Changes in Silence:
Patterns and Observations in Intercultural Conversations between Japanese and Exchange Students[i]

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Abstract

Silence is a part of communication that in the last decade has become increasingly focussed upon as an area of research in conversation analysis, pragmatics and cognitive behavioural analysis. This paper looks at the changes in patterns of, understanding and appreciation of silence across multiple conversations involving multi-national students over a period of eight months. It shows that not only the overall proportion of time students spent "silent" varied with Japanese students becoming less silent and non-Japanese students becoming more silent. It also shows that non-Japanese students were more prepared to wait longer for Japanese students to answer and simultaneously were more conscious of their earlier efforts to fill the gaps of prolonged silence and consciously curbed those efforts which may not have led to a marked change in speaking or silent time but did lead to more balanced and culturally attuned conversations.

1.　Introduction

Silence is an integral part on non-verbal communication (Eaves & Leathers, 2018; Moore, Hickson & Stacks, 2010) and as such it has been subject to different approaches; communication theory (Tannen & Saville-Troike, 1995), psychoanalysis (Granger, 2004), intercultural discourse and communication (Nakane, 2014) and politeness theory (Spencer-Oatey & Kádár, 2021). Silence in the language classroom has been clearly identified as a problem and hindrance to language learning and that some nationalities in particular, those from East Asian countries and more specifically, Japanese students, are more prone to be silent than other students. In terms of second language (L2) learning, while

Kember & Gow (1991), McDaniel (1993) and Tannen & Saville-Troike (1995) did much to try to dispel the dichotomy of talkative Westerner and silent Asian students, the aforementioned image of the silent Japanese L2 learner of English persists. Harumi (2011) and Wilang (2017) have considered the experiences of Japanese students abroad whereas King (2013a, 2013b) has looked at silence in Japanese university classrooms. In a wider approach looking at L2 learning from the Asian students' ideas of self and motivation, Apple, Da Silva & Fellner (2017) revealed cultural and individual views of the self noticeably affected students' silence in the classroom. King & Smith (2017) showed that Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) had a similar affect. King and Harumi (2020) widened their approach to consider to learners from other East Asian backgrounds and as result, 'silent' students were seen as having certain traits and characteristics determined by their cultural and individual background which in turn affected their behaviour in classrooms and other language exchanges.

This research looks at the changes in silence shown by Japanese university students over a series of short conversations based on task solving with non-Japanese exchange students at a medium-sized private university in Japan. It also looks at any similar differences shown in silence by the exchange students and also discusses the possible causes and reasons for those changes. Prior to this, it is necessary to lay out what is meant by silence and how it will be used and considered in this research.

2. Silence

Moore, Hickson and Stacks (2010, p 240) provide a simple and readily accessible definition of silence when they state that it is, "an absence of sound". While this allows the concept of silence to be easily and succinctly 'packaged', it merely looks at it aurally and as such might not be sufficient in terms of conversational analysis. If, as King (2012) suggests, we "consider silence from a pragmatic rather than an acoustic perspective" then we can see silence as a "lack of interruption" (Moore, Hickson and Stacks, 2010, p 27). This in turn allows silence to not only be looked at in terms of a lack of audible sound but also in terms of a lack of interruption in the middle of a speech act and the different types of silence and the different respective reasons for them that occur not only in interactions but also for the intents of this research, within multi-person verbal exchanges.

Moore, Hickson and Stacks (2010) note that silence is used for many different pur-

poses and means of communication. They argue that it can be used to modify other behaviour, to establish interpersonal distance, to allow people to put their thoughts together before answering and in some social situations (e.g. classroom, concerts and speeches) to show respect to others.

There is some overlap with King (2013b) and his assessment of the different kinds of silence exhibited in the Japanese university classroom in which he identifies 'five conceptions of silence'(ibid).

    i. The silence of disengagement.

    ii. The silence of teacher-centred methods.

    iii. The silence of nonverbal activities.

    iv. The silence of confusion.

    v. The silence of hypersensitivity to others.

Moore, Hickson & Stacks' final purpose would seem to coincide particularly with King's second and fifth conceptions in a university classroom based around a single teacher. In such a situation, students are not only expected to, but also subscribe to the idea of paying respect to the teacher and simultaneously are very aware of the 'eyes' and opinions of other students in the classroom and as a result are likely to be reticent to fully participate in any oral activity in the classroom due to concern of being judged negatively by those other students.

