

# Orientation and Culture in Office-hour Interactions

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## Introduction

Each week, I provide three office-hour periods for students and every week, from two to seven students come to my office during one of those periods; however, while some students attend regularly, others come sporadically, and I generally never know how many students will show up or what they want until they walk in the door and sit down. Sometimes, they need help with homework, sometimes advice about home stays, and sometimes want a conversation in English. While a few students continue to visit for the first two reasons listed above, the third one became the most common in the first semester of this year.

One student in particular, Maya (a pseudonym) had been visiting me regularly since last year. Independent and open-minded, she was a highly-motivated learner, and enjoyed conversing about a wide and challenging array of topics. Maya began attending my office hour last year at the same time as Marika, an older, yet less proficient student, whose motivation to come to my office hour was to prepare to study abroad in Canada. Because in Japanese culture the *senpai-kohai* (senior-junior) relationship implies that the junior should show deference to the senior, I was concerned that one of two things might happen: that because Marika was older, Maya would be quietly deferential, not wishing to embarrass Marika or appear to be showing off, or that Maya would dominate the conversation and Marika would be intimidated and leave off attending the office hour completely, unless I intervened. Happily, in this case my fears were unfounded; the two young women became good friends, appreciated each other's strengths and had patience for each other's weaknesses, so there never appeared to be evidence of tension or frustration during our office hour interactions.

However, last semester, interactions between Maya and other, primarily first-year students, didn't seem to be proceeding quite as smoothly. I began to wonder why this occurred, and what factors enhanced or limited participation. This research, primarily data-driven, presents the results of three methods of data collection and analysis in order to determine what happens during an office hour interaction, why it happens, and what factors seem to determine student participation (or non-participation).

A study of office hour interactions is an ideal situation to be analyzed from a qualitative perspective, as it fulfills all of Cresswell's (2003) characteristics of qualitative research. First, it takes place in a natural setting: my office. Second, the methods of data collection were interactive and humanistic in that I had built rapport with the students before conducting the study, did not disturb the site, and collected data via different methods: tape-recording, note-taking, and post-

recording interviews with the participants to obtain more information about the interactions. Third, this research was emergent, as after having done the recording, note-taking and initial transcription, follow-up interviews were conducted to obtain more detailed data. Fourth, this research was interpretive, as I interpreted the data for themes and categories, always keeping in mind my personal “take” on the analysis. Fifth, I took a holistic view of social phenomenon by noting those aspects of Japanese culture which may have influenced the results. Sixth, at each stage, I reflected on my own role in the inquiry and sources of possible bias. Seventh, I used both inductive and deductive reasoning as well as iterative thinking processes. Finally, I used the strategies of conversational analysis and content analysis to guide the procedures for this study.

### **Research Questions**

The initial question guiding this study was, “What type of interaction occurs during an office hour interaction between students of different years?” After analyzing the transcript of a 5-minute segment of one office-hour interaction, two more research questions arose: “What do students say about their interactions?” and “What factors may underlie participation in office-hour conversations?”

### **Literature Review**

As mentioned previously, the research questions and analysis of results were primarily data-driven. However, before conducting the research, I had some hunches about why students come to office hours, what they expect, and why they participate as they do. Although, as the above incident involving Maya and Marika illustrated, the opposite may also happen, generally Japanese students who are “good at English” may choose not to display their ability in the presence of their seniors or those who are less proficient, since this violates social rules governing behaviour between seniors and juniors, or may cause one to stand out, something generally to be avoided (Eckstein, et al., 2003). The following literature review therefore focuses on learner differences, asymmetry in power relationships, social identity, and imagined communities.

In the language-learning classroom, it is important for teachers to be cognizant of possible differences among students. Cognitive factors, such as intelligence, language aptitude, and learning strategies, as well as affective factors, such as language attitudes, personality, motivation, preferences, beliefs, and anxiety, are all said to account for language learning success (Mitchell & Myles, 2001; Lightbown & Spada, 2001). In addition to these, social factors, such as class, ethnicity, and gender are also significant, as are relationships between learners and the social context of their learning (ibid).

