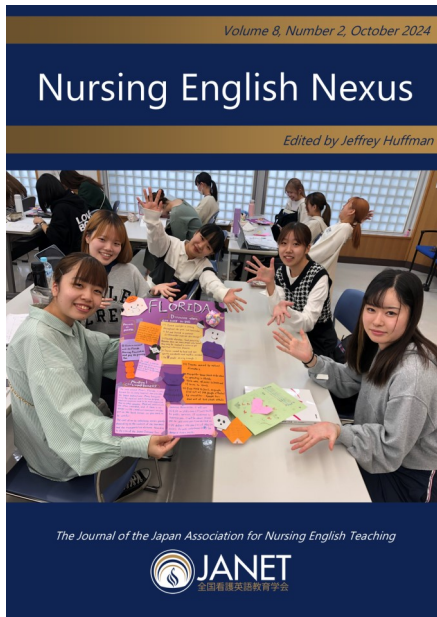


Japanese Nursing Students' Participation in EFL Classes: Assessment and Teaching Suggestions

Adam Crosby

Kobe City College of Nursing



Article citation

Crosby, A. (2024). Japanese Nursing Students' Participation in EFL Classes: Assessment and Teaching Suggestions. *Nursing English Nexus*, 8(2), 15-23.

Nursing English Nexus

<http://www.janetorg.com/nexus>

ISSN 2433-2305

Nursing English Nexus is made available under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License. Authors retain the right to share their article as is for personal use, internal institutional use and other scholarly purposes. English Nursing Nexus and the articles within may be used by third parties for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Please contact the author directly for permission to re-print elsewhere.



Japanese Nursing Students' Participation in EFL Classes: Assessment and Teaching Suggestions

Adam Crosby (crosby@kobe-ccn.ac.jp)

Kobe City College of Nursing

Abstract: *This article explores the prevalent culture of silence among Japanese nursing students in English classroom settings, emphasizing the importance of understanding the cultural and pedagogical influences that shape their communication behaviors. It delineates the contrast between Western and Japanese classroom ideals, emphasizing the traditional Japanese educational emphasis on obedience and quietness as distinct from the Western focus on critical thinking and individual expression. Based on the results of an in-class questionnaire, this paper offers nuanced strategies that will help native-English-speaking (NES) teachers encourage Japanese nursing students to participate more actively. These culturally sensitive strategies aim to bridge the gap between NES teachers' expectations and the cultural tendencies of Japanese students, fostering an environment where students feel comfortable participating in English language classrooms.*

Keywords: Japanese university students, participation, silence

About the Author: Adam Crosby is an English teacher at Kobe City College of Nursing. He was awarded a doctoral degree in education from the University of New England in 2024 for his research on the silence of Japanese university students in English language classrooms. His research interests include the willingness to speak, silence in the classroom, and the effects of cultural norms in the classroom.

The interpretation and use of silence vary significantly across cultures. In Japan, silence is generally viewed positively and is linked to harmony, rather than signifying an unwillingness to communicate. It plays an important role in Japanese communication practices, where it can even serve as a form of expression. This cultural emphasis on silence extends to classroom settings, where silence can serve multiple purposes. While some NES teachers might mistakenly perceive this quietness as passivity or reluctance to speak, it is essential to consider the cultural and educational contexts that shape these communication dynamics in the classroom.

Silence in Japanese Culture

The way silence is used depends to a large extent on culture (Ishii & Bruneau, 1994). Some cultures view silence positively while others view it negatively (Su, Wood, & Tribe, 2023). Silence in a Japanese context does not necessarily mean an unwillingness to speak; rather, it is regarded positively and is associated with harmony. The

use of silence in Japan plays a role in communication (Akiyama, 2017), and silence in Japan is even used as a means of communication (King, 2013).

The Japanese have long been characterized as placing importance on silence by incorporating it into their communication practices. Silence is part of Japanese communication, and the importance of silence in the Japanese culture is noted by Ruch:

If given a choice, the Japanese would prefer not to use words. A Japanese proverb says, "not to say is better than to say." To the Japanese, non-verbal communication is often more important than verbal communication. For them, the verbal message accompanies the nonverbal cues instead of the other way around, as in other cultures. (1984, p. 65)

The emphasis on silence is evident through the numerous idioms and proverbs in the Japanese language that revolve around the concept of silence. An analysis of 504 Japanese

idioms and proverbs related to speaking and silence found that only one-quarter of them contained positive connotations towards speaking out (Katayama, 1982).

