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"My head became blank and I couldn't speak": Classroom factors that influence English speaking

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If English as a foreign language (EFL) learners speak their target language in the classroom, it can help them to develop appropriate communication skills and facilitate their language acquisition (Goh & Burns, 2012). As a result, many Asian governments have tried to implement communicative language teaching (CLT) policies with an emphasis on using English as the medium for learning. However, the results have been mixed, often resulting in failure (Humphries & Burns, 2015). Japan is an example of this trend. Despite numerous CLT policies, classes continue to be conducted in Japanese, and student reticence to speak English is one factor blamed for this phenomenon (King, 2013). In order to explore the complexities that influence students' capacity to speak (CTS) in English in the classroom, the authors investigated the perceptions of 104 English Department undergraduates using the "narrative frames" approach (Barkhuizen & Wette, 2008). Students were asked to report on the factors that increased and decreased their CTS in high school classrooms. Based on the findings, the authors discuss the following classroom strategies: (a) developing a supportive classroom culture, (b) setting a framework of rules, (c) introducing a variety of activities, and (d) showing empathy and flexibility to students' needs.

Keywords: capacity to speak; narrative frames; classroom strategies; Japan

Overview

In this era of globalization, English has become the lingua franca spoken to some extent by about a quarter of the world's population (Crystal, 2012). To meet this globalization challenge, many governments in Asia have attempted to introduce communicative language teaching (CLT) with limited degrees of success in contexts such as Thailand (Tayjasanant & Barnard, 2010), Indonesia (Lamb, 1995), the Philippines (Waters & Vilches, 2008), Vietnam (Le & Barnard, 2009), South Korea (Han, 2010; Li, 1998), Taiwan (Wang, 2002), Hong Kong (Carless, 1999; Cheng, 2002) and mainland China (Deng & Carless, 2010).

In Japan, since the late 1980s, the Japanese education ministry (MEXT) has introduced various policies in an attempt to develop students' communicative competence. Regarding speaking, the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) programme hires thousands of Assistant Language Teachers (ALTs) from overseas to team-teach in schools (Kikuchi, 2009) and, from April 2013, a policy came into effect for Japanese high schools stating that in principle classes should be taught in English (Tahira, 2012).

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Despite these attempted reforms, Japanese teachers of English (JTEs) continue to use "yakudoku", a teaching approach in which classes are teacher-led, highly structured, focused on recurring language structures and, fundamentally, conducted in Japanese (Humphries & Burns, 2015). Scholars have indicated various causes for this phenomenon (which can also apply to other contexts in Asia) including: (a) high stakes university entrance examinations that focus on reading comprehension, lexico-grammatical knowledge and translation skills (Kikuchi, 2006); (b) strong institutional cultural norms that discourage divergence from existing practices (Sato & Kleinsasser, 2004); (c) teachers' lack of confidence in their own communicative proficiency (Nishino & Watanabe, 2008) and the proficiency of their students (Humphries, 2014); (d) fear of losing control of the class (Humphries, 2014; Sakui, 2007); (e) teacher-training that is too theoretical (Kizuka, 2006) and fails to address local problems (Humphries & Burns, 2015); and (f) government-mandated materials that rely heavily on low output, highly structured exercises (Humphries, 2013).

Although teachers are responsible for deciding how classes should be conducted, student participation (or lack of it) has a strong influence on classroom interaction. In one study where teachers attempted to use English with Japanese students, the students resisted by replying in Japanese, using silence or extended pauses, uttering single English words, and/or speaking using Japanese "katakana" pronunciation (Humphries & Stroupe, 2014). Moreover, the media report low motivation, low achievement scores and a reluctance to take speaking tests among Japanese high school students ("Disappointing levels of English," 2015).

The literature appears to highlight five causes of students' reluctance to speak English in the classroom. First, teacher behaviour, the yakudoku approach, university entrance examinations, vocabulary memorisation and textbooks may demotivate students (Kikuchi, 2009). Second, paradoxically, students may prefer these traditional non-communicative practices, which are viewed as serious preparation for examinations (Sakui, 2004). Third, cultural classroom norms of teacher-led communication are developed in other subjects, which make it more difficult for students to change roles and participate actively (Nishino & Watanabe, 2008; Sakui, 2007). Fourth, many students may be hypersensitive about how they appear in front of their peers, worrying that if they make mistakes they may be ridiculed and if they volunteer correct answers they may appear conceited thus preferring to stay silent (King, 2013). Fifth, they might face linguistic problems in English; for example, they may not understand questions posed or they may struggle to articulate their thoughts (Harumi, 2011).

