

4 Silence and Anxiety in the English-Medium Classroom of Japanese Universities: A Longitudinal Intervention Study

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Introduction

This chapter reports on a longitudinal intervention study which focused on the anxiety, social inhibition and silent behaviour of foreign language learners studying English within three Japanese university English-medium classrooms. It comes in part as a response to King's (2013a, 2013b) large-scale, multi-site enquiry into the prevalence and causes of silence across Japan's varied tertiary L2 sector. Using a mixed-methods approach to data collection (structured observations, semi-structured interviews and stimulated recall), King investigated the oral participation, or lack of it, of over 900 learners within 30 classes at nine universities across Japan. After 48 hours of minute-by-minute structured observation, he found compelling quantitative evidence of 'a robust nation-wide trend, with minimal variation, towards silence within Japanese university foreign language classrooms' (King, 2013a: 95). Such a powerful pattern of silence across a diverse sample of learners suggests that single-cause explanations for student reticence are unlikely. And this was indeed found to be the case, as qualitative phases of the project revealed that the silent behaviour of individual learners emerged for a multiplicity of reasons stemming from the dynamic interplay between learner-internal variables and contextual factors operating at both an immediate classroom level and a higher sociocultural level (for a more in-depth and wide-ranging discussion of the dynamic interplay between context and language learners, see King, 2015). An individual-level analysis of learner silence suggested that in among these various factors, there appeared a strong

connection between learners' anxious feelings of social inhibition in the classroom and their avoidance of L2 talk.

The research outlined above was essentially cross-sectional and did not provide any research-backed solutions to non-participatory learner silence, and hence the current longitudinal intervention study described in this chapter. Yashima *et al.* (2016) responded to King's study by designing an innovative small-scale intervention project which sought to answer the question: if silence has become such a strong norm in the Japanese university classroom for English as a foreign language (EFL), how can we encourage learners to break their silence and actively communicate in English? After observing a first-year group's weekly 20-minute discussion tasks over the course of an academic semester, they found dynamically fluctuating levels of oral participation, with an inverted relationship between silence and talk. Among various reasons for not participating in discussions, participants most frequently reported topic difficulty as being behind their silences, with anxiety being the reason mentioned second most often. Based on their findings the researchers suggest that to encourage participation, discussion topics should be selected which have a direct relevance for students and on which they can elaborate, while at the same time more attention should be paid to preparing learners for target language discussions through the use of rehearsal tasks, vocabulary priming and so on.

While silence is an inherently complex and ambiguous phenomenon which can be devilishly difficult to interpret and which defies easy generalisations, in the current study we do take an unapologetically negative view of silence when it is characterised by learner unresponsiveness and a withdrawal from oral participation in the target language. This view is informed by a broad and persuasive body of research on L2 output and interaction (e.g. de Bot, 1996; Ellis, 1999; Gass, 1997; Izumi 2003; Long, 1996; Swain, 2005) which suggests that meaningful oral communication in the target language aids acquisition. Even so, it would be foolish to deem *all* instances of non-talk as undesirable: some silent episodes, usually involving the micro-silences of extended pausing, can be helpful to learners. For example, echoing Jaworski and Sachdev's (1998) findings within UK mainstream education, Bao (2014) makes the distinction between low-quality inhibitive silence and high-quality facilitative silence for L2 learners, suggesting the latter works to benefit learners' cognitions. Correspondingly, Harumi (2015: 128) suggests that some Japanese learners of English see silence as 'a "desirable space" for learning' which allows them time for comprehension and the formulation of ideas. Smith and King (2017) build upon this notion in their complexity-oriented study of L2 teachers' silent wait time. Defining wait time as 'the duration between a teacher elicitation and student response or second teacher utterance' (Smith & King, 2017: 1), they found this type of micro-silence played an intricate role in influencing patterns of talk in

the classroom, with extended wait times (defined as over two seconds) helping shift discourse out of rigid initiation–response–feedback (IRF) patterns and into more student-driven phases. Care should be taken, though, not to overextend wait time, as unusually long inter-turn silences can lead to communication breakdown, are prone to misinterpretation and have the potential to be anxiety-inducing for some interlocutors (see King & Aono, 2017).

