

Investigating why Japanese students remain silent in Australian university classrooms

The influences of culture and identity

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While Australian academic contexts generally prioritize verbal participation, Japanese educational environments expect students to participate silently. This research project explored why Japanese students remain silent in Australian classrooms despite knowing the expectations of western universities. Contrary to prevailing conceptions of silence in classroom contexts, findings revealed that some participants' silent in-class behavior does not necessarily suggest reluctance or inability. Rather, participants assumed that verbally contributing to the class would impede the teacher's lecture and their peers' learning. Additional findings indicated that while cultural, identity traits, and previous education in Japan may have shaped their silent in-class behavior, some participants acknowledged the need to participate verbally to satisfy their teachers and peers in Australian classrooms. Peripheral factors such as the size of classrooms and lack of genuine rapport between classmates also influenced their classroom behavior. The findings expand upon existing literature which shows that Japanese students' silence in Australian classrooms is often juxtaposed with teacher and student expectations.

Keywords: Silence, Classroom, Culture, Identity, University, Learning style

Moving to a new country to study at a university is a daunting challenge. Bridging linguistic and cultural barriers can present a host of challenges to international students. Japanese students, for instance, are not accustomed to expressing their opinions in their native classrooms, as they are expected to listen to teachers silently. Japanese academic culture often views students' silent in-class behavior as acceptable or even desirable, whereas mainstream Australian academic culture typically values and encourages a contrasting set of characteristics. This exploratory study investigates Japanese students' perceptions and modifications of their silent behavior in Australian classroom contexts to better understand how culture,

identity and silence intersect in multicultural classroom settings. For the purpose of this exploratory study, identity is defined as the variable character and personality of individuals that they express depending on conditions and contexts (Block, 2006; Omoniyi, 2006) in relation to cultural backgrounds and status as a silent learner. Identity is not viewed as unitary but as fluid and evolving in response to social circumstances (Norton, 2000).

Contextual background

The ascription of positive or negative connotations to silence is deeply embedded within cultural considerations (Hao, 2011; Zembylas & Michaelides, 2004). On one hand, Western societies often equate silence with dependency, or lack of confidence and understanding (Lee & Ng, 2010; Nakane, 2006). On the other hand, silence is not necessarily restricted to one's inability to verbalize, but rather represents a strategic means of conveying meaning and purpose, particularly when considered in conjunction with body language or facial expressions (Hao, 2011). Moreover, in educational settings, silence often allows individuals to reflect upon and organize their thoughts by facilitating what Zembyras and Michaelides (2004, p. 201) refer to as "wait-time."

In particular, perceptions towards the effectiveness of silence as a communicative strategy in the classroom differ remarkably between Japan and Australia. For the purpose of this study, silence is viewed through Japanese cultural norms and defined as an expected classroom behavior whereby a student listens and remains in a non-talkative state. Teachers and students from Western societies tend to prefer spoken interactions, for they deem verbal participation as a sign of engagement and a desire to express ones' ideas (Ellwood & Nakane, 2009; Ollin, 2008). Western educators often value discussion, tending to allocate a large amount of time to verbally interacting with students in class (Jaworski, 1993; Kim & Markus, 2002). On the other hand, they often view silence as a sign of inability, dependency or reluctance to actively participate (Zembylas & Michaelides, 2004), and even an impediment to learners' academic progress (Harumi, 2011; Yue & Le, 2009).

Previous research has already demonstrated a tendency for Japanese students to remain silent in educational settings (Nakane, 2007). Japanese students tend to listen to the lecturers and take notes silently rather than verbalizing their opinions (Hammond, 2007). Japanese people generally consider silence not only as a cultural indication of respect for teachers and fellow pupils but also as a desirable behavior in classrooms (Cheng, 2000; Kato, 2010). In these contexts, silence is utilized deliberately to foster harmony and promote cooperation (DeVito, 2004). This

exploratory research investigates why Japanese students remain silent in Australia university classrooms.

