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The complexity of silence in Japanese classrooms: Teachers' perspectives

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the phenomenon of Japanese university students' silence in English classrooms. Through qualitative interviews with both native English-speaking (NES) and native Japanese-speaking (NJS) teachers in Japanese universities, the study highlights cultural and pedagogical perceptions that shape the students' classroom silence. The findings indicate that Japanese students' silence does not necessarily signify non-participation; it reflects a distinct cultural approach to learning and engagement. Influenced by Western educational norms, NES teachers tend to equate participation with verbal output, potentially misinterpreting Japanese students' silence as disengagement. In contrast, NJS teachers recognize silence as a valid form of participation within Japanese educational settings. The study emphasizes the importance of culturally responsive teaching practices that accommodate diverse forms of participation, challenging conventional Western paradigms. By understanding and respecting the cultural and pedagogical differences in the classroom, teachers can better support Japanese students' learning experiences in English language classrooms.

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1. Introduction

This study investigates the issue of Japanese university students' silence in English language classes. Despite considerable prior research, this phenomenon continues to be significant (Stroud, 2024). Osterman (2014) argues for deeper qualitative research to uncover the underlying reasons for Japanese students' silence and reluctance to participate in English classes. Similarly, others advocate for qualitative approaches focusing on identity and motivation to better grasp the roots of this issue (Goharimehr, 2017). One significant gap in the existing literature is the scarcity of research directly examining the perspectives of English teachers themselves. Their firsthand experiences may offer unique insights into the ongoing phenomenon of Japanese university students' silence in English language classrooms. This study seeks to address this gap by exploring the perspectives of these teachers, thereby contributing to a deeper understanding of why Japanese university students remain silent in English classes.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Reasons for Japanese silence

The silence of Japanese students in English classes has been a well-researched topic (Mitchell, 2017; Ohashi, 2015; Harumi & King, 2020). The literature has provided many culturally and linguistically related reasons for Japanese students being silent in English classrooms: Inexperience at Western turn-taking in the classroom (Hammond, 2007); the intention of expressing politeness to the teacher (Banks, 2016); the inability to understand class activities (Williams & Andrade, 2008); a preference for consensual group work rather than individual work (Anderson, 1993; Banks, 2016; Woods, 2006); teacher-centered learning (Amar, 2021; Bosio, 2015; Falout, Elwood & Hood, 2009; King, 2013); a fear of unfavorable feedback from teachers (King, 2013; Shachter et al., 2022); the embarrassment of making mistakes in front of other students (Kawamura et al., 2006; Richmond & Vannieu, 2019); and a reluctance to stand out in class (Anderson, 1993; Hammond, 2007; Harumi, 2010; Sasaki & Ortlieb, 2017).

2.2. Silence in Japan

Silence, both as an absence of sound and as a cultural communication practice, holds significant implications in Japan. Ishii and Bruneau (1994) assert that silence is not merely a lack of speech but a communicative tool deeply rooted in Japanese cultural norms. This cultural context underscores the challenge faced by Japanese students in engaging actively in English language learning environments (Akiyama, 2017; Harumi, 2023). It should be noted that there is a difference between silence and reticence as noted by Bao: "Silence turns into reticence when it is not intended for learning" (2014, p.152).

The potential bias of categorizing students who are silent as unmotivated or not participating has been noted in the literature by Maher and King (2022, p. 215) who stated that "[t]he weight placed on participation in the language classroom means that silent behavior is likely to draw negative attention to a student's in-class performance. A display of 'silence' could reflect poorly on their ability or identity." Students who are silent in the classroom are often negatively judged as noted by Mendoza & Thian, (2023, p. 55):

> In such educational contexts, students who come from an educational environment that encourages passive participation; remaining quiet but attentive to class, may be at a disadvantage to those from an educational environment that encourages active class participation and discussion.

Categorizing students who are silent in class as unmotivated or not participating is particularly relevant in Japan as Japanese students are noted to be quiet and passive in classroom contexts (Anderson, 2018; Sasaki & Ortlieb, 2017; Shachter, 2022).