Over the last couple of decades, foreign language anxiety has attracted much attention from applied linguistics scholars conducting research within Japan's L2 education system (e.g. Kimura, 2017; Kitano, 2001; Matsuda & Gobel, 2004) and the general consensus of their endeavours is that anxiety works to hinder language learners both performatively and psychologically and is related to poor academic achievement, reduced self-confidence and problems with cognition. Although there exists some debate about the potentially beneficial effects that low levels of anxiety may have on stimulating student performance in certain situations (for a critical account of facilitative anxiety in L2 education, see Horwitz, 2017), the overwhelming evidence is that high levels of anxiety interfere with students' L2 speaking skills in particular, making it more difficult for them to orally interact in the target language and being linked to increased levels of reticence (see Liu & Jackson, 2011; Tsui, 1996). King's (2014) study contributes to this evidence by suggesting the Japanese university L2 classroom resembles an emotional danger zone which has rich potential for triggering anxiety among hypersensitive learners concerned about social evaluation. Adopting the idea that social anxiety is a key element of foreign language anxiety in a context which places great importance on maintaining face, that study found that many Japanese learners of English remained silent in the public arena of the classroom in order to protect their self-image and avoid both embarrassment and the negative judgements of their peers. King and Smith (2017) propose that a potentially effective approach for reducing social aspects of language anxiety and increasing learners' oral participation is for educators to carefully manipulate the group dynamics of their classrooms (see Dörnyei & Murphey, 2003). Among a number of other group-oriented strategies, they advise that:

anything instructors can do at the start of courses to promote acceptance (a term from Humanistic Psychology meaning non-judgmental, positive regard) amongst class members will be of benefit in reducing the likelihood of negative evaluations occurring within the group. Interpersonal relationships based on acceptance acknowledge that human beings are complex and flawed but that they can still be regarded in a non-evaluative, positive manner. Classrooms characterized by a general feeling of acceptance represent learning contexts in which social fear beliefs are downplayed and the benefits of this for socially anxious silent learners are obvious. (King & Smith, 2017: 104)

Hence in the current study, while we acknowledge that an individual L2 learner's non-participatory silent behaviour may have multiple, interconnected sources (King, 2013a, 2013b), our intervention focuses primarily on strategies which aim to improve classroom dynamics and interpersonal relationships among students, to mitigate their feelings of anxiety and inhibition in L2 learning situations, with the overall goal of encouraging increased oral participation in the target language. If viewed from a complexity perspective (Larsen-Freeman & Cameron, 2008), our study's aim is to add perturbations to the discourse systems of the classrooms under investigation and the individuals within those classrooms with the objective of better understanding system behaviour in relation to oral participation and anxiety.

The Research Setting and Participants

The research was conducted at a large, private university located in a metropolitan area on Japan's main island of Honshu. The institution has a good reputation for its EFL education courses and runs a popular study-abroad programme, which sends large numbers of undergraduates on long-term sojourns to English-speaking countries. Access was gained to three intact first-year classes (Groups A, B and C) whose focus was on improving learners' English language communication skills and in which English was the medium for instruction. The overall student population totalled 71 (31 males, 40 females). Students taking part in the study were aged from their late teens through to their early twenties and their English proficiency levels were assessed to be above average in comparison with mainstream first-year undergraduates studying at other tertiary institutions in Japan. The three teachers were all highly experienced EFL educators who had gained tenured positions at the research site. One teacher was a Japanese woman, while the other two were male expatriates who had lived and worked in Japan for a number of years.

The Intervention Activities

Intervention activities were instigated in each of the three classes around the mid-point of the observation phase of the study (i.e. after the third observation had been completed) and, where appropriate, continued thereafter. In line with King's (2013a, 2013b) complexity-based notion that, rather than there being one single causative factor, student silence is actually governed by multiple, intervening learner-internal and contextual variables, the intervention adopted a multi-strategy approach which acknowledged the key role that factors relating to anxiety and social inhibition can play in the reticence of language learners in Japanese universities (see King, 2014; King & Smith, 2017). Thus, the intervention focused on three interrelated areas: raising awareness of how anxiety

can impact upon students' in-class behaviours and classroom discourse patterns; the improvement of group/interpersonal dynamics and social collaboration among students; and encouragement to engage in target language interaction. Students were presented with a fictional case study of a highly anxious language learner and encouraged to reflect upon the case's relevance to their own experiences of learning English. After being introduced to typical cognitive and somatic symptoms that might be experienced by anxious L2 learners (e.g. raised heartbeat, difficulty concentrating), students were provided with an opportunity to discuss what they thought were the situations or activities they faced in lessons that were most likely to provoke anxiety, particularly when called upon to speak in the target language. Students were also encouraged to discuss potential strategies that they could use to deal with anxiety when learning English in order to reduce any feelings of inhibition and increase levels of oral participation in class.

The three groups were taught by highly experienced English language instructors familiar with the tenets and pedagogical techniques associated with a contextually sensitive approach to communicative language teaching in Japan (see Littlewood, 2007; Sato & Kleinsasser, 1999). Their classes typically provide opportunities for learners to engage in meaningful target language dialogue through staff–student and student–student interactions, and could be characterised by what Kramsch (1987) terms *convivial discourse* (i.e. talk that is somewhere between instructional and natural discourse on an interaction continuum). Learners displaying silent behaviour in the observed classes would not be doing so because of a complete lack of opportunity to speak English during lessons and therefore our intervention focused on improving group and interpersonal dynamics among class members, with the aim of encouraging a low-anxiety, cooperative classroom atmosphere in which learners could feel comfortable enough to seize these opportunities to speak in front of their peers when they arose.