Research design

A case study approach is used to ensure an in-depth account of why Japanese students remain silent in Australian academic contexts. The sample population of this study consists of eight Japanese students studying at an Australian university (see Table 1). In order to obtain the participants' demographic data, a questionnaire was utilized (see Figure 1). Following the questionnaire, semi-structured interviews were used to examine each participant's use of silence and the impacts of culture and identity on their behavior in the classroom. When the participants did not fully understand the questions as originally scripted, probing questions were provided. One example is question six: Do you think the relationships with your teachers and classmates and the size of classrooms contribute to influencing your in-class behavior? Two students commented that they only interacted with some peers outside of class so the primary researcher inquired further saying, "Can you tell me about who you interacted with and who you did not, and how those out of class conversations impacted how you behaved in class?"

Self-reported data from semi-structured interviews were utilized as the primary data collection. Classroom observations were not conducted because of the apprehension that the researcher's presence in the classroom would affect student behavior. We used their words, feelings, and experiences rather than observed their in-class behavior as a minimally invasive approach and in accordance with best practices in ethical research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Kimmel, 2009). Interviews were conducted once in Japanese to ensure a comfortable context for participants to articulate their views on silence. Each interview lasted approximately 45 minutes. Afterwards, a coding scheme was used to classify their comments into emergent themes. Pattern matching techniques were used to ensure the internal validity of the data (Gilgun & Sussman, 2014), and then related back to participant demographics (Mertens, 2014) to provide insight into why students remained silent and how culture played a role in their behavior within classrooms in Australia.

This exploratory study drew upon the tenets of the "double-swing model" and a phenomenological approach (Creswell, 2012). The "double-swing model" theorized by Yoshikawa (1987) was utilized to investigate the possibility of students' adjustment to a new cultural environment. The "double-swing model" is dynamic and diverse in that individuals' cultural and identity attributes will be transformed when encountering others with contrasting/different cultural and

identity traits (Yoshikawa, 1987). That individuals' cultural and identity traits are not to be eliminated but to be reconstructed or modified. This study also utilized a phenomenological approach to explain how individual students' subjective experiences impact their behavior and perceptions of silence. Using personal accounts facilitated the eight participants to reflect and vocalize their situational understandings of lived events from a holistic perspective. Hence, this study sought to explore participants' perceptions as they emerge from their firsthand experiences by extracting the phenomenological 'essence' of these experiences (Creswell, 2008; van Manen, 1990).

Table 1. Participant profiles.

Participants' pseudonyms	Gender	Age	Educational qualifications	Working experience	Current area of specialization
Hanako	Female	51	BA	23 years as a Japanese teacher	Master of Applied Linguistics for Language Teachers
Yotahachirou	Male	54	BA	27 years and 7 months as a science teacher	Master of English as an International Language
Hikaru	Female	29	BA	4 years (University academic staff for 3 years and incorporated administrative agency for 1 year)	Graduate Diploma in Applied Linguistics
Haruka	Female	30	BA, MA	8 years as a Japanese teacher	Graduate Diploma of Education
Yoko	Female	34	BA, MA	3 years	Graduate Diploma of Education
Kumiko	Female	52	BA, MA	30 years as a Japanese teacher	MA by Research in Applied Japanese Linguistics.
Gomuku	Male	46	BA, MA	18 years as an English teacher	PhD in Japanese Applied Linguistics
Masako	female	30	BA, MA	5 years as an English and a Japanese teacher	Graduate Diploma of Education

Questionnaire

1. Preferred pseudonym:
2. Gender: Male Female
3. Age:
4. Your job experience in Japan (including the length of your service):
5. Your academic qualifications:
6. Your current area of specialization in Australia:

Interview questions

1. How do you define your in-class behavior in Japan and Australia (silent/ verbal)?
What factors cause you to behave this way? Explain why.
2. Are there any differences in students' in-class behavior between Japanese and Australian academic settings? If so, describe them.
3. How do you feel about remaining silent and being verbal in classrooms in Japan and Australia? Do you feel any differences in terms of the perceptions of remaining silent and being verbal in both settings?
4. What kinds of circumstances have caused you to remain silent or verbal in classrooms in Japan and Australia? Describe them.
5. What are the benefits and limitations of remaining silent and being verbal in academic settings? Explain them. (You can also provide circumstances).
6. Do you think the relationships with your teachers and classmates and the size of classrooms contribute to influencing your in-class behavior?
7. Do you often intentionally remain silent as a way of learning in classrooms? Explain why or why not.
8. Do you think you have changed your in-class behavior or felt the need to transform your modes of classroom participation from silent to verbal or vice versa after being exposed to Australian classrooms? Explain why or why not.

Figure 1. Questionnaire and interview questions.

Findings and discussion

This study sought out to answer the following research questions: 1) To what extent do Japanese students desire to remain silent or modify their silent behavior in Australian university classrooms? and 2) To what extent do culture and identity shape students' modes of learning in these classrooms? Data were collected, analyzed, and assembled to address each of these questions, as described in the following sections: costly pragmatism and silent barriers. Emergent themes within these overarching categories provide an organizational structure for addressing

the two interrelated research questions, as one's willingness to modify behavior is inherently impacted by culture, identity, and prior experiences. Student voices are represented via verbatim statements to most accurately reflect their positions and stances on why they remain silent in Australian university classrooms.

Costly pragmatism

Based on the data derived from interviews, it was abundantly clear that participants experienced an ongoing tension regarding how to "engage" in learning within higher education. Their main objective was always the same – to learn; yet, they have been accustomed to a very particular learning style in their previous educational development in Japan, where they focused on absorbing content through direct instruction via listening comprehension and connecting prior knowledge through solo reading and writing exercises. This is their preferred means of acquiring information from instructors and texts. It appears, however, that these cultural norms and preferred behaviors were not as important to the majority of participants compared to performing well in class and doing what was required of them in order to satisfy their Australian teachers. Balancing instructor's demands while maintaining cultural identity only increased the difficulty that these students already experienced with the demands of higher education in a foreign land with minimal support systems in place to ease their transition (Campbell & Li, 2008; Hung & Hyun, 2010; Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 2001).

While all participants categorized themselves as silent students in class, a discontinuity may exist between students' self-reported perceptions of "remaining silent in the classroom" and their actual classroom behavior. In particular, discrepancies exist between students who have a willingness to modify their silent behavior and those who prefer to maintain their inherited learning style. This may lead many teachers to perceive students' behavior as a lack of willingness to engage in the classroom than students purported. This notion may explain why some students stated that their teachers continued to demand increased levels of verbal participation in class, even though the students believed they were just as verbal as their Australian peers.

For students to successfully adapt to a multicultural classroom setting, they must transform their in-class behavior and take the plunge into new spaces by having the willingness and drive to step outside their comfort zone; those most capable of this feat have high levels of self-efficacy (Wadsworth, Hecht & Jung, 2008). Cultural adaptation is not an easy process (Wadsworth et al., 2008) or one that is guaranteed to net positive results as measured by academic dispositions and performance, and this is also true of modifying one's silent or verbal interaction in the classroom.

Silent barriers

Although most were aware of teachers' expectations for verbal participation, they struggled to meet those demands. Remaining silent is typical within Japanese educational contexts whereas voicing opinions is often a normative act in Australian educational contexts (Ellwood & Nakane, 2009; Hao, 2011; Lebra, 1987; Saville-Troike, 1985). Nevertheless, many made efforts to verbally contribute within Australian classrooms when required but not always through voluntary means, resisting whenever possible. Deviations from cultural identity ranged from major to minor changes with no students reporting that they were totally successful in assimilating into the Australian verbal participatory context. What follows is an articulation of specific reasons of students' silence, ways of modifying their behavior (as applicable), and the impact of culture, identity, and demographics on their participatory practices. Data analysis yielded three major thematic topics that emerged from coding students' responses including "Maintaining Cultural Identity," "Cultural Integration," and "Learning Environment." These themes were used to discuss data to answer the research questions previously described. The findings of this study reinforce and extend prior research.

