

Conflict between Critical Thinking and Cultural Values: Difficulty Asking Questions and Expressing Opinions in Japan

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Abstract

While the ability to think for oneself is essential in this rapidly changing world, it has not been encouraged in Japan's traditional social and therefore its educational culture. Although the government of Japan has issued policies to engage students in independent thinking for almost two decades, high school and university students' responses to surveys about asking questions and expressing opinions in class suggest that students do not think deeply in the classroom. However, careful analysis of the students' responses could indicate that (1) students in Japan have difficulties expressing questions and ideas verbally because these activities do not agree with the values with which they have been raised, (2) students are not fully taught the different values reflected in these activities at school, and (3) very few Japanese teachers are able to teach values of which they have little direct experience themselves, nor can they encourage students to practice those activities. Evidence suggests that classes in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) offer the best opportunity for students to overcome these barriers and gain experience in asking questions and expressing opinions.

Keywords: critical thinking, culture, asking questions, expressing opinions, Japan

1. Introduction

Since the turn of the century the government and business leaders in Japan have been saying that we need to teach students to think, express themselves, and judge by themselves, because the world is changing rapidly and teaching knowledge alone does not give students the ability to succeed in this globalized community. The ability to "think," however, did not receive much attention in Japan until 1998, when the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) released the new *Course of Study* (guidelines for all elementary and secondary schools), which emphasized the importance of activities with "thinking." Unfortunately, according to the results of a survey conducted in 2014 (Okada, 2015), sixteen years after the 1998 *Course of Study* was issued, the introduction of thinking activities into classrooms had apparently done little to change the nature of teaching in high schools in Japan. In this situation, in order to nurture students to be successful in the twenty-first century, it is crucial and urgent for university teachers to teach students to think deeply and independently although they tend to pay more attention and spend more time on researching than teaching (*The Nikkei*, 2015, April 7, p.34). The author, an EFL (English as a foreign language) teacher in university in Tokyo, undertook a new survey to assess the role of thinking activities in higher education in Japan, with the aim of understanding whether these activities are successful in encouraging independent thinking in students.

In this paper, the author will first review briefly how teaching has been practiced in Japan. She will then present the results of the recent survey on how often university students are engaged in thinking activities and how students feel about those activities. Finally, she will discuss what hinders Japanese students' ability to think independently and express themselves, and suggest the role of EFL teachers in nurturing these skills.

2. Traditional Classrooms in Japan

In the traditional Japanese classroom, teachers were assumed to be always right, and students were expected to memorize what is taught in class and were not allowed to doubt what is written in textbooks (Ohmae, 2003, p.17). Therefore, "neither verbal ability, nor class participation . . . nor the ability to write well significantly affected grades" (Fukuzawa, 1995, p.300). That is because "the key Japanese value is harmony, which they seek to achieve. . . almost by intuition, rather than by a sharp analysis of conflicting views or by clear-cut decisions" (Reischauer, 1977, p.135).

The survey conducted in 1999 with high school teachers (183 valid responses returned) and high school students (1,284 valid responses returned) demonstrated the persistence of traditional classroom culture in Japan (Okada, 2000): less than 30% of teachers responded that they always or often had students paraphrase, as few as 18% of the teachers always or often had students express opinions in writing, more than half (about 60%) of the students seldom or never asked questions in class, and as many as 90% of students never or seldom expressed opinions verbally in class. These results showed that there were quite a few students who did not think deeply, because in order to ask questions it is necessary to comprehend and analyze what is missing or contradictory in given information, and in order to express opinions students need to analyze and synthesize what they are thinking. All these activities are higher skills in Bloom's (1956) thinking taxonomy.