2.3. Recommendations to break the silence in Japanese classrooms

There is a vast amount of teaching recommendations in the literature that focus on encouraging students to speak up. Some of these include: Making the classrooms exciting (Dewaele, 2019; Dewaele & Dewaele, 2020); shadowing the speaker (Talandis & Stout, 2014); using praise and positive feedback (Rode, Hayashi, & Momose, 2023); using group work to boost confidence (Kawai & Kawai, 2005); making students aware of the importance that English plays in intercultural communication (Maftoon & Ziafar, 2013); having a cultural understanding of the learners (Tsui, 2001); setting language-learning goals (Kitano, 2001); using in-class materials that are stimulating and contemporary (Kikuchi, 2009); and allowing learners to role-play in class (Kikuchi, 2009; Kikuchi & Sakai, 2009).

Many of the recommendations in the literature only acknowledge the need for Japanese students to develop self-assurance and comfort when speaking. The study habits and in-class cultural behavior of Japanese students are viewed as shortcomings that need correction to enable them to succeed, while the Western way of speaking and learning is deemed ideal. Moreover, many of the recommendations on how to get Japanese students to actively participate and break their silence merely inform students that speaking up in class is necessary.

The culture of the learners in the classroom is influential in the language learning process. Gay (2000), and Mendoza and Thian (2023) noted that the culture present in Japanese university

classrooms is a key factor that needs further research as it plays a role that is vital in English language education. Following Mendoza and Thian (2023), this paper aimed to further investigate the effect of Japanese culture on the participation of Japanese university students in English classes. The aim of this is to find new data that may shed light on Japanese students' silence in English classes. This research is of importance as the phenomenon of Japanese students' silence in English classes is still ongoing today (Egitim, 2024).

3. Data collection and method

3.1. Research question

This study aimed to address the following research question:

RQ: What reasons did NES teachers and NJS teachers perceive to be for Japanese university students' silence in English language classrooms?

3.2. Research methods

While quantitative research has explored the correlation between low output and English language learning, scholars argue for deeper qualitative investigations to uncover the underlying motivations and identity-related factors influencing Japanese students' reticence in speaking English (Goharimehr, 2017; Osterman, 2014). This call highlights the need for a nuanced understanding through qualitative methodologies to investigate the ongoing phenomenon of Japanese students' silence in English classes.

3.3. Participants

The six teacher participants comprised three full-time NES teachers and three full-time NJS teachers. Each of the teachers was responsible for their classes. All the participants had two important characteristics in common: They were professional English teachers with a minimum of ten years of experience teaching English in Japanese universities. They had also resided in Japan for at least ten years. This guaranteed that they were well-versed in Japanese culture and had firsthand experience teaching English in Japan. The teacher participants were selected based on the following criteria and show in Table 1:

- Currently teaching English at a university in Japan
- Fully understanding and agreeing to the research conditions
- Being able to participate in all aspects of the research
- Possessing more than ten years of teaching experience
- Having an understanding of Japanese culture in the classroom
- Living in Japan for more than ten years

Table 1. Participant Information

Participant	Gender	Age range	Native Language	Nationality	Number of Interviews	English Teaching Experience
A	female	50-60	Japanese	Japanese	1	30 years
B	female	40-50	Japanese	Japanese	3	20 years
C	male	50-60	Japanese	Japanese	3	25 years
D	male	40-50	English	UK	3	15 years
E	male	50-60	English	American	3	25 years
F	male	30-40	English	UK	3	10 years

3.4. Interviews

This study used interviews to collect data. Interviews are beneficial in qualitative research as they are effective in exploring the emotions, experiences, and beliefs of the participants (Mwita, 2022; Yin, 2016). Specifically, for this study, semi-structured interviews were adopted to ask the participants to reflect on their teaching experiences in a Japanese university classroom context. "In semi-structured interviews, similarly, researchers prepare a list of questions to ask their subjects with

an option to ask follow-up questions for further clarification" Mwita (2022, p. 415). According to Mwita (2022), through follow-up questions, semi-structured interviews offer more flexibility than structured interviews, enhancing the quality of the data collection.

The first interview for each of the participants followed the same 13 semi-structured interview questions (see Appendix 1). These interview questions provided a base that allowed the participants to reflect on their experiences and opinions. The use of semi-structured interview questions allowed the comparison of the information provided by each participant and, in doing so, helped find data that were similar, different, or notable.

