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5. Answer the Question: A Research Project

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Level: Intermediate to advanced

Resources: Handouts (see appendices), recording device (smartphone or USB recorder), access to fluent or near-fluent English speakers

Activity length: Two class periods

Problem: Responding to questions with prolonged silence can lead to confusion and miscommunication during cross-cultural communication

Pragmatic focus: Strategies and language for avoiding prolonged silence during conversation

Goals: Interact with fluent or near-fluent English speakers; build research and presentation skills; develop ability to answer questions while avoiding long silences

Teacher: *So, what kind of music do you like?*

Student:

As you probably know from experience, many Japanese students have trouble answering questions during English class. Why is that? According to Harumi (2011), the roots of this phenomenon lie in a complex mixture of linguistic, psychological, and socio-cultural factors. There is, in fact, quite a large culture gap in how silence is interpreted. For example, from a Japanese view point, the silent response from the student above could be seen as a means to save face, avoid difficulty, or request help. On the other hand, from a “western” perspective, the silence may come off as a sign of disinterest, boredom, or laziness. This phenomenon makes it very difficult for teachers to facilitate active learning (Harumi, 2001) and presents a risk of misunderstanding during cross-cultural encounters (King, 2005), both in Japan and while traveling

or studying abroad. As a result, silence in the EFL classroom is widely acknowledged as a serious problem (King, 2013; Humphries, Akamatsu, Tanaka, & Burns, in press). It is therefore essential we help our students promptly respond to questions, whether they know the answer or not.

Raising awareness of the issue is one way to help. For example, we could examine silence from both sides, reflect on varying cultural interpretations, then practice basic expressions that can restore the conversational flow (Vannieu, Talandis Jr., & Richmond, 2012). There are indeed some textbooks and other materials offering strategies such as *asking for clarification*, *elaboration*, and *repetition*. The issue is whether or not students understand “why” they need to use these strategies. What is the point of teaching about *fillers* and *buying time to think* only to see our students greet a difficult question with that dreaded “great wall of silence” (Harumi, 2001, p. 28)? Moreover, on a test, students can certainly fill in blanks and match answers, yet continue to stumble in real situations. Our students therefore need practice outside of the book, and if possible, outside of the classroom.

The following activity takes an ambitious approach by sending students out into the world on a research project to examine how fluent or near-fluent English speakers deal with difficult questions. Over the course of the project, students learn about and discuss common causes of prolonged silence and some strategies to manage this issue. After preparing a questionnaire of difficult Japan-based trivia questions, they record and transcribe a conversation with a fluent speaker, such as a teacher, international student, or host family member¹. Finally, the students present, reflect upon, and consolidate their findings with their classmates. Through this procedure², your students will have an opportunity to experience meaningful English communication outside the classroom and learn deeply about a very important pragmatic issue while building research and presentation skills.

Preparation

To get ready for this project, you’ll need to prepare three 2-page handouts, decide the presentation format, and facilitate access to fluent or near-fluent English speakers. Feel free to photocopy and use the handouts in the appendices as is or download editable .docx (Word) versions from www.pragsig.org. The first handout, in Appendix A, is a pair-reading and discussion activity meant to introduce typical causes of student silence and some possible solutions. It is written at a level that upper intermediate/advanced students should be able to handle, but feel free to adjust the language as needed. The next, in Appendix B, enables students to prepare the questionnaire and provides guidance on the recording and transcription process. Students will need to find really challenging questions about Japanese culture, so preparing some resources ahead of time will help. Travel guides from *JTB* or *Lonely Planet* are great places to start. Japan-based trivia websites are also easily accessible via a quick online search.

1 This project would be an ideal activity on a study abroad trip.

2 Once learned, the methodology of this activity can be repeated to research other aspects of language.

Finally, the third handout (Appendix C) provides a place for students to consolidate their findings and prepare for their presentation.

For the second lesson, you'll need to decide on how students will present their research. Depending on class size and available time, whether they do so individually or in pairs/small groups is an important decision you'll need to make. As no one way works best for everyone, do whatever feels comfortable and practical. For example, strictly oral presentations are fine, but if you have access to an OHP or a projector, you may want to encourage students to present their results visually. Alternately, if you have experience with conducting poster presentations, this activity can work quite well in such a format³.