Although there has been research in Japan into students' willingness to communicate (WTC), it has tended to focus on abstract variables such as international posture, which is "a tendency to relate oneself to the international community" (Yashima, 2009, p. 145). However, many Japanese students, like other Asian EFL students, study English as a compulsory subject without an immediate need to use it outside the classroom. Research is needed that focuses specifically, from Japanese students' perspectives, on what classroom situations facilitate and inhibit their capacity to speak English. Such research would assist teachers to adjust their approaches to instruction. The term, "capacity to speak" (CTS), refers to students' perceptions of their abilities to speak under various classroom situations. This study asked the following two questions about students' high school experiences:

1. What classroom situations facilitate students' CTS in English and why?
2. What classroom situations inhibit students' CTS in English and why?

Method

Data collection

We collected the data using narrative frames, which is a methodological approach first proposed by Barkhuizen and Wette (2008). A narrative frame is a template comprising sentence starters and transitions that contains gaps for respondents to complete with their own experiences or opinions. These frames "provide guidance and support in terms of both the structure and content of what is to be written" (Barkhuizen & Wette, 2008, p. 376). Therefore, the frames give flexibility and support to the respondents, while also guiding them toward providing responses that meet the research aims. Narrative frames are culturally appropriate in the Asian context, because they are, more open-ended than questionnaires and participants have "more freedom to divulge information than might have been the case in potentially face-threatening interviews" (Nguyen & Bygate, 2012, p. 57).

A link for an anonymous and voluntary online questionnaire was sent to First Year undergraduate English majors during their first semester in a prestigious private university in western Japan. Most of the students had entered the English department by passing a difficult entrance examination that assessed their reading ability and lexico-grammatical knowledge. Some students had entered from domestic international schools. These international schools contain many Japanese "returnee" students who have returned from living overseas and often tend to be more proficient at English than their peers who were educated only in Japan. In order to narrow the results to regular high schools, a preliminary section asked about the type of high school that students had graduated from. We then disregarded the responses from students who had graduated from international schools. From the remaining responses, 104 students completed at least one of the following two retrospective narrative frame statements in Japanese about their high school days:

1. When [classroom situation], I could speak English well, because [reason]
2. When [classroom situation], I could not speak English well because [reason]

Data analysis

Students' responses were tagged anonymously from S1 to S104. The data were translated independently by a bilingual Japanese teacher of English and then analysed using a memo-writing grounded theory approach (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The data were categorised according to the classroom situations perceived to increase and inhibit CTS. We noted that there were some overlaps in categories for reasons given for each situation and some respondents did not provide reasons. However, whenever possible, we calculated the frequency of comments for each reason within each category.

Results

Before outlining the situations that increased and decreased students' CTS, it must be noted that 17 statements indicated that students lacked any opportunities to speak English in the classroom. S95 felt crowded out by teacher talk "teachers were explaining all the time in Japanese" and S34 said "I had no chance to speak English except reading out of textbooks". Some students seemed to assume that it was normal not to speak English in class. For example, S25 claimed that there was "no chance to speak English" due to attending "an ordinary public school". Moreover, four students

indicated that it was normal not to speak English when studying for examinations; for example, "when I was practising for university entrance tests because I didn't need to speak" (S60).

Situations that increased students' CTS in English

Students' comments about situations that increased their CTS fell into six categories: (a) pair and group work, (b) positive supportive environment, (c) teacher's language, (d) preparation time, (e) simplicity versus effort, and (f) forced to speak (see Table 1 for examples).