In 2014, sixteen years after the 1998 *Course of Study* and six years after the next *Course of Study*, issued in 2008, which also emphasized students thinking and judging independently (MEXT, 2008), another survey of high school students (1,481 valid responses returned) demonstrated that there was some improvement during the fifteen-year period, but that about half of all surveyed students still did not think critically by themselves in high school: 40% of the students responded that they never or seldom asked questions, and 62% reported that they seldom or never expressed opinions (Okada, 2015). As Tahira (2012) observed, "there remains a big gap between the stated policies and what is actually done in the classroom" (p.3), and the problem has been described as lack of support for teachers to become confident and capable of teaching in the new manner.

3. Survey with University Students

If high school students in Japan do not engage enough in thinking and expressing activities, they must be given abundant practice in independent thinking across the curriculum in higher education. In order to determine how often and in which subjects students get experience thinking logically and expressing ideas, a survey was conducted at one department of a university in Japan in 2015.

3.1 Subjects

The subjects were first- and second-year students who majored in information and telecommunications engineering in one of the largest private universities in Japan. The academic level of the students in the department is about in the middle compared with students in private universities in Japan generally. The survey was given to the first-year students at the end of the first semester and to the second-year students at the end of the third semester; 277 valid responses were returned.

3.2 Questionnaire

The questionnaire included the same multiple-choice questions given to high school students in 2014 and some additional open-ended questions. The multiple-choice questions were:

[Q-1] "How often do you ask questions in class?," with five choices for an answer: "always", "often", "sometimes", "seldom," and "never";

[Q-4] "How often do you express opinions in class?," with five choices for an answer: "always", "often", "sometimes", "seldom," and "never."

The additional open-ended questions which followed Q-1 and Q-4 were:

[Q-2] "In which subject(s) do you ask questions in class?," which was to be answered by students who chose "always", "often" or "sometimes" in Q-1;

[Q-3] "Why do you NOT ask questions in class?," which was to be answered by students who chose "seldom" or "never" in Q-1;

[Q-5] "In which subject(s) do you express opinions in class?," which was to be answered by students who chose "always", "often," or "sometimes" in Q-4;

[Q-6] "Why do you NOT express opinions in class?," which was to be answered by students who chose "seldom" or "never" in Q-4. (See Appendix 1 for the questionnaire in Japanese and Appendix 2 for the English translation of the questionnaire).

3.3 Results

The results of the survey were as follows.

First, about 45% of the university students responded that they seldom or never asked questions in class (Figure 1), and about 60% responded that they seldom or never expressed opinions in class (Figure 3). These numbers are slightly higher than those for high school students in 2014 (Figures 2 and 4).

