

Exploring ways of accommodating silent Japanese language learners in the classroom: Insights from scholars in the field

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ABSTRACT

The following paper highlights a podcast narrative that emerged through a series of interviews for the podcast series "Lost in Citations". The thread that connects each guest is the topic of silence in 2nd-language university classrooms in Japan. Much like academics read, cite, and then publish responses, throughout this podcast narrative, leading scholars in the field of silence in university classrooms were able to listen in "real time" to their colleagues and subsequently respond and forward the ongoing conversation to future guests in the series. After reviewing 5 interviews that focused on publications regarding silence in university language classrooms, the following themes emerged: ways of conceptualizing silence, silence and culture, approaching research, problematizing and coping with unwanted silence, and categorizing meaningful/productive silence. Where appropriate, we situated these commentaries within the wider discourse of silence literature.



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And the vision that was planted in my brain

Still remains

Within the sound of silence

— Simon & Garfunkle, "The Sound of Silence" (1964)

1. Introduction

When students accurately produce speech patterns in a language class, teachers are afforded a sense of immediate gratification. Conversely, when silence emerges after a teaching prompt, language teachers can be confused and unsure of how to proceed (Harumi, 2011). What does the silence mean? Depending on the scenario, silence can represent misunderstanding, low confidence, low proficiency, anxiety, shyness, embarrassment, a lack of willingness to communicate, defiance and the desire to maintain social harmony, among others (King, 2013a). Because speech production can signal aptitude, many language teachers may inherently view silence with a bias. (Bao 2014) pushes back against this notion and argues that there is a silence duality. Yes, instances of "negative silence" (e.g., anxiety, low willingness to communicate) can subtract from the learner experience. However, "positive silence", (e.g., processing), is not only additive but also essential to the learning experience. Moreover, 'the

silent period' or 'silent phase' has been debated as a temporary bridge toward limited speaking proficiency (Bligh & Drury, 2015). Regarding Japanese language learners specifically, it has been found that outward emotional displays are projected with less intensity than western students (Matsumoto, 1991; Matsumoto et al., 2002). Possibly because of display rules and other cultural differences, (Harumi 2011) argued that the ambiguity of silence can be amplified in a scenario with a western teacher and Japanese students. While there are no easy answers and a "one size fits all" mentality in dealing with silence in 2nd-language university classrooms, long-form discussions on the subject may shed more light on teacher and student perspectives.

2. Research design and data collection methods

As academics, we like to talk, share ideas, congregate, and be an active part of our field. Due to the pandemic, however, sharing and opportunities to congregate were limited. To fill this void, the podcast "Lost in Citations" was started by Jonathan Shachter with the aim of contacting academics at various stages of their careers and offering a platform to share insights from their research. Joined by Christopher Haswell as a bi-weekly rotating host, each episode revolves around an academic citation - namely a peer-reviewed article, book chapter or book. In each interview, we learn about the background of the academic and the background of the citation (i.e., factors that influenced the production of the work). There is also time in each episode to focus on relevant discussion topics within each publication. Often these discussions reference other academics in the field and we endeavor to contact these "cited" individuals to forward the dialogue. As we continued to contact future guests based on previous guest recommendations, an organic "podcast narrative" emerged that focused on connected themes of research.

To define the term, a podcast narrative describes the nature in which academics can respond to each other and build upon arguments in "real time" through the medium of podcasting (Haswell & Shachter, 2021). Previous podcast narratives within the 'Lost in Citations' catalogue have explored World Englishes/ English as a Medium of Instruction (Haswell & Shachter, 2021) and a forthcoming article exploring research labels in the interdisciplinary field of the Psychology of Language Learning.

This research study employs a sociocultural design whereby scholars in the field of silence were recruited to reach out to the public with their voice and expertise. Qualitative data are analyzed retrospectively whereby organically emerging themes are identified and compared. Our research design is unique in that experts in the field are provided an innovative space to respond and/or expand on discussion themes presented by previous guests in the series without significant publication lags. The focus of our thematic analysis is student and teacher perspectives regarding learner silence in second-language classrooms - with four of the five interviews focusing specifically on Japanese language learners.