To this end, each class group was asked to organise an out-of-class activity to take place as near to the in-class intervention as the students' schedules would allow. To encourage ownership of the task, they were given full autonomy in choosing the type of activity, its timing and venue. Instructors did not attend. Group A played ten-pin bowling together and then went out for dinner at a local restaurant, Group B also went out for dinner together and afterwards visited a karaoke parlour, while Group C had a picnic on the campus grounds. Our aim was to provide an opportunity for participants to freely interact and engage with each other in a situation that did not require English to be spoken and which would likely be less inhibiting than the public realm of the university foreign language classroom, with all its various social performance expectations (see Dörnyei, 2009). Thus, the out-of-class activity was instigated to promote group cohesiveness so that it could subsequently

act as a foundation for building a cooperative learning atmosphere within classes. Teachers wishing to increase oral participation in their lessons and improve students' speaking performance ignore social-psychological dynamics at their peril. As Dörnyei and Murphey (2003: 65) rightly state, 'A cohesive group has a more pleasant atmosphere than a non-cohesive group, but cohesiveness is not just about feeling good. Past research has consistently revealed a positive relationship between group cohesiveness and performance.'

Methodology

The project employed a mixed-methods research design that drew its data from four sources: (1) structured classroom observations provided information about changing levels of oral participation and the incidence of silence over the course of six lessons; (2) self-report reflection sheets enabled learners at the end of each class to write down their thoughts about why they did or did not speak; (3) stimulated recall interviews allowed individual students to discuss their thoughts and feelings about specific silent episodes they had encountered in the classroom; and (4) teachers wrote reflection memos after each observed lesson had concluded.

Instruments and Procedures

Structured observations

To track any changes in oral participation patterns and the amount of silence occurring during lessons taking place pre- and post-intervention, a modified version of the Classroom Oral Participations Scheme (COPS) (King, 2013a; 2013b; see also Peng in Chapter 8 of the present volume) was employed. The COPS consists of nine low-inference categories of student/teacher talk and allows for data to be recorded directly onto the scheme using an exclusive focus coding approach (Spada & Fröhlich, 1995). As the observer is required to tally rather than infer classroom events, the COPS provides a highly reliable method of real-time coding that can be performed by a single researcher. The nine COPS categories of participant organisation of oral participation are: teacher-initiated talk; teacher response; student-initiated talk; student response; students speaking in a single pair/group; students speaking in multiple pairs/groups; choral drilling; off-task melee; and silence above the level of pauses and hesitations. These illustrate who is talking during the course of a lesson and how the talk is arranged, and conversely tell us much about who does not talk and remains silent. Structured observation inevitably involves restricted coding categories and so to offset this, space is provided on the COPS for the observer to make freehand notes about

classroom events in parallel to in-time coding. On the original COPS, this in-time coding was performed minute by minute. In the current study, we wanted to achieve an even greater level of accuracy than this. Through a process of careful piloting we were able to reduce the observation segment down to 30 seconds, by removing the individual student modality sections of the scheme. An inter-rater reliability score of 84.06% was achieved among three observers following more than two hours of observations in two lessons.

Each of the study's three classes was observed six times over the course of the 2017 spring term (the start of the academic year in Japan), three times before the intervention class and three times after. This resulted in a total of over 21 hours of data built up from more than 2500 observation segments, each of 30 seconds. For each class, the observer took up a non-intrusive position at the front of the classroom so that staff–student/student–student interactions were easily visible and refrained from engaging students in any conversation. By adopting a non-intrusive, passive role during lessons and by audio-recording rather than video-recording the classes, the observer was able to keep participant reactivity (see Allwright & Bailey, 1991) to a minimum.

Self-report reflection sheets, stimulated recall interviews and teacher reflection memos

Complementing the study's observation data, students completed self-report reflection sheets (see Yashima *et al.*, 2016) at the end of each class. Open-ended questions on the sheets asked learners to reflect upon their oral participation during the preceding lesson and to think about possible reasons that might have contributed to why they either did or did not speak. To help provide rich data, learners were able to choose whether to complete the sheets in English, Japanese or a mixture of both languages. By and large, the vast majority of these retrospective accounts were written in Japanese. The study's three instructors were also asked to reflect upon the classroom events they had encountered during the observed classes and to write down at the end of each lesson a short memo providing their perspectives on students' oral participation patterns, any silence incidents which occurred and, later on, how they perceived the intervention activities and their effects.

