Japanese Undergraduates' Reticence toward Dialectic Pedagogy: Reasons and Remedies

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0743

The Asian Conference on Education 2013

Official Conference Proceedings 2013

Abstract

This study examined why Japanese students are so reticent to ask questions or make comments in classes. The subjects of the study were three groups of Japanese undergraduates who had various lengths of exposure to American instruction. Most American instructors expressed their concerns regarding the lack of responses from these students. Surveys and focus groups were conducted to probe students' views. Qualitative method was used to uncover if the students were aware of instructors' expectations, if the students were cognizant of the reasons that kept them quiet, and if there were any solutions.

Most students said they knew they were expected to speak up. The excuses for not doing so were: not having enough courage; being too embarrassed to speak publicly; being too nervous to raise their hands; not knowing what, how, or when to ask questions; not having good or well stated questions; anxiety about individualized exchanges; perceived demand for reflective or evaluative answers; preference for consulting the instructor privately; and fear of being disrespectful of the instructor or the older students.

Students said the instructors' smiles, friendliness, collegial attitude and handouts made classes conducive for discussions. The instructors' seriousness in addressing every student question, not criticizing what the students said but praising and welcoming their contributions, and having interpreters available encouraged them to speak up. Requiring each student to ask a question each session worked well for one instructor when she combined it with preparatory pre-sessions. Seeing how the shared comments and questions aid the learning of others is potentially a powerful motivator. Another easy remedy is to provide orientations to the instructors who use interpreters for the first time making them aware that the time to solicit participation is when the interpreter completes each segment.

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INTRODUCTION

Pedagogy based on questions and answers has been a mainstay in Western cultures since Socrates, although the one of the most significant teachings in Eastern cultures, Confucian Analects, are known to contain dialogue-based instructions (Soothill, WE, 1999.) In recent decades, dialectic approach has been adapted to follow the logical processes of antithesis and synthesis (Hegel, GWF, 1975) or to emphasize collaborative, argumentative, and reflective discourses (Vygotsky, L, 1978). Many educators today, however, adopt a less formalized dialogic (Bakhtin, M, 1986) aspect of this approach to incorporate perspectives of the learners.

A wide use of dialectic pedagogy in American classrooms is probably due to the educational research that comes out of such institute as the Center for Postsecondary Research which has years of cumulative national data collected with the College Student Experience Questionnaire (CSEQ). Kuh, GD, as the director of the center, summed up the research findings in 2005 in his address titled *Taking Stock of What Matters to Student Success.* He identified six key factors that contributed to student success: student-faculty contact, active learning, prompt feedback, high expectations, respect for diverse learning styles, and time on task. These characteristics find their way to the ideal pedagogies college faculty try to emulate.

The dialectic approach often causes confusion and distress for the Japanese students who come to study in American institutions. Takeya, K (2000) in "Culture shock: Schools in the US and Japan" < http://leo.stcloudstate.edu/kaleidoscope/volume3/cultureshock.html > said that American teachers value participation and expect students to give their opinions or ask questions but teachers in Japan expect students to be quiet in class and listen to their lectures and copy what they write on blackboards. There is a movement among some Japanese teachers, however, to adapt a dialectic method to Japanese culture. Isoda, M et al. (2009, 2011) has been writing about the problem solving activities, such as group investigation, presentation, and discussion as a way to create classroom dialectic.

This study investigated why Japanese undergraduates are so reticent to participate in American style dialectic classes and if any remedies can be found. The students in this study experienced their eye-opening encounters with dialectic method when they were taught by American faculty, although earlier exposures to similar methods used by their Japanese instructors were reported by some. The cross-cultural communication context heightened the students' anxiety and frustration. In each case, however, potential cross-language barrier was addressed by employing an interpreter.

METHOD

Qualitative method of investigation was used by collecting data through open-ended questions in surveys and focus groups. The subjects of this study were occupational therapy (OT) and physical therapy (PT) students of traditional college age in a post secondary technical school in Japan. They experienced varying lengths of exposure to American instructors' dialectic pedagogy, ranging from one workshop to two years of course work:

- Group 1: Workshop Attendees
  37 OT and PT students (23 males 14 females) between their junior and senior years traveled to the US to attend a three-day non-credit workshop. This group participated in a survey.