2.1. Context of selected interviews

Dr. Seiko Harumi was the first guest in the series specifically because of her influential 2011 paper written in the ELT Journal, "Classroom silence: Voices from Japanese EFL learners". The second interviewee was with John Wiltshier who co-wrote a chapter entitled in "Tearing down the wall of silence" in the book "Teaching English at Japanese Universities" (Wadden & Hale, 2018). During the interview with Harumi, she mentioned that an upcoming book "East Asian Perspectives on Silence in English Language Education" (King & Harumi, 2020) might be of interest to educators and researchers with an interest in this focus. Co-edited by Dr. Jim King and aforementioned Harumi, East Asian Perspectives on Silence in English Language Education is a collection of chapters from contributing authors. After reading the book, co-editor King and one of the contributing authors, Dr. Dat Bao, were invited to come on the podcast. Both of these individuals are highly respected in the field, contributing seminal papers and books on silence and reticence (e.g., Bao, 2014, King, 2013a). In the interview with King, it was recommended that the host speak to his Ph.D. student Kate Maher - an individual who had collaborated with King on a variety of journal articles and book chapters.

2.2. Interview Details

The details of the podcast interviews in the *Lost in Citations* catalogue specifically covered in this paper are as follows:

Episode 1. Dr. Seiko Harumi, University of London

Paper discussed: Harumi, S. (2011). Classroom silence: Voices from Japanese EFL learners. *ELT Journal*, 65(3), 260-269.

Episode 21. John Wiltshier, Miyagi Gakuin Women's University

Paper discussed: Wiltshier, J., & Helgesen, M. (2018). Tearing down the wall of silence: Constructing the English conversation class at a Japanese university. In P. Wadden & C.C. Hale (Eds.), *Teaching English at Japanese Universities* (pp. 43-53). Routledge.

Episode 27. Dr. Jim King, University of Leicester

Paper discussed: King, J. (2013b). Silence in the second language classrooms of Japanese universities. *Applied Linguistics*, 34(3), 325-343.

Episode 35. Dr. Dat Bao, Monash University

Paper discussed: King, J. (2013b). Bao, D. (2020). Silence, talk and in-betweens. In J. King & S. Harumi (Eds.), *East Asian perspectives on silence in English language education* (pp. 17-36). Multilingual Matters.

Episode 39. Kate Maher, Kyoto University of Foreign Studies

Paper discussed: Maher, K., & King, J. (2020). Observing anxiety in the foreign language classroom: Student silence and nonverbal cues. *Journal for the Psychology of Language Learning*, 2(1), 116-141.

Since it is impossible to include the transcripts of entire podcasts in this paper, we recommend that you listen to the interviews in full at [LostInCitations.com](https://www.lostin citations.com). Regarding data collection methodology, Mp3 audio files were transcribed using the application Otter.ai. Interview transcripts were back-checked by listening again to the original audio file. For reference purposes, we have included time stamps after quoted material (e.g., 41:03). Where grammar or punctuation errors occur, they are due to the original transcription.

3. Discussion

After reviewing the podcast interviews, certain themes emerged. These themes, which are presented in the following discussion are as follows: ways of conceptualizing silence, silence as culturally contextualized, approaching silence research, problematizing and coping with unwanted silence, and categorizing meaningful/productive silence. Where appropriate, we situated commentary within the broader discourse of silence literature.

3.1. Different ways of conceptualizing silence

Harumi's interest in the topic of silence in language classrooms came from her experience team-teaching with foreign assistant language teachers (ALTs) in Japan. She noticed that when silence occurred after teaching prompts, there were three distinct perspectives: foreign teachers, Japanese teachers (her perspective), and Japanese students. Interestingly, all of these individuals were viewing the 'wall of silence' through different lenses. "As a Japanese English teacher, I came across this problem very often - this issue is a sort of widespread (in Japan). And the reason why I was interested in this topic is because two groups of people inspired me: at first the students and the other group is the ALT teachers because I did a lot of team teaching with them. They often said that it is so difficult to break the wall of the silence. When you ask questions, there is no answer, and you don't know what to do. And then as a Japanese person, I could sense what students are feeling and thinking, but I couldn't explain well. That's why I wanted to find out the reason why this is happening in the Japanese classroom" (12:38). Harumi touches on her experiences observing a cultural divide in the classroom - using these awkward instances as a springboard for research.