Table 1. Situations that increased students' CTS in English

Classroom condition	Number of statements	Data sample
Pair and group work	21	"When I spoke in a small group because I wasn't nervous" (S24)
Positive supportive environment	9	"When students were enjoying debates and discussions, I could join in the class positively" (S97)
Teacher's language	16	"When teachers were willing to use English, I started to think in English automatically" (S87)
Preparation time	12	"When I prepared for a presentation because I knew what I was going to say" (S69)
Simplicity versus effort	14 vs 10*	"When I read out from the textbook because I knew what to read" (S52)
Forced to speak	13	"When I was nominated because I had no choice" (S43)

*Simplicity (14 statements); Effort (10 statements)

Pair and group work

The highest proportion of positive statements (21 comments) focused on the benefit of working in small groups, pairs or a small class. Most of the comments reflected affective benefits. In particular, students seemed to feel more relaxed when the class became noisy and lively from groups talking at the same time (13 comments). For example: "when I spoke English in a pair. I didn't become nervous because the class was noisy, so only my partner could hear me" (S61) and "it was easier to speak in a small group [because] I could talk freely when the class was a little noisy" (S100). S86 indicated that smaller audiences make it easier to speak: "doing group work, I didn't get nervous because I didn't need to speak in front of many people". Other students noted that conversations in small groups become livelier (2 comments). For example, "when we had group work, there was a situation when everyone could speak with fun and without hesitation" (S63). In small groups, in a noisy classroom, students felt that they could express themselves better for two reasons. First, they did not need to worry about the language that they used: "when the class was noisy, I felt like telling people what I wanted to say without getting laughed at, but with confidence and a positive attitude. I didn't need to worry about grammatical mistakes" (S32). Second, some students felt that they could convey their opinions more confidently: "I could talk freely when the class

was a little noisy" (S100), without worrying about turn taking: "I could tell my opinion freely in a small discussion class. I didn't need to care about the timing for speaking out" (S71).

Positive supportive environment

Nine students felt that a positive classroom environment increased their CTS. In particular, when other students spoke English, it seemed to increase their confidence: "when other students were speaking out, the atmosphere became good" (S29). Enjoyment was also a factor: "when students were enjoying debates and discussions, I could join in the class positively" (S97). In addition to the influence of the enthusiasm of their peers, students preferred classmates who were patient and supportive, which was encapsulated by S21:

> S21: If I didn't know the expressions in English, my teacher and friends helped me— When people were waiting for me to finish talking, I felt that I was being rushed and I'd get confused, so the little help was very helpful.

Moreover, S36 felt that it was important that other people in the class avoided ridiculing each other for reticence or language errors: "when I could think that it was OK to make mistakes and feel shy in a class, I didn't worry about being teased after the class and I could relax about speaking English".

Teacher's language

Sixteen students felt the necessity for an English-speaking teacher. S85 noted the cognitive benefit caused from using English with the teacher: "when teachers were willing to use English, I started to think in English automatically". Fourteen students said directly that they could speak better when they had classes with a native speaker of English such as an Assistant Language Teacher (ALT). In fact, the presence of an ALT almost seemed to be taken for granted as necessary for speaking by nine students who did not suggest reasons for their preference. For example, "I had ALTs only in the first grade [therefore] I had no chance to have a conversation in English [in later grades]" (S84). Only two comments seemed to illustrate awareness that speaking to an ALT provided a chance for authentic communication. S16 noted the motivation to speak to a native speaker: "I felt like talking with him", and S92 highlighted the necessity to use English for successful communication: "when I spoke with the ALT, he couldn't understand Japanese so he didn't understand me if I didn't pronounce well". Two other students noted qualities that their ALTs possessed. S96 wrote "Speaking with the ALT because he spoke slowly" and S60 claimed "when we had native speakers' classes, they could tell us if we were expressing what we wanted to say". However, it must be noted that JTEs could replicate these two latter strategies.

Preparation time

Although, as mentioned earlier, many students had noted the affective advantages of talking in pairs and groups, speaking in front of the whole class in speeches and presentations seemed to work well if they had time to prepare (12 comments). S15 described the benefit of time to practice: "when we gave a speech in front of others because I practised a lot so by the time I gave the speech I was used to it". Other students used the time to formulate the correct language: "I could speak well with a

script that I had prepared in advance" (S41) and memorise "I just needed to remember what I thought about at home" (S23). Moreover, preparation time can be beneficial for students who might favour writing over speaking: "when I prepared on paper like for a presentation in advance" (S20).