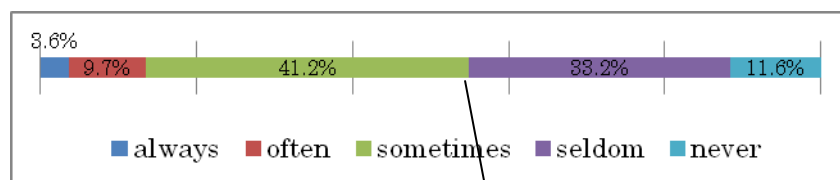


Figure 1. How often UNIVERSITY students asked questions in class



Figure 2. How often HIGH SCHOOL students asked questions in class

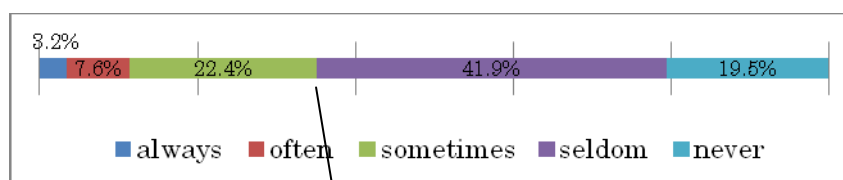


Figure 3. How often UNIVERSITY students expressed their opinions

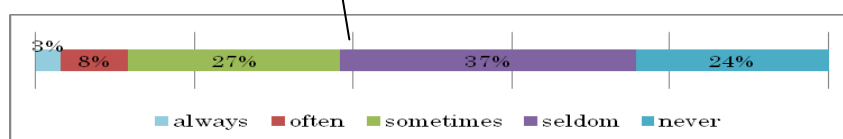


Figure 4. How often HIGH SCHOOL students expressed their opinions

Second, there were three main kinds of reasons for never or seldom asking questions in class (Figure 5). About half (48%) of responses showed that students felt uncomfortable asking questions in class. Responses included "shy/unconfident" (13.7%), "uncomfortable atmosphere to ask" (16.1%), "not feel like asking" (12.9%), and "worry about disturbing the class" (5.6%). In another 25% of responses students indicated that they did not need to ask questions of teachers, with responses such as "I solve questions later by myself" (17.7%) and "I ask my close friends later" (7.8%). Finally, in 11.3% of responses students indicated that they did not ask questions because they had none.

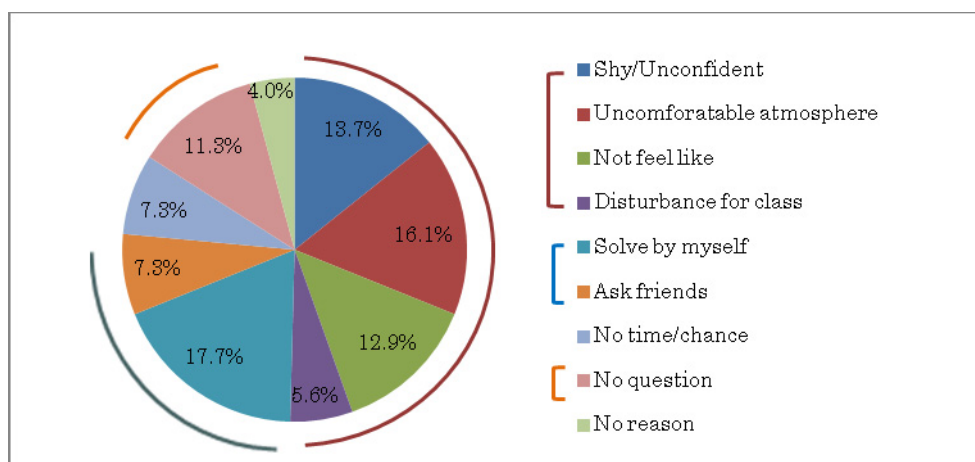


Figure 5. University students' response to why they do NOT ask questions (n=124)

Third, as reasons for not expressing opinions in class, about 40% of the students cited the same emotional discomfort that discouraged them from asking questions, with responses such as "shy/unconfident" (13.5%), "uncomfortable atmosphere to ask" (19.4%), and "worry about disturbing the class" (4.7%). Another 20% responded that they had no time or no chance to express opinions in class. And a final 32% of responses imply that respondents had no intention of thinking by themselves about what is discussed in class, because, for example, "expressing opinions is not necessary" (7.1%), "I have no opinions" (18.8%), or "there is no reason for expressing opinions" (6.5%) (Figure 6).