Harumi admitted that she "could sense what students are feeling and thinking but couldn't explain well" (12:35). In this brief statement, Harumi highlights cultural interpretations of silence that the non-Japanese teacher did not (or could not) perceive. Where an ALT observed "awkward silence", Harumi interpreted the incidence as "problem-solving silence" (see [Bao, 2021](#)). Later in the paper we will discuss cultural connections to silence in more detail.

When Wiltshier first started teaching in Japan, he was surprised by 'the wall of silence', especially coming from his teaching training in the U.K. "That was one of the biggest issues when I came over to Japan as an ELT (English Language Teacher). And it probably still is now... I was a teacher in the U.K., in a primary school... the most important thing for children in the UK if the teacher asked the question, is the speed of the answer. Right? Not whether it's right or wrong. It's actually the speed of the response" (24:45). Wiltshier spotlights a disconnect of expectations regarding teacher-student rhythms and patterns. Japanese students who were not used to U.K. teachers perhaps did not view this silence as a wall.

From his training in the U.K., Wiltshier explained that teacher prompts served the purpose of (a) introducing the topic and (b) gauging aptitude or previous knowledge. When faced with silence after a teaching prompt, Wiltshier concurred with Harumi - there is a lot of confusion and hesitancy regarding how to proceed. Did the students understand my question? Are they disinterested? Wiltshier concluded that Japanese students put a priority on accuracy over speed (i.e., it is better to remain silent than risk answering the question incorrectly). This is evident in classroom situations in Japan when a teacher addresses an individual student directly and that student converses with a classmate before giving a response. Wiltshier also explained that the individual Japanese student may feel that they carry the responsibility of giving a correct answer on behalf of the class. (Bao 2021) classifies this kind of silence as either "protective" or "individual versus collective".

When King came to Japan from teaching in Italy, he was struck by major differences in student behavior. "What I found as an English teacher in Italy was that my students would reach maybe about pre-intermediate level. And then, they were just they were off - they would just talk and talk... And my difficulty there was actually trying to stop them... When I came to Japan, I was teaching quite a few compulsory first-year English classes for non-language majors. And it was just the stark contrast with that experience in Italy whereby just faced by this kind of wall of silence, and it just got me thinking... you know, rather than actually being frustrated by that, so-called 'non-responsiveness'. I decided to try and look into what's causing it and try to get to the root of it" (12:22). We should note here that comparisons between different cultures are rarely effective as analysis, especially in anecdotal research, but our work attempts to map the evaluations of experts on the events they encounter.

When situating silence within an institutional framework, it is also important to consider the correlation between compulsory university language requirements (as King touched on) and willingness to communicate (WTC). This is because some may argue that compulsory educational requirements will automatically have a negative effect on WTC (Fryer et al., 2014). Perhaps to negate this underlying influence, rather than further investigating the relationship between WTC and silence in compulsory university language classrooms, in a recent study, (Humphries et al. 2020) instead considered Capacity to Speak (CTS), which focuses on perceptions of ability rather than volition.

In their empirical investigation, (Humphries et al. 2020) found that student confidence and classroom support were the main factors that support CTS. As often happens when one explores incidences of silence, though, one question begets another. For example, does classroom support correlate with confidence? If so, then a student's personal educational experience would most likely impact attitudes toward speaking. When speaking with Dat Bao (who was educated in Vietnam), it was apparent that personal shifts did occur as a result of institutional influences (e.g., over-arching policies, direct teacher feedback).