Other students noted that time given in class could help them to speak English. For example, one student described how group discussions helped their preparation: "after reading a text, we then discussed it in a group, it was easy to make sentences because I knew what to talk about" (S44). Another student felt that it was important not to be hurried while trying to speak: "when we had the time. I could talk to make the teachers and students understand while thinking carefully without feeling rushed" (S47).

Simplicity versus effort

Two contrasting patterns emerged regarding the types of speaking that could increase students' CTS. Whereas 10 students favoured activities that would require effort to communicate, 14 students preferred less demanding situations.

Regarding activities that required effort to communicate, two students (S83 and S97) tried hard in order to display a positive impression. Other comments focused on the need to make themselves comprehensible to interlocutors, such as, "when I spoke my opinion, I wanted people to understand" (S57). S45 noted choosing phrases carefully: "when I said about my opinion in a debating style, I tried to make others understand my opinion, so I used the expressions that I knew". Two comments focused on the desire to persuade others: "when we said our opinions like for and against, we tried hard to persuade other people" (S11 and S13). S91 was the only student who indicated that anxiety could facilitate CTS: "when doing a presentation [I could speak well] because it made me nervous".

In contrast, four students pointed out explicitly that they preferred simple English such as greetings (S58) and easy questions (S59, S69 and S81). S59 indicated that a lack of confidence led to this necessity: "I didn't have the skill to be able to tell my opinion, so I was ok to answer the simple questions". Ten students showed a preference for traditional non-creative exercises such as reciting from a textbook (six comments) and repeating after a teacher or CD (four comments). S30 explained that listening and repeating helped because "the sound and timing were in my head". Other students noted that recitation helped their CTS because "the content was already there" (S55) and "I knew what to read" (S52).

Forced to speak

Thirteen students wrote that they spoke English when they had to. Five students indicated that their CTS increased during immersion-style classes: "when teachers made the rule that we should only talk in English" (S39). Labelling this as a "special class," S17 adds that students could not stay silent: "I was told to speak out. I was in the situation where I wasn't supposed to speak Japanese". The other seven students cited that their CTS increased when the teacher nominated them. It is not clear if these students liked the situation, because they used explanations such as "because I had no choice" (S43) and "everyone had to speak out" (S9). Only one student commented directly against this non-democratic style of teaching: "when I wasn't forced to speak out [I could speak English well] because I became worried and nervous when I was forced to speak" (S28).

Situations that decreased students' CTS in English

In general, situations that decreased students' CTS formed five themes: (a) speaking to the whole class, (b) influence of peers, (c) influence of the teacher, (d) complex thoughts and complex language, and (e) lack of preparation time (see Table 2 for examples).

Table 2. Situations that decreased students' CTS in English

Classroom condition	Number of statements	Data sample
Speaking to the whole class	20	"When the teacher picked me in the class to answer. I felt shy for others to hear what I say in English" (S4)
Influence of peers	21	"When no one spoke out, it was difficult to speak out" (S12 and S14)
Influence of the teacher	12	"When teachers didn't speak English in the class and didn't expect students to speak English. Thinking in English is more difficult than thinking in Japanese, so I tend to choose the easier way" (S85)
Complex thoughts and complex language	15	"When I had a discussion with my friends, it was difficult to translate what I thought about in Japanese into English" (S31)
Lack of preparation time	11	"When I thought that I had to answer quickly, I forgot the words that I knew and made grammatical mistakes" (S47)

Speaking to the whole class

Speaking to the whole class was a large category that emerged for situations that reduced students' CTS (20 comments). Speaking in front of the whole class includes two types of activities: speeches/presentations and being nominated to answer a question. Nine students described their feelings of stress in this situation with comments such as "when I give presentations because I become nervous" (S1). Fourteen comments highlighted their awareness of their classmates listening to them. S4 said "when the teacher picked me in the class to answer, I felt shy for others to hear what I say in English". Other students explained how this anxiety could lead to mistakes: "everyone was listening to me, so I was worried about the grammar and using the correct words. Because of my anxiety, I couldn't say everything that I wanted to say and I couldn't stick to the point" (S32) and "when I gave a speech in front of everyone. I felt rushed so I couldn't think in English" (S48).