Further complementing observation data and providing another more fine-grained source of individual-level analysis as to why some learners in the study refrained from speech, 13 stimulated recall interviews (see Gass & Mackey, 2000) were conducted over the course of the project. Using the completed COPS instrument as the main stimulus, along with learning materials and a digital audio-recording of the lesson when necessary, these interviews elicited retrospective testimony from learners who were either responsible for specific silence incidents (e.g. providing a silent

response to a question/solicit) or directly involved in such incidents (e.g. being a member of a group in which one or more participants did not speak). Our aim was to elicit testimony about how individual learners perceived their own silent behaviour, the silences of their co-learners and also the classroom activities they were being asked to perform. Deliberately, the recall sessions were relatively unstructured and so in addition to focusing on students' concurrent thoughts, feelings and emotions, we allowed discussion to take place that was not cognitively oriented but was still relevant to the research topic. To avoid memory decay, all recall interviews took place within 24 hours of the observed lesson. As with the self-report reflection sheets, stimulated recall participants were able to choose whether to use their L1, L2 or a mixture of both languages in order to help them give a fuller account. These accounts were audio-recorded with the participants' consent and later transcribed verbatim. Where translation from Japanese to English was necessary, sections of the data were back-translated (Brislin, 1970) to ensure accuracy.

Results and Discussion

Structured observations: Patterns of talk and silence

Tally marks were counted for each of the nine variables columns of the modified version of the COPS, with the totals indicating how much time was taken up during each observed lesson by the various categories of whole-class oral participation. This then enabled us to work out the average time taken up by each observed data variable over the course of more than 21 hours of structured classroom observation performed

Table 4.1 Observation results across the three groups

	Pre-intervention				Post-intervention				t	p
	Total	M	SD	%	Total	M	SD	%		
T initiated	668	222.67	72.13	48.94	748	249.33	16.26	60.91	0.57	0.63
T response	24	8	11.36	1.76	2	0.67	0.58	0.16	1.15	0.37
S initiated	6	2	1	0.44	2	0.67	1.15	0.16	1.51	0.27
S response	120	40	40.85	8.79	95	31.67	2.52	7.74	0.36	0.76
Ss pair/grp single	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	N/A	N/A
Ss pair/grp multi	398	132.67	54.93	29.16	240	80.00	34.18	19.54	2.24	0.15
Choral	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	N/A	N/A
Off task melee	26	8.67	11.72	1.90	102	34.00	6.56	8.31	5.02	0.04*
Silence	123	41	12.12	9.01	39	13.00	5.57	0.73	6.73	0.02*

M, mean; SD, standard deviation; T, teacher; S, student; Ss, students; grp, group; multi, multiple.

*Statistically significant at $p < 0.05$.

1296.5 minutes of observation (21 hours 36.5 minutes).

during the study. Table 4.1 shows the number of 30-second tally marks and means coded for each oral participation category during pre- and post-intervention observations for the three groups combined, along with the percentage changes. The table further shows frequency data for each category of oral participation that was observed across the whole study. Paired *t*-tests were carried out for each type of classroom talk, in order to investigate whether post-intervention changes were statistically significant. With $p < 0.05$, significant differences were found in two categories: off-task melee and silence. This increase in off-task melees and decrease in the amount of silence could indicate an improvement in group dynamics as the learners became more familiar with their peers and comfortable in each other's company.

The results presented in Table 4.1 illustrate well the asymmetrical nature of classroom discourse, with the study's three teachers being responsible for the majority of the talk that was observed both pre- and post-intervention. The study's overall findings on participation patterns are broadly comparable to those uncovered in King's (2013a, 2013b) Japan-wide investigation, with there being a similarly marked contrast in occurrences of near non-existent student-initiated talk in comparison with much more ubiquitous teacher-initiated talk. That said, it should be noted that the apparent decrease in the amount of student-response talk appears to be due primarily to a large amount of student-response talk in one class during the pre-intervention observations (87 coded instances). In fact, two out of three classes increased their talk in this category from pre- to post-intervention. Over the whole study, just over half of all lesson time was taken up by teachers talking (cf. Chaudron, 1988; Tsui, 1985) as they presented information, posed questions, gave task instructions, provided feedback and so on, while a mere four minutes of the study's observation time was taken up by students initiating discourse. The vast majority of teacher-talk was teacher-initiated (e.g. teacher-fronted explanations), with two out of the three observed classes increasing teacher-initiated talk from pre- to post-intervention. The complete absence of any instances of choral drilling or the use of a single pair or group of students to model interactions reflects a movement away from behaviourist approaches to L2 pedagogy.