Bao has taught extensively in Southeast Asia and Australia - the only participant in this series who is not heavily influenced by teaching or learning languages in Japan. His interest in the subject was sparked by personal experiences in the Vietnamese education system. "I was a very talkative kid. And back in Asia, in many classrooms, when you are talkative, it's considered wrong behavior. So I had to learn to be silent. And so I was developing my silence throughout my primary years. And then when I went to high school, we started to learn English. Then my teachers were very upset because I was a very silent student in class. I didn't participate in discussions. So my teacher said, look, you can't graduate, if you keep your mouth shut, you have to speak" (6:12). Bao highlights how circumstances or contexts influence behavior. Through a positive lens, Bao (2021) categorizes this form of silence (or lack thereof) as "adaptable silence". Depending on the situation or personal interaction, however, this kind of silence could also be classified as "subjugated silence" (Bao, 2021).

As mentioned previously, King suggested we speak with his Ph.D. student Kate Maher because they had recently published a paper investigating the relationship between anxiety and silence in the Japanese language classroom. King thought a conversation with Maher would add depth to the narrative series. Like Wiltshier, Maher (who was also trained in the U.K.) faced the 'wall of silence' while teaching English language learners in Japan and initially researched the area of silence from a teacher perspective. However, as she continued investigating the nature of silence, she gradually shifted her focus to a student perspective. One factor that helped shift her focus was a reflection on her personality. "I'm very shy. I'm a very anxious speaker. I get 'tongue tied' quite easily. My friends are still in shock that I'm a teacher - they can't comprehend why on earth I would choose this profession. They cannot imagine me standing up in front of a group of people and speaking" (9:45).

Unlike Bao, who was a naturally chatty child in school, Maher indicated that she has been a silent student all throughout her schooling. "I'm not the most chatty in English or Japanese... So I became very interested in students that were more silent or quieter like me. And was it because they were anxious? Or was something else going on? Also, it's very rare to get a student that sits silent all the time, right? I'm sure you know, in your classes, they're quiet, but there's no student that's just always silent. They're, they're bubbly when they come in from outside of the classroom, they come in and they're chatting away, and then they quiet down, and something happens in there. And it was just very, very interesting to me" (12:02).

These conversations highlight the complexity of how silence is conceptualized from the teacher and student perspective. Moreover, the influence of the 'past self' was evident even though the interviewees did not explicitly reference it as such. (Falout 2016) writes that "personal pasts are ever changing and unfolding, depending on how people live and how they remember it" (p. 61). While it is not in the scope of this paper to pursue this notion of past selves extensively, it is worth noting that in a given learning environment, student and teacher perspectives can dynamically shift both perceptions and incidences of silence. Now we move beyond individual perspectives and focus further on discussions that emerged regarding the effects of culture on silence in language education contexts.

3.2. Silence as culturally contextualized

As previously noted in her interview, Harumi (who is Japanese) could sense what Japanese students were feeling and thinking whereas the foreign language teachers seemed more disconnected by the 'wall of silence'. This observation emphasizes the cultural dynamics of silence that many language instructors who live abroad may not be aware of. While some ELTs (or ALTs) may be cognizant that certain students will be prone to silence because of competency, personality or psychological traits, others will be ignorant of the relationship between silence and culture (i.e., the dynamics of silence in and out of the classroom).

In Japan, for example, silence can be used as a tool to maintain social harmony, to defy, avoid or signal embarrassment, or simply represent an individual's true feelings (Harumi, 2011). The challenge (or possibly the motivation) for researchers is mapping or defining patterns of silence over long periods of time - something that Harumi endeavored to do in longitudinal studies. "It's very difficult. It depends on the age group and proficiency level as well. My colleague, Jim King conducted similar research (see King, 2013b) - more quantitative research. And he found that teacher talk time in Japan is more than 80% - 90%. So the students aren't making a significant response. You can't really know what a person's thinking when they're silent, right?" (16:43). From this comment, it is clear that Harumi acknowledges a broad view of observing silence and that cultural influences can be both prevalent and hidden depending on a particular class or teacher. With less than 10% of student talk time, incidences of silence can be difficult for researchers to track and categorize.

Shifting to the educator perspective, Harumi drew attention to the importance of culture and context on a learner's behavior. "I think if a student is learning English outside Japan, they try to adapt themselves to the new culture. So I think maybe in some sense, it's much easier to help them to speak out. But in Japan, I think you need more preparation for the students so they can be confident enough to speak out in the classroom" (26:22). So while Harumi acknowledges that there is a wide spectrum of silent occurrences, she argues that cultural influences in Japan may impact each influence. From her comments it is logical to predict that when outside of Japan, students may in turn be influenced by Western culture and adopt more outward communication styles. It is important to qualify this argument, however, because study-abroad students may have higher base levels of motivation and WTC to even embark on such an endeavor.

