

The Importance of Verbalization Skills as Described by Japanese Preschool Teachers and Caregivers: Implications for language teachers in Japan

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Abstract

English teachers in Japan are known to struggle with students who are reserved in classes that aim to utilize oral communication as a means for practicing target language. Explanations for such lack of engagement frequently point to cultural norms of communication with Japanese culture being characterized as emphasizing less direct verbalization of thoughts and ideas than most English speaking cultures and the importance of silence (Harumi, 2011). Preschools have been described as places where cultural expectations are displayed through the practices and beliefs of the educators working there (Tobin, Hsueh & Karasawa, 2009). In an effort to combine these two assumptions, this project attempts to analyze the views of Japanese early childhood educators and caregivers regarding the importance of verbalization skills in the children they teach, and deliberate if Japanese culture, represented in this in way, provides support to the claim that verbal reticence is part of current cultural expectations in Japanese society. Results suggest that it would be prudent to reexamine whether the general cultural communication norms of Japanese society should be considered as an explanation for students' lack of verbalization in language classes.

Keywords: verbalization skills, listening skills, Japanese preschools, teachers' views, ESL, student reticence

Introduction

Japanese students in language classes (Harumi, 2011; Saito, 2004), and Asian students in other academic settings (Jones, 1999), have been observed as reluctant to engage in verbal communication. With an emphasis on communicative and active teaching practices currently common in ESL and EFL education, explanations and remedies are sought after for this reticence. A view of Japanese cultural norms and communication style as emphasizing the listener's role rather than valuing verbalization of thoughts and feelings in the communication process is often discussed among language educators in Japan as an explanation for such disjuncture of expectations and

performance in classroom experiences.

Two focuses of research shed light on students' apparent reluctance to engage. Studies addressing the issue of the silence in language education such as Harumi (2011) and Czarnecki and Rees (2014), tend to highlight the different interpretations of silence and point to alternate, or positive, meanings and uses it may have both culturally and educationally. They do not however, refute its existence. Other studies on Japanese education, not necessarily language education, challenge the stereotypical claims that children in Japan are taught to focus on noticing the feelings of others rather than engaging in self-expression (Kubota, 1999) which in turn is assumed to have a negative effect on verbalization in class.

The Current Study

This study is an effort to follow Kubota's suggestion (1999) that language educators and researchers strive to examine, rather than accept, the common assumptions concerning Japanese culture, in this case, reticence in verbalizing thoughts and feelings. Tobin et al. (2009), and Holloway (2000) claim that the practices and beliefs of preschool teachers closely reflect culture, and by natural extension language socialization, as these are the people and institutions entrusted with the responsibility of educating children to be "culturally appropriate members of their society" (Tobin et al., 2009, p. 1). Therefore, in an attempt to gain insight into current cultural expectations regarding verbal communication skills in Japan, views of preschool educators and caregivers concerning these skills were elicited and analyzed. The question to be explored is:

How do Japanese early childhood educators and caregivers view the importance of verbal communication skills?

The results of such an investigation could provide a glimpse of the current balance between positive or negative cultural views on verbalization of one's feelings and thoughts in Japan.

The Japanese term chosen for verbal communication skills in this study and used in the interviews was *kotoba no chikara*. The term 言葉, or *kotoba*, means literally "word" but is translated in the Course of study for Kindergarten (Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT), 2008) as "language" used for communication. The document makes reference to the two skills of verbal expression and listening, *hanasu* and *kiku*, respectively. This framework allows for a separation of focus between verbalization skills and listening skills in the interviews, discussions and data analysis.

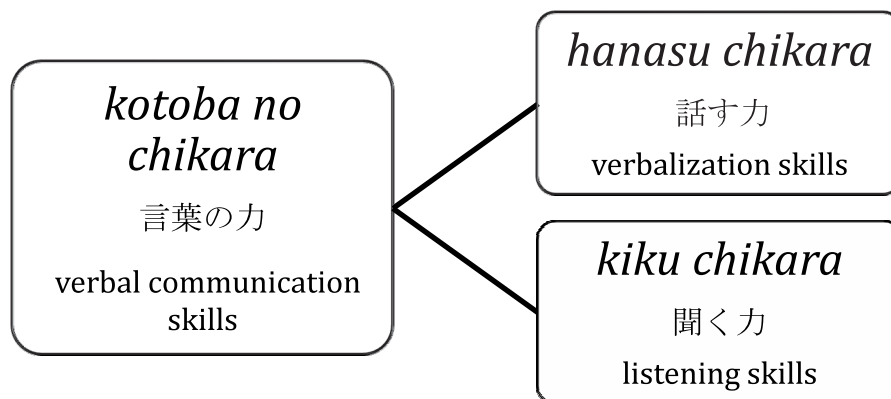


Figure 1. Terminology in both English and Japanese

Considering the explicit mention of verbal communication skills in the Course of study for Kindergarten (MEXT, 2008), the rapidly globalizing society, and personal observations by the authors, it was expected that preschool educators and caregivers would consider the teaching of verbal communication skills a necessity. It was less certain, however, how the importance of verbalization skills pertaining to expression of thoughts and feelings would compare to the development of listening skills.