- Group 2: the Juniors
  10 junior OT and PT students (4 males and 6 females) were cross-enrolled in an affiliate university in the US and were taking the first several courses of a degree program in Japan taught by the visiting American faculty. This group participated in the survey questionnaire and a focus group discussion.

- Group 3: the Seniors
  19 senior OT and PT students (10 males and 9 females) who had just attained or about to attain a Bachelors' degree from the affiliate US university by completing the last several courses on the US campus participated in the survey. Only the last five seniors were able to participate in a focus group.

Written statements and spoken comments were collected, transcribed or keyed, and translated into English. The word data were analyzed to uncover recurring themes in order to answer three questions:

- Question 1: what understanding did the students have regarding the instructors' expectation for their participation in class

- Question 2: What caused these Japanese undergraduates to be so reticent when instructors invited them to comment or ask questions?

- Question 3: What factors contributed to overcoming their reticence as some students were able to participate with modest success?

RESULTS

Re: Question 1, What Understanding Did the Students Have Regarding the Instructors' Expectation for Their Participation in Class?

About 40% of the workshop attendees were aware that participation was expected. They further said this was not a new experience because some Japanese teachers encourage them to ask questions. Japanese instructors, however, do not keep asking or do not show high expectations for the students to respond. One student explained the reason for this difference as "because few Japanese ask questions and they typically are poor at making comments."

The juniors, during their first courses realized they must express their own thoughts. The juniors began to identify speaking up in classes with independent thinking. For example, they said that "the atmosphere these teachers bring is that we think together, we own the fun, shaping it by thinking together," "[these] classes, compared to Japanese ones, often require us to think on our own and answer individually addressed questions," "[American] teachers often ask individually what we are thinking," and "we now have to be active on our own."

The seniors became very cognizant of the instructor expectations for participation. One female student said "for American teachers, it would be rather rude to just do that [sit quietly]." In fact an OT student described how an instructor made it a requirement for the Japanese students to speak up at least once each session. This may be because she had both American and Japanese students in the same class and wanted to balance the contributions from both groups in discussions. The instructor said that she had learned, over the few years of teaching Japanese students, that there was no other way to make them speak up. She, however, offered a preview session each week just for the Japanese students which according to this student, was simplified enough so that she did not need an interpreter, "when we met for the very first preview session before the class, he [the interpreter] determined … how much I understood, so the second and the third time he did not offer much interpretations, not very much…"

The seniors understood how questions can benefit the whole class. "Classes here take up individuals' questions and let the whole class discuss them together making them into positive learning experiences," or "in Japan, talking is one sided and teachers do all the talking but if classes are carried forward by conversations, that will leave stronger impressions to remain in our heads."

Re: Question 2, What Caused These Japanese Undergraduates to be So Reticent When Instructors Invited Them to Comment or Ask Questions?

The workshop attendees said they could not say anything or ask questions, except seven students out of 37 who said they were able to ask simple questions seeking additional information. None were to challenge the instructor's position because as one student said they "do not like to argue." Those who spoke up were admired and appreciated because their questions helped others learn more and made them recognize diverse perspectives, as one students said, "I learned something I did not know and different ways of thinking," and another also said, "I felt that other people have different perspectives." Those who could not speak up wished they did because that would have "increased their confidence" and" expressive ability".

The workshop attendees gave the following excuses for not participating: The most common excuses that were cited by at least six respondents included:

- Could not think of a question or did not know what or how to ask questions. A variation of this theme was expressed as "I did not fully understand the lecture so did not know what I did not know," or "there were some unclear things but did not know how to ask questions." Some were concerned about the quality of their questions saying "I was afraid my questions were not good," "I could not think of a good question," and "I thought my question may not be culturally appropriate." One student shared an insight related to lack of questions saying "this has to do with us needing to get in a habit of having own thoughts and expressing them in everyday life."
- Did not have enough courage or confidence and felt shy or passive. This excuse is seen in the statements such as "not confident if my self-expression is adequate for questioning, because it was a group learning and not one on one," "I felt embarrassed and felt the pressure from the gazes of other students," and "even if I dared to ask a questions, I was

afraid I would lose my confidence when I cannot get my question across."

- Was too nervous or tense to raise hand or ask questions
- Not good at or not used to speaking in public as one student stated "I usually do not ask questions."

