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Japanese students contributing to a pro-verbalisation pedagogy

Investigating the perspectives of three individual Japanese learners of English from a university in Japan on the nature of their classroom reticence, this project highlights the voices of silent learners who yearn to speak. Unfortunately, silent student perspectives often go unheard in the classroom and are under-reported in research studies. We intended to search out these silent 'pro-talk' voices and investigate conditions that might assist these students in (a) moving away from reticence, (b) increasing verbal communication, and (c) developing their verbal English proficiency. Drawn from in-depth interview data and to contribute to English language teaching (ELT) pedagogy, the following article outlines strategic ways of assisting the learning of quiet students who do not wish to be silent anymore. Although, in their ideology, these students yearn for a verbally proactive classroom process, they often experience verbal limitations in the everyday classroom. While on the outside, these students seem to be peacefully quiet, within each, there is an accumulation of feelings and thoughts that cause internal tension and, at times, intense disappointment. For this study, we have labelled these silent students as

'pro-verbalisation learners'. Speaking entirely in Japanese, the three pro-verbalisation learners in this study shared critical views toward undesirable classroom processes and offered possible solutions to improve limitations in existing classroom methods. According to these students, ideal conditions for verbal change can only occur if the teacher is willing to modify their pedagogy to establish new participation rules, ease classroom tension, nurture peer cohesiveness, and build verbally supportive elements into the learning process.

Keywords: reticence, talk, pro-talk, pro-verbalisation, classroom culture, pedagogy

Słowa kluczowe: powściągliwość, rozmowa, rozmowa aprobująca/wspierająca, werbalizacja aprobująca/wspierająca, kultura klasy, pedagogika

1. Scope of the study

This article reports three case studies conducted at a Japanese university on how silent learners of English aspire to switch to a more verbal learning mode for their good, based on their belief that English language communication must involve verbal discussion. At the start, we surveyed 1st and 2nd year Japanese students of English (n=116) who were enrolled in a compulsory Listening & Speaking course at a private university in Japan. After collecting data regarding learning behaviour and aspiration, the study identified three individuals who wished to talk about their undesirable silence and the need to speak up more for their learning benefit.

The voices of these students, who are quiet learners but who dream about achieving high verbal proficiency in English through practice, were captured through in-depth interviews. In the discussion, they will be called "pro-talk" silent learners. We felt this label was apt because although these students exhibit quiet behaviour during classroom learning, they expressed the need to break away from such silence. The data generated from individual interviews with these participants point to a set of ideal conditions for verbal participation to take place. Moreover, these conditions suggest the importance of establishing classroom practices that make it easier for silent learners who desire to move out of silence and toward active verbal participation. While some learners consider silence an essential element in verbal exchanges (Bao, 2014), these learners do not.

2. What pro-verbalisation means

Pro-verbalisation pedagogy is not an established term in the discourse. The authors coined it to denote a specific concept that remains under-explored in language education. Most of the time, pedagogy across all education disciplines promotes teaching approaches that foster verbal interaction (Glew, 1998; Tatar, 2005). Recent education research, however, discovers that effective learning does not always embrace speech but, in many cases, takes place during student silence (Bao, 2014; Bellino, 2016; Caranfa, 2004). It is learned that advanced language proficiency can be achieved through either active verbalisation or active mental processes. Some silent learners (those who rarely participate in class discussions) are content with their quiet behaviour and do not wish to change it. Others, in the meantime, hope to move away from silence and speak out if classroom conditions (which include pedagogical, cultural, and social dimensions) allow them to do so. Unfortunately, many teachers do not know how to make these conditions happen, since methods to assist the speaking of individuals are not universal. Depending on personality and learning style, every student would prefer specific ways of being helped to participate. As Shachter (2023) recommends, based on empirical research, it is helpful to develop a social network and support system to respond to student learning needs. Such an opportunity allows one to explore potentials one might not have known before (Walejko & Stern, 2022).

This case study focuses on the voices of silent learners who wish for a pedagogy to minimise their silence. We shall refer to this group as pro-verbalisation learners or pro-talk; their silence will be seen as reticence. While silence is a neutral concept, reticence means undesirable silence. The reason for selecting this group for research (through the help of a survey that will be presented later) is because their perspectives are currently under-researched. Many studies designed to help students speak often rely on a teacher or researcher perspective, that is, what teachers and scholars perceive as helpful for student learning, such as research by Alerby and Brown (2021), Liu and Martino (2022), Webster (2022), Zebdi and Monsillion (2023) that observes quiet children from scholarly angles, by Lees (2022) that examines silence in a therapist stance, by Huynh and Adams (2022) that investigate adult learners from a teacher perspective, among many others. This article, however, chooses to do the opposite by asking students to say what pedagogy they need to move them to a more verbal learning mode.

3. Discourse on scholarly perceptions of reticence

Many language teachers love seeing their students actively participate in classroom discussions because such collaboration can illuminate comprehension, motivation, classroom dynamics, mood, etc. A teacher's expectation of "active participation" can be established when a language teacher throws the class into the "deep end" (i.e., simply asking questions and unconditionally waiting to hear student responses without scaffolding). As research shows, students can be guided in a scaffolding process by teachers connecting silence and speech with task types (Bao, 2020; Bao & Ye, 2020). When hit with a wall of silence, teachers may become confused, annoyed, or even embarrassed (Harumi, 2011). At the very least, an outside observer may perceive increased classroom tension (King, 2013). To compound this tension within silence, teachers are left "exposed," so to speak, because they cannot possibly understand what is happening in every student's mind (Maher, King, 2020). Consequently, it is difficult to employ "pro-talk" strategies with a broad brush (i.e., catering to both individuals and the class as a whole). In summary, tensions occurring within silent incidents may stem from *what teachers want* rather than from the need to comprehend *what students w*ish.