Methods

17 teachers from 4 different preschools were interviewed regarding their thoughts and practices on the teaching of verbal communication skills. The interviews were semi-structured to allow for organic responses and recorded with an IC recorder and iPad. Each interview lasted approximately one hour.

Transcriptions of the recordings were made and then analyzed following the meaning condensation technique as outlined by Kvale (1996). Initially, all transcriptions were read through, followed by identification of meaningful segments. Each unit was then ascribed a simplified statement of theme or topic. These themes were compared against the central research question and redundant themes eliminated. Finally, the essential themes were compiled to present a meaningful image of the concepts that emerged.

Participant Preschools

In Japan there is a distinction made between the early childhood care and education options of *yuochien*, which are under the authority of the Ministry of

Education, Science, and Culture and *hoikuen*, which are under the authority of the Ministry of Health and Welfare. The *youchien* are traditionally considered more educationally oriented as they were designed for elite families, accepted children from ages 3 to 5, and had shortened hours with breaks in summer holidays. They may be likened to something between a kindergarten and a nursery school in the American system (Boocock, 1989).

The *hoikuen* are traditionally considered to be more similar to a daycare center. They were originally established with the intent of providing childcare services for working class families that required both parents to be employed due to economic constraints. They accept children from newborn to 5 years old, are open from early in the morning to later in the evenings, and do not have breaks for typical school vacation times during the year. Even though in recent years the practices of the two types of institutions are becoming less clearly differentiated, with *youchien* offering extended hours and *hoikuen* building up their educational programs, they are still governed by different ministries and are typically treated as different entities inside the Japanese system.

For this study, a total of 4 preschools, 2 *youchien* and 2 *hoikuen*, one private and one public of each, were chosen to provide a varied pool of responses. All four preschools are located in a mid-sized city on the main island of Japan.

Participant Teachers

17 teachers were interviewed. 13 of the teachers were classroom teachers of the 3, 4 and 5 year old classes while the other 4 were the head teachers at each institution. The teachers' years of experience ranged from 3 to 40 years. 16 female teachers and one male teacher participated.

Results

Two themes emerge as especially relevant to the research question of this study with one theme centralizing around the expressive nature of verbal communication or verbalization skills and the other pertaining to the teaching and development of listening skills.

1 *Kotoba no Chikara* and Expressions of Feeling

The first theme is the recurring tendency of teachers to connect the concept of *kotoba no chikara* to the expression of personal feelings or thoughts. Participants were given the opportunity to provide a personal definition of *kotoba no chikara*. In these definitions the connection between feelings and words resonated throughout the data.

1.1 Exchange of feelings through words

The following examples illustrate the sense that words and the exchange of words are an important aspect in allowing people to create connections with each other and participate more fully in society. The focus is on the relationships developed and the connections formed.

Example 1-

言葉はやはり心を通わせるとても大事な道具というかね。言葉なしでは人間の気持ちは伝わらないかなと。まあジェスチャーとかそれはあるかもしれないけども、やっぱり言葉があることでよりよく言葉のコミュニケーションが図れて相手が気持ちが分かるというところかな

Words are an important tool for understanding each other's hearts...If there were no words humans wouldn't be able to express their feelings. Yes, there are gestures and such, but because of the existence of words communication is better and we can understand the feelings of others.

Example 2-

経験して、気持ちを言葉で言い合って。友達ができて。社会性がね、伸びていくと思うんですけど。

Through experience of sharing feelings through the exchange of words. Friends are made and I think sociality (of the children) will increase.

1.2 Unilateral expression of personal feelings

The idea that words and verbalization of words allow people to express their ideas and thoughts to others was repeatedly seen in the dialogues, especially when defining the meaning of *kotoba no chikara*. Through the expressions listed below, in comparison to the above examples, we see that the communication is more unidirectional from the speaker to the listener. Each example begins with 自分 (*jibun*) or *one's*, and ends with 相手 (*aita*) or *the other*. The words used to express the transmission of meaning, 伝える (*tsutaeru*) or convey、言える (*ieru*) or say、表す (*arawasu*) or express, illustrate the idea that through the words, feelings or thoughts are being passed from one person to another. The focus is on the speaker.

Example 1-

自分の気持ちを相手に伝える。

To convey one's feelings to another.

Example 2 -

自分で思ってることをきちんと言葉でいえる。

To be able to say/tell one's thoughts in words.