When comparing a Japanese student of English in Japan or abroad, one may hypothesize that students abroad will generally speak out more in class. However, in a series of interviews with Japanese university students studying abroad in America, (Ohata 2005) found that Japanese cultural norms continued to negatively influence individuals who had a desire to speak. In some cases, the fact that they were living abroad worsened the influence. In particular, the fear of being negatively evaluated or singled out in class pulled students toward silence. Again, Bao (2021) categorizes this as "protective silence". Interestingly, students also said in the Ohata (2005) interviews that competition between fellow Japanese students also served as a debilitating factor. In short, Japanese cultural conditioning to educational and social egalitarianism persisted abroad.

When discussing incidences of silence and the effects of culture, we are reminded that internal and external influences often compound the murkiness of causation. As mentioned previously, student responses can give teachers instant feedback on how to proceed. If a student is hesitant to respond (for whatever reason), it can affect a teacher's momentum. From growing up in the U.K. schools and being trained as a teacher in the U.K., Wiltshier shared his cultural perspective regarding silence as a hindrance to teaching momentum. "I want to keep people awake, I want to keep them switched on. I want to give this class some energy, feel an energy, we're all interacting" (29:18). From this statement, another clear disconnect regarding expected patterns and rhythms has been brought to the forefront. Perhaps Japanese students do not desire a particular speed or momentum. In contrast, the priority for these students appears to be accuracy and anonymity.

Considering this gap in priorities between ELTs and Japanese students, Wiltshier questions why the term "active learning" has gained such recent popularity in the Japanese Ministry of Education. "To most of my colleagues and things, this is just, I mean, we were doing this 20 years ago... How else do you do it?" (29:35). Wiltshier again emphasizes how his U.K. teacher training prioritized momentum and quick responses. The fact that he was recruited to teach in Japan 20 years ago means that this teaching style was viewed as ideal (even though students remained reticent in class). With recent pushed toward "active learning", Wiltshier wonders if the Japanese Ministry of Education now wants students to be more outgoing in class.

To explain the specific gulf between U.K. teacher expectations and the behavior in university language classes, Wiltshier questions what kind of learning experiences students largely encounter in language-learning contexts throughout Japan's pre-university. "Maybe active learning isn't something which was naturally happening within the classes in Japanese junior high school and the high schools and universities" (30:13). Indeed, Burns and (Humphries 2015) detail overarching difficulties during a planned curriculum change in Japan (i.e., moves toward active learning and communicative language teaching focus). While the Japanese Ministry of Education 'in principle' would like a shift toward western language teaching practices, prevailing cultural influences continue to impede progress. As one Japanese colleague once shared in a staff meeting, "The English classroom is still in Japan."

Regarding cultural influences, King notes that from a young age, Japanese people are made aware that their actions, speech, and behaviors are constantly being monitored. As children become adults, this hypersensitivity to monitoring continues. "I think that students in class do feel that they're being judged or observed by classmates, I know that when I went on after this study (discussed in the interview), to do interviews, again and again, and again, this hypersensitivity to others in the class came up. And interviewees, they talked about feeling, you know, uncomfortable about speaking out, because it was a risk, they could lose face, there was a danger that they would look foolish in front of others, they were, you know, afraid of making mistakes. And when you think about it, for a lot of these learners, in that kind of situation, silences is the sensible option" (28:11). In multiple studies, the fear of making mistakes has been noted as a factor contributing to anxiety in the classroom (Liu, 2002; Liu, 2007; Woodrow, 2006; Dewaele, 2018). For some students, it is safer to remain silent than risk embarrassment.