Finally, students may need your help in finding English speakers to interview. Is there an international students organization on your campus? You could get in touch with them ahead of time to inquire about the availability of prospective interviewees. Perhaps you could have a group of them attend your class in another lesson and conduct the interviewing then. Similarly, if there are fluent or near-fluent English speaker teachers available, give them a heads up that your students will soon be asking them for their time. This project could also fit quite well into a study trip curriculum, so you may need to coordinate this idea with those in charge of such programs. Alternatively, students could conduct interviews online via *Skype*, *Facetime*, *Zoom*, *Blackboard*, *Google Hangouts*, *Facebook*, *Moodle*, or some other video conferencing platform. For example, they could talk with host family members or classmates from a recent study abroad experience. If your school has a partner institution arrangement, that could also provide opportunities for virtual communication. In any case, helping students in some way to connect with English speakers will be an important part of the preparation process.

Procedure

- (Optional) As a lead-in, ask the class a random question on Japan trivia, such as *What is the second highest mountain in Japan?* Hopefully, no one will know the answer. If someone does, keep asking questions until you get the desired long pause. Wait a few beats in the ensuing silence, then begin the activity: *Okay, everyone! What's going on right now? I asked you all a question, but everyone is totally silent... here, in Japan, maybe that's not such a big deal. However, from a "western" point of view, this could be taken as a sign of disinterest or laziness. In other words, there's a big culture gap about what silence means. We need to study this point so that you can communicate more effectively...*
- Pass out **the first handout** (Appendix A: *Why the silence? Common reasons and some possible solutions*) and go over the directions for **Step 1**. Have students pair-read the content aloud. In other words, Student A reads the first sentence, Student B the next, Student A the third, and so on. This technique ensures everyone reads the content and lets you know when it's time to move on. Also, to save time, this handout could be read ahead of time for homework.

3 For more information on conducting successful poster presentations, see Tanner & Chapman (2012): *Poster presentations speak for themselves*.

- Briefly summarize the content by reviewing the key points. Another option is to relate a personal experience of how you felt when students replied to your questions with prolonged silence. For example, if you're not from Japan, you might tell a story from one of your early English classes, about how confusing it was to have students fail to reply to even basic questions. If you're from Japan, perhaps you could talk briefly on how you feel about this issue from a Japanese cultural perspective.
- Go over the directions for **Step 2**. Give students a few minutes to discuss the reflection questions. While they speak, move about the room and facilitate their discussions. Afterwards, have a few students share their thoughts.
- Move on to **Step 3** of the handout: Introduce each strategy and have the students repeat the phrases after you. If you'd like to add more content to each category, encourage students to write additional expressions in the spaces provided.
- Finally, in **Step 4**, introduce the research project assignment. While students pair-read the text in this step, pass out the next two handouts.
- Go over **the 2nd handout** (Appendix B: *Research project: How do fluent English speakers answer difficult questions without long silences?*). Provide advice for how to set up an interview, then make time for creating suitable trivia questions. Students can work individually, in pairs, or small groups, as you see fit. Also make time for describing the transcription process. If possible, have the students practice a bit by recording and transcribing a single question with a partner.
- Before class ends, pass out and go over **the 3rd handout** (Appendix C: *Present your research results*). It's quite self-explanatory, but you may want to stress certain points. Also, be sure to let your students know how you want them to present their findings—individually? With a partner/group? With *Powerpoint* or not? As a poster session? Letting them know what to expect will help them prepare.
- In the following lesson, have the students conduct their presentations as per your directions. As they do, it might help to write their results on the board. After everyone has spoken, you can go over the collective results and offer commentary as needed. For example, you could note the level of formality and register, which expressions were most commonly used, or introduce new strategies that were not previously covered. To avoid too much duplication, some individuals or pairs could report only about the number and length of silences, some about noises, some phrases, and others about clarification. If this approach is adopted, it is best if a few sets of recordings or transcripts are shared among a group of students.