Influence of peers

Students also struggled to speak because of their concerns about the attitudes of their peers (21 comments). Eleven comments referred to the influence of a classroom where other students were reluctant to speak. For example, "when no one spoke out, it was difficult to speak out" (S12 and S14) and "when others didn't want to speak English, I had less chances to speak" (S16). Some of these comments focused on the atmosphere directly, "when the atmosphere in the class was quiet and negative" (S75) and "when

the atmosphere wasn't relaxed" (S88). Moreover, S36 described a malevolent consequence of speaking well: "when I was better than the other students, I felt that I was isolated and felt guilty from showing off my English". Unlike students such as S36 who felt isolated for speaking, staying silent seemed to be a way to stay part of the group: "when I wasn't nominated [I did not speak] because others weren't in the mood for speaking English" (S43). Other students demonstrated that their peers' silence enabled them to reduce effort in class; for example, "when we had to answer voluntarily, I didn't feel like speaking" (S9). S40 stated that this avoidance strategy was easier in a big class: "I felt lazy about speaking out because I thought someone else would speak out".

In addition to silent peers, seven comments concentrated on the influence of classmates using Japanese or the Japanese katakana pronunciation of English. Students worried about appearing different: "I felt that I would stand out if I pronounced words correctly" (S36). S77 felt shy too and added "I sometimes used Japanese sounding English to make myself understood better". During group work, two students felt that they did not need to make the effort: "I didn't feel that I needed to speak English because everyone spoke in Japanese" (S83) and "I became lazy when I spoke with my friends" (S91).

Influence of the teacher

In comparison to the influence of classmates, fewer students commented on the negative effects of the teacher on their CTS (12 comments). Five students indicated that they were less likely to speak English when they had a JTE. Two students explained a perceived lack of need "I didn't feel that I needed to speak English" (S56) and "I tended to be lazy about speaking English if the situation allowed me not to communicate in English" (S77). In contrast, four students struggled to understand the ALTs; for example, "I couldn't catch the words" (S57) and "the native speaker teacher gave a question very fast" (S74). Regardless of whether the teacher was a JTE or an ALT, other students noted that some teachers did not create the opportunities for students to speak. S17 wrote "in almost all of the classes, teachers used English only when they read textbooks and they used Japanese most of the time, so I did not have to speak in English". Another agreed that without the obligation to use English, students might revert to the easier option: "when teachers didn't speak English in the class and didn't expect students to speak English. Thinking in English is more difficult than thinking in Japanese, so I tend to choose the easier way" (S85). S36 added that, without a teacher-enforced English only policy "it wasn't natural" to use the target language.

Complex thoughts and complex language

Seven students commented that they found it difficult to express their opinions. However, most of them did not provide reasons why. These respondents might take it for granted that sharing their opinions can be embarrassing, as indicated by S41, "I found it difficult to speak out" and by S44 who preferred not to ask "questions to teachers voluntarily". Other students seemed to point to the double cognitive load of thinking about what to say and how to say it in English. For example, "I wasn't good at organising my opinions and ideas instantly" (S69) and "when I spoke while thinking, my head became blank and I couldn't speak" (S55).

Four students noted that they struggled to transfer their thoughts from Japanese into English. S31 felt the need for time for translation: "when I had a discussion with my

friends, it was difficult to translate what I thought about in Japanese into English" and S22 added "when I was asked my opinion ... I didn't know how to express it in English because I thought about my opinion in Japanese".

Other students worried about formulating the correct language: "when I spoke with my own words the English didn't come out" (S52) and "when I had to ask the ALTs questions about their speeches, I couldn't express myself in English even though I knew what I wanted to ask" (S45). In particular, S59 noted the fear of ridicule:

> S59: When I didn't know if my English grammar was correct. Reason: I knew what I wanted to say, but I was scared of being pointed out about the mistakes by teachers and other students. Also I worried that others would think that I didn't have good English skills.

Lack of preparation time

The need to answer questions without preparation caused problems for 11 respondents, such as "when I was nominated suddenly because I cared about the words and grammar" (S23) and "when I thought that I had to answer quickly, I forgot the words that I knew and made grammatical mistakes" (S47). S81 noted that, unlike reading, it is difficult during real time communication to fill in gaps in understanding:

> S81: When there were some words that I didn't know in the conversation. Reason: when reading I can guess the meanings from the surrounding content but in speaking it is difficult to do it instantly.