This disconnect between students and teachers can be exacerbated when expectations are contrary. For instance, at the beginning of a lesson (or learning point), a Western-trained educator may expect that teacher prompts should be followed by quick student responses (Panova, Lyster, 2002; Wang, Loewen, 2016). These prompts and, to a lesser extent, the reactions (whether correct or not) are often used to help a teacher gauge understanding or skill level. Moreover, prompts are frequently utilized to help students contextualize learning points (e.g., If you had $1,000,000, what would you buy?). This contrasts the Japanese learner perspective, for example, whose priority is to give the 'correct' response – regardless of the time needed to produce the result (Saito, Ebsworth, 2004). Recognising such subjectivity in teacher positioning, many scholars have investigated silence from a learner perspective, and have found that learner resistance to speech falls into four significant categories, namely linguistic, cultural, sociopsychological, and academic challenges.

Research that reveals learners' undesirable silence due to weak linguistic proficiency in the target language includes projects focusing on Korean students in the U.S. (Lee, 2009; Choi, 2015; Kim, 2016; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994), international students in Canada (MacIntyre, Noels, Clément, 1997), and Chinese students in Canada (Karas, Faez, 2020). These studies recognise that students withdraw from openly expressing themselves simply

because they cannot speak the target language. Students are aware that their English is flawed, broken, and slow. Their emotion is filled with worry about error-making and fear of being unfavorably judged.

Research that identifies learner silence as part of cultural norms has been conducted on: Chinese students in the U.S. (Liu, 2002), Asian international students in Australia (Tani, 2005), Korean students in the U.S. (Lee, 2009; Choi, 2015), Japanese students in Japan and Australia (Nakane, 2006), Chinese students in the in the U.S. (Reid, Trofimovich, 2018), students in China (Wang, 2011), students in Japan (King, 2011), students in Indonesia (Santosa, Mardiana, 2018), and students in Vietnam (Nguyen A., 2002; Nguyen H., 2002; Yates, Trang, 2012). These studies conclude that students who move from one society to another would tend to bring their previously established behaviour with them. Those who used to be quiet in the classroom in their home country might not effortlessly become articulate in a new educational context regardless of the new expectation for verbal activeness.

Research that highlights learner silence as a response to socio-psychological factors comes from studies in classrooms in the U.S. (Howard, James, Taylor, 2002), on Korean students in the U.S. (Kim, 2013), on Chinese students in the U.K. (Gallagher, 2013), in classrooms in Poland (Mystkowska-Wiertelak, Pawlak, 2014), in Canadian classrooms (MacIntyre, Gardner, 1994; Peirce, 1995), in Turkish classrooms (Turnbull, 2019); on Spanish learners of ESL in the U.S. (Steinberg, Horwitz, 1986; Auster, MacRone, 1994), and various American classroom contexts (Coombs, Park, Fecho, 2014). These studies explain that student silence can be the consequence of an unbalanced power relationship (Bosacki and Talwar, 2023; Turnbull, 2021), public-speaking apprehension (Karas and Uchihara, 2021; Shachter & Haswel, 2022), the feeling of isolation (Musaio, 2022), the inability of authentic self-expression (Umino, 2023), and unfamiliarity with socialisation rules in a new environment (Bao & Thanh-My, 2020) as well a lack of teacher-student bonding and community cohesiveness (Maher, 2021; Petrova, 2021).

Research that emphasises silence as a matter of struggle in coping with academic pressure is found in projects in Indonesian classrooms (Fadilah, 2018), in Pakistani classrooms (Syed, Kuzborska, 2020), and in Japanese classrooms (Yashima, MacIntyre, Ikeda, 2018), among others. These projects connect student quietness in the classroom with the overwhelming requirements of new academic skills, foreign-language medium of instruction, new participation rules, and the pressure of peer competition during classroom discussions.

Research that recognises learner silence as resistance to uninspiring lesson content comes from a study focusing on native English speakers enrolled in an American university-intensive graduate business school

communication class (Dallimore, Hertenstein, Platt, 2004). Other research that constructs more than one view on reticence can be found in studies that look at a mismatch in teacher and student expectations (Bao, 2002; Harumi, 2010). Results show that different students might exhibit conflicting views on what drives them to remain quiet in the classroom.

These studies highlight the specific challenges of learner reticence in the learning environment. Nevertheless, while the discourse covers a range of dimensions that illuminate various causes and the nature of students' resistance to verbal participation, the role of teacher practice in perpetuating such reticence seldom receives a strong focus. Instead, most pedagogical recommendations tend to come briefly at the end of every discussion, often as additional thoughts rather than as the main argument. In response to the gap, this article will counterweigh such inattentiveness to teacher roles. Informed by interview data, we have discovered that learner reticence in the case study originates from lack of everyday support in classroom settings. Participant voices indicate that teacher pedagogy would have the power to create changes through a clear understanding of the assistance and concrete teaching strategies students most needed .

4. Rationale for focusing on Japanese language learners (LLs)

While it is true that Japanese L.L.s are sometimes grouped with other Confucian-heritage learners in studies that investigate learner communicative behavior in the university classroom (Woodrow, 2006), research focusing specifically on Japanese university L.L. silence has increased in recent years (Humphries et al., 2020; Maher, King, 2020; Maher, 2021). In our view, the increased attention on Japanese silent behavior in the classroom (as opposed to large-scale studies that include a range of Confucian-heritage learners) indicates that Japanese university L.L. student silence may be increasing.

Falling proficiency levels (or perhaps motivations to become proficient in English) in Japan may explain why this is the case. For example, while other countries in Asia have steadily increased their English proficiency (Singapore is currently ranked 4th in the world), Japan's English proficiency rating has dropped considerably (14th in 2011 to 78th in 2021) (E.F. English Proficiency Index, 2021). To be clear, the goal of this study is not to investigate the correlation between English proficiency and Japanese L.L. student silence. It explores how Japan seems to be moving in a different linguistic direction (in relation to English globalism) compared to neighboring countries like The Philippines, Taiwan, Korea, and China. We agree with other researchers

that student silence in Japan continues to be a prevalent influence in university language classrooms.