The second and third interviews were based on what each participant had said in the first interview. This approach aimed to explore specific aspects and experiences mentioned by each participant in the first round of interviews. By adjusting the questions accordingly for each participant, the researcher aimed to clarify information and uncover more detailed perspectives to collect comprehensive data about each participant's teaching experiences in Japanese university classrooms. Each interview was approximately 50 minutes in length. Approximately 13.3 hours of interview data with the six participants were collected over one year.

3.5. Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness is a key criterion for qualitative research (Creswell, 2009). In addition to being instrumental in collecting data to answer the research question, a three-interview format helped ensure that trustworthiness was met through clarification and confirmation. Clarification in something of interest or potential interest that was mentioned by the participants in a previous interview was able to be clarified through follow-up questioning in the next interview. Confirmation in that the researcher was able to confirm anything that required more detail, or confirm something to be sure that the data being collected were consistent. Being able to clarify and confirm data in subsequent interviews allowed the researcher to be confident that the data being collected were trustworthy.

Besides the adoption of the three-interview format, trustworthiness was obtained by the confirmation of the interview transcripts by the participants themselves. The transcripts were sent to each participant so that the participants could verify that the transcripts were accurate. Creswell (2009) notes that having the transcripts checked for accuracy by the participants is a way to make sure the data is trustworthy.

3.6. Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to examine the data. In qualitative research, thematic analysis is a helpful technique for locating, evaluating, and documenting data patterns and themes (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Thematic analysis can delve further into the participants' experiences (Naeem et al., 2023). Thematic analysis procedures used in this thesis were derived from (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

4. Analysis and Findings

While previous research has noted that NES teachers view Japanese students' silence as a lack of interest or non-participation (Sasaki & Ortlieb, 2017), the findings from this research indicate that silence is much too complex to just be seen as a lack of interest or non-participation. The interviews revealed two factors contributing to the complexity of silence: 1) different cultural perceptions of participation and 2) different cultural perceptions of silence. Excerpts from the interviews are used to highlight these factors. Each excerpt has been tagged with a letter and a number to offer elucidation on the participant and the interview. For instance, B1 denotes that participant B is the interviewee, and 1 denotes that this is the participant's first interview. Punctuation has been added to selected excerpts to improve their readability.

4.1. Different cultural perceptions of participation

The first aspect of the complexity of silence is the different cultural perceptions of participation by NES teachers and NJS teachers. This point was mentioned by five of the participants: B, C, D, E, and F. According to F, participation has a cultural element to it. F explained that individuals with equal motivation from different cultural backgrounds may participate in class differently. F gave a specific example involving a person from Japan and a person from Great Britain. According to F,

the Japanese individual is likely to use less verbal output compared to the British person due to the cultural aspects of participation:

"They might have a different way of participating which means they might do a lot of homework for example." (F2)

Expecting people from different cultural backgrounds who are equally motivated to participate in the same manner might be unrealistic. A person's way of participating is dependent on their culture.

Participant B made the point that participation can be achieved through silence:

as long as they are thinking and actively engaging themselves to the lessons, then I think they are participating. (B2)

B went on to explain in more detail about the students' participation and what participation means:

it depends on what you mean by participation because basically in my classes, the students are rather silent speak out only when they are pointed out but they are listening to me in the class. They are busy writing and they are being active in that sense so I would say they are participating. (B1)

From this extract, it can be observed that Japanese students' participation in the classroom may appear passive to NES teachers, but according to NJS teachers, for example, B, participation through silence can still be seen as a form of participation if the students are concentrating or thinking. In other words, participation can be achieved through silence.

In the third interview with E, the following point regarding participation was mentioned:

it's an active skill rather than rather than passive sitting down receptively. (E3)

For E, participation in a Western context is a skill that involves an element of being active. From an NES teacher's perspective, silent participation is not participation per se.