The Japanese try to achieve the appropriate balance of speaking and silence depending on the cultural expectations of a given situation. According to Kim et al. (2016), this does not mean that, overall, they are quiet and nontalkative—they are talkative, but not in the same situations and social settings as Western people. One should not assume that the Japanese do not want to talk because they are silent.

Silence in Japanese Classrooms

Silence is noticeable in classroom contexts in Japan. There is empirical evidence (Kato, 2001; King, 2013) indicating that a culture of silence prevails among Japanese students. King's (2013) research findings shed light on the silence of Japanese university students in conversational activities, indicating that they dedicated a mere 0.3% of a 90-minute class to dialogue. This pervasive silence was observed by King to be evident across nine universities throughout Japan. Because of this silence, Japanese students are often stereotyped as being passive or reluctant to speak English (Karas & Uchihara, 2021). While many native-English-speaking (NES) teachers may directly attribute Japanese students' silence to an unwillingness to speak, it would be wrong to apply this viewpoint to a classroom context without factoring in pedagogical and cultural understandings of silence within the classroom context of Japan.

Japanese students use silence to maintain harmony by not interrupting and disturbing the class (Banks, 2016). Harumi (2010) investigated the features and culture-specific uses of silence in Japanese classrooms in a study comprising 197 Japanese university students in a first-year EFL course. Her findings show that silence serves a variety of purposes that cannot all be attributed to

a lack of topical understanding or English proficiency. She claims that because speaking and silence impact each other, it is vital to see silence as a significant social factor. Her research finds that several factors, including each individual's distinctive style and way of communication, might account for learner silence linguistically, psychologically, and socially. Although these three components may be seen as causes of silence in the classroom, they appear to be linked with Japanese collectivism, which is frequently at the root of students' silence (Harumi, 2010).

The reluctance to stand out in front of classmates is seen as a factor contributing to the silence of Japanese students. Okada (2017) found that when Japanese students are asked to perform activities that require self-expression, they first weigh how they would be seen by their classmates and the instructor before speaking out. In Japanese society, including the classroom, the group outweighs the individual; the group's opinion and actions are given more value than the individual's opinion and actions (Harumi, 2010). Japanese students are very aware of their classmates, as noted by Maher and King (2022): "If their classmates do not speak, they may feel expected to remain silent too or feel reluctant to act differently" (p. 217).

Japanese and Western cultures have different ways of taking turns. According to Harumi (2010), compared to English, the Japanese style of communication exhibits less spontaneous interruption and turn-taking. Similarly, Ellwood and Nakane (2009) discovered that Japanese university students' capacity to speak in class during discussions was constrained by their inability to take turns. Hammond (2007) notes that Japanese discourse normally expects both participants to respect turn-taking, whereas Western-style discourse entails a back-and-forth interchange of speech with interruptions. The Japanese communication style allows for longer acceptable periods of quietness, pausing, and

silence (Nakane, 2007). NES listeners may interrupt without waiting even when the speaker has not completed speaking, and according to Kumagai (1994), this behavior is “extremely rude and aggressive in the Japanese context” (p. 23). Moreover, Furo (2001) examined how American and Japanese group discussions differed in their discourse styles, with a particular emphasis on turn-taking. She discovered that while taking turns by interrupting was common and accepted among Westerners, it was less common among Japanese people.

Another factor that affects silence in Japanese classrooms is the attitude toward making mistakes. Japanese students have a strong tendency to remain silent in class out of fear of embarrassment from making mistakes in front of other students (Kawamura et al., 2006). Students have been taught that English has a correct form; a sentence should be constructed perfectly before being uttered because in Japanese classrooms, only grammatically correct English is seen as acceptable (Tanaka & Nechita, 2020). This often causes silence as the student may be trying to construct a perfectly formulated sentence in their head before outputting it (Richmond & Vannieu, 2019). In particular, students who lack confidence in their English ability are reluctant to speak out as the embarrassment of making mistakes in front of classmates may overshadow the desire to speak out (Richmond & Vannieu, 2019). Burden (2002) reported that 75% of a sample of 1,057 middle school, high school, and college students claimed to feel a sense of embarrassment speaking English in front of their classmates.

