishable from the silence of preparation, non-comprehension, or simply embarrassment at being singled out. Compounding the problem is the fact that students often anticipate some

sort of penalty for not being able to answer with the *correct* answer, and take measures to avoid that. Assuring students that “I don’t know” is as good an answer as any other is usually not effective in eliciting it, so it’s something that needs to be re-framed and re-conceptualised.

I ask students to imagine what an ordinary conversation with a friend would look like if saying “*wakaranai*” or “*shiranai*” (“I don’t understand/know”) was prohibited or avoided in the same kinds of ways that it is in a classroom context. On my iPad, I have scribbled up a sequence of cartoonish pictures of two friends sitting together drinking coffee (See Figure 2), which I display in sequence on the projector screen. After the blank speech bubbles have bounced back and forth several times symbolising an ordinary conversation, one suddenly contains a question mark, and I suggest that the friend might be asking a question as innocuous as, “So, what time are you going to go home today?” or “What are you going to have for dinner tonight?”. The interlocutor on the right, however, doesn’t have an exact, accurate, correct answer to this—but rather than admitting as much he erupts into an exaggerated, panicked avoidance. Suddenly, his eyes bulge in fear, his jaw drops, his hair is suddenly disheveled. He looks behind himself for someone who might be able to help, he looks at the table, back at his friend, back at the table, behind himself, at the table, up, down, over and over and over, thoroughly trapped by his (in this context) irrational and inappropriate refusal to simply announce the truth—that he doesn’t know what time he’s going home, or what he’ll be having for dinner. Students almost always laugh at the absurdity of this response, and seem to be more receptive to affirming “I don’t know” in my class. I assure them that doing so is preferable to any degree of discomfort and awkwardness, for both them and me.

Figure 2

“But... but... I don’t know!”



At another stage of the course, I like to teach students a communication strategy called “A-A-A”, standing for *Answer-Add-Ask*. Upon being asked a question, a good communicator will *answer* it, then voluntarily *add* some

amount of additional information, then *ask* a question of their partner, who should do the same, thus keeping the conversation flowing. When demonstrating this strategy, I attempt to perform a self-deprecating satire of the avoidance strategy I've so often seen in students who doubt their ability to communicate in English. Such students will often only give a terse quiz-like answer to the question before reverting to silence. I request that a random student simply ask me one random question from the page of the textbook that we're on, usually something such as, "Who do you live with?" I'll instantly give the shortest answer I can possibly think of, such as, "Family!" and then stare at the floor. The silence that follows is awful, I look like a fool, the student who asked the question invariably squirms and looks around not knowing what to do, until I break character and mercifully let them off the hook. A few performances like this can persuade students that they don't want to look as silly as me, and that following the communication strategy is a much better option. ("I live with my family. My wife and three children. Who do you live with?")

Again, I'll suggest that the students try responding to their friends' questions at lunchtime with nothing beyond the same kind of quiz-style response, allowing the students another chance to determine for themselves that such a manner of response really is a strange impediment to smooth communication that they can easily overcome whilst in the communicative classroom.

### Conclusion

Teachers will be able to come up with their own ways of juxtaposing the impediments to communication that they observe in their classrooms with the kinds of ordinary communicative contexts that their students are familiar with. The art, of course, is to do so without mockery, and to always keep in mind the goals and potentials of the students. Taking this approach has helped my own students to make the choice to participate and interact during speaking activities in a more efficacious way. After years being taught English within the confines of silent, non-interactive classrooms, helping students to imagine English outside of a classroom context might even be the most important and far-reaching work we do.



### References

- Banks, S. (2016). Behind Japanese students' silence in English classrooms. *Accents Asia*, 8(2), 54-75.
- Brown, R. A. (2004). Learning consequences of fear of negative evaluation and modesty for Japanese EFL students. *The Language Teacher*, 28(1), 15-17.
- Harumi, S. (2011). Classroom silence: Voices from Japanese EFL learners. *ELT Journal*, 65(3), 260-269.
- Hofstede, G., Hofstede, G. J., & Minkov, M. (2010). *Cultures and organizations: Software of the Mind* (3rd ed.). McGraw Hill.
- Kumaravadivelu B. (2006) Dangerous Liaison: Globalization, Empire and TESOL. In Edge, J. (Ed.), *(Re-)Locating TESOL in an Age of Empire (Language and Globalization)*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Miller, T. (1995). Japanese learners' reactions to communicative English lessons. *JALT Journal*, 17(1), 31-52.

### Bio

**Stephen Paton** (M.Ed TESOL, CELTA) taught English to foreign students in Sydney, Australia, before coming to Japan in 2008. He is a member of the Apple Distinguished Educators program and is the editor of the CUE SIG publication *CUE Circular*.

[home@steppaton.com](mailto:home@steppaton.com)