In spite of the fact that teachers still dominated talk in their classrooms, numerous opportunities were provided for students to speak with each other using the target language in pairs and groups, and this accounted for nearly a quarter of the study's observation time. Even when the majority of the class were actively engaged in this type of activity and it was recorded on the COPS, pockets of silence could still persist within a classroom and instances of this were documented in the instrument's notes column when particular students were observed to be either unable or unwilling to engage in pair-based or group-based speaking tasks. Stimulated recalls and the self-report reflection sheets enabled us to look

more closely at why individual learners remained silent either during these speaking tasks or in response to teachers' questions, and so it is to these contributory factors that the discussion now turns.

Pre-intervention student self-reflection reports on the sources of their silent behaviour

Results from the first three observations for each class show that silence was the third most commonly observed data variable, accounting for just under 10% of class time. In the same period, students responding to teachers' solicitations also accounted for just under 10% of lesson time. Although representing a form of student talk, it should be remembered that this category of oral participation tended to involve just a single learner speaking while the rest of his or her classmates remained silent and many participants were observed to be either unwilling or unable to volunteer answers during open-class exchanges with their teacher. Indeed, Group C's instructor reflected that there was 'Almost no response when I (i) greet at the beginning of the class, (ii) ask questions relating to the class topic, (iii) ask for answers to comprehension questions'.

Self-report reflection data from these initial classes point towards a degree of anxiety and inhibition among some participants as they struggled to become accustomed to their new L2 learning situation, with its unfamiliar instructor and peers. As participant B08F put it, 'I wasn't able to speak much because I didn't know anybody. I get tense when I speak up or talk to the teacher.' This learner and others from all three groups used the Japanese term *kinchou suru* on their reflection sheets to indicate they had experienced feelings of tension, nervousness or mental strain which they believed had contributed to them not speaking in English at certain points during the class.

Other learners revealed concerns about their perceived lack of L2 communicative competence and how this affected their participation (for more on the relationship between anxiety, perceived competence and willingness to communicate, see Yashima, 2002). For example, after Group C's first lesson, participant C19M wrote, 'I don't have confidence with my English ability and even when I had some ideas in Japanese, I couldn't put them into English', while C04M revealed, 'I was very nervous as it was the first class. I'm not good at listening and comprehending English.' At the conclusion of Group A's initial class, A10F noted 'I was ashamed of my terrible pronunciation. I couldn't find the right English vocabulary straight away and I was anxious because I wasn't sure the words I was going to use were correct.' Participant A14F disclosed, 'I felt overwhelmed because people around me spoke better English than me. I can't be confident.' Foreign language anxiety strongly correlates with perceived communication competence (see e.g. MacIntyre & Charos, 1996) and anxious students tend to make negative comparisons of their

own performance with that of other learners. It is indeed unfortunate that anxious individuals are prone to make negatively skewed assessments of their own performance. In part, this is because their cognitive resources are directed inwards, monitoring internal reactions and perceived self-generated image, thus diverting attention away from an objective assessment of external information (e.g. their interlocutor's responses) relating to how they are actually performing and appearing to others (King, 2014).

Pre-intervention student accounts of specific in-class silence incidents

Stimulated recall interviews conducted immediately after observed lessons allowed us to investigate in more detail specific silence episodes, and provided student participants with an opportunity to volunteer a rich account of their thoughts, feelings and perceptions surrounding their own and others' classroom silences. Findings from recall sessions conducted before the intervention back up the study's self-report reflection data, with almost all of the 13 interviewees revealing they had to some extent experienced feelings of anxiety, worry or embarrassment related to speaking in the target language and concerns were expressed by some participants about the possibility of being negatively evaluated by their peers. For example, Chika (all names are pseudonyms), an 18-year-old member of Group A, was consistently silent in response to open-class solicits posed by her instructor. Preparing for study abroad, with a relatively high TOEIC exam score of 765 (the second highest band achievable) and choosing to do the interview entirely in English, it would be reasonable to assume that Chika did not remain silent because of any lack of language ability. Even so, when asked about her failure to respond to one particular question posed by her teacher, Chika revealed that she was desperately waiting for someone else to answer and that 'I don't want to make mistakes in front of many people. I know that is not a good thing for studying English but I'm Japanese so I'm not good at English.' Apart from her concern about being negatively evaluated by others, it is interesting that Chika saw her nationality as a plausible excuse for her supposed lack of L2 competence. For some time now, scholars employing a nationalism discourse have been debating the threat posed to Japanese identity by English language education (see Aspinall, 2003; Tsuda, 2000). Key to this debate is the idea adopted by Chika and expressed so succinctly by the communication scholar Haru Yamada (1997: 140) that 'You are Japanese because you speak Japanese, and if you speak Japanese, you do not – indeed you cannot speak a foreign language fluently.'