Less common excuses cited by only a couple students included:

- Could not figure the timing
- Asked or talked with other students and expected someone else to raise the question. One student said "I thought I should ask other students my questions," others said "we discussed our questions among the students around me," and "I was hoping someone else would ask my question."

The juniors expressed the desperate feelings of insecurity they initially experienced: "Japanese classes are passive but [these] classes make us all think together and I could not cope with that in the beginning," "I was surprised at first," "I did not do well. I could not speak up partly because I lacked self- confidence," "I was nervous," "I was at a loss," "I cowered," and "I could not respond and stayed silent. That was painful."

The juniors also described how they overcame their reticence later: They concluded that "it [participating in classes] was positive," "it was beneficial," and "it was enjoyable but unusual and strange." The juniors quickly gained confidence, which they expressed as "I find it not too difficult to speak up" or "it is easier to express my opinions."

The seniors were struggling with their internal pressure to perform at a higher level. They expressed this dilemma as "I do feel, perhaps too strongly, that I need to ask well stated questions," "I am conscious about making mistakes in asking questions," and "I do have that intention [to speak up]…ever since I started taking this program, but I often end up saying nothing…"

The seniors became aware that they need to offer reflective and evaluative comments unlike the short and factual answers they used to give in Japan. "In math, one plus one is two: Two is the only answer you can give, so when it was not that way I was nervous." "He [one of the instructors] expects our reflections…our evaluation of what was important and what I thought about it, something I never experienced in Japan: I never met any teachers in Japan who asked that kind of questions. I now feel that may be essential."

The seniors were weighing the new challenge against the old comfortable passive style saying **"**I was really rooted in the Japanese tradition of cramming education and was feeling comfortable, because I never was good at speaking," "I used to think, in the beginning, that all I needed to do was to listen for the important points and summarize the gist, but that just prepares me to pass the test …the greatest way for me to apply what I learn is for the lectures to create interests in me: Teaching method that stimulates my interests, or creates an active learning attitude, these things can make my learning real. That's how I started to think after I came to this program,"

and another senior agreed "I used to think, before, that teachers should just explain things in a way that is easy to understand and students should just listen. That was my idea of good teachers. I still want the same things, but in addition, I begun to think that it may be necessary for them [teachers] to have some sort of relationships with students."

The seniors were trying to reconcile their respect for the instructors and interrupting them, saying "generally [in Japan] students are expected to sit quietly and listen to lectures," "Most Japanese students think if they ask questions, they might interfere with the progression of the class: It is bad. So the typical thing for the students to do is to individually go to their teachers after the class and ask questions about what they did not understand: They don't speak up during the class to say 'I don't' understand this,'" and another one added "because of my old habits it is not easy to ask questions." The respect for the instructors' planned flow of lectures was aptly exemplified by a female student who expressed her displeasure with American peers' interruptions, "It seems common here for the students to eat or drink during classes, but in Japan that kind of behaviors are considered very rude and show a lack of respect for the teacher: something we never do, but when they [American students] are eating… they feel so free to just get up and go to get water, or walk around and when they do this too frequently, that can interfere with the effectiveness of the class."

The seniors described an incident when the traditional power relations became an issue. It exposed an unexpected aspect of vertical relationship that exists even between junior and senior level statuses. The incident involved a seemingly good classroom activity one American instructor employed where students were divided up in several groups for discussions. The instructor did not realize he mixed some seniors and juniors together in these groups. The students in the focus group were recalling this incident that happened when they were juniors. They felt they could not speak up because they had to show some respect for the seniors' status difference even though the instructor repeatedly encouraged them to participate. He never suspected such an internal power differential was operating in a group of students who did not look very different.

The seniors saw how interpretations can work for or against their attempts to speak up. Students often felt a greater need for the interpreters' help when they had comments and questions, as one senior described, "when I try to say something without an interpreter, I am left with a problem of how to say it." Often, however, the instructors forgot to pause for the students to ask questions or comment and proceed as soon as the interpreters stopped speaking. The alternating turns between the instructors and the interpreters escalated the pace of the lectures so that the students had difficulty seizing the opportunity for questions or comments. One student said "topics seemed to develop quickly, probably because we had a translator, and I missed the chance to ask questions." They described one class by saying "when the interpreter hesitated a moment midway…teacher started again, 'Oh, not yet!' I was thinking." " "Stopping seems to signal the end and teacher does not wait for our reactions": "I think the teacher expected our reactions when she finished talking in English, and thought it was time to move on when the interpreter finished."