Like other members of this series, Bao touches on the powerful influences of culture. Chinese students in a past research project told of a similar educational experience to his in Vietnam. "Many of the students said to me that in high school, they were conditioned to be quiet. Listening is a virtue in the classroom. And then when they moved on to college, teachers started to encourage them to speak out more. And because they have so long been conditioned to be silent, in high school, that it became very hard to break this inertia and become a verbal person. So I guess, around Asia, that there's

a tendency to condition students in the classroom as more of a listener than a speaker" (8:56). This highlights the tension within the learner, which is one contributing factor to behavior.

When faced with competing for cultural influences, it is clear to see why a Japanese student may remain in a silent 'safe zone'. Silence protects some Japanese students from being negatively evaluated by their peers or teachers (King & Smith, 2018). In contrast, Western teachers who were culturally conditioned to speak out may become frustrated that students are behaving opposite as to what is expected. Moreover, in most cases, teacher training reinforces the methodology to which they were exposed as pupils (i.e., my favorite teacher acted how I am being trained now). As Wiltshier noted, this disconnect on a surface level can cause teacher frustration; are my teaching methods subpar or are these students completely unmotivated? As the conversations in this podcast narrative illuminate, however, there are far more hidden factors at play.

3.3. Situating research in a system

When examining large periods of silence contained within a confluence of numerous affective factors (e.g., anxiety, interpersonal relationships) Harumi emphasizes the need for comprehensive measuring systems. "You need to have data from different sources... I think, in reality, even if you asked the reason for being silent, that person cannot be hundred percent sure... You need to be careful about making generalizations. In that sense, I think the multiple data collection is very important" (26:11). Indeed, retrospective surveys can be unreliable due to recall bias (Coughlin, 1990) and in recent years there have been more calls for "state" (i.e., at the moment) data collections (e.g., Shachter et al., 2020). In response to the complicated nature of tracking, measuring, and categorizing silent incidences in the classroom, King recommended that researchers consider dynamic systems theory (DST) as a methodology.

When asked why King is a proponent of DST, he explained that as his interest in the subject grew, his knowledge of contributing factors to silence also grew (e.g., willingness to communicate, anxiety, culture). Instead of making things more complicated, DST helped fit pieces of a moving puzzle together. "I see it (DST) as a kind of a supra theory, a theory that is able to sit on top of other theories, it doesn't preclude the use of other theories. And I see it just as a way of making sense of the world. In traditional research, variables are isolated, and they're measured. And then we try to make predictions based on those measurements. And dynamic systems theory is a little bit different because what it says is that you can't really isolate variables because, for example, a student's classroom discourse behavior, it's not caused by just one variable, one factor. It's caused by multiple variables, multiple factors that are all interlinked and related to each other, that push the discourse system in a particular direction" (14:29).

King continues with his view of how dynamic systems and attractor states can explain incidences of silence in language learning contexts. "With silence, and silence in Japanese University language classrooms, my argument is that there are a lot of very powerful factors related not just to the individual learners and their mental characteristics, but also to the setting the immediate classroom setting that could be connected to the teacher, or the methodology or the task in hand, but also to the societal context as well. You know, how is silence valued? How is it viewed, especially in education, when you get lots of these factors working together to push the system in a particular direction, you will call those attractors. And when they are all together, it's like an attractor basin. Okay? So in the paper, I made the comparison of a beach ball rolling along the beach pushed by the wind, you can consider the beach ball there's the students or the class's discourse system. As it rolls along the beach, there are hollows in the beach. Now, these are hollows that are trapped towards reticence and silence" (15:58). From this explanation, EFL teachers (especially those teaching outside their native countries) may be more equipped to grasp the confluence of affective and interpersonal factors in the classroom.

When asked to explain DST to an early career researcher in silence, King offers a simple metaphor to understand patterns of behavior. "When these hollows are very deep, and they have a very strong attraction, and all group together, that beach ball is going to get stuck, it's not going to move. And that's the comparison that I make with silence in Japanese University language classrooms is that the beach ball is kind of stuck, we can actually predict what discourse behavior is going to be relatively easy in this context. Some people say that complex dynamic systems are not very useful, because it says that you can never predict anything, you know, the idea that a butterfly flaps its wings in America and there's a tsunami in Vietnam. But actually, when we look at a phenomenon, and there are lots of factors that pull the discourse system in a particular direction, yes, we can predict behavior" (17:05).