5. Methodology

5.1. Research location

We collected data at a private university in Kyushu, Japan, to further investigate student silence in Japanese university language classrooms. At this university, all 1st and 2nd year students (regardless of major) are required to earn 8 credits of compulsory English (4 credits Reading & Writing, 4 credits Listening & Speaking). If 8 credits are not earned during the two-year window, students can take remedial English classes each term to satisfy the requirement. Language courses are primarily delivered within a department named the "Language Education and Research Center" (LERC). Because of (a) the large number of students taking compulsory English and (b) the university's emphasis on research aimed to strengthen the language curriculum, students are accustomed to being asked to volunteer in research that has investigated a broad spectrum of issues (e.g., motivation, interest, textbook design, pedagogical strategies, learner anxiety). Perhaps the university is best known for researching motivation (Fryer et al., 2016) and interest (Fryer, 2015) because many students dislike the compulsory requirement and consequently display low motivation and disinterest in English.

5.2. Survey Participants

In the winter term of 2021 we surveyed 116 Japanese L.L.s (M=73, F=43) who were recruited from 4 classes (two 1st-year and two 2nd-year) at the LERC. When entering the university, all students take a university-specific English proficiency test, and based on these results, students are divided into 3 levels. The students in this data collection were classified at the top level. Level 3 students are considered at the A2 level according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). A2 is the second lowest of the CEFR's six proficiency levels. At the A2 level, students have sufficient skills for tourism and basic conversations but are not yet ready for academic study or the use of English media. The 4 classes represented various majors, including Art, Science, Engineering, Architecture, Economics, International studies, and so on. Students were given the survey during the first class of the winter term. Because of COVID-19, previous English courses had

been delivered via Zoom. At the time of the survey, students had not received face-to-face instruction at a university level.

5.3. Overview of survey

To address the complexity of silence in Japanese university classrooms, our survey investigated (a) individual learning styles, (b) classroom behaviours, and (c) student-perspectives, as they pertain to "ideal" conditions for language development. All questions were crafted within our investigative scope, which pertained to the causes, frequency, and impact of silent incidences in Japanese university English-language classrooms. In the survey (data will be presented later in the paper), there were twelve 10-point Likert questions, two short-answer questions, and 2 open questions, which elicited long-form answers. The survey's primary purpose was to identify a pool of potential interviewees. Focusing on ideal behaviour for English language development in English classrooms, our goal was to classify students who identified as 'pro-silent,' 'both,' or 'pro-talk.' The survey results informed our selection criteria and helped pinpoint ideal candidates for our qualitative data (in-depth interviews). Students were first categorized by their Likert scores, and then a pool of 18 students was chosen, based on their short and long-term answers. From there, we narrowed our search to 9 students (3 from each category) to equally represent sex and age.

5.4. Interview data collection

We organized 27 questions linearly within a framework of 5 categories: (1) Peer work (e.g., What kind of people do you work well with?), (2) Self-contradiction (e.g., You say that you should speak to achieve proficiency, so why do you remain silent?), (3) Ideal learning conditions (e.g., What are the best opportunities to speak/ stay silent?), (4) Tension in the learning process (e.g., Are there factors which are impeding you?), (5) Changes over time (Have you always thought/acted this way?).

Using the 5 categories as a base, the 27 questions were written in English and then translated into Japanese by our R.A., a professional Japanese interpreter/ translator. The R.A. was instructed to go through the questions in order and to say the number of each question before asking the participant. This helped when coding and grouping the answers from the Zoom recording. The R.A. was also instructed to automatically ask follow-up questions (e.g., Why? Could you give an example?) to elicit detailed responses. If

a participant expanded on an answer that covered subsequent questions, the R.A. was directed to skip questions. During the 3 interviews, all 27 questions were unnecessary to cover the 5 categories (i.e., participants were detailed in their responses, allowing us to skip questions).

Participants were offered blocks of available time on Zoom and voluntarily signed up for the most convenient times in their schedules. When entering the Zoom room, the participants were again informed by the R.A. (in Japanese) that the interview was voluntary and that responses may be included in a future academic publication. The interview commenced with Question 1, and each interview lasted about 22 minutes. The students seemed to be open to questioning and gave detailed responses. 'Mari' seemed especially interested in the topic (as was noted by the R.A.). After the participants left the Zoom room, the Zoom meeting was closed to export the audio and video files. Occasionally, some internet connection issues caused minor delays, but generally speaking, the technical aspect of the recording over Zoom was smooth.

After exporting the audio files, the Mp4 was uploaded to the transcription service "Sonix." The R.A. reviewed the transcriptions (while listening to the recordings) and made corrections (in Japanese) as required. The R.A. estimated that Sonix produced a 60% accurate transcription, so considerable time was dedicated to ensuring that the Japanese transcripts were accurate. Once the transcriptions were ready, we used the translation application Deepl to translate Japanese into English. Once again, the R.A. reviewed the translations and deemed that the accuracy was closer to 85–90%. As such, there was less time needed to adjust translations.

5.5. Qualitative Analysis

Informed by the quantitative results of our survey, this project followed the protocols of a critical qualitative case study, whose methodological choice serves in-depth analysis (Flyvbjerg, 2006) and which is informed by a constructivist, interpretive perspective to bring out the potential complexity of the issue in question (Bryman, 2012). Data generation, analysis, and interpretation take on critical features of a post-qualitative research tradition (St. Pierre, 2013), (Thomas & Bellingham, 2020), in which theorisation is developed with the help of metacognitive thinking (Flavell, 1979), reflexivity and self-knowledge (Ellis, 2009; Saldaña, 2018). At the same time, the study is inspired by Husserl's (1931/2013) oeuvre on phenomenology in the need for bracketing, which means the researcher must bracket themselves from their participants to avoid potential bias-and to stay as neutral as possible.

The method for data handling is abductive thematic analysis (Braun, Clarke, 2006) combined with creative theorising (Swedberg, 2014). Abductive thematic analysis is a process in which the research goes back and forth between data and relevant theory to achieve the most practical theorisation possible (Braun, Clarke, 2006). The six phases of conducting thematic analysis include familiarising oneself with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining themes, and producing findings; we made a system comprising seven steps that include overviewing data for an overall impression, identifying themes, coding themes, elaborating themes, numbering themes, selecting illuminating quotes, and connecting themes or joining the dots. (Braun, Clarke, 2006). Below is what we performed in each stage.