Example 3 -

自分の気持ちを上手に表す。

To have a high ability to express one's feelings.

These explicit descriptions exemplify how the preschool teachers in this study believe verbalization allows people to express their ideas and feelings through words for the purpose of creating relationships or understanding each other's emotions. This trend in the data is in stark contrast to the claims that Japanese interpersonal communication patterns do not require the verbal expression of feelings because of the "responsibility of listeners to intuit the un-verbalized feelings and thoughts of others" (Tobin et al., 2009, p. 139).

2 The Teaching of Listening Skills

A clear pattern in the teaching of *kiku chikara*, or listening skills, arises out of the data. A shift can be seen from the emphasis of supporting the development of *hanasu chikara*, or verbalization skills, in classrooms of 3-year-old children to a more balanced effort to support the development of *kiku chikara*, or listening skills, along with *hanasu chikara* to the 5-year-old children.

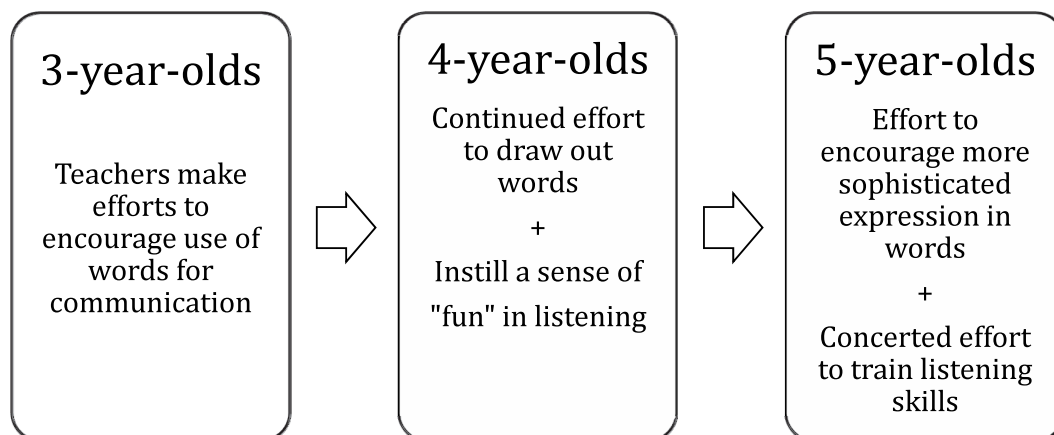


Figure 2. Shifting of educational focus from speaking to listening through preschools

EXAMPLE 1 -

今は一緒に居てっていうところから、3歳の終わり頃には、少し一緒に関わってって
いうか、言葉で自分の気持ちが少し言えるようになることを3歳で、目指したい。

Towards the end of the year for 3-year-olds, from where we are now, we should be involved together, shall we say, in aiming for the 3-year-olds to be developing at least a small ability to express their feelings in words.

EXAMPLE 2 -

4歳5歳になってきて、やっぱり自分の思ってることが相手に伝わって、そして、相手のお友達と一緒にお話をできるっていうことが、すごく会話を楽しんでいる様子が、やっぱり年齢を追うごとに、すごくこっちにも伝わってくる。

When they become 4 and 5 years old, they are able to convey their thoughts to another, then, that friend can join in the conversation. We can see how they enjoy the conversation, as the children get older this becomes more and more evident.

Example 3 -

5歳児は、今度は何を決めるにしても、役割分担だとか、今日の遊びは、じゃ、こういうふうに進めていきたいだとか、そういうのを子どもたち同士でグループごとに、じゃあこの時間まで、お友達同士で話して、決まったことを聞かせてっていうふうにして、子どもたち同士で、私が入るんじゃないかって、ディスカッションをしてもらって、そして自分たちで決めて、自分たちで次の行動に行けるように

For 5-year-olds, if we are trying to decide something, for example roles for an activity or what to play today, or how to move forward with an idea, I'll have the children talk to each other in groups, give them a time frame, and with each other, without my involvement, have a discussion, then have them move forward based on what they decided themselves.

Example 4 -

聞く力が20分とか25分とか聞かれるような状態に、姿勢よく聞くっていうのは。あんまり私はそういうの好きじゃないんだけど、学校に合わせていかなきゃ駄目だから、そういうように5歳児は、文字で遊ぼうでずっとやってるんだけど

The ability to listen for 20 or 25 minutes with appropriate posture. I don't really like this, but we have to follow the school's expectations, so the 5-year-olds have always participated in the mouji de asobou (play with letters) lessons.

Interestingly, this last quote demonstrates that a major goal of the lesson focusing on reading and writing skills was to develop the listening skills deemed necessary for elementary school. This idea is further explored below.