The following extract is from the initial interview with D where he explicitly stated that NES teachers strive to encourage students to actively participate, which involves generating output:

we as non-Japanese English teachers we try to get them to participate actively. (D1)

The fact that D was referring to NES teachers collectively suggests that, in his view, NES teachers have the goal of encouraging Japanese students to actively participate in class activities. D may be implying that participation is dependent on a degree of verbal output. Moreover, D's use of the word "try" indicates that achieving this objective can be challenging.

On the other hand, NJS teachers, for example, C cited below, have diverse ways of promoting participation. This contrast in promoting participation between NJS and NES teachers highlights a clear difference. Unsurprisingly, potential misunderstandings may arise between Japanese students and their NES teachers. C emphasized the need to define what constitutes participation, as he explained below:

you have to define participation because many students hear the word participate they think I'm participating because I'm here. So in their view they are participating. (C2)

According to C during the second interview, the concept of participation needs to be clarified, as Japanese students tend to believe that merely being present in the class qualifies as participation. In the third interview, he clarified the reasoning behind why Japanese students define being in the classroom as participation:

they've never expected to participate true definition of the word so the English word for participation the Japanese word for participation are not the same meaning. (C3)

Participant C highlighted that Japanese university students attend numerous weekly lectures conducted by NJS teachers wherein keeping silent and refraining from speaking is the prevailing expectation. Consequently, within the framework of Japanese classrooms, maintaining a quiet demeanor during class is regarded as the standard practice:

the majority of the classes are lecture classes which they're not required to speak out at all. (C2)

Participant B said that in the classes she taught, she only let the students speak when they were asked to do so. In addition to only being permitted to speak when asked, the students said what they were expected to say:

I ask them and they reply but they can only say certain things which they are supposed to say. (B2)

The wording that B used: "which they are supposed to say" holds significance. When B stated that the students in her class "say certain things which they are supposed to say," because of the use of the word "supposed to," she may be implying that the students should only answer or say things that they are expected to in class. In other words, when a student is presented with a question in the classroom, providing an answer is the expected course of action. However, the student may assume that they are not expected to provide extensive elaboration or offer additional information beyond the scope of the question's answer.

Output or active participation can become an issue for NJS teachers as the following extract in the first interview with C, who is Japanese, indicates:

Japanese professors are very very vocal about how they don't want their students to speak out when they're speaking. Every time someone speaks out they look at that as an interruption. If someone raises their hand and asks a question or challenges the teacher they look at that as an interruption. (C1)

Participant C expressed strong feelings about this point through his direct language. In Japanese universities, NJS professors or teachers tend to discourage students from asking questions or adding to the lecture. Consequently, Japanese university students might assume that it is expected of them to remain quiet in class, not only in classes taught by Japanese professors but also by NES teachers. However, it is important to note that the students' silence and lack of active participation do not necessarily imply disengagement, as demonstrated in the following extract from participant B:

they are participating but it's not like they speak up voluntarily very often. (B1)

In a Japanese context, participation should not be solely equated to verbal output. Participation can encompass non-visible or silent engagement, which may not necessarily produce any tangible output. For instance, B mentioned that actively concentrating on the teacher's discourse is considered a form of participation within the Japanese educational framework:

for me participation is concentrating on what is happening in the classroom. (B2)

In the second interview, B emphasized the importance of "concentrating" as a crucial aspect of student participation. Japanese students may appear quiet and reserved, but they are still actively engaged in the learning process, even if they do not verbally express themselves or raise their hands. Instead, it encompasses a broader spectrum of involvement, which may be perceived as passive or silent from a Western standpoint, but is acceptable in a Japanese context.

To sum up, the different cultural perceptions of participation are the first key finding from this research. The data analysis shows that participation has a cultural aspect to it in the context of a classroom. Therefore, participation needs to be viewed, observed, and interpreted by considering the cultural background of the participant. Problems arise when the teachers and students have different perceptions of what participation is.

Teachers have different perceptions of participation reflecting their cultural backgrounds. NES teachers and NJS teachers tend to hold different views on what constitutes participation. NES teachers consider participation as students speaking up, asking questions, engaging in extensive discussions on a topic, and actively taking part in classroom activities. However, not all of the NES teachers in this study held the same opinion regarding participation. Participant F suggested that although Japanese students may appear to be silent in class, they are still participating albeit it non-verbally. On the other hand, NJS teachers view participation as encompassing activities such as remaining silent, thoughtful contemplation, attentive listening, and focused concentration.