Overviewing data for an overall impression—We read data the first time to get an overall impression of the tone of what is said. The purpose is to see the participants' positions regarding what areas they support and what areas they resist.

Identifying themes – We reread data to find critical issues or themes. These issues are identified first of all through words and concepts that are mentioned repeatedly (such as 'joyful', 'mood', 'tense', 'good,' 'perfect,' etc. in the data of this report); secondly through synonymous words (such as 'don't like,' 'nervous,' 'uncomfortable,' 'not interesting,' 'not good' in this data); thirdly through ideas that seem to deeply bother or interest the participant (such as their recurring resistance to the behaviour of the class, their constant desire to practice speaking, their desperation towards the way peers treat their participations. These moments occur multiple times throughout the whole interview).

Coding themes – We give names to every issue. This will require either imagination or knowledge of the relevant discourse. For example, when the participant describes how they struggle to phrase English sentences in their head and how they suffer from the pressure of having to come up with good ideas simultaneously, I capture that phenomenon as 'tension between cognitive and linguistic loads.'

Elaborating themes – We explain and interpret the nature of every issue. Based on various things the participants say (they usually do not say something just one time but tend to go over it with consideration of word choice and idea formulation), I gather different clues to understand what they mean. For example, when Mari describes that she is 'not good at English' but tries to 'paraphrase a lot' in her head, working hard to decide and finalise 'what' she wants to 'say,' delaying as she cannot say 'anything right away,' and feeling that her 'presentation has to be perfect,' I put all these ideas together and narrate her process of what is involved in her attempt to

reach perfection in her verbal performance. That process is constituted by a cognitive, linguistic, and social nature. I describe it as such because I am sure I can collect specific words to string all these elements together.

Numbering themes –Once I have identified, understood, and named an issue, I give it a number and put a page number next to it. The issue number will help me decide which dot point will go into the report, and the page number allows me to come back and read further if I have any doubts about the meaning.

Selecting illuminating quotes—We decided what to quote in our study report. Immediately after performing step 5 above, we underline key expressions and sentences that seem to help demonstrate the lively voice and attitude of the participants. We make sure that for every issue, we have at least one if not more than one, direct quote from the raw data. We also edited the participants' words slightly when the grammar seemed inaccurate.

Connecting the dots – We looked for and established associations among themes. This is made possible by rereading all the points to determine the links which may fall into these three types. One, we identify themes that can be collapsed together logically. Two, we decided which themes could be grouped under the same categories. We used numbers, signals, or arrows to indicate such systematic choices. We also created a mind map to write the data analysis report.

Our data interpretation also incorporates three steps in theorising (Swedberg, 2016). The theory includes observation, conceptualisation, and explanation. Theorizing often comes before theory, and emphasizes the significance of prior theoretical understandings of a particular field, so that the researcher can avoid conducting the research from nothing and falling into the trap of reinventing the wheel (Swedberg, 2016). This way of working is known as a constructivist, interpretive paradigm that stresses the inter-dependence and dynamics of social phenomena (Bryman, 2012), whereby we work simultaneously deductively and inductively by oscillating between "theory in the clouds" and "data on the ground" (Lingard, 2015: 187–188).

Quantitative analysis

Table 1 below presents the findings (n=116) from 12 Likert questions. Investigating within the scope of "pro-talk" versus "pro-silence" in an English language classroom in Japan, these questions were designed to ascertain learning style, learning preferences, insights on processing information, interactional preferences, creative thinking, generating ideas (quality and quantity), and so on. Mean, standard deviation (S.D.), and internal consistency were calculated using SPSS. Regarding internal consistency, Cronbach's alpha was .74—a score considered within the acceptable range of .70 –

.90 (Tavakol & Dennick, 2011). Notwithstanding question 2 (SD 2.5), all items could be rounded down to an SD of 2.0. Likert questions were prefaced with "on a scale of 1 to 10" with specific definitions of 1 and 10 according to each item. The question details and mean scores are presented below.

6. Findings

Quantitative

Table 1. Survey findings

1. What kind of language learner are you? Don't like speaking (1). Like Speaking (10).	**Mean score** 4.3
2. What is the ideal way to learn English? When you're listening, thinking in silence (1). When talking in English with others (10).	5.5
3. Is it easier to process information when you are studying English? When silent (1). When talking (10).	4.8
4. The only way to learn to speak English well: Take time to think in silence (1). Talking to/with another person (10).	7.9
5. The ability to generate quality ideas in English: When I'm silent (1). Talking to/with another person (10).	6.4
6. Creative thinking is enriched in English through: Quietly listening to others (1). Talking to/with another person (10).	6.9
7. What kind of person do you want to interact/communicate with in English class? Quiet person (1). Talkative person (10).	7.2
8. If the other person is silent during English class: It is important not to ask direct questions but to guess the reason for their silence (1). To understand why they are silent, it is important to ask questions (10).	6.7
9. In my experience, the most painful and uncomfortable part of an English class is... When I'm silent (1). When I'm speaking (10).	6.3
10. I can collaborate well in English class with: Silent people (1). Talkative people (10).	7.5

Table 1 – cont.

11. The only way to get more ideas in English: Silently thinking (1). Talking with others (10).	7.4
12. The quality of your thinking when you think in English depends on: The quality of silence (0). The quality of conversations with others (10).	6.4

Findings from our survey reveal that students view a 'pro-talk' mindset as conducive to positive language learning outcomes. However, results from item 9 (In my experience, the most painful and uncomfortable part of an English class) suggest that although speaking in English class is ideal, students are cognizant of uncomfortable incidences that may occur more during classroom interactions. In the survey, we also asked students directly whether they were verbal or reflective learners. Table two displays the results of this question:

Table 2. Verbal or reflective learner (n=116)

Verbal	66–56.8%
Reflective	33–28.4%
No Answer	11–9.4 %
Both	6–5.1%

While the majority of students in our survey classify themselves as 'pro-talk,' there is data to suggest (e.g., Likert questions 1 & 9) that many students may feel uncomfortable speaking. This tension between one's *ideal language-learning self* and the reality of what a learner may negatively experience in class requires more examination. As such, we identified 9 students for in-depth interviews (3 pro-talk, 3 both, 3 pro-silence). This paper will explore the viewpoints of the 3 pro-talk interviewees. Before sharing the findings of the interviews, we will briefly provide a general overview of the 3 pro-talk interviewees.