Maintaining cultural identity

All students attributed their silent in-class behavior to their cultural backgrounds and identity as Japanese students. They highlighted that fears of receiving negative evaluation from teachers and peers, showing off their abilities in front of students, and interrupting the flow of classroom dynamics were particularly salient. Haruka, Masako, and Hanako claimed that they remained silent in Australian classroom contexts as a strategy to improve their learning based on their previous successful experiences in Japan. Kumiko, Gomuku, and Hikaru ascribed their silence in Australian classrooms to preserving harmony with peers and teachers, which also represents the cultural norm carried over from Japan, where silence is viewed as facilitating teachers' conduct in classrooms. These findings coincide with DeVito's (2004) and Jandt's (2000) previous research on the cultural aspects underpinning Japanese students' silent behavior.

All students also recognized the differences between the teacher-student interactions and teachers' expectations towards Australian students and those of Japan. They emphasized that their Australian peers and teachers seemed to be displeased with their silent participation, although remaining silent in Japanese classrooms was generally perceived as an appropriate participation style. Hikaru compared teachers' expectations in Australian classrooms with those in Japanese classrooms:

I think teachers in Japan generally want students to memorize answers by reading textbooks or listening to teachers. But, on the other hand, teachers in Australia generally want students to express their own opinions. (Hikaru)

She suggested that teachers and peers in Australian classrooms usually view speech as a natural act, whereas those in Japan take silent in-class behavior for granted. Australians often consider speech as a desirable act for social/affective communication and relationship building, whereas Japanese perceive it as undesirable unless there is factual information to be explicitly communicated (Sifianou, 1997). It seems that the conflicting gap between these two expectations made Hikaru aware of the social norms relating to verbalization in Australian classrooms. Despite this realization, she struggled to modify her classroom participation style while persisting in her efforts. Her background of working in a Japanese university setting may have influenced her ongoing desire to successfully interact with others in multicultural contexts.

On the other hand, Haruka, Hanako, and Masako expressed that remaining silent did not necessarily have a negative impact on their in-class learning:

Listening silently helps me absorb and build knowledge. (Haruka)

Silence helps me organize ideas... (Hanako)

Their comments reinforce Jaworski's (1993) argument that teachers and students in Australia prefer to respond verbally, whereas those in Japan prefer to ponder responses silently. It appears that their assertions regarding their use of silence as a method of comprehension reiterate the possibilities of silence as a learning tool in academic settings (cf. Hao, 2011).

Masako reported the efficacy of remaining silent in classroom contexts:

I want the teacher and other students to understand my silence in classrooms... This is how I built knowledge. (Masako)

She emphasized that as remaining silent in Japanese classrooms contributed to her learning, and it was her hope that her classmates and teachers in Australia would value this mode of learning. In this sense, her assertion challenges Yoshikawa's (1987) "double-swing-theory", highlighting the importance of creating a sphere of "between" Eastern and Western perspectives.

Hanako, Yoko, Yotahachirou, and Hikaru reported that they had been taught to remain silent in their native classrooms since primary school and that they had taken it for granted in Japanese academic contexts. While silence in classrooms in Japan is generally deemed to foster harmony and promote cooperation, expressing opinions is often construed as impolite or offensive to teachers and other students (Aubrey, 2009; DeVito, 2004; Kato, 2010). Davies and Ikeno (2002), Ellwood and

Nakane (2009), and Nakane (2006) also claim that silence is a common practice employed to avoid confrontation between teachers and students in Japanese educational settings, which are very hierarchical. Overall, it appears that they considered their silent in-class behavior to be a culturally sophisticated strategy to maintain 'harmony' with peers and teachers in the classroom and that these students have transferred this Japanese norm to Australian academic contexts.