Echoing Chika's testimony, Rie, an 18-year-old languages major from Group C who had been learning English since the age of two, shared her concerns about her classroom self-image and how feelings of inhibition

contributed to her silent behaviour. In the class that formed the basis for a subsequent stimulated recall interview with Rie, her instructor posed an open-class question about the level of difficulty of a homework task. After reframing the question twice and waiting for a total of around 10 seconds, the instructor pleaded 'Respond to me!', but was again met by silence from the whole class. When Rie was asked about this incident she related how at high school her excellent pronunciation and willingness to speak had marked her out as being different from her classmates and that her high school English teacher had told her, in no uncertain terms, 'I know you can speak English but it's everyone's class. Don't speak too much.' This negative experience seems to have stayed with Rie, feeding her self-consciousness and helping to shape her current beliefs about what is appropriate classroom discourse and what is not. Hence, in front of the audience of her university classmates Rie avoided volunteering any answers or comments but was happy to respond when directly nominated. This pattern of behaviour reflects the fact that learners' subjective memories of their past learning experiences can strongly connect to present behaviours (Falout, 2016).

For Japanese learners of English, the foreign language classroom represents a highly public social performance situation in which an absence of good interpersonal dynamics between members can contribute to feelings of inhibition, hypersensitivity to others' judgements and the avoidance of talk (King, 2013a, 2014). This is especially true during the initial lessons of a course, when students are on guard and 'observe each other suspiciously, sizing up one another and trying to find a place in an unestablished and unstable hierarchy' (Dörnyei & Murphey, 2003: 14). Rie certainly was sizing up her classmates and making comparisons between their English abilities and her own. In her recall interview she recounted how she had heard one particular classmate, Natsuki, speaking relatively fluently during group-work tasks and that this student's better-than-average English pronunciation had been commented upon by other class members. It turned out that Natsuki was actually a third-year student who was repeating the course after having failed it initially as a freshman. Believing Natsuki had been staring at her, Rie confided she was unsure whether the third year was friendly or not and that Natsuki's presence in the class had made her quieter than would otherwise have been the case. Although seemingly inconsequential, Rie's testimony does illustrate well the tendency of Japanese students to observe quite rigid *senpai/kōhai* (junior/senior) distinctions which impact upon both their language and behaviour. Indeed, in her own stimulated recall interview, Natsuki related how class members had started talking to her using *keigo* (honorific expressions) after they had found out she was a third-year student. Silence and power are inexorably linked and status inequalities do play a role in influencing whether a person decides to refrain from speech within a particular situation (Braithwaite, 1990; Saville-Troike, 1985). Usually, the less

power/status a person has, the more likely it is that he or she will remain silent. In contrast to this, Natsuki reported that she held back from giving verbal responses to the instructor's questions because she 'knew all the answers' and wanted to give other students the opportunity to speak. Even so, Natsuki's supposedly higher status did not save her from feelings of apprehension about communicating in the target language and she confided how she felt her younger classmates' expectations were too high: 'I think my English is not perfect but they expect it to be.... I worry about if I'll make a mistake. If I make a mistake, I'll be embarrassed so I don't want other students to expect my English is perfect.'

Post-intervention structured observation results: Changing patterns of talk and silence

With their emphasis on anxiety, inhibition and social discomfort, it is clear from qualitative results garnered from the first half of the study's student reflection reports and stimulated recall interviews that an intervention targeting negative affect among learners and the improvement of group and interpersonal dynamics as a means of combating non-participatory silence was indeed justified. However, how did oral participation patterns change, if at all, after the intervention activities were implemented? Table 4.1 reveals some interesting changes. The first thing to note is that the frequency of whole-class silence recorded on the COPS in the second half of the study dropped by just over 8 percentage points. However, this decrease was accompanied by a significant rise in the proportion of lesson time taken up by teacher-initiated talk (an increase of nearly 12 percentage points averaged out across the three groups), along with a surprising drop in students talking in multiple pairs/groups (down nearly 10 percentage points). Upon closer inspection, the observation results for individual classes tell a slightly more nuanced story. Teacher-initiated talk in Group C actually reduced by just over 6 percentage points during the second phase of observations, while in Groups A and B it increased, with the former group seeing a significant rise of over 31 percentage points, from 37.59% of lesson time to 69.35%. Reflecting upon events of a lesson after the intervention, Group A's instructor wrote: 'I think that I spoke for too long (about 30 minutes). I tried to ask questions, but the students were very quiet today. I had to nominate them.... They were sat at individual desks rather than in groups, so this might have deadened the dynamic.' Of course, the more a teacher talks, the more silent learners may become, and the more silent they become, the likelihood is that the teacher will talk more. Certainly, results for individual groups show that increases in teachers' talking time appeared to correspond to a decrease in opportunities for learners to engage in small-group speaking tasks. While Group C saw a slight rise in the proportion of students speaking in multiple pairs/groups, Groups A

and B experienced declines of around 15 percentage points in the second half of the study.