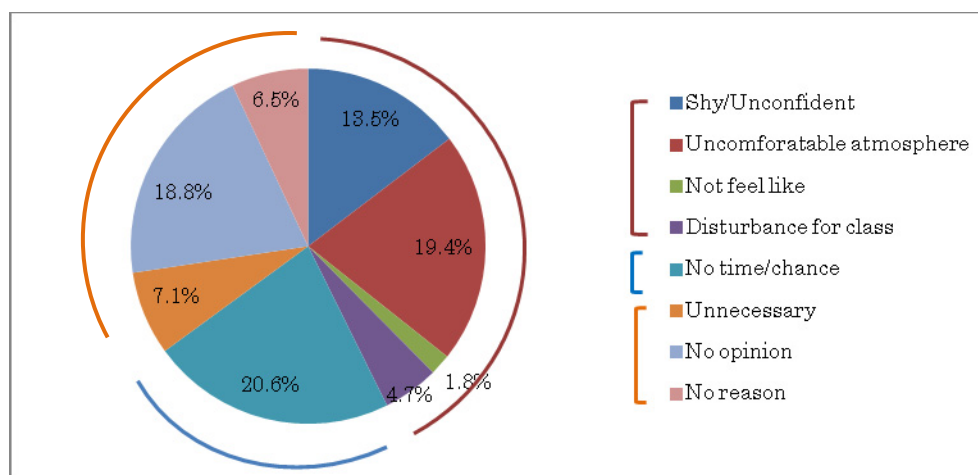


Figure 6. University students' response to why they did NOT express opinions (n=170)

Finally, the extent to which students reported that they asked questions or expressed opinions varied depending on the academic subject of the class. Thirty percent of students who always, often, or sometimes asked questions did so in EFL classes, while 17% or less of students did so in other subjects such as math and major field subjects (Figure 7). The students who reported EFL as the class in which they expressed opinions comprised 27% of those who always, often, or sometimes expressed opinions, while as few as 2% or less of students did so in classes in math and major field subjects (Figure 8), and almost no students did so in other subjects, such as "Modern Civilization" and "Environment and our Life".

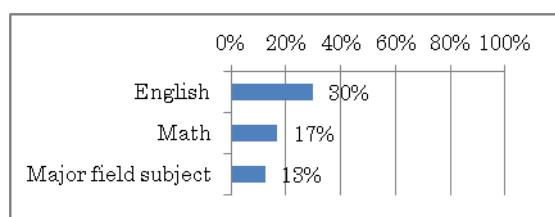


Figure 7. In which subject(s) university students ask questions (multiple answers allowed, n=277)

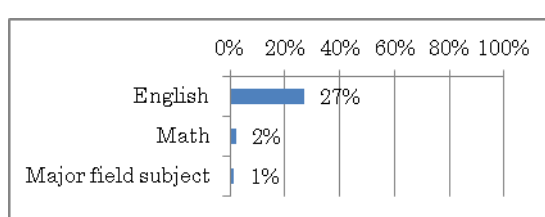


Figure 8. In which subject(s) university students express opinions (multiple answers allowed, n=277)

4. Discussion

These results reveal five interesting things about students' thinking in Japanese university classrooms.

First, the low percentages of students who asked questions and expressed opinions in class, which are similar to or worse than the percentages of high school students who did so, demonstrates that first-year university education does not give students enough opportunities to ask questions for better understanding or to express opinions to deepen their thinking. The Central Council for Education in 2012 emphasized the necessity of nurturing academic skills such as thinking critically and expressing opinions in higher education, and in response

the institution where the survey was conducted launched a small-size seminar-type class called "Introduction to Academic Study" as a requirement for all first-year students. Unfortunately, however, this class does not seem to have been very effective in realizing the goals of enhancing students' skills in asking questions and expressing opinions. According to a 2014 report by the National Institute for Education Policy Research in Japan, a survey found that 63.4% of 1,649 Japanese university students from 200 different academic departments never or seldom expressed opinions in class, and 71.9% responded that the current situation in their classes was appropriate. It is evident that many students in universities in Japan do not understand the importance of expressing themselves in class in order to deepen their thinking.

Second, quite a few students report that they don't dare to think independently, as demonstrated by survey responses such as "I have no opinions or questions," "It is not necessary to express opinions," or "I can't find any reason for expressing opinions." It can be assumed that these students accept whatever is given by authorities, such as teachers and books, without thinking for themselves. Until recently it was commonly accepted by Japanese students that, as Davidson (1995) states, "unthinking acceptance of the ideas of one's teachers and elders is considered a virtue" (p.41). However, as Paul (1993) notes, "in a world of accelerating change and complexity, a new form of thinking and learning is required, a form of thinking and learning that involves much more intellectual discipline and skills of self-evaluation than we have yet learned to accept" (p.v).