It should be noted that both these summaries of types or conception of silence are 'macro-silences', that is the silence of non-participation (King, 2013b) rather than of 'micro-silences', the naturally occurring pauses and hesitations in conversations which are most often covered in conversation and discussion analysis. As stated above, this research will look at the changes in silence within short 10-minute multi-person conversations and in this respect, it can be argued that these will be changes in micro-silences. However, as will be further described below, these conversations were extensions of classroom content and activities and cannot only be seen within the microcosm of pauses and hesitations because, as will be shown in turn, those two elements are directly affected by "the social dynamic and have consequences for individual and behaviour." (Goebl, Thang & Mori, 2017).

3.　Research Method

The data was collected from combined audio-visual recordings carried out between October 2017 and July 2018 on two groups of students.　Each group had one Japanese student and Group 1 had three non-Japanese students and Group 2 had two non-Japanese students.　A total of five different first language (L1) backgrounds were represented in the two groups.　The students' nationality, gender and relative English proficiency are represented in Table 1 below.

Table 1.　Student Groups make-up: nationality, gender and English proficiency

Group	Students' Nationality and Gender	Relative English Proficiency
1	Fr-M	Advanced
	Cz-F	Advanced
	US-F	L1
	Jp-M1	Intermediate
2	Fr-F	Advanced
	Cn-F	Intermediate
	Jp-M2	Upper-Intermediate

Nationality Key

Cn: China　　　　　　Fr: France　　　　　　　US: United States of America

Cz: Czech　　　　　　Jp: Japan

The other L1 speakers were exchange students visiting Hiroshima Shudo University (HSU) from various partner universities in Asia, Europe and North America.　These five students had varying levels of Japanese ability from lower-intermediate to high intermediate.　All seven students were participating in classes within the Multi-Cultural Project section of the 'Intercultural co-learning courses' (国際共修科目).　These courses were (and still are) part of HSU's response to the 2009 MEXT directive encouraging Japanese universities to offer classes in English as Means of Instruction (EMI) as part of the Global 30 project aimed at increasing the number of international students whilst simultaneously internationalising Japanese higher education through and emphasis on EMI (Aizawa and Rose, 2019).

A total of six recordings were made; three in English and three in Japanese.　How-

ever, for the purposes of this research, only the English recordings were used. For each of the three recordings, the groups were given a task and then asked to discuss the task within an allotted time of ten minutes and produce an answer that they were satisfied with. Within each group one student allotted the role of initiator, timekeeper and note-taker. The roles were rotated for each of the three tasks. In the case of Group 2, the fourth student was given the role of interlocutor. The contents of the tasks can be found in the Appendix. Each of the audio recordings was transcribed professionally and then amended by the author as well as a colleague[ii].

After transcription and amendment then the author measured the total speaking and silent time displayed by the all of the participants and then calculated the percentage of both kinds of time. The results of each group's total speaking and silent time as well as each participant's percentage of that time is displayed and discussed in the next section.

4. Results

As described in the previous section the total speaking and silent time and the individual student's percentage of that time for each of the three tasks is shown Table 2 below.

Table 2. Speaking and Silent Time Per Group over Three Tasks

Gp	Students' Nationality and Gender	Relative English Proficiency	Task 1		Task 2		Task 3	
			Speaking Time (%)	Silent Time (%)	Speaking Time (%)	Silent Time (%)	Speaking Time (%)	Silent Time (%)
1	Fr-M	Advanced	39	28	31	16	28	14
	Cz-F	Advanced	16	28	31	16	28	14
	US-F	L1	42	19	31	26	13	18
	Jp-M1	Intermediate	3	32	17	29	26	54
2	Fr-F	Advanced	54	23	46	27	41	31
	Cn-F	Intermediate	43	29	41	29	24	36
	Jp-M2	Upper-Intermediate	3	48	13	44	35	33

4.1. Group 1.

Table 2 above shows that over Tasks 1, 2 and 3 for speaking time there two noticeable patterns with each pattern shown by two non-Japanese students respectively. The amount of speaking time decreased over the three tasks for both the French and American student with the latter showing the greater drop from 42% of total speaking time in Task 1 to 13% of the same in Task 3. In comparison, the French students' speaking time dropped from 39% to 28% over the three tasks. The other two students, the Czech student and the Japanese student, showed an increase in speaking time. The Czech student's speaking time increased from 16% to 33% whereas the Japanese student's speaking time increased from 3% to 26%.