For some, "dynamic systems" or "complexity theory" may conjure up images of chaos. Contrastly, King offers his view of dynamic systems and the underpinning theory as a way to predict, project, and track factors that may push or pull a student toward silence.

It is beyond the scope of this article to discuss dynamic systems theory in great detail. However, for more comprehensive insights into research directions and recommendations using dynamic systems/ complexity theory, we highly recommend the book "Research Methods for Complexity Theory in Applied Linguistics" by Hiver and Al-Hoorie (2019). In this book, the authors highlight several useful approaches for investigating aspects of student behavior using qualitative and quantitative methodologies.

3.4. Problematizing and coping with unwanted silence

As Wiltshier continued his teaching career in Japanese universities, he began to realize that his students were actually "false beginners". The term false beginner describes a student who arrives at university with little confidence or experience interacting in English. Research shows that many Japanese students arrive at university with passive knowledge of vocabulary, grammar and perhaps basic skills in writing and listening (Glasgow, 2014). This is mainly because high school curriculums are designed to prepare students for college entrance exams. Some argue that until a speaking component is added to university entrance exams in Japan, the false beginner will continue to prevail.

For these false beginners, Wiltshier stresses the importance of activating knowledge and allowing for "silent time" before required output. As you will recall, this echoes Harumi's advice regarding preparation. "I think allowing our students time to rehearse what they're saying, you tend to get sort of richer content, especially in pair work/ group work, speaking activities in the classroom... rather than just immediately saying, 'Okay, come on, stand up, let's get on with it. Hurry up.' This type of thing, no... just take a couple of steps back and take your time... think about what you're going to say" (8:58). In the book chapter discussed in the podcast interview, Wiltshier and Helgesen (2018) label these preparations as "think time".

When asked to give his advice to educators, Wiltshier focuses on the concept of rapport. "As we all know, certain students are much easier to make relationships and build quickly build rapport. And some students, it's much more difficult to do, it takes a long time. One thing is always to be on the lookout, I think for an opportunity to start the positive rapport-building process, and never to miss it. So if the student actually does do something positive - makes a contribution, you don't miss that opportunity! Especially if it's a student who generally hasn't done anything like that before - you can quickly pick up on it, that doesn't mean to say in front of the whole class, you suddenly go over the top praise that student because they may be they may not feel comfortable with that. And this is again, where we have to try to quickly assess what type of student that person is... Often, after the class in private, I talk to students saying 'I really appreciate the answer you gave today'. I know it's difficult'... and just little words, you know, it takes a few seconds... if you don't have the rapport, especially in speaking classes, classroom management is very difficult. So I think that's one way to go" (39:36).

When asked about advice for educators, Bao recommends that teachers accommodate silent learners by employing varied task types. Specifically, Bao suggests that in every lesson, teachers assign involving tasks (i.e., process-oriented) and engaging tasks (i.e., product-oriented). He also reminds teachers to consider the process and product-oriented task design. "I like process-oriented tasks where the dynamic of classroom discussion matters the most, rather than the outcome. In the end, maybe the teacher doesn't have to care about what product he or she receives. But more attention will definitely go to how people share ideas. So, I will make sure in every lesson I have process-oriented tasks and product-oriented tasks. And I have a number of strategies to encourage the shy members of the class to open up a little bit more because they trust me. So I put all of these things in the same lesson, if possible" (53:01).

Much like other interviews in this podcast narrative, the conversation with Maher shifted to the teacher's role in the classroom. Looking beyond teacher-student rapport (Wiltshier) or task design (Bao), Maher highlights the importance of facilitating student-student interpersonal relationships. "One finding of this paper and just my research in general, (and it is hitting me more and more) is the teacher's role. I kind of started this out with thinking how do we support students and get help students to support themselves? But I'm really starting to realize that the teacher's role, my perspective of my role as a teacher is actually very different to what the students expect or want from me. And I discussed

that a bit in the paper where I say, you know, they want us to not just facilitate activities, but they want us to facilitate the interpersonal relationships in the classroom because it can be awkward for them to choose who to work with if you give them the freedom... I mean, I've had the classes where I'm like, Okay, this time, guys, you can choose who you work with. And they look at me and like, no, can you do it, please?" (56:41).