The third finding is that although students do not ask questions or express opinions, it does not necessarily follow that students do not think for themselves. After analyzing the students' responses, we can assume there are other reasons for refraining from asking questions or offering opinions in class, among them that (1) teachers do not allow enough time for students to express opinions, (2) students do not appreciate expressing themselves to teachers in class, and (3) students are afraid of losing face among peers in class.

The first assumption, that teachers do not give time to express opinions in class, is clearly confirmed in student feedback: 20% of the students who responded that they never or seldom expressed opinions stated that there was not enough time or opportunity in class to offer opinions. We can assume that students did think and did have opinions but they were not allowed to express them in class. It seems that teachers continued to use a traditional teaching style and do not know how to manage the class to make students think autonomously.

The second assumption that students do not appreciate talking to teachers in class, is inferred from the responses of 25% of the students who never or seldom asked questions in class. They reported that they solved problems by themselves or by asking their friends. Students did think and did have questions but hesitated to ask the teacher. The reasons for this are not clear from their responses, but they may have felt that teachers did not welcome their questions, teachers were not friendly, or teachers' explanations were hard to understand.

The third assumption, that students are afraid of losing face in class, is deduced from the reasons given by 50% of the students who never or seldom asked questions. The reasons included "I don't ask questions because I am not confident," "The classroom atmosphere is not comfortable for asking a question," "I don't feel like asking questions in class," and "My question could disturb the class." (Some of the responses may reflect a lack of friendliness from teachers, as noted above, but for many young people in Japan today relations with peers tend to be more important than those with teachers.) Probably because students had not been taught the importance of asking questions or expressing opinions, they behaved as they had been raised to behave in their family and at school. For them, expressing opinions and asking questions could cause "all involved to lose face, especially if superiors and subordinates are involved," as FitzGerald (2003, p.136) states. He explains this as a trait of East Asian cultures:

Positive face or positive politeness is related to the desire for involvement and the need to be accepted as member of one's group or society. One displays this positive politeness by accepting the point of view of others, agreeing with them and working to create common views of the world (p.26). . . . Because in collectivist cultures the self is never free but is tied up in mutual role obligations, this facework is focused on giving support to others' face while not bringing shame on one's self or one's group" (p.27).

It is clearly necessary to teach students in Japan different values, especially the usefulness of asking questions—something that traditional Japanese education, with its emphasis on acceptance of authority, has discouraged. Browne (2007) explains the real meaning of asking questions as follows:

By asking questions, we are saying to the person: I am curious; I want to know more; help me. This request shows respect for the other person. The questions exist to inform and provide direction for all who hear them. . . . The point of your questions is that you need help to have a deeper understanding or appreciation of what is being said" (p.2).

Teachers need to continually teach students that asking questions does not show skepticism or doubt, but it can instead communicate interest, deeper understanding, appreciation, and respect.

Fourth, ordinary Japanese teachers seem to have difficulty teaching students to ask questions and voice opinions effectively in class. Some of the results of the survey explain this: (1) even after taking the "Introduction to Academic Study" class in their first semester, many students did not ask questions or express opinions more often than high school students did, and (2) many more students asked questions or expressed opinions in EFL classes than in other classes given by Japanese teachers. Some facts about the department where the survey was given may explain why: (1) out of 47 full-time instructors, four instructors, including Japanese and non-Japanese, received academic degrees from universities in English-speaking countries, where students are "asked to form their own opinion and defend them in front of classmates" (Samimy, 1993, p.7). All four of these instructors teach EFL. (2) Among 125 part-time and full-time instructors, eight are non-Japanese from western countries, and all of them teach EFL. These two facts and the students' responses lead us to assume that teachers of EFL know how to encourage students to think and express themselves more effectively than the typical Japanese teacher, who has no experience of education in a western institution, where the academic culture reflects the global community.