Re: Question 3, What Factors Contributed to Overcoming Their Reticence as Some Students Were Able to Participate with Modest Success?

The workshop attendees felt the instructor created a conducive atmosphere by:

- Smiling
- Being humorous
- Being cheerful
- Being friendly
- Engaging eye contact or
- Engaging in conversations during the break

The workshop attendees felt the instructor encouraged the students to ask questions by:

- Setting the time aside for questions
- Checking if every sentence was understood
- Not waiting till the discussion got difficult
- Urging the students to ask questions
- Asking the students many questions
- Taking every question student asked seriously

The workshop attendees felt the organizer and advisors contributed by providing:

- Interpreter
- Advice to think of questions before the workshop
- Handout for preview and review
- Snacks and drinks for relaxation

The Juniors attributed their success to instructors' verbal encouragement:

- *Calling me by name*: "I find it not too difficult to speak up because teachers ask for my opinions by name."
- *Expressed inclusiveness without the air of power differentials:* "Teachers were in the same circle with the students," "teachers were so friendly and drew students closer," "often asked us to express ourselves," and "they welcomed our opinions."

The Juniors sensed the instructors' openness in their nonverbal behaviors:

- "They [facial expressions] made us feel that the teachers were very close to us."
- "She [an instructor] always looked at the person, me, in the eyes which made me nervous sometimes. But she tried very hard to understand what I was trying to say which made me very happy."

The Juniors were heartened by a lack of certain negative instructor behaviors:

- *Did not criticize:* "I found out that they will hear me out and will not flatly reject [what I say]" and "always listened to what the students said without interrupting or judging."

The seniors also credited the instructors' verbal behaviors as motivating factors:

- Conversations with students in and out of classes: "She often initiated conversations with me. When I struggled to understand what she said she would

rephrase and explain what she said," "she invited individual students to her office
to provide us a chance to have a discussion with other faculty."

- Attending to students' questions: "During the class, if we had questions, he [an instructor] took time to deal with them and responded properly," "I asked a question once and he gave it a serious thought even though there seemed to be no time left," "the course was successful because the teacher … allowed us to ask questions anytime we could not understand," or "she [another instructor] often entertained students' comments and questions so I had a chance to participate."
- Commending students when they speak up*:* A student remarked that "teachers of this program praise us when we speak up. Always respond to what we say. I thought they make it easy for us to be receptive of classes creating the environment that enable us to participate."
- Soliciting student opinions/views: "[Instructors] expect not only a summary in
our presentations but our reflections, not just summary but our evaluation of what was important and what I thought about it…" or "Classes often had assignments like getting into group discussions and produce one-page summaries. It was most trying when other [American] students asked me for my opinion," "we did not just turn them[assignments] in but made presentations each time which allowed us to hear the opinions of others and receive stimulations."

The seniors were impressed by the absence of certain negative behaviors:

- "In Japan, I had teachers often write on the blackboard on and on, then say something when we are copying and unable to listen at the same time… that is why I did not like the Japanese lecture method." He then observed "I always thought the teachers here do not use whiteboard or blackboard too much." He was so delighted to think of the answer to his own question, "I was thinking why it doesn't happen here, it is because they give us handouts with everything on."

The seniors also recognized the influence of other overall factors:

- Understanding the content helped think of questions as one student said "as I understand what is being said, more questions came to my mind, more questions
came up especially if teachers discuss new information in classes and get me interested."
- Experiences with different "foreign" instructors made it increasingly easier to speak up. One student described it this way: "usually first time meetings, especially relating to foreigners, tends to be uneasy. On top of that we had different languages that created a wall. But as the time passed, it [fear] disappeared. After that [first] course, it not only disappeared but there were no difficulty talking."
- Smiles: "I thought many of the teachers smiled while they talked. I have not seen too many Japanese teachers smile and talk, but most teachers here do smile and talk…"