4.2. Different cultural perceptions of silence

The second aspect of the complexity of silence is the different cultural perceptions of silence by NES teachers and NJS teachers. Participants D and E view silence as an indication of non-

participation. However, participants A and B, who are NJS teachers, do not share the same perspective.

Participant D referred to silent students by using the phrase "not motivated or participating." The inclusion of "motivated" alongside "participating" suggests that he likely saw a connection or relationship between these two aspects:

well in Japan as you know a lot of students are quiet and they do not put their hands up to speak so we assume they are not motivated or participating. (D2)

That is, silence in Japanese classes is interpreted by Western teachers as a lack of motivation, which is shown through non-participation, not speaking, or not raising their hands. He mentioned even students who may be motivated remain silent and do not participate in class:

they may be walking into my classroom and in their head saying I really like English I want to study hard and learn English in this class but they may be reluctant to participate. (D2)

According to D, these students showed a strong desire to study diligently and learn English; however, from D's perspective as an NES teacher, the students are unwilling to participate. This perception stemmed from D's belief that participation should be demonstrated through verbal output. D assumed that students who remained silent during class were not participating. D associated participation solely with speaking and expressing thoughts verbally. However, as the collected data has indicated, Japanese students' participation includes non-verbal aspects such as thoughtful silence and concentrated thinking.

Participant B explained that the way Japanese students participate may not be verbal; they may be participating in ways that involve limited verbal output. Being Japanese herself, B saw the students as participating even though they were not outputting, as shown in the extract below:

I would say they are participating but it's not like they speak up voluntarily very often. (B1)

For behavior such as students remaining silent in class, NES teachers tend to feel frustrated, which can be seen from D's multiple 'don't 'just' wordings in the first interview:

they don't just participate, they don't just answer, they don't just engage in pair tasks. They need a lot of scaffolding, lot of support, and cajoling and prodding. (D1)

Participant D mentioned that Japanese students require help to actively participate. From further clarification, it became evident that D meant the particular Japanese students he was referring to in the extract failed to participate in the manner he expected. D had setup activities to encourage active participation; however, the students did not participate verbally in the way he had expected.

The following extract is from the initial interview with E. In this extract, E repeatedly used the word "do," indicating his frustration that the students are either incapable of or unwilling to participate in the activity as he anticipated:

you do have to prompt them you do have to set it up you do have to go around and tell them hey what are you doing or get back on task or you know they're not self-directed you have to you know they're not autonomous. (E1)

The two extracts mentioned earlier from D1 and E1 share some similarities: Both teachers express frustration because their students are not participating in the manner they expect. As a consequence, both D and E perceived the silent students as non-participants. However, both D and F may have failed to recognize that in the minds of the students, they were participating because participation from a Japanese perspective is not dependent on verbal output.

In the initial interview with A, the topic of participation was broached using the same question posed to D and E: Do you think there are students who want to study but are not participating? A responded thus:

if you ask them a question they will answer. (A1)

Participant A, who is Japanese, mentioned that Japanese students are willing to answer questions if they are asked, indicating their willingness to participate from a Japanese perspective. Even though the students respond to questions rather than initiate speech on their own, their active

involvement can still be observed. According to A, Japanese students tend to wait until prompted by a question directly from the teacher to speak out.

In conclusion, the NES teachers and the NJS teachers in this study held contrasting views regarding the silence of Japanese students in class. Two NJS participants argued that the silence of Japanese students did not indicate non-participation. On the other hand, what two NES participants suggest is that silence in class illustrates non-participation.

