

Why the silence? Common reasons and some possible solutions

Name: _____ Class: _____ Date: _____

Step 1: With a partner, take turns reading aloud the following information about silence in the English classroom (Student A = 1st sentence, Student B = 2nd, etc).

For a wide variety of reasons, including the education system, psychology, and culture, Japanese students are often quite silent in the classroom. This can be a big problem when learning English because from a “western” point of view, long silences are not a good thing. For example, if someone asks you a question, and you don’t promptly reply, you might come off as rude, uninterested, or lazy. To avoid this kind of misunderstanding when talking to people from English-speaking cultures, we need to learn more about silence and how to avoid it during conversations.

Of course, there could be many reasons why students respond with long silences. Typical ones include low ability level, feeling anxious or shy, or not understanding what to do. A Japanese professor once researched this topic by asking her students: *Why do you choose to remain silent?* She grouped her students’ replies into four categories:

Reason 1. Problems with language, vocabulary, and knowledge

For example, a student might not understand a new word or phrase in the question and get lost as a result.

- e.g., “Have you ever procrastinated before a test?”
“What is a staple food in Japan?”
“Do you know anyone who is ambidextrous?”

The vocabulary could also be a form of idiomatic expression and/or local slang.

- e.g., “What are the odds of meeting a Martian?”
“Do you have a *loonie* in your pocket?” (a Canadian one-dollar coin)
“Have you ever *tweeted* about *fake news*?”

Native speakers usually talk very fast and use reduced forms that sound like *wanna*, *gonna*, *gotta*, *hafta*, *dunno*, etc. Students find it hard to respond when they can’t understand these blended words. Unfamiliar accents and local dialects can contribute to this problem.

- e.g., A: *Whachagonndo* this weekend?
B: Oh, *Idunno*. I *wanna gotathe* movies, but *Igottastudy feratest*.

Finally, maybe a student understands the question but just does not know the answer.

- e.g., “Who wrote *Crime and Punishment*?”
“Which animals are indigenous to Brazil?”
“What is the definition of GNP?”

Reason 2. Problems with time

Japanese students also sometimes feel they do not have enough time to process all the information coming at them. Perhaps they feel the teacher is impatient, so the pressure to answer quickly makes it even harder to answer.

- e.g., Teacher: So, Keita, what is the answer to question #3?
Keita: Ah... (1 second)
Teacher: Okay, thanks anyway. Yumi, what do you think?

Reason 3. Lack of confidence

Sometimes students are simply not accustomed to answering an adult or a person in authority, especially in a second language. As a result, they may not have the courage to answer at all. Similarly, they may feel shy, nervous, or tense due to the class atmosphere. Perhaps they have not formed clear opinions yet and don’t feel comfortable saying whatever is on their mind. Some students also depend heavily on classmates for support and do not feel up to answering a question without talking to someone first.

Reason 4. Problems with turn-taking

In many English-speaking cultures, people are expected to jump in and say whatever is on their mind in a free-flowing manner. However, many Japanese students are not used to this way of speaking. They keep waiting for a chance to speak which never clearly arrives and thus have difficulties in claiming turns. On the other hand, out of a sense of modesty or fairness, some students may feel they have spoken too much and would like to offer others a chance.

Step 2: Which of these reasons do you relate to? Can you recall a specific example of when you could not answer a question? Discuss with your partner, then share your thoughts with the rest of the class.

Step 3: Go over the following strategies for avoiding long silences when answering questions.

Strategy 1: Use “fillers” to give yourself time to think

- *Um, uh, well, let me see*
- *Oh, that's a good/hard question*
- *Hm. I have to think about that for a minute*
- *Just a moment, please*
- A *shadowing strategy* (i.e. repeating a key word) can also be used to give yourself time to think:

Teacher: So, Keita, what is the answer to question 3?

Keita: **Question 3?** Hm! That's a hard question. Ah, just a moment, please. Is it ... ?

- Other filler expressions:

Strategy 2: Use phrases and expressions to provide clarification, elaboration, and repetition

The following phrases and expressions can be used to slow the conversation down and ask for help. This is a very good thing to do--asking these questions shows that you are interested! Remember, you always have the power to control the speed and flow of information.

- *Pardon me? Excuse me? Could you repeat that? I'm sorry, I didn't catch that.*
- *What does mean? What do you mean by...?*
- *Could you ask again a little more slowly, please? More slowly, please.*
- Other similar phrases:

Strategy 3: Brainstorming about admitting to not knowing the answer

These phrases are especially useful when you do not know the answer to a question or a particularly difficult word:

- *I'm sorry, I don't know, I'm not sure*
- *Sorry, but I don't understand, I'm sorry. I have no idea*
- *I don't know the meaning of ..., What does ... mean?*
- Other similar phrases:

Step 4: Prepare for a research project about how to avoid long silences during English conversation.

To really learn how to avoid long silences when answering questions, let's do a small research project. Your assignment is to ask a fluent or near-fluent English speaker a series of trivia questions about Japan. Record the conversation, then transcribe their replies on another form. Highlight the strategies and phrases used, then present your findings in our next class. You could talk about the following:

- Before the interview, which strategies did you expect the person to use?
- Which ones did they actually use?
- What impressed you about the way the person dealt with difficult questions?
- From now, will you be able to deal with difficult questions like the person did? Why or why not?