Cultural integration

Contrary to Japanese classrooms where silence is generally viewed as a sign of maintaining harmony with peers and teachers, Kumiko, Gomuku, and Hikaru assert that verbalization does not necessarily disrupt harmony with peers and teachers in Australian classrooms. They report that they were previously silent students themselves who preferred not to verbalize in Japanese classrooms. However, their realization that verbal participation plays a role in being accepted as a productive member of an Australian classroom leads them to expand upon their existing learning styles:

I felt the need to change my in-class behavior from silent to verbal when I saw my classmates actively articulated their opinions in class. (Kumiko)

I tried to articulate in class in Australia, although I had been quiet in class in Japan. (Gomuku)

I think Australian teachers and students view speaking as signs of diligence and willingness. (Hikaru)

Hikaru also maintained that her identity and in-class silent behavior transformed from predominantly silent to predominantly verbal. She suggested that she was unconsciously adding layers to her identity; while she continued to be generally silent in class, she also began to verbalize her views. The "double-swing model" reinforces her comment by emphasizing that one's identity could be pluralistic as a result of encountering different cultures (Yoshikawa, 1987).

Meanwhile, Yotahachirou and Hanako demonstrated an unwillingness or the inability to modify their own identity and participation styles:

Changing in-class behavior is difficult and I do not want to do it either. (Yotahachirou)

Raising hands and articulating opinions often pleased teachers and peers... But changing learning styles and identity once developed is very hard. (Hanako)

Being a lifelong science teacher in Japan, Yotahachirou reported both a difficulty and an unwillingness to modify his identity and participation style. Hanako experienced tension regarding whether she should adhere to the silent in-class

behavioral norms commonplace in Japan or adapt Australian customs to please her teachers and peers. Although she recognized the normative expectations in Australian academic contexts, she chose to maintain her silent in-class behavior. Her decision to hold her existing identity was partly shaped from her 23 years' experience as a Japanese teacher and over 20 years' experience as a Japanese student. Their comments reflect the conceptions of "double-swing-model"; intercultural encounters are not constructed in a homogeneous world but in the environments where pluralistic cultures prevail (Yoshikawa, 1987).

Learning environment

Haruka, Hanako, and Gomuku ascribed their silent participation in classrooms in Australia to their experiences of relationship building between teachers and students over many years in Japan. They commented that their teachers normally exerted their authority over students and were quite intolerant of mistakes:

Japanese teachers often attempted to keep distance from their students. I think this is the typical nature of Japanese academic contexts. (Gomuku)

My experience of having received Japanese teachers' negative feedback regarding mistakes made me hesitate to verbalize in class. (Haruka)

My teacher in my junior high school forced me to answer although I could not... It made me frightened to answer verbally. (Hanako)

As opposed to their comments, Kumiko reported:

I often ask questions in class if I feel my questions are the ones that my classmates also have. (Kumiko)

She prioritized contribution to classroom dynamics by actively asking questions over concerns of losing face. Her attitude challenges the argument of Liu and Littlewood (1997) that Japanese students tend to remain silent when they feel their questions might lead to losing face. Kumiko's willingness to do whatever was needed for optimal success is a testament to her 30 years' experience as a Japanese teacher across both Japan and Australia.

Haruka, Gomuku, and Yoko attributed an anxiety of peers' evaluation to their lack of verbal involvement in Australian classrooms. Haruka and Gomuku prioritized asking questions before or after class rather than in class mainly due to a fear of being labeled as incompetent by their peers. Negative experiences from verbally participating in Japanese classrooms caused them to hesitate verbalizing their opinions in Australian classrooms.