Rationale for interest in the 'pro-talk' group

Of the twelve 10-point Likert questions, the question with the highest or lowest average score (7.9) was question four: The only way to learn English well: (1) take time to think in silence – (10) talk to another person. From the mean score it seems that the class seems to agree that active communication will facilitate language development, and the class views a "pro-talk" attitude as ideal. However, when asked what kind of language learner they

are currently (from a scale of (1) don't like speaking – (10) like speaking), the class average was 4.4. Results from the survey indicate that Japanese students do not view silence as a facilitator of language development. We found this interesting because (as we argued in the background section of this paper) silence in Japanese university language classrooms seems to be increasing. Using this dichotomy as a springboard, we endeavored to learn more about learners who identified as "pro-talk." We were interested in "pro-talk" learner viewpoints regarding "ideal" classroom conditions for active communication.

Participant profiles

After selecting 6 potential candidates for the 'pro-talk' group, we selected 3 students, using the pseudonyms of 'Mari', 'Kenta', and 'Hiro'. As mentioned, these students were first identified as "pro-talk" via Likert scores and then selected because of more extended responses in the qualitative portion of the survey. After reading their thoughtful responses, we thought they would make ideal candidates for in-depth interviews. Mari is a 2nd-year female student in a mixed-major class (her specific major is unknown). Kenta is a 1st-year student majoring in Art. Hiro is a 1st-year male student in a mixed-major class. All three students were evaluated as having similar levels in English (the highest classification for compulsory English). Personality and classroom behaviour was relatively unknown during the interview because the spring term classes had been held on Zoom. Socioeconomic status is also unknown. However, private universities in Japan are significantly more expensive than public universities. The three students were contacted by the second author and asked to participate in an approximate 25-minute recorded interview (via Zoom) with a Japanese research assistant (RA). Students were informed that the audio and video would be recorded. They were also informed that the second author would be present in the Zoom room. Participants understood that the interview (conducted in Japanese) was utterly voluntary, would have no bearing on their grade, and that they could withdraw from the interview at any time (and/or request that data be deleted).

Qualitative

As highlighted, all 3 interviews lasted approximately 22 minutes each. No interview had to be cut short (i.e., when the last question on our list was completed, we ended the interview). The transcriptions for the male participants (Hiro and Kenta) were both 6 pages, while the transcription for the female participant (Mari) was 7 pages. At first, Hiro seemed more reserved in his answers, while Kenta and Mari appeared open and willing to speak openly from the start. Mari was perhaps the most energetic interviewee –

often elaborating on answers without cues from the R.A. In sum, the 3 interviews produced a corpus of 6,958 words. Table 3 shows favourable and unfavourable conditions for speaking. These key themes were drawn from each interview.

Table 3. Favourable and Unfavourable Conditions for Speaking according to interviewees

Name	Favourable	Unfavourable
Kenta	• Connection (through shared understanding) • Positive classroom mood/ the essential role of the teacher • English speaking *as practice* (rather than a formal assessment or learning activity)	• Unintended discouraging attitudes from listeners (e.g., silent learners with delayed responses)
Mari	• Verbal harmony • Positive classroom mood • The helpful role of acquaintances • The need for an open discussion to overcome pressure • The collaboration of a verbal learning partner	• Tension between cognitive and linguistic processing loads • Fear of being misunderstood or poorly evaluated • Unintended discouraging attitudes from listeners • Uncertain relationship with the English language
Hiro	• Teacher's role in facilitating/continuing motivation • Teacher's role in facilitating more opportunities to learn/ more interactions with foreigners/ increased exposure to foreign cultures	• issues with confidence • discouraging attitudes from listeners • teacher who is not able to guide understanding

Table 3 shows that our three pro-talk participants outlined favourable and unfavourable conditions for speaking in class (i.e., practicing verbal communication). These conditions can be broadly labeled within the categories of 'social sphere,' 'personal dynamics,' and 'interpersonal dynamics.' All three shared similar views regarding the detrimental effects of unintended/ discouraging attitudes from speaking partners. While Kenta and Mari highlighted the role of the teacher, student-student classroom dynamics were given more attention. In contrast, Hiro emphasized that the teacher's role in the classroom is the main affective factor.

Kenta expressed his need to feel connected to his speaking partner. For this to occur, (a) the teacher needs to establish ideal conditions for speaking, and (b) speaking partners must actively engage in speaking sessions. Tangentially, both Kenta and Mari agree that speaking partners need to be cognizant of their role and how their behaviour has the power to positively or negatively shift classroom dynamics. Mari spent more

time highlighting her insecurities in English class—these included linguistic and social elements. Mari also spoke of how the role of the teacher and her classmates can influence classroom dynamics and her own personal confidence levels. Of the three, perhaps Mari established the most dynamic factors with the most corresponding variables. Hiro spoke at length regarding how the teacher can influence motivation and his issues with confidence. In summary, the three participants highlighted numerous intersecting factors and variables that affect silent students in language classrooms (e.g., teacher-student, student-student, enthusiasm, motivation, and linguistic ability).

7. Emerging Themes

Tension arising from self-perception and peer dynamics

Data reveals two kinds of tension experienced by participants and suffered by others. The first kind occurs within every student (intrapersonal pressure), and the second kind is between the student and the social environment of the classroom (interpersonal pressure). Intrapersonal pressure happens due to the discrepancy between students' cognitive and linguistic processing loads; the ability to think and share that thought with the class is not at the same level, but the former tends to be higher than the latter. To come up with a good idea for sharing is already a challenge; to put that idea in a foreign language is even more demanding. The transfer from thoughts to articulation is a burden for Japanese learners with minimal exposure to English use in the real world. Mari clearly articulates this challenge:

> 'If [the language of classroom communication] were Japanese, I could somehow get through, but in English, I can't think of something to say right away. This is not to mention that when I think of an idea in English, I might easily forget it or struggle to articulate it'.