Different Teaching Styles

There are clear differences between the teaching styles of NES teachers and native-Japanese-speaking (NJS) teachers in universities. In university classes taught by NJS teachers, the classes tend to be teacher-centered just like in secondary school (Schneider & Mecba, 2018). A

teacher-centered style of teaching is very different from the student-centered classroom environments that require active participation used by many NES teachers in university language classes. NES instructors typically promote dialogue, evaluate verbal involvement as a sign of participation, and look at silence as non-participation or a lack of interest (Sasaki & Ortlieb, 2017). As a result, student silence tends to conflict with the expectations of NES teachers.

Teacher-centered instruction is still the norm in Japan, with little opportunity for student input unless specifically requested (Cutrone, 2009; Mitchell, 2017). In contrast, university English classes in Japan taught by NES teachers frequently incorporate Western-style activities and pedagogy (Cutrone, 2009) that are more student-centered (Nguyen et al., 2006; Park, 2002). Japanese university students being taught by NES teachers face a teaching style that may be very different from what they are accustomed to. NES teachers frequently adopt strategies in their classrooms that many students did not experience in secondary school: critical thinking, group work, opinion-giving, role-playing, questions directed to the entire class, and other activities that require active participation (Bosio, 2015). According to Amar (2021), active participation is relatively new in Japan and many students are inexperienced at it.

In addition to the different teaching styles, perceptions of ideal classroom behavior differ between Japan and Western countries. Western education is centered around critical thinking and expressing oneself. For example, in the United States, students are exposed from an early age to expressing their opinions, debating, and discussing (Hammond, 2007). Western teachers ask their students what they think and why, and there are even students who challenge the teacher (Kawabata & Barling, 2020). Good students are thought to be the ones who actively participate and speak out. By the time Western

students reach university, they are fully accustomed to such behavior in the classroom. However, students are taught very differently in Japan, where rote learning and memorization are mainstream in educational settings (Gorsuch, 1998; Kawabata & Barling, 2020). In Japan, good students are thought to be those who display traditional Japanese cultural traits: being obedient, quiet, and good at tests (Nozaki, 1993). Students rarely challenge the teacher, and by the time they reach university, they are fully accustomed to such behavior in the classroom.

Method

This study had two aims. The first was to gain insights into how Japanese university nursing students participate in English communication classes taught by NES teachers. The second was to provide suggestions based on the findings to help NES teachers create classroom environments that encourage nursing students to participate more in English communication classes.

To understand how Japanese university nursing students participate in English communication classes, a simple questionnaire (see Appendix 1), administered in both Japanese and English, consisting of four yes/no questions was given to two first-year classes with a total of 98 nursing students at a university in Japan. It was explained to the students that the questionnaire was for research purposes, anonymous, and completely voluntary. Two random students from each class were asked to distribute the questionnaires after the teacher had left the room. After the questionnaire was completed, the questionnaires were put in a box that was left at the front of the classroom, which was collected by the teacher at the end of the day. Of the 98 students present on the day of the questionnaire, 96 students responded to the questionnaire (response rate: 98%). The questionnaire was designed to be simple and easy to answer, with the specific aim of obtaining a high response rate

from the participants.

Results and Discussion

The results from Question 1 show that 89 of 96 students (93%) do not raise their hands to ask questions to the teacher when the teacher is teaching. This result is expected based on literature that has noted that from secondary school, Japanese students expect to remain silent while the teacher is teaching.

The results from Question 2 show that 90 of the 96 students (94%) do not raise their hands to answer questions posed to the class. Similar to Question 1, the reason for this may be the result of the education environment that the students have been accustomed to since secondary school. Maftoon and Ziafar (2013) found that Japanese students, upon entering university, likely expect their role to be similar to that of secondary school, where students generally do not ask or answer questions unless individually nominated by the teacher.

The responses to Question 3 indicate that 81 of the 96 students (84%) hesitate to speak English in front of other students. The hesitance of Japanese students to speak in front of classmates (see Cutrone, 2009; Goharimehr, 2017; Sasaki & Ortlieb, 2017; Yashima, 2002;) has been well-researched and discussed, and the findings from this study are consistent with previous research.