Although it can be challenging, Maher emphasizes the need for teachers to be actively looking for ways to support a wide range of students. As previously highlighted, a student may be silent for a variety of reasons (e.g., anxiety, shyness, competency). "I found that teachers need to be more aware of what silence means looking for these cues of anxiety when they come out, and you know, your intervention or your method is, you're trying to find ways to pinpoint it to provide that support at exactly the right time for them... the students want us to be there to support them, and provide the right type of facilitation to help it work" (57:42).

3.5. Conceptualizing meaningful/productive silence

Bao emphasizes that "silent" or "active" learner in the classroom does not necessarily accurately predict achievement. Over the course of his teaching career, Bao has informally tracked verbal participation as a correlation to overall performance. "I keep doing this, throughout my semesters, I never see a pattern, you know... There will be highly verbal students who perform very well and perform very poorly. And the other way around. Likewise for the silent members of every class. And so it's very hard to tell to conclude that silent might people are less effectively compared to talkative students, you know?" (65:47) Concurring with Wiltshier, Bao stated that Japanese students prioritize accuracy over speed of response (i.e., just because they may know the answer does not mean they will offer it aloud for the class to judge).

Speaking about the nature of silence in language classrooms, Maher agrees with Bao that silence is often viewed with a negative stigma. "Silence in the classroom can often represent something negative. Either about the students' ability or the teachers own ability to get the students talking. It feels like we (teachers) should create this very energetic classroom all the time - full of talk. And that's not really the case... There is facilitative silence, as well as the negative silence types" (7:51). Considering the duality of silence, Maher began focusing her research on instances of 'marked' silence or 'unexpected acted silence'. "When students are given an opportunity to speak, but they don't, and it becomes an unexpected silence or marked silence, that's what I'm interested in. Because if Japanese students don't use the classroom as an opportunity to develop their speaking skills, very limited opportunities outside of there" (15:30).

4. Conclusion

In this podcast narrative, leading experts in the field of language learner silence offered insights on ways to accommodate silent learners in the classroom. After analyzing five interviews (with four of the five interviewees focusing on Japanese language learners specifically), a thread emerged regarding (a) ways of conceptualizing silence, (b) silence as culturally contextualized, (c) approaching silence research, (d) problematizing and coping with unwanted silence, and (e) categorizing meaningful/productive silence. Perhaps the most significant takeaway from these interviews was the power of the teacher to shift dynamics and support learners in the classroom. For teachers to do this, however, they must come to terms with 'the wall of silence' and accept cultural differences regarding the incidences and meanings of silence.

Wiltshier highlighted how western-trained teachers in Japan must accept that slow responses to teacher prompts do not necessarily correlate with the quality of the prompt. To help teachers adjust to conditions in an environment where silence is perhaps more prevalent, Wiltshier and Harumi emphasized the importance of allowing for preparation time. Bao suggested that teachers carefully consider task design and try to include both process- and product-oriented activities. With process-oriented activities, the accuracy or response is less of a priority. This may perhaps mitigate how some students will remain in "protective silence" (i.e., silence to avoid making mistakes) (Bao, 2021). Maher highlighted how teachers and students have different expectations of teacher behavior (e.g., some students may feel that it is the teacher's job to assist in interpersonal relationship development). King shared how his keen interest in the complexity of silence drew him to dynamic systems theory research. Indeed, with so many factors at play, renowned dynamic systems researcher Larsen-Freeman writes the following:

It is counterproductive to separate the learner from the learning process. Individual differences are truly person-oriented, even phenomenological, and mutable. Variability in intra- and inter-individual performance is ubiquitous (Hiver & Al-Hoorie, p. 10).

After reviewing this podcast narrative, it is clear that teachers must develop or reinforce a tolerance for silence. At certain incidences, there will be a clear cause; at other times, silence will remain a mystery. In closing, it is our view that when silence emerges in a learning context it needs to be treated deftly and with preparedness. One method of preparing for silence in the language classroom is to listen to the experts.

Declarations

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