The reason behind this discrepancy can be attributed to cultural norms. Hence, NES teachers must be conscious that silence does not imply disinterest or a lack of participation among the students. NES teachers tend to interpret students' silent behavior as a lack of participation or motivation, rather than recognizing the cultural practice of silence in Japanese classes

4.3. Redefining participation on a cultural basis

The complexity surrounding Japanese students' participation and silence in English classes unveils clear differences in expectations held by NJS and NES teachers. These differences revolve around how students are expected to participate in classroom activities. Participation in Japanese educational settings is shaped by cultural perspectives, as supported by interviews with NES and NJS teachers in this study. Japanese students may be highly motivated but are influenced by their cultural behavior. Therefore, they may participate differently from how their NES teachers expect them to. Japanese students may participate through activities such as applying themselves to tasks rather than frequent verbal engagement in contrast to the more vocal participation expected in Western contexts. Moreover, participation in Japanese classrooms incorporates silence, emphasizing that participation may not be verbal; concentration and thoughtful consideration constitute participation in Japanese classrooms. This stance underscores the potential misunderstanding regarding what defines participation.

Based on the findings from this study, there is a need to redefine Japanese participation on a cultural basis, especially when applying the Western notion of participation. This is an important issue in English teaching Japanese students as Western teachers tend to incorporate student participation—interpreted in terms of oral output—in their grading criteria. However, as noted by Mendoza and Thian (2023), this is problematic.

The core of this problem lies in the subjective nature of this grading criterion. NES instructors assign participation scores based solely on their assessment of individual student involvement. This assessment is influenced by Western ideas of participation. Consequently, this approach can have serious consequences for Japanese students who may struggle to adapt to the expectations of participation by NES teachers. It was noted that L2 students' willingness to communicate should not be limited to oral communication, but extended to include other forms of communication such as writing. Unfortunately, this concept has yet to be implemented in many L2 learning contexts as is evident in the ongoing practice of assuming that Japanese students who are quiet in class are not participating.

Additionally, the interview data showed that Japanese students tend to respond when prompted directly, rather than initiating their own speech or answering spontaneously. This cultural tendency can influence classroom participation. The important pedagogical implication here is that NES teachers in Japan may need to reconsider their expectations regarding the level of student participation in class discussions.

If NES teachers adopted the Japanese style of directly calling on specific students to participate, it could help address the issue of participation, especially in terms of eliciting responses from silent students who might be reluctant to speak up without being asked. This approach could align more closely with students' cultural expectations encouraging more students to participate without feeling the pressure to volunteer or speak out on their own.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

The interview data has revealed a more intricate dimension to student silence than previously portrayed. While the literature characterizes Japanese students as silent and passive participants in English language classes, this investigation has unearthed cultural reasons behind their silence in

English classes: 1) the different cultural perceptions of participation and 2) the different cultural perceptions of silence.

The reasons behind Japanese students' silence in classrooms are deeply rooted in culture and are complex. Only when a deep understanding of the reasons for their perceived silence is reached can any issue around their silence be addressed. Rather than solely equating participation with verbal output, recognizing that participation can be achieved through silence and non-verbal involvement, is crucial. Understanding that Japanese students participate differently in classrooms as part of their cultural practice is vital for NES teachers.

The interviews highlighted the differences in teachers' views and expectations regarding student participation. Therefore, the term "participate/participation" needs to be culturally defined and viewed when assessing Japanese students' engagement in the classroom. NES teachers should be mindful of this cultural difference to avoid misunderstandings and misinterpretations of students' ways and levels of participation. A culturally responsive perception and definition of participation are crucial to fostering better understanding and effective teaching practices to respond to Japanese university students' classroom silence.

This study adds to the literature by arguing that participation can be achieved through silence as it reflects a different form of participation within the Japanese educational framework. Recognizing and defining participation within the cultural context is pivotal to facilitating more effective teaching strategies for NES teachers without misinterpreting the silence of Japanese university students.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Interview One Questions

1. How did you feel the students reacted to ……activity? Why?
2. What do you think went well in class? Why?
3. What do you think you could have done differently? Why?
4. In what ways do you think the students have improved in this class?
5. Do you think there are any students that are not improving? Why?
6. Do you think there are students that want to study but are not participating? Why?
7. If you were able to plan and control the lessons any way you wanted, what would you do?
8. How do you feel about these coordinated English classes with set textbooks and curriculum? Are they beneficial for the students and their learning?
9. Why did you do …….. in that particular class?
10. If you could teach the same class again, what would you do differently? Why?
11. How do you feel about the students' participation in your class?
12. How do you feel being white/Japanese affected the students' motivation in your class?
13. Can you expand/clarify ……..?