The responses to Question 4 (Figure 4) show that 94 of the 96 students (98%) prefer speaking English in small groups. This result indicates that the size of the group may be a factor affecting student output. The results from Question 4 align with the findings of Riasati and Rahimi (2018), who found that speaking in large groups has the unwanted effect of lowering oral output as students may suffer from insecurity.

To sum up, the findings show that the majority of students who took part in this study hesitate to ask or answer questions in class. In addition, the majority of the students indicated a hesitation to

speak English in front of classmates and a preference to speak English in small groups. While these findings may not be representative of all Japanese university students in English language classes, teaching strategies based on these findings to encourage student participation in English language classes taught by NES teachers are presented in the next section.

Suggestions for NES teachers

There are a number of strategies and approaches teachers can use to encourage students to speak out, including the following: making the classroom exciting (Dewaele, 2019; Dewaele & Dewaele, 2020); shadowing the speaker (Talandis & Stout, 2014); using praise and positive feedback (Rode, Hayashi, & Momose, 2023); and making students aware of the importance that English plays in intercultural communication (Maftoon & Ziafar, 2013);

However, merely reminding Japanese students about the importance of active engagement in Western-style English conversations or using strategies and approaches to encourage them to speak up may not be sufficient. Many Japanese students already understand the differences between their communication styles and Western-style English conversations, as supported by various studies (see Harumi, 2010; Sasaki & Ortlieb, 2017).

It is important to remember that silence among Japanese students in class does not always imply an unwillingness or incapacity to participate. According to Sasaki and Ortlieb (2017), although cultural background, personal characteristics, and prior rote-style schooling in Japan may influence their quiet classroom conduct, other factors in the classroom may also contribute to the silence of Japanese students.

Harumi (2010) notes that using activities Japanese students are culturally and pedagogically comfortable with may help create environments that allow them to be comfortable learning

English. According to Harumi (2010), Japanese students are more likely to participate in English classes when the teacher is seen to be empathetic regarding their silence. NES teachers can do this by starting with activities that first focus on accuracy, drills, and repetition, using this as a base to gradually scaffold to more communication-based exercises. For example, the teacher can model a dialogue with the entire class so that all the students are participating equally. Then, the teacher can create small groups where the students model the same dialogue with each other. Finally, the activity can be done as an open discussion without a dialogue.

The avoidance of questions to the entire class may be helpful. Japanese students expect the teacher to ask them questions directly, and if not, they will not raise their hands to answer (Amar, 2021). Setting a designated time aside near the end of the class specifically for asking questions may be helpful in encouraging the students to ask questions. During this time, students can come to the front individually, in pairs, or in small groups to ask the teacher questions directly without having to ask in front of the class. This makes asking questions a less stressful task.

Another strategy that may be successful in encouraging Japanese students to speak more is avoiding large group activities. Large group activities put Japanese students in the spotlight, which tends to make them feel uncomfortable. First having the students discuss or collaborate in small groups of three or four, then transitioning to pairs, and finally to individual speaking activities over the course of a semester is a good way to slowly accustom the students to student-centered activities.

If group-work activities are done in Japanese classrooms, encouraging the students to work together toward a clear goal or product may help them interact and participate. In Japanese classrooms, solutions to problems are highly appreciated when they are achieved through

group consensus rather than individual efforts (Anderson, 2018). Therefore, setting up activities, such as task-based learning, where all the students work together to reach a consensus and then present their ideas as a group ensures that all the students in each group can participate in a way that is culturally comfortable.

Finally, changing the seating arrangements so that the students are not facing the teacher or board may also help in fostering student output. Arranging the tables into small groups where the students are facing each other encourages them to participate as the focus shifts from the teacher to the group. It also creates a much more relaxed classroom environment.

Conclusion

In conclusion, while it may be challenging to adapt to the pedagogical and cultural differences of Japanese students, including nursing students, it is certainly possible to be aware of these differences. NES teachers can then use this knowledge to create learning environments that best suit Japanese nursing students in English language classrooms. Japanese students' inclination toward silence is not indicative of a reluctance to participate or incompetence but rather a strategic choice to foster positive connections with both classmates and teachers. Therefore, the knowledge of why Japanese university students choose silence may help NES teachers create learning environments and activities that the students are comfortable with.