In terms of silent time, Task 1 and 2 showed a relatively even split between all four students with fluctuations of between 5% and 8%. Also, the silent time of the three non-Japanese students all decreased from Task 1 to 3 with the French student's time falling by half from 28% to 14% with the Czech and American students' silent time falling by 6% and 1% respectively. The most striking trend showed in the silent time is that of the Japanese student in that while there was a drop from 32% to 29% between Task 1 and 2, there was an extremely large increase in Task 3 to 54% of total silent time. This leads us to the seemingly contradictory situation of both the speaking and silent time decreasing.

4.2. Group 2.

Similar patterns of change for speaking and silent time as described for Group 1 can also be seen in Group 2. The relative times in Task 1 showed the 'expected' or stereotypical image of silent Japanese student with only 3% of total speaking time compared to a combined 97% of total speaking time by the other two students. This situation changed in Task 2 what is the amount of speaking time for both the non-Japanese speakers decreased to 87% and increased to 13% for the Japanese student. While the amount of silent time stayed the same for the Czech student at 29% for both Task 1 and 2, the amount of the total silent time for the French student increased from 23% to 27% and accordingly decreased from 48% to 44% for the Japanese student yet still remained the highest of all the three participants. It is only in Task 3 does the amount of the speaking time for the Japanese student increase to 35% to be second to the French student at 41% as well as the amount of silent time reaching the 30% percentile for all students for the first time.

5. Discussion

It might be possible to explain the changes in the amount of silent time over the three tasks and between the students if several factors are considered: the size of the groups, task content and familiarity of the task process, the concomitant changes to the speaking and silent time of the non-Japanese students and other aspects of non-verbal communication such as posture, eye-contact and use of hands.

5.1. The Size of the Groups.

The relatively small number of students in the group (3 or 4) may have been intimidating for the Japanese students. Although, Japanese primary school pupils are placed 'han' or groups of 4-6 pupils from the age of 6 onwards and a lot of classroom activities and learning take place in these *han*, the smaller number of students may have been off-putting for them. Furthermore, the small number of the group contrasts with the larger class of 15 students that all the students were members of and naturally this would have been much smaller than any large-scale lectures at either HSU or the exchange students' home universities.

5.2. Task Familiarity and Content.

Task 1 was not only obviously the first of the three tasks that they completed for the purposes of this study; it may also have been the first time for all the students to experience such a kind of task-solving exercise. In this way the lack of experience in this type of problem-solving task could have led to some reticence on behalf of the Japanese students to contribute to the conversation needed to complete the task. Through the progression of the three tasks and the consequent growing familiarity with the nature of the task the Japanese students may have grown more accustomed to their expected role of contributor, timekeeper or initiator. This enhanced familiarity may also have been affected by the nature of the tasks themselves.

Task 1 was concerned with the selection of primarily English language films to introduce to first time visitors to Japan and as such the Japanese students may have been at a distinct disadvantage with this. Indeed, at the end of Task 1, the Japanese student in Group 2 said, "This is hard for Japanese people...". The comment itself is striking in that

he chooses not to say "(This is hard for) me" but seemingly thinks that all Japanese people would have the same problems as himself.　Any further research might be enhanced by investigating into the students' opinions of whether such tasks are difficult on an individual basis or on a cultural or ethnicity basis.

Task 2 and 3 were similar to each other in that both tasks asked the students to explain particular Japanese concepts (as described in the Appendix) to first time visitors to Japan.　Naturally, the content of these tasks put the Japanese students at an automatic advantage in terms of familiarity and understanding of these concepts.　This is turn allowed them to take on the role of the explainer of any of the concepts in question and as such afforded them the time to listen to the conversation, assess when and how to interject and offer a succinct or precise definition of the term under discussion.　Both students seemed to be content to wait in silence for their turn and when they did showed positive body language features such as leaning forward into the middle of the conversation, smiling as well as hand position and movement.　These other elements of non-verbal communication will be highlighted and discussed in 5.4.　Another element which can be seen to have directly affected both the amount of speaking and silent time was the changes in the behaviour of the non-Japanese students.

5.3.　Changes to the speaking and silent time of the non-Japanese students.

Over the three tasks it was shown that the for Group 1 the non-Japanese students' speaking time on average decreased apart from the tasks when they were instigator and facilitator of the conversations.　In Group 2, there was a shift in the two non-Japanese students speaking behaviour to overly dominating the conversation in Task 1 to a more balanced share of both speaking and silent time in Task 3.　In both groups, the non-Japanese students appear to have grown accustomed to the longer time needed for the Japanese students to contribute to the conversations.　Being more willing to wait can be argued to be 'cultural attentiveness' which could be seen to be the students themselves showing '*kikubari*' or awareness.