Such tension within the self, which causes students to remain quiet, becomes even more severe when students get into the habit of comparing their English proficiency with their aspired competence and with the skills of native speakers. As Hiro explains:

> 'I think I should talk in class more, but I don't think I have enough confidence in my communication skills yet, and when I see foreign people communicating so actively, I feel embarrassed as I feel I'm not good enough. When this impression takes over, I lose my enjoyment in speaking English.'

This negative self-evaluation constantly reduces confidence in communication. Hiro believes that for his confidence to increase, he would need more exposure to and more experience in international communication, rather than relying on unauthentic interaction with Japanese partners. Since Japanese students share the same mother tongue, conversing in English often feels unnatural, and many prefer communicating with native English speakers. Unfortunately, such opportunities do not come quickly, and Hiro's motivation for verbal practice has decreased.

Besides unfavourable self-perception, participants such as Hiro and Mari also fear being misunderstood or poorly evaluated by others. Mari, for example, notices that her classmates tend to underestimate her competence as they often laugh at her every little attempt to speak English. Mari feels that if she could participate frequently, her actual competence would be revealed, she would make progress, and peer negative judgement would be less likely. Unfortunately, the unfavourable classroom conditions constantly intimidate her speaking efforts. Mari resents being in a very quiet class and yearns to communicate verbally: 'I don't want to stay in a corner forever and let others make assumptions about me. I wanted to speak.'

Interpersonal pressure also occurs when participants are paired with an introverted partner who is not keen on sharing ideas. When faced with a quiet classmate, Kenta feels clumsy in communication, worried about being misunderstood and about causing embarrassment. For these reasons, he prefers being paired with a more verbal partner than himself.

> 'Why do I prefer someone talkative? I think it's because if you can converse, things can move on smoothly. When I speak, and the person doesn't respond, I am unsure how to behave. I'm afraid I will make a mistake or cause embarrassment.'

Hiro, in the meanwhile, adopts a more flexible attitude toward both articulate and silent peers. He believes that both options can bring learning benefits. Speaking of the highly verbal partnership, he comments: 'I think [that] makes the conversation go smoother, and it's easier to express my opinion.' Reflecting on his experience with silent partners, Hiro explains: 'If you don't actively talk [to silent peers], they won't open up to you. I think both [types of partners] are good because you need to find ways to know the person better.' Hiro sees a silent partner as an opportunity to speak more actively, an attribute he identified as necessary for target language improvement. With a talkative partner, he associates talkativeness with more opportunities for listening practice.

Tension in communication is highly complex, as it is caused by a range of factors, including learners' unfavourable self-perception of L2 proficiency, social constraints when peers do not show respect towards the participation of others, the gap between wishing to express complex ideas and having rudimentary speaking skills, the time taken to transfer thoughts to words, individual preferences for working with articulate partners versus quiet partners, and the fear of misunderstanding and embarrassment. While some of these factors come from the social environment of the classroom, others are related to students' specific experiences and observations. The conflict between the perception of each student and their classmates' behaviour is central in all these cases.

Research in peer dynamics concerning silence and talk has primarily focused on how the classroom climate damages learners' self-esteem, which discourages communication. Examples of such studies are adverse peer reaction (Kurihara, 2006), the challenge of social forces over learner reticence (Kim, 2004), intimidation from teacher authoritativeness (Hwang, Seo, Kim, 2010), intimidation from more eloquent peers (Cheng, 2000; Jackson, 2003, 2004; Liu, 2002; Campbell, Li, 2008), and poor learning efficiency (Hanh, 2020). The finding in this section offers additional nuances to the existing research literature by identifying learners' complex perceptions of the self. While peer actions heavily influence silence, it is also triggered by a learner comparing their abilities with others. This also happens when students compare their current competence with their goal competence, their cognitive skills with their speaking skills, and when they consider the difference in the benefits of working with silent compared with talkative partners. All of these were attributes contributing to their reticence to speak in class.

The need to reform classroom rules

All three participants wanted to see classroom rules changed to move everyone's learning style towards a more verbally active mode. They suggested:

- Explicitly requiring verbal involvement from everyone
- Developing explicit norms for participation
- Systematically teaching verbal participation strategies to students, guiding them through intensive rehearsal and positive experience.
- Obtaining consensus from all class members to a class culture where ideas are shared openly without quality judgment

To Mari, the ideal classroom behaviour would involve everyone being trained in the same self-expressive approach. She elaborates:

> 'An ideal learning environment? There is no disparity between people. It's not interesting when some speak a lot, and others don't. Instead, everyone should participate at the same level.'

Similarly, Kenta argues that verbal harmony is more important than silent harmony. This means that the ideal classroom behaviour needs to be mutually supportive of speech. In his view, effective communication involves more recurrent responses than mere instigation of a conversational topic. He believes that silent partners sometimes might cause communication to be filled with misunderstanding and embarrassment, as he reasons:

> 'If they don't answer me, I feel like I made a mistake, and then I feel embarrassed. That's why I try not to stay silent and respond actively – if I stay silent, my speaking partner will think I don't understand them.'

Mari adds that if the above ideal cannot be achieved as a whole class resolution, change can occur gradually in small groups. She also yearns for a mutually respectful classroom climate where everyone is genuinely interested in the voice of others, rather than mocking each other's contribution through irritating giggles. After all, the impact of a supportive mood on speaking does not depend on participation alone. Instead, it is contingent upon how one feels about the support from the whole class. Mari explains:

> 'I'm like a chameleon and'll match the common mood. If it is cheerful like a parrot, I will be a parrot. If it's sullen, I'll be sullen too, and I'll try to erase my presence as much as possible.'

One important reason for having agreeable classroom rules is to strengthen a positive social partnership. Along this line, Kenta strongly desires social rapport with peers beyond mere learning affiliation. Mari also emphasizes the helpful role of acquaintances in facilitating an open spirit of verbal communication. They believe that when one student is paired with another, the nature or history of their relationship dictates the ease of the conversation; that is, familiarity and mutual understanding will make the discussion comfortable. Not knowing a person's behaviour, personality, or interests tends to cause discomfort or reluctance. Mari reflects:

> 'Knowing what kind of person you're talking to is a big thing. When I was in high school, I knew what kind of person each classmate was and could tune myself to their way. In university, however, people are not close anymore, making me nervous, especially when I'm paired up with someone I don't know.