References

- Akiyama, Y. (2017). Vicious vs. virtuous cycles of turn negotiation in American-Japanese telecollaboration: Is silence a virtue? *Language and Intercultural Communication*, 17(2), 190–209.
- Amar, C. (2021). Exploring EFL teachers' perceptions of active and passive learning in Japanese universities. *Journal of the School of Languages and Communication, Kobe University*, 17, 15–30.
- Anderson, F. E. (2018). Nails that don't stick up: Revisiting the enigma of the Japanese college classroom. In P. Wadden & C. C. Hale (Eds.), *Teaching English at Japanese colleges and universities: A new handbook* (pp. 125–136). Routledge.
- Banks, S. (2016). Behind Japanese students' silence in English classrooms. *Accents Asia*, 8(2), 54–75.
- Bosio, E. (2015). Intercultural communication in Japanese learners of English across learning contexts. *Journal of Soka University Graduate School*, 37, 211–236.
- Burden, P. (2002). A cross-sectional study of attitudes and manifestations of apathy of university students towards studying English. *The Language Teacher*, 26(3), 21–29.
- Cutrone, P. (2009). Overcoming Japanese EFL learners' fear of speaking. *Language Studies Working Papers*, 1, 55–63.
- Dewaele, J. M. (2019). The effect of classroom emotions, attitudes toward English, and teacher behavior on willingness to communicate among English foreign language learners. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*, 38(4), 523–535.
- Dewaele, J. M., & Dewaele, L. (2020). Are foreign language learners' enjoyment and anxiety specific to the teacher? An investigation into the dynamics of learners' classroom emotions. *Students in Second Language Learning and Teaching*, 10(1), 45–65.
- Ellwood, C., & Nakane, I. (2009). Privileging of speech in EAP and mainstream university classrooms: A critical evaluation of participation. *TESOL Quarterly*, 43(2), 203–230.
- Furo, H. (2001). *Turn-taking in English and Japanese*. Routledge.
- Goharimehr, N. (2017). Identity, motivation, and English learning in a Japanese context. *World Journal of English Language*, 7(4), 18–30.

- Gorsuch, G. (1998). Yakudoku EFL instruction in two Japanese high school classrooms: An exploratory study. *JALT Journal*, 20(1), 6–32.
- Hammond, C. (2007). Culturally responsive teaching in the Japanese classroom: A comparative analysis of cultural teaching and learning styles in Japan and the United States. *Journal of the Faculty of Economics, Kyoto Gakuen University*, 17, 41–50.
- Harumi, S. (2010). Classroom silence: Voices from Japanese EFL learners. *ELT Journal*, 65(3), 260–269.
- Ishii, S., & Bruneau, T. (1994). Silence and silences in cross-cultural perspective: Japan and the United States. In L. Samovar, & R. Porter (Eds.), *Intercultural communication: A reader* (pp. 246–251). Wadsworth.
- Karas, M., & Uchihara, T. (2021). Silence: A duo ethnography. *Journal of Silence Studies in Education*, 1(1), 64–75.
- Katayama, H. (1982). ことわざに反映された日本人の言語観 Kotowaza ni hanei sareta Nipponjin no gengokan [Japanese views of language reflected in proverbs]. *日本大学一般教育紀要 Nihon Daigaku Kyoiku Kiyō [Journal of Japanese University Education]*, 8, 1–11.
- Kato, K. (2001). Exploring 'cultures of learning': A case of Japanese and Australian classrooms. *Journal of Intercultural Studies*, 22(1), 51–67.
- Kawabata, S., & Barling, G. (2020). Hierarchy, collectivism, and group identity: An analysis of the potential effect of cultural values on ELT in a Japanese high school. *Bulletin of Shikoku University*, 48, 43–48.
- Kawamura, K., Kudo, T., & Hail, E. M. (2006). Ways to activate students' utterances. *Ritsumeikan Gengo Bunka Kenkyū*, 18(1), 169–181.
- Kim, S., Ates, B., Grigsby, Y., Kraker, S., & Micek, T. A. (2016). Ways to promote the classroom participation of international students by understanding the silence of Japanese university students. *Journal of International Students*, 6(2), 431–450.
- King, J. (2013). *Silence in the second language classroom*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Kumagai, Y. (1994). The effects of culture on language learning and ways of communication: The Japanese case. *Master's Capstone Projects*, 80, 1–45.
- Maftoon, P., & Ziafar, M. (2013). Effective factors in interactions within Japanese EFL classrooms. *The Clearing House*, 86(2), 74–79.
- Maher, K., & King, J. (2022). "The silence kills me": Silence as a trigger of speaking-related anxiety in the English-medium classroom. *English Teaching & Learning*, 46, 213–234.
- Mitchell, C. (2017). Language education pressures in Japanese high schools. *Shiken*, 21(1), 1–11.
- Nakane, I. (2007). *Silence in intercultural communication: Perceptions and performance*. John Benjamins.
- Nguyen, P. M., Terlouw, C., & Pilot, A. (2006). Culturally appropriate pedagogy: The case of group learning in a Confucian heritage culture context. *Intercultural Education*, 17(1), 1–19.
- Nozaki, K. N. (1993). The Japanese student and the foreign teacher. In P. Wadden (Ed.), *A handbook for teaching English at Japanese colleges and universities* (pp. 101–110). Oxford University Press.
- Okada, R. (2017). Conflict between critical thinking and cultural values: Difficulty asking questions and expressing opinions in Japan. *Asian Education Studies*, 2(1), 91–98.
- Park, C. C. (2002). Cross-cultural differences in learning styles of secondary English learners. *Bilingual Research Journal*, 26(2), 443–459.
- Riasati, M., & Rahimi, F. (2018). Situational and individual factors engendering willingness to speak English in foreign language classrooms. *Cogent Education*, 5(1), 1–15.
- Richmond, S., & Vannieu, B. (2019). *Over the wall of silence: How to overcome cultural barriers when teaching communication in Japan*. Alma Publishing.