In these situations, it seems that students felt that they lacked the linguistic proficiency to speak without preparation; however, S2 added "when I have no topics to talk about because I get embarrassed without topics". Without clear topics to discuss, it would be difficult for students to speak even in their mother tongue.

Discussion and pedagogical implications

Based on the findings described above, four categories emerge that can influence students' CTS either negatively or positively: (a) use of English and level of support offered by the teacher and classmates; (b) rules and framework for speaking; (c) the activity's cognitive load and level of spontaneity; and (d) the affective state of the student. Therefore, teachers can use four major strategies to try to increase students' CTS.

First, develop a supportive classroom culture. Lightbown (2014), drawing upon the work of McGroarty (1989), advises the use of cooperative learning rather than "whole class 'competitive' instruction" (p. 61) that is dominated by teacher-centred activities. Cooperative activities aid the development of social skills and "engage students in a greater variety of language features and language use, requiring both input and output and multiplying opportunities for students to use language meaningfully" (Lightbown, 2014, p. 61). She notes the risk of learners reverting to the L1 during such group- and pair-work activities, but explains that they can be successful when the tasks are well planned and organised according to the students' language abilities. Edge and Garton (2009) suggest some useful strategies for stimulating discussions in small groups, such as (a) providing fictionalised topics containing problems to solve, (b) supplying useful phrases for helping students take their turn, and (c) giving role plays where students need to circulate to find a partner who has the information that they need.

Second, set a framework of rules. As noted by King (2013), "[in Japan], to not orally participate in one's foreign language class is deemed, by both students and teachers alike, to be normal behaviour" (p. 339). Harumi (2011) suggests negotiating the teaching and learning styles. In this study, students noted the benefits that can arise from special immersion-style classes and the danger of taking the easy/lazy route when classmates begin to use the mother tongue. If students accept that they should use English and they understand its benefits, then they can monitor and encourage each other to follow rules that they help to create. Moreover, frequent speaking assessments can help to motivate reluctant learners and identify areas of improvement irrespective of ability level (Talandis & Stout, 2015).

Third, introduce a variety of activities. Many students favoured discussions and other activities that encourage creative language production, but other respondents favoured simple structured activities such as recitation from the textbook or repetition after the teacher. Some students disliked speaking in front of the whole class, but others preferred presentations and speeches because they had time to prepare what to say. Drawing upon a wide range of second language acquisition research, Lightbown and Spada (2013) stress the need for balanced instruction. They advise "form focused instruction and corrective feedback provided within the context of communicative and content-based programmes" rather than the "exclusive emphasis on comprehension, fluency or accuracy alone" (Lightbown & Spada, 2013, pp. 196-197). Edge and Garton (2009) advise varying the interaction patterns in the classroom (e.g., teacher to whole class, teacher to individual, and student to student). They recommend group work followed by a report-back stage to the whole class, because it focuses the group members to keep on-task, encourages them to reflect on what they have done and gives students the time to plan what to say and receive guidance from their peers about how to say it.

Fourth, show empathy and flexibility to students' needs. Students in this study indicated that their CTS increased or decreased due to affective factors such as their desire to communicate or their levels of anxiety in front of the teacher and peers. Harumi (2011) notes the need for a balanced step-by-step approach to build the confidence of learners. Citing the work of Gray and Leather (1999), she calls for a combination of safety and challenge. Teachers need to be patient with reticent students, and give them time and support to develop their language before nominating students to speak while their classmates listen.

Conclusion and future directions

This research focused on the retrospective opinions of First Year undergraduate English majors from a prestigious private university in Japan of their high school experiences of CTS. It can be assumed that many of these students ought to be more motivated to try to speak English than the majority who study the language as a compulsory high school subject. While the findings are not generalizable, they provide some insight into the situations that can encourage or discourage learners from speaking English in the classroom. Empirical research from a wider student population, including those who are still at high school, is necessary to gain a stronger understanding of the complex factors influencing students' CTS. Similar studies conducted in other Asian contexts would also add to the understanding of this important issue that challenges many teachers.

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