Follow-Up

- Students could make another appointment with their interviewees to report on the class findings. This would provide another opportunity to consolidate and deepen learning on this topic. Alternately, invite one or more interviewees to subsequent lessons either in-person or virtually for a nice group chat on how things went. Spreading guests out over time would be a great way to revisit this topic.

- If the project goes well, consider using this format to research another area of pragmatic language. Subsequent attempts should go more smoothly once you and the students are familiar with the format.
- Try using a different presentation format next time. For example, if students presented results orally the first time, have them try using Powerpoint the next. If they did use Powerpoint, try a poster session. Each format has its strengths and weaknesses, so a variety of approaches can really help boost learning.

Assessment

If you'd like your students to memorize the strategies and associated expressions, consider a traditional writing-based quiz. For example, you could provide a list of expressions all jumbled up, then have the students sort them into the correct strategy categories. Another idea is for students to read a transcript (real or imagined) and label all of the strategies and expressions found within. To encourage students to master specific vocabulary, set up a speaking activity where they must answer trivia questions about your country or some other topic. Mark them on fluency and variety of strategies/expressions used, and how well overall they were able to avoid long silences. Another idea is to keep this point in the background by not forcing use of specific vocabulary. Instead, look at the students' overall ability to avoid long silences. For example, *Promptly answered each question* could be one of the criteria on your marking rubric, marking it on a scale of *Needs work / Good job / Great job!* If the interactions are recorded, you can review them later on with the students to point out strengths and areas for improvement.

References

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Appendices

- Appendix A: *Why the Silence? Common Reasons and Some Possible Solutions*⁴ (Handout 1)
- Appendix B: *Research Project: How Do Fluent English Speakers Deal With Difficult Questions Without Long Silences?* (Handout 2)
- Appendix C: *Present Your Research Results* (Handout 3)

Feel free to photocopy any handout directly from this book. PDF and editable .docx (Word) versions are also available for download from www.pragsig.org

4 The content in this handout is informed by student-reported data (Harumi, 2001).

Why the Silence? Common Reasons and Some Possible Solutions

Name: _____ Class: _____ Date: _____

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

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

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

Reason 1. Problems with language, vocabulary, and knowledge

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Reason 2. Problems with time

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

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

Reason 3. Lack of confidence

Sometimes students are simply not accustomed to answering an adult or a person in authority, especially in a second language. As a result, they may not have the courage to answer at all. Similarly, they may feel shy, nervous, or tense due to the class atmosphere.

Perhaps they have not formed clear opinions yet and don’t feel comfortable saying whatever is on their mind. Some students also depend heavily on classmates for support and do not feel up to answering a question without talking to someone first.

Reason 4. Problems with turn-taking

In many English-speaking cultures, people are expected to jump in and say whatever is on their mind in a free-flowing manner:

However, many Japanese students are not used to this way of speaking. They keep waiting for a chance to speak which never clearly arrives and thus have difficulties in claiming turns. On the other hand, out of a sense of modesty or fairness, some students may feel they have spoken too much and would like to offer others a chance.

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

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

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

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

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

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

- Other filler expressions:

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

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

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

Strategy 3: Brainstorming about admitting to not knowing the answer

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

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

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

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

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

A blank sheet of lined paper with a vertical dashed line on the left side, serving as a margin. The page contains 28 horizontal lines and one vertical dashed line.

2. Write up a short presentation along the following outline:

I. Introduction and background information

- *I interviewed (NAME).*
- *She is an international student from...*
- *She is currently majoring in...*

II. Question 1 results and impressions

- *My first question was...*
- *(NAME) could not answer this question. She used the following strategies...*
- *I thought it was interesting how she...*

III. Question 2 results and impressions

- *My first question was...*
- *(NAME) could not answer this question. She used the following strategies...*
- *One thing I noticed here was...*

IV. Question 3 results and impressions

- *My first question was...*
- *(NAME) could not answer this question. She used the following strategies...*
- *I was surprised that...*

V. Overall impressions and conclusions

- *Overall, the results matched/did not match my expectations...*
- *For me, the most interesting point was...*
- *I learned that...*
- *From now, I hope I will be able to use these strategies and phrases with more confidence.*