Post-intervention reductions in the proportion of observed whole-class silence were relatively stable across the three groups. Other categories of oral participation saw either negligible changes or no change at all, apart from the variable 'off-task melee'. In the second half of the study, the mean average class time taken up by learners being off-task and engaged in laughter and raucous chatting in Japanese with peers rose by more than 6 percentage points. This finding is significant and is particularly intriguing when we consider that a key aim of the intervention's out-of-class activity was to improve interpersonal dynamics within the classes and make students feel more comfortable with each other in order to facilitate cooperation and interaction. Even though in this case the interaction was not in the target language, an increase in the frequency of off-task melees would suggest improving socio-psychological dynamics between learners as they become more familiar with each other and establish functioning social structures (see Forsyth, 2009). This process could well have occurred anyway as the courses progressed, even without the helping hand of the extracurricular activities. Structured observation data can only paint part of the picture of what is happening in classrooms and so it is to participants' individual-based qualitative data that the discussion now turns, in order to find out more about how participants perceived the intervention activities.

Participants' perceptions of the intervention activities and their effects

Akari, an 18-year-old member of Group C, was observed to be consistently silent during lessons, avoiding giving any answers to questions posed by the teacher and participating only minimally in speaking tasks. Like many others in the study, Akari reported that she was afraid of making mistakes and that she felt speaking out in English was potentially embarrassing. She also described her class as having a 'heavy atmosphere'. In her stimulated recall interview following Group C's fifth observed lesson, Akari revealed that she believed the out-of-class social activity had made little difference in helping class members get to know and feel more comfortable with each other. In comparison with the other groups, Group C's activity of an on-campus picnic appears to have been the most superficial and Akari seems not to have affectively engaged with the event: 'It would've been okay if it'd been one-to-one but we all got together and didn't know what to talk about ... it ended up just being a photo opportunity.' Other students were much more positive about having the opportunity to interact with peers outside of class, particularly interviewees from Group A. For example, Chika believed that the 'social activity might have helped us. Since then, everyone definitely opened up. Before it,

we knew each other's faces but nothing more.... I think the social activity has made us more positive'. Naota described having 'talked to people who I don't talk to normally and we became good friends.... It used to be difficult to talk to others because they were strangers but now I know who's who. There used to be a distance but now I know who they are and it's better.'

The instructors' reflection memos revealed that their reactions to the social activity were mixed. Group A's teacher deemed the initiative to have been a great success and related that, in their subsequent class, students very much enjoyed watching a video and looking at photos of the event. This lively atmosphere contrasts sharply with the one perceived by Group B's instructor, who believed his students' event had had some unexpected consequences for the level of oral participation in the subsequent class. He wrote:

This was the day after the out-of-class activity. There were five students absent (the most all semester) and students seemed very tired. They went out for dinner the night before, maybe some of them drank some alcohol, so the atmosphere wasn't very conducive for lots of interaction. Additionally, the discussion topic was very challenging. In terms of speaking English, I would say this was probably the worst discussion of the semester.

Qualitative data related to the in-class intervention activities focusing on students' feelings of anxiety and inhibition when speaking English were, on the whole, more positive. During the intervention, learners were taught to recognise typical cognitive and somatic reactions to anxiety and discussed what type of activities in the foreign language classroom typically made them feel anxious. Possible strategies for overcoming negative affect and actively participating in the target language were also discussed. In two of his post-intervention self-reflection reports, C24M used the expression *haji o suteru* (literally 'throw away the shame') when explaining why he had spoken up in classes subsequent to the anxiety intervention, noting 'I tried to look into the person's eyes while talking. I threw away the shame.' Also commenting on how she felt better able to deal with negative affect, participant A75F disclosed, 'I think I was more confident than usual because we discussed as a class how to get rid of the tension before group discussions.' The comments of these students and others point towards the effectiveness of the intervention and an improving atmosphere in their classrooms which could encourage them to increase their target language participation. That said, it would be misleading to give the impression that some students did not continue to struggle with feelings of embarrassment and inhibition impacting upon their participation in post-intervention lessons. Also, it should be remembered that the causes of learner silence are multiple and dynamic, and

relate not only to individual and group psychological processes (King, 2013a). Data from self-reflection reports show that, for a number of learners, task complexity and the difficulty of the topic for discussion (cf. Yashima *et al.*, 2016) in particular continued to play a role in this regard during the second half of the study.