There may be objections to this idea because more and more Japanese university instructors are participating in global conferences and publishing papers internationally. For example, in the department where the survey was given, among 47 full-time instructors, 35 presentations were given internationally and 104 international academic papers were published in 2015. This leads us to believe that teachers are well aware of the importance of the ability to think critically and express opinions in the global community, so they should be able to teach these skills.

However, Japanese teachers giving presentations internationally and writing papers in English do not necessarily have the skills to teach students to think and express themselves verbally in class, because most teachers are "self-taught," as Hirose (2003) states. As Suzuki (2006) argues, the problem is that detailed teaching materials or manuals to guide teachers to nurture students' ability to think independently and express themselves are not sufficiently developed for each academic subject, so it is difficult for Japanese teachers to change their teaching style to one they have never experienced first-hand.

Finally, being encouraged not to use Japanese in the EFL classroom, students may feel freer to ask questions and voice opinions than in classes given in Japanese. Since language and behavior are strongly connected, students may be able to behave differently in EFL class, using English, than in other classes, taught in Japanese. In the present situation in Japanese higher education, in which traditional values are in conflict with the new style of learning, the EFL classroom could be the ideal place to teach students to ask questions and voice opinions so as to be able to think critically.

5. Conclusion

The first part of this paper showed how seldom students in Japan ask questions or express opinions in class, which was assumed to be the result of not thinking for themselves. However, careful analysis of the reasons why students do not ask questions or express opinions suggests that this assumption is not necessarily valid. We have found that students in Japan have difficulties expressing questions and ideas verbally because these activities do not agree with the values with which they have been raised. As Suzuki (1978) states, "People take everything in their culture for granted; most of them go through their lives without realizing that there can be other ways of living or doing things" (p.22). Then, the problems Japanese students have asking questions and voicing opinions could result from the fact that (1) students are not fully taught the very different values reflected in these activities, and (2) very few Japanese teachers are able to teach values of which they have little direct experience themselves, nor can they encourage students to practice those activities.

According to Ichimura (2013), Japanese business annually requires 260,000 new workers who are able to work globally, which means that almost all newly graduating students have to be able to work with people from different cultures. We urgently need to train students to be globally competent. EFL teachers must take a leading role in teaching students to think independently, to ask questions, and to express themselves by including opportunities for these activities in class. Once students in EFL classes have learned the meaning and importance of asking questions and voicing opinions, they will be able to transfer these skills to activities in classes given in Japanese, thereby developing their ability to think deeply and critically.

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Appendix A. Questionnaire in Japanese

学年(1年生、2年生、3年生、4年生)						
Q1	授業中に疑問に思うことや不明なことを質問しますか。	いつもする	よくする	時々する	余りしない	全然しない
Q2	「いつもする・よくする・時々する」に○を付けた人にお尋ねします	特に多く質問する科目は、どの科目ですか。				
Q3	「余りしない・全然しない」に○を付けた人にお尋ねします	なぜ質問しないのですか。				
Q4	授業中、学習内容に関連したことや自分の意見を発言しますか。	いつもする	よくする	時々する	余りしない	全然しない
Q5	「いつもする・よくする・時々する」に○を付けた人にお尋ねします	特によく発言する科目は、どの科目ですか。				
Q6	「余りしない・全然しない」に○を付けた人にお尋ねします	なぜ発言しないのですか。				

Appendix B. Translation of the questionnaire

	Which year are you in?	1st year / 2nd year / 3rd year / 4th year
Q-1	How often do you ask questions in class?	Always / Often / Sometimes / Seldom / Never
Q-2	If you chose "always", "often", or "sometimes" in Q-1, in which subject(s) do you ask questions in class?	
Q-3	If you chose "seldom" or "never" in Q-1, why do you NOT ask questions in class?	
Q-4	How often do you express opinions in class?	Always / Often / Sometimes / Seldom / Never
Q-5	If you chose "always", "often", or "sometimes" in Q-4, in which subject(s) do you express opinions in class?	
Q-6	If you chose "seldom" or "never" in Q-4, why do you NOT express opinions?	

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