DISCUSSION

The surveys and focus groups data revealed that the instructors were saying and doing all the right things to encourage these Japanese students to speak up. Smiles, eye contact, cheerfulness, friendliness were all appreciated by the students for creating a receptive learning environment.
Combined with repeated invitation, the workshop instructor was able to convince almost 20% of the attendees to speak up during the three days. The juniors moved on from their initial shock to thorough adaptation over the several courses. The faculty consistently affirmed their value as partners in collaborative learning. It gave them an unabashed confidence and joy of participatory learning. They responded to the faculty's message with strong positive affect and belief, although their comments may have been naïve. The seniors' assessment of pedagogies became more philosophical contrasting the benefit of dialectic style with the comfort of passive style. They continued to grapple with the gap between their growing desire and the felt inadequacy to perform well. The faculty kept encouraging and building closer relationships with the seniors that gave them a bitter-sweet experience of satisfaction and frustration.

In spite of the effective teaching by the faculty, dialectic pedagogy still remained somewhat counter intuitive to Japanese students who were entrenched in a belief that their questions might interrupt the class or their comments might offend the instructor. Student statements provided an interesting insight into how the egalitarian practice of dialectic method and the Japanese practice of status differentiation can come in conflict. Japanese power relations (Khoo, 2007) dictate younger persons to defer to older ones, students to teachers, and sometimes women to men. Instructors must be mindful of the potential interference this practice presents to collaborative learning activities.

This hierarchical power structure created the long tradition of the sage on the stage approach to education in Japan, and it continues to feed the fear of disrupting the status quo. This fear of disrespecting or disappointing the instructor was a strong emotion and no one seemed to be able to convert it effectively except the students themselves. Some students on their own came to a realization that it is rude to be quiet in American classes. One instructor was able to use their fear of disrespecting the teacher to her advantage when she "required" the students to speak up at least once every session. It worked because the students' fear of being perceived as apathetic or obstinate superseded the fear of speaking up. It will probably work again if an instructor can top the students' fear of speaking with another stronger emotion.

Another reason that the students keep quiet is the higher level of tolerance that seems to exist in Japanese culture for shy students who are uncommunicative in classes. Reverence for silence is reflected in numerous Japanese proverbs that stress this virtue and the admiration for men and women of few words is found in folklore and literature. There was almost a sense of justification when the workshop attendees made such excuses as "Japanese are not good at making comments," or "I usually do not ask questions." Several students said that some Japanese teachers encourage students to ask questions sometimes, but these statements were often qualified by how Japanese teachers have "low expectations" for student responses, implying they do not usually press on students to speak up.

A vicious cycle seems to exist when shyness is excused and students do not have to face the challenge of speaking up in classes, effectively forgoing the very opportunities they need to exercise their self expressions. This was evident in a circular reasoning many workshop attendees gave. For example the same students who said they were too embarrassed to speak up in public also expressed their regret for not trying because, they said, trying would have improved their abilities to speak.

Most students thought asking questions as a means to clarify what s/he did not understand in the class. They did not see a need for interrupting a class in order to get help because in their mind it was something personal. Their thinking was to save the classroom activities for collective communication. In addition, many students seem to think that the more expedient option was to individually seek the answers from the peers or the instructors. Only a few students were beginning to see how the student questions revealed different perspectives. Another vicious cycle revealed itself because these students do not have enough opportunities to see the benefit of questions and comments shared by others they do not become convinced of the importance of sharing their own. Perhaps, sitting side by side with American students in a class is the catalyst these Japanese students need since some of the seniors who had that experience seemed to have gained much.

Many students spoke of their habits that kept them from speaking up. Most were talking about the passive learning habit that prevented them from even coming up with questions. It was obviously a formidable task to change the pattern that had worked well for 12 to 15 years of schooling. One workshop attendee said it exactly right when he recognized the need for the change to develop and express own thoughts in everyday learning. A habit of listening to lectures critically with some skepticism and to know that it is not disrespectful to do so may take time to develop. New habits may not emerge spontaneously, just as some seniors had to be warned ahead of time to prepare their questions beforehand, some concerted effort may be needed before these new behaviors to become natural and effortless. Guided exercises to show some strategies for critical thinking may be very helpful in developing the new habit.

There is an easy remedy to restore some opportunities for participation in interpreted classes. An orientation can be provided to all the instructors who use interpreters for the first time, making sure they will not be tempted to fill every silent moment and to remind themselves that the time to solicit participation is when the interpreter completes each segment.

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