Conclusion

By employing a series of structured classroom observations of three English-medium classes over the course of a semester, this study tracked the oral participation levels of 71 undergraduates studying English as a foreign language in lessons designed to improve their speaking and listening skills. Despite making some tentative claims, there are some limitations to this study that need to be highlighted in order to direct future studies. Firstly, our research design lacked a control group, therefore making it difficult to attribute the reduction in non-participatory silence exclusively to the intervention. Secondly, while the sample was of a respectable size and contained participants from a very specific context (i.e. first-year students of good proficiency), a future study with a larger sample size could, for example, investigate proficiency as a mediating variable.

Despite accomplished instructors using a context-sensitive form of communicative language teaching and the relatively high L2 proficiency levels of students, the research presented in this chapter provides further quantitative evidence of the lack of student-initiated discourse and the continued existence of non-participatory silence that can be found among some learners within the Japanese university EFL classroom. Qualitative data collected prior to the intervention from students' written self-report reflections and a series stimulated recall interviews pointed towards individuals' feelings of anxiety about using English and learners' social inhibition and discomfort as key factors connected to the avoidance of target language talk during lessons. These findings would appear to justify the project's intervention activities, which were designed to mitigate student anxiety, improve classroom dynamics and build group cohesiveness, with the overall aim being a reduction in the frequency of non-participatory silences. While the proportion of silence across the classes did reduce in the second half of the study, that is, after the intervention, this drop was accompanied by a reduction in students talking in pairs/groups and a significant increase in teacher-initiated talk. These findings serve to underline the key role teachers play in shaping discourse participation patterns within classrooms as their institutional status allows them to determine learning tasks, topics for discussion and who has access to the floor. While it is difficult to assign the drop in observed instances of whole-class silence conclusively to the intervention activities, noticeable increases in off-task melees would suggest that interpersonal

relationships between class members had improved by the second half of the study. Although the intervention activities were by no means a panacea for all participants, qualitative data from this phase of the study suggest that many students perceived the out-of-class group-building events and in-class anxiety-related learning activities to be useful in encouraging them to deal with feelings of social embarrassment, to break free from inhibitive silence and to actively participate in their English classes.

Self-reflection/Discussion Questions

- (1) Think about the last time you had to speak in a public situation in front of people you did not know very well. For example, it might have been in a meeting, at a social gathering or perhaps within a classroom. How did you feel before, during and after speaking? Did you feel comfortable or uncomfortable at any time? Why?
- (2) Citing Smith and King (2017), this chapter argues that promoting *acceptance* (non-critical, positive regard) among learners is a key part of manipulating group dynamics in order to reduce anxiety and encourage target language interaction. What are some possible ways that language teachers can promote acceptance at the start of courses?
- (3) The three classes in this study undertook an extracurricular activity in order to try to improve social relationships among group members. To what extent do you think teachers in universities should be involved in or should encourage this type of initiative? What are the possible pros and cons?
- (4) It would seem that the nature of the learning task is a key factor (among many) in whether someone experiences anxiety and remains silent in the L2 classroom. Do you think it is possible to design learning tasks that are so interesting and stimulating that learners become fully engaged during the task and their anxious feelings about speaking just fall away? If so, what might be some characteristics of these tasks and how might they be presented to learners in a classroom context you are familiar with?

Recommended Reading

Dörnyei, Z. and Murphey, T. (2003) *Group Dynamics in the Language Classroom*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

This is an excellent introductory text for educators wanting to find out more about how group dynamics can affect student behaviour and discourse within language classrooms. Written in an accessible style with lots of practical pedagogical tips, the book considers why some groups of learners develop the ability to cooperate and communicate with each other well and why others do not.

Smith, L. and King, J. (2018) Silence in the foreign language classroom: The emotional challenges for L2 teachers. In J.D. Martinez Agudo (ed.) *Emotions in Second Language Teaching* (pp. 323–340). Dordrecht: Springer.

This chapter considers the emotional effects that silence can have on teachers and their identity development within the foreign language classroom. Smith and King draw attention to three types of affective silence (related to embarrassment, anger and disengagement) that teachers might encounter in their work and suggest a series of emotion-regulation strategies for mitigating the negative effects of these silences.

King, J. and Aono, A. (2017) Talk, silence and anxiety during one-to-one tutorials: A cross-cultural comparative study of Japan and UK undergraduates' tolerance of silence. *Asia Pacific Education Review* 18 (4), 489–499.

Like the current chapter, this open-access paper explores the issues of silence and anxiety in an educational setting but does so from a cross-cultural, comparative perspective and focuses on one-to-one tutorials. Comparing Japanese English majors with their UK counterparts in a quasi-experimental study, the research presented questions the notion of a 'silent East' versus a 'talkative West', with some surprising results about how tolerant to silence students actually are when face with an interlocutor who refuses to speak.

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