2.1 Reason for the shift

There was a shared sense evident in the data that the perceived need to prepare the children for elementary school was the reason for the decision or opinions that teaching listening skills should be phased in through the years. There was a shared understanding that the preschool had an obligation to help children master their ability to listen to direction and instruction.

EXAMPLE 1 -

やっぱり小学校とか上がっても、きっと話を聞く力、話すことも、聞くことも大事な

んじゃないかなと思うので。

After all, I think, as the children move up to elementary school listening skills and verbalization skills are important.

EXAMPLE 2 -

学校に行けば、聞くシステムだと思う。ま、授業もそうですし。でもね、だんだん発言しないと、大学とかになったら、発言もしなきゃいけないし。

When going to school, I think it's a system based on listening. Well, lessons are that way. But, gradually if we aren't able to express ourselves verbally, once we get to university, we have to verbalize there.

In this example, both the need to develop listening skills for the entry into compulsory education and the need for verbalization skills at the other end of the education system are expressed. This idea will be visited again in the implications section.

2.2 Exceptions

There was an exception to this trend worth mentioning in that it exhibits a complete opposite opinion in terms of timing for the teaching of listening skills. Notice how this teacher expressed that the development of listening skills should be a balanced component of education for 3-year-olds from the start.

EXAMPLE 1-

だんだんそれで言葉が分かってくる。だから、どっちにしても3歳から5歳は聞く力(が大事)。聞く力もそうだし、そして、聞かなければ話すこともできないから、話すのと聞くのと一緒なのかね。

This is how words are gradually learned. So, from both 3 years old and 5 years old listening skills (are important). If children don't listen then they can't speak. Listening skills and verbalization skills are integrated I think.

While it is likely that upon hearing this sentiment, a number of other teachers may have agreed that the skills are indeed integrated, it was not a theme that emerged and was contradictory to the theme of focusing on the development of verbalization skills first.

Implications

Results indicate that among the Japanese preschool teachers in this study there is a distinct belief in the power of words and the necessity of verbalization skills. The teachers make conscious efforts to encourage use and development of verbalization

skills. They connect the ability to express one's self verbally with the ability to make friends, maintain relationships and function in society.

Listening skills were also a theme that emerged as important to the teachers. Teachers especially felt that it was their job to prepare the students for elementary school where they will be required to listen for long stretches of time.

There was a gradual phasing in of listening skills over the 3 years in the preschools. While this could reflect the natural developmental stages of the children in those years, with 3-year-olds presumably being more self-centered and as of yet unaware of others, or the natural developmental stages of language acquisition for children of those ages, the teachers' own explanations highlighted the necessity for improving listening skills as dictated by group society and educational practices at elementary school. MEXT (2011) is currently encouraging a more balanced and strengthened connection between preschool education and elementary school and it would be worth considering if this might have influenced how the preschool teachers have approached their teaching or what effects it may have in the future.

At the other end of the education system it seems that, as one teacher above so clearly described, universities also have expectations of verbalization skills. This can also be seen in the recent trends in hiring procedures of Japanese companies. The results of a survey taken by the University of Niigata Prefecture Career Center (2014) showed that communication skills significantly out ranked any one other skill as to what companies are looking for in graduates. Furthermore, in response to the question as to why certain graduates were hired, a number of companies explicitly stated that they were impressed with students' abilities to express their thoughts and opinions or to lead discussions.

The combination of these two trends might lead one to believe that since both the entry and exit of compulsory education in Japan are currently putting emphasis on the verbalization skills of the children and graduates, societal norms and expectations most likely also tend in this direction and are not the root cause of verbal reticence seen in language classrooms.

Conclusion

If we accept that beliefs and practices of preschool teachers' reflect a society's ideal values and cultural norms, and the results of this study indicate that in the Japanese preschools in this study self-expression through verbalization of ideas and feelings is considered important for successful communication, then society should also share these values. Furthermore, part of the emphases that does arise in these 4 preschools on the development of listening skills, is strongly influenced by the perceptions of what skills are necessary at elementary school.

Consequently, it may be more appropriate to look specifically to the elementary or

secondary education systems and how these train students to be participants in an educational setting. The changes in curriculum that have been phased in according to The Revisions of Courses of Study for Elementary and Secondary Schools (MEXT, n.d.) encourage schools to make improvements in the area of teaching verbal abilities. It would be an interesting time to examine how Japanese compulsory education has, or has not, shifted to further develop verbal communication skills in continuation of what the preschools are teaching, and in consequence, how that influences students' verbal participation in university language classes.

In conclusion, this study provides one piece of evidence that would suggest language teachers struggling with silence and reticence of Japanese students in the language learning classrooms would do well to avoid pointing to Japanese communicative norms on the whole. They should look for other reasons to pursue in an effort to overcome the challenge of encouraging students to be verbally active participants in class.

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