Mari feels uncomfortable with silence and wants an articulate learning partner. If a partner has a silent nature, there is the pressure of having to think more intensively either to make up for the lost time, or to find ways

to facilitate a conversation. She also expresses distress towards 'unintended discouraging attitudes' (in Mari's words) from listeners every time she tries to speak. In her view, the listener's attitude exerts a powerful influence over the openness of a speaker. Listeners need to be well-behaved, which means being attentive, remaining silent, and avoiding making disruptive sounds to show respect and encouragement. In Japanese culture, listening is as important as speaking. Not knowing how to listen would be as destructive as not knowing how to communicate. Any visibly critical attitudes exhibited by a listener could be discouraging to the speaker, as Mari recalls:

> '[My experiences with speech in junior high school and high school were not particularly positive]. When I gave my speech, other students just went 'oohs' and 'aahs.' [I found this behaviour very mocking, and I felt extremely uncomfortable]. [Despite this], I must continue to think about what to say. I had the feeling that I was going to keep my speech in my head forever. It would have been easier for me to speak if others were listening quietly'.

Hiro, by the same token, points out scenarios in which some peers' uncooperative behaviour impedes on communication:

> 'For example, if you're doing group work with two people, and you reject the other person's opinion outright, or if the other person doesn't listen to your opinion, or if you have a judgmental attitude.'

This finding essentially confirms what has been commonly advocated in the discourse. Arguably, every society has its own rules for how to communicate. Agreeable rules lay the foundation for communication, understanding, and mutual acceptance. Scholars who are influenced by the works of Vygotsky have unanimously agreed that language, thought, and behaviour cannot be disassociated from the values of their surroundings, but are subject to the influence of social context (Davydov, 1995; Margolis, 1996a, 1996b; Leontiev, 1981; Halliday, 1985). Furthermore, disempowerment occurs when the expected classroom interaction does not conform to learner styles, manners, and values, but is imposed on the learner through teacher authority (Hwang, Seo, Kim, 2010). As widely stated in the discourse, participation rules need to be as explicit as possible (Moeller & Ishii-Jordan, 1996).

Complying with the rules, which is part of conventional wisdom, is the key to success in verbal and non-verbal communication (Burgoon, 1983). The only new nuance in this finding is the extension from social support to strategic support. The students in the current study are concerned about being

explicitly taught verbal participation strategies, that is, intellectually and metacognitively guided, rather than only being told how to behave socially.

Making communication authentic rather than pedagogical

The data points to the need for exposure to authentic communication with international friends. Hiro desires exposure to global cultures, including content and behavioural adaptation. Although he is willing to modify his conventional learning style, such readiness exists only in his thoughts. In reality, he would wait for the teacher to assist him in making that connection. Hiro believes it is the teacher's responsibility to remind students *why* they are studying English and *how* to use these skills abroad or when interacting with foreigners in Japan. He argues that if a teacher does not emphasise such motivation and trigger students' practical needs, unhealthy silence will persist in the classroom. Hiro explains:

> 'What do I think teachers should do for their students? I think I'd like to know more about the appeal of English or the benefits of being able to do these things if you can speak English.'

Hiro has the impression that foreigners often interact more actively than Japanese; thus, keeping to Japanese communication conventions would not help. He sees the teacher's role as creating learning opportunities to prepare students for international interaction and exposure to other cultures. He recalls:

> 'When I see foreign people, I imagine they are more active in communication. I once worked with a Nepalese person as a part-time job, and he was very active in talking to me.'

Moreover, Hiro thinks that teachers should not 'force' students to practice but rather inspire students and provide them with opportunities for language practice. Such opportunities would include, for example, inviting international guests to the class, setting up language exchange sessions through Skype, and organising excursion tours outside of the classroom for authentic interaction with non-Japanese. He elaborates:

> 'Do I think it's good for me and the class to feel the pressure to speak English? No, I don't think so. I think there is a big difference between being forced to do something and doing it voluntarily... I think the ideal environment is to communicate with people from abroad and overseas.'

Along the line of learning inspiration, there is the need to bring enjoyment into language practice. All the participants believe that the nature of English-speaking practise needs to be rethought. Kenta stated that he became more serious about studying English when preparing for college entrance exams. However, he sees classroom speaking activities as enjoyable practice, rather than opportunities to acquire new knowledge. In this way, speaking practice is a barometer for what has been learned so far. All other studies (such as learning writing and vocabulary) prepare one for the litmus test of the speaking experience. As he argues:

> 'Why was English speaking practice fun? I think it's a sense of accomplishment. I think it's because it's easy to demonstrate the knowledge you've gained. I don't know what to say about writing; it's a direct way to prepare for exams, but the other half is just for fun. I do it because it's fun.'

Among the causes of anxiety influencing Japanese students are their inexperience with Western teaching methods, the teacher's demeanor and attitude, students' shy personalities, and evaluation paradigms associated with an activity, such as learning for exams (Maftoon, Ziafar, 2013). Kenta feels that a great deal of tension will be removed if an activity is not graded.

Very much of the discourse in ELT recommends being aware of communication styles in local cultures (Franks, 2000). While authenticating local behaviour is essential, one should also learn to accept variations that enrich one's life experiences. Since the alternation of talk and silence forms classroom discourse, both should be seen as components of participation (Schultz, 2009). Teachers must broaden their understanding of silence and talk in classroom interaction. If talk is permanently assigned or agreed upon by the teacher, it may not be authentic communication, but only 'allowed talk.' Sometimes, if the teacher finds the act of whispering among peers (which could be learning-related) disruptive to the lesson, this narrow interpretation could create a false assumption about students' learning styles and ability, which could result in inappropriate pedagogical decisions.