- Rode, T., Hayashi, P. M. J., & Momose, M. (2023). Considerations for effective teacher praise and positive feedback for EFL classes in Japanese elementary schools. *Meiji University Educational Center Research Journal*, 6, 19-29.
- Ruch, W. V. (1984). *Corporate communications*. Quorum Books.
- Sasaki, Y., & Ortlieb, E. (2017). Investigating why Japanese students remain silent in Australian university classrooms: The influences of culture and identity. *Journal of Asian Pacific Communication*, 27, 85–98.
- Schneider, A., & Mecba, J. (2018). A job interview task-based unit: Employing the PACE inductive grammar approach. *CUE Journal*, 11(1), 51–67.
- Su, F., Wood, M., & Tribe, R. (2023). 'Dare to be silent': Re-conceptualising silence as a positive pedagogical approach in schools. *Research in Education*, 116(1), 29-42.
- Talandis, G., Jr. & Stout, M. (2014). Getting EFL students to speak: An action research approach. *ELT Journal*, 69(1), 11-25.
- Tanaka, H., & Nechita, F. (2020). Social cognition of temporality and environment: Lingua franca English construction. *Business Communication Research and Practice*, 3(1), 17–26.
- Yashima, T. (2002). Willingness to communicate in a second language: The Japanese EFL context. *The Modern Language Journal*, 86(1), 54–66.

Appendix 1: Student Questionnaire

Questionnaire

- | | | |
|---|---|---|
| 1: I raise my hand to ask questions when the teacher is teaching. | Y | N |
| 2: I raise my hand to answer questions asked by the teacher to the class. | Y | N |
| 3: I hesitate to speak English in front of other students. | Y | N |
| 4: I prefer speaking English in smaller groups than larger groups | Y | N |

All responses are anonymous, voluntary, and private, and will not be used for anything other than statistical analysis for research purposes. Please circle Yes or No.

アンケート

- | | | |
|-----------------------|----|-----|
| 1: 授業中、手を挙げて先生に質問する。 | はい | いいえ |
| 2: 先生の質問に答えるために手を挙げる。 | はい | いいえ |
| 3: クラスの前で英語を話すのをためらう。 | はい | いいえ |
| 4: 大人数よりも少人数で英語を話したい | はい | いいえ |

すべての回答は匿名、任意、非公開であり、研究目的のための統計分析以外に使用されることはありません。「はい」「いいえ」に○をつけてください。