Yoko warned that verbalization in Japanese classrooms could break the harmony amongst other classmates, ultimately resulting in social ostracism:

I did not want to answer verbally in class in Japan because I was afraid that if my classmates thought I was showing off my ability... I was also worried about being isolated from my classmates by speaking in class. (Yoko)

Many participants attributed this fear to the size of the class and the strengths of relationships with their peers to their in-class behavior. Kumiko and Hikaru expressed their preferences to study in smaller classrooms:

I feel more embarrassed in a larger classroom... I need to speak up if the classroom is large. In doing so, I apprehend if classmates will evaluate my ideas and my English proficiency. (Kumiko)

I feel it is hard to make myself understood in English in a large classroom is more difficult than in a smaller classroom. (Hikaru)

Yotahachirou and Yoko attributed the relationships with fellow classmates to their in-class behavior:

Whether I remain silent or not in class depends on classmates. The closer I am with them, the more verbal I become. (Yotahachirou)

I usually hesitated to verbalize in front of the classmates who were not so close. They might hold a strong view against me... it increases a fear of verbalizing in class. (Yoko)

Furthermore, Haruka and Masako expressed their preference to be surrounded by non-native English speakers rather than native English speakers in class:

As non-native English speakers usually understand the difficulty of speaking English, they will be more tolerant of my remarks and mistakes. (Haruka)

I acknowledged that I was poor at speaking English... But the experience of being praised by my non-native English friends reduced the fear of verbalizing in class. (Masako)

Overall, it appears that their in-class behavior was significantly influenced by the size of the class and their relationships with fellow classmates. This finding challenges some previous research which has focused too heavily on cultural reasons behind Japanese students' preference of silence. Furthermore, it demonstrates a need to investigate relational factors that affect Japanese students' decision to remain silent in classroom contexts.

Conclusion

This exploratory study revealed that Japanese students' reported silent in-class behavior in Australian classrooms is deeply entrenched in differences in cultural traits, identity and previous educational experiences in Japan. Therefore, transforming their classroom behavior was quite challenging. Their preference and inclination towards silence in Australian classrooms did not necessarily denote their reluctance or incompetence but was rather related to retaining harmony with classmates and teachers, promoting the learning process, avoiding showing-off, and losing face. However, their realization that Australian academic contexts tend to view verbal contribution as a preferred classroom practice led some to be more verbal, resulting in further evidence of the theory of "double-swing model" related to the students' transformation of identity and culture.

The findings also suggested that intergenerational factors could play an important role in determining the differences in classroom participation styles. While younger participants (around the age of 30) generally expressed their attempts and/or willingness to adapt their existing learning styles which they developed in Japan, older participants (over the age of 50) expressed their disinclination or difficulty in transforming their existing learning styles. This provides an impetus for future research on the impacts of age in relation to Japanese students' learning in multicultural settings. Additional findings suggested that the classroom silence of Japanese students should not be solely associated with their cultural background. Peripheral factors such as the size of the class and the classroom atmosphere also affected the students' decision to remain silent.

Despite numerous studies regarding Japanese students' silence in academic settings (Ellwood & Nakane, 2009; Tatar, 2005), the study of peer and teacher acceptance of students' silent in-class behavior and the utilization of silence as a learning tool in multicultural classrooms remains inconclusive (Ollin, 2008; Vassilopoulos & Konstantinidis, 2012). The findings of this study suggested that silence could contribute to the deepening of students' understanding and their information absorption. Nevertheless, this study merely focuses on students' use of silence in classroom settings and does not demonstrate how Japanese students have attempted to improve their English speaking proficiency and keep up with their peers in Australia. Hence, future studies need to investigate whether silence can contribute to Japanese students' oral language improvement. Additionally, future studies need to include teachers with a range of multicultural sensitivities (whether they are comfortable with students' silence or not) to confirm or challenge Japanese students' perceptions of silence in classrooms. Finally, a study into how Japanese students' verbal adaption within multicultural classrooms can affect their inherent cultural behavior outside the classroom would also be valuable.

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