Language teachers are often trained to work with talk, such as organising discussions, raising questions and responding to ideas. Since it is uncommon for teacher development programmes to explore the use of silence, it often becomes confusing when many teachers encounter this phenomenon in the everyday educational setting and so silence quickly interferes with pedagogy. For this reason, teachers and learners should develop sensitivities for timely talk, or silent reflection, in response to changing needs and classroom conditions. As a tool for both learning and communication, silence should be cognitively functional and socially authentic, that is, functioning

well in the classroom and making sense in the broader social context of L2 use.

The need for pedagogical modification

Participants request modifications for teachers to consider, in four main areas. Precisely: changing the culture of learning, reducing tension, building social rapport, and increasing teacher support and guidance. Regarding the culture of learning, Mari sees the need for an open meta-cognitive discussion between teachers and students (i.e., discussing how to learn), as initiated and guided by the teacher, for everyone to be aware of new rules of participation and so overcome the pressure of not daring to share ideas openly. According to her, if there is pressure in the classroom climate that seems to obstruct communication, it may be helpful if the class agrees to bring this up and discuss it, with the teacher's guidance.

Kenta believes that to build a positive classroom climate, the role of the teacher is essential. He highlights how important it is for teachers to foster an ideal atmosphere for speaking practice. Most language teachers organise icebreakers at the beginning of a school term. Still, he stresses the importance of an icebreaker at the beginning of *every* speaking activity (especially if the partners do not know each other). In his view, in Japanese culture, students are used to this behavioural pattern, and when it does not occur in language classes, this adds tension. Kenta elaborates:

> 'Is there anything that makes me nervous when I do pair work? Well, I get a little bit nervous when talking to new people or when pairing up with people I've never met before, not just in English, but in a different language.'

He highlights that a sense of social connectedness must start before speaking practice. A lack of such bonding would create tension. He also highlights the role of the teacher in lowering student anxiety:

> 'I think it's important to get used to the first contact because once you start talking, the tension will go away, so it's important to have an ice breaker. So, I think it's important to have an ice breaker, a little conversation. The teacher can suggest something like this. The ideal learning environment is to be able to concentrate, but also to be able to ask questions easily.'

Kenta also said he had positive experiences with native English teachers in junior and senior high school. They created a low-stress atmosphere where students could freely ask questions or discuss topics with the teacher, making English much more fun. In fact, he sometimes encountered his

teacher on the train, and they had casual conversations. He said he was not nervous about these encounters at all.

> 'I had two native speaker teachers in my three years, and one of them was a teacher that I would run into on the train sometimes, because we would be on the morning train together, and I would be able to talk to him casually. In English, we would talk about how difficult tests were.'

Hiro emphasises that he needs increased teacher support throughout class processes:

> 'I need a teacher who teaches me what I don't understand. For example, I often hear that the pronunciation and accent of Japanese people and native speakers are different, so it would be nice if I could learn those things.'

From a practical perspective, it may be helpful for teachers to poll students before term and specifically ask them areas in which they need guidance. This may be useful because it is rare for Japanese students to instigate conversations or pro-actively ask teachers questions during class. Hiro highlights the importance of the teacher being proactive:

> 'I need a teacher who is proactive and communicative. I think that a teacher who is polite and instructive will motivate me more to learn English.'

This implies that Hiro expects a teacher to know how to help his individual learning goals. This is an exciting area of the interview and may be a cause of silence and tension between foreign teachers and Japanese students. Shared understanding is a theme often highlighted in Japanese society. Usually, Japanese people need to read the room and read between the lines to gain understanding. This is mainly to avoid insulting someone and to maintain social harmony. The next section will unpack some of the requests described above in concrete terms. These include ways of reforming classroom rules, enhancing socialisation, bringing enjoyment into language practice, and making communication authentic.

Learner contribution in the classroom decision-making process has been a classic theme in the discourse of language education (Allwright, 1984: 167; Barkhuizen, 1998: 85). There has been a strong awareness among scholars that students and teachers do not view the experience in the same way (Tomlinson & Bao, 2004). In a study of learners and teachers of Greek and French backgrounds, for example, only 20% of the teachers considered this helpful practice compared to 81% of the learners (McDonough,

2002). Similar discrepancies between teacher and learner perceptions of the usefulness of classroom activities have also been reported in numerous studies (Nunan, 1988; Williams, Burden, 1997: 201–202; Barkhuizen, 1998; Spratt, 1999). This divergence between teacher and learner perceptions has often been attributed to culturally influenced determinants of classroom behaviour. Learner voice in pedagogical practices is essential in education research because learner views would remain forever unknown without investigation, and teachers would unknowingly impose their decisions on their students. Arguably this is critical as teacher practice impacts on a learner's sense of identity.

8. Concluding remarks

Although the 'pro-talk' learners in these case studies have clear motivations for verbal participation and, by nature, also seem to be socially-minded, they feel incapable of taking the initiative to boldly change their behaviour and disregard what other classmates think about them. Instead, they need help from the teacher to facilitate an ideal learning environment.

This tension occurs on two levels: personal tension caused by participant personality, perception, and communication ideology, and public tension shaped by the learning culture, with classmates' attitudes, behaviour, and learning styles that do not favour the spoken word. Because of this, the participant suffers from an inability to participate and fear of being misjudged and misunderstood. Being part of high-context society, the Japanese students expect to be able to "read the air' in a classroom, (i.e. understand the situation without the need for words) and yet this commonly accepted cultural practice does not appear to work productively in second-language classroom settings.

Previous language-learning experiences in junior and senior high school must have made an impression on the thinking of these students, so they now know what to ask for and the ideal conditions they need to learn. Although their experiences may have been either positive (such as enjoyable communication with a native speaker in and outside the classroom), or negative (such as the lack of support from the teacher and seemingly mocking responses from classmates), some native English teachers modeled what for the students was authentic and inspiring communication, as many of them recalled these helpful learning moments. Previous experiences with Western cultures and meeting a foreigner played a motivating role in student learning. Thanks to those memories, students are aware of what effective communication looks like, and anything less than that would cause

disappointment. Together these students believe that the teacher holds the power to recreate the classes of those lovely reminiscences and enable a vibrant communicative learning style to continue. In many cases it seems that the students have quite high expectations, and teachers, who may or may not be aware of this, might need to work much harder to satisfy these legitimate needs.

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