This is in keeping with the findings of Takita (2020) that over time while the overall length of silent time within conversations may increase this does not mean the conversations as such have 'failed' to be meaningful interchanges.　As the participants grow more accustomed and familiar with one another, it is because of the increased mutual understanding of each other's conversational style i.e. non-Japanese participants are prepared to

wait more often and for longer intervals for the Japanese participants to speak or to speak themselves.

Takita also notes that in her study that Indonesian students were more likely to wait more often and for longer periods of time with Japanese students than they were German students.   A possible area of further research would be to analyse conversations between Japanese students and at least two non-Japanese students longitudinally.   Comparisons of not only the micro-silences and macro-silences of the Japanese student but also assessments of marked and measurable differences between the length of silences between Japanese students and non-Japanese students might highlight differences in pauses between turns across two or more cultures.   It is through a more holistic approach to analysing conversations and the silences within can we gleam some true insights into intercultural communication.   Similarly, as noted above in the introduction, silence is a part of non-verbal communication and it is also important to note differences in other aspects such as posture, smiling and hand position and movement.

5.4.   Other Non-Verbal Communication.

While not a primary focus of this research, it is necessary to reference other physical types of non-verbal communication and more precisely the changes to them over the three tasks.   The low speaking time of both Japanese students in Task 1 was accompanied by physical behaviour that strongly indicated anxiety: a lack of eye contact with the other participants, a similar lack of smiling, leaning away from the centre of the conversation and also using hands and arms as barriers between themselves and the non-Japanese students. The Japanese students repeatedly placed a hand or fist in front of their mouths when they were silently waiting between turns.   In both Task 2 and 3, both non-Japanese students began to show much more confidence in their physical behaviour through posture (leaning into the centre of the group), smiling more often and for longer during the conversations as well as laughing repeatedly throughout.   It must be admitted that this is hard to quantify and measure, it should be noted that these kinds of non-verbal communication are revealing to the state of mind of the students taking part in the conversations.

It has been shown that there were distinct changes in both speaking and silent time for Japanese and non-Japanese students alike over the three tasks and conversations.   It can be seen that there while a more even balance between speaking and silence may not have been achieved in both groups there were other indications of successful intercultural

communication and understanding in increased appreciation of the different communication styles and awareness that as such not silence whether on a micro or macro level may not be a directly inhibitive to successful communication.   Further research into any gender differences as well as differences between other Asian students as compared to Japanese and/or European and American students in terms of their use of silence and physical non-verbal communication might reveal important aspects not covered in this research.   Finally, it should be noted that post-interviews conducted with students looking at and/or listening to the conversations as well as self-assessment of the transcribed dialogues could also be further used to enhance a greater and deeper understanding of silence within intercultural communication.

6.   Conclusion

This research has shown that silence can now be seen as not an absence of sound or interruption but also as a pragmatic element within speech acts that is affected by both the cultural and individual background of any participant in a social setting such as a conversation.   Within this small sample of conversations between students using English as common language it was also been shown that a student's choice to speak or to be silent cannot be seen in isolation from their wider and personal background as well as in reference to the conversation that they are taking place.   A greater appreciation of the factors that affect and determine silence within such situations is essential to promote and enhance intercultural communication.

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Appendix

Task 1 (First Recording: October 2017)
"Choose FIVE mainly English language films that you would recommend to a foreign student coming to Japan for the first time. Then, rank the films in order of recommendation." (1 = the most highly recommended).

Task 2 (Second Recording: December 2018)
"Some people you know are coming to Japan for 3 weeks on their very first visit here. From your knowledge of the concepts of 'wa', 'kikubari', 'kenjou', 'ichigoichie' and 'misogi kegare', brainstorm pieces of practical advice related to Japanese hospitality and service that you could give your visitors. Then, decide on your team's Top 2 pieces of advice.

'wa'- harmony   'kenjou'- modesty

'kikubari'- attentiveness   'ichigoichie'- once in a lifetime encounter

'misogi'- purification   'kegare'- impurity

Task 3 (Third Recording: January 2018)
"Some people you know are coming to Japan for 3 weeks on their very first visit here.   From your knowledge of the concepts of 'kisetsukan', 'gokan', 'shitsurai', 'yosooi', 'furumai' and 'kata', brainstorm pieces of practical advice related to Japanese hospitality and service that you could give your visitors. Then, decide on your team's Top 2 Advice."

'kisetsukan'- seasonal feeling   'yosooi'- correct way to dress

'gokan'- five senses   'furumai'- behaviour/treatment

'shitsurai'- seasonal room decoration   'kata'- way of doing things