Symmetry of relationships, too, plays a part. van Lier (2001), in highlighting issues of equality, inequality, control, and power notes that “the question of equality may play a role in the interaction between native and nonnative speakers or between a more proficient and a less proficient nonnative speaker” (p.98). He continues to say that “unequal participants tend to have asymmetrical interactions” (ibid). In further discussing the asymmetrical relationships within classrooms, Breen (2001) notes that not only are there power imbalances between teachers and stu-

dents, but within certain subgroups as well, in which students identify themselves as being “ more successful or less successful and even groups who share a common identity (such as friendship groups) outside the classroom ” (p.131).

Peirce (1995) proposed a theory of social identity in which “ power relations play a crucial role in social interactions between language learners and target language speakers ” (p.12) and that the language learner should be conceived as “ having a complex social identity that must be understood with reference to large, and frequently inequitable social structures which are reproduced in day-to-day social interaction. ” (p.13). Learners then, through language, negotiate their senses of self differently at different places and at different times, and gain access or are denied access to social networks that allow them opportunities to speak.

How learners envision themselves in the English-speaking community may be relevant as well. Citing work drawn on by Lave and Wenger (1991), Kanno and Norton (2003) refer to earlier studies which sought to uncover how the idea of imagined communities “ might enhance our understanding of language learning and identity ” (p. 242). Fundamental to this is the idea that “ As learners become more adept at community practices, they increase their responsibility in the community and become more active participants ” (ibid).

While the above research has taken place primarily in classroom contexts, perhaps these findings can also be extended to the office hour situation. According to van Lier, (2001) “ Elements of appropriateness (ratified behaviour and talk in the language classroom), most prominent inside the classroom, may remain visible outside the classroom, whenever learning talk is carried out... ” (p.92). And so, it could be argued that the same forces governing classroom interactions may be governing office-hour interactions as well.

## **Methods of Data Collection**

### *Context*

The initial recording took place in my office on Monday, May 7<sup>th</sup>, during my office-hour period, from 1:00-2:30. My office is a large, bright room filled with shelves full of books and videos, and the walls are covered with photographs of my friends, family, hometown, country, and other assorted art such as posters and calendars. I have a small sink, refrigerator, microwave oven, and hot-water pot that students are welcome to use if they wish. I played a CD, as I usually do, so that the mood would be more relaxed. The students and I sat around a long rectangular table in the centre of my office. It is interesting to note that no one sat next to me. This may have been because, in Japanese culture, there is a clear delineation between the “ host side ” and the “ guest side ” (Japan Management Association, n.d.). Or this may have been because there is usually distance between teachers and students.

### *Participants*

There was no formal selection of participants; those who attended my office hour on that day were recruited for this study. There were five participants in all: myself as participant researcher, one female, and three male students. Two students were in their first year of study, one in his second year, and one in her third year. It is difficult to say whether this group of students is “ typical ”

or “ atypical ” of students in our department. While most students visit one or all of the foreign teachers some time during their four years of study, perhaps Maya is the least “ typical ” in that she continues to do so on a regular basis.

#### *Melodie (Mel)*

To address problems of external reliability, it is incumbent upon me to recognize and clearly define my researcher status position (LeCompte & Goetz, 1982) in this study. I am the participants’ teacher, and though I wish to have more informal and friendly discussions with them, cannot underestimate the power of my role as “ teacher ”, especially within a Japanese context. In Japan, there is an idea that “ The teacher’s position in relation to pupils has traditionally been an unconditional one in which the former is regarded as the one with power and dignity ” (Honna & Hoffer, 1989). While this may no longer hold true as much as it once did, or hold quite as strongly with a foreign teacher, the fact of my being the oldest person in the room will still accord me “ the most respect and accommodation ” (Eckstein, Kalaydjian, Miranda, Mitchell, Mohamed, Smith-Palinkas, York, Jr., & Zollner, 2003).

#### *Maya*

Maya, a third-year student, and I had a friendly and relaxed relationship; she had been attending my office hour for a year, and I had once hired her as a research assistant. As mentioned in the introduction, Maya was very outgoing, confident, and spoke easily, if not always accurately. Maya’s TOEIC score was high compared to our other students; she was usually placed in a high-level class. She had been abroad for home stays on previous occasions. Personally, I felt “ closest ” to Maya, because I had known her the longest and she had visited me more than the others had. Maya hopes to become an English teacher in the future.

#### *Tommy*

Tommy, a second-year student, initially came to my office to explain why he had missed some classes. Although his pronunciation was generally better than most students at our university, he seemed to have trouble with grammar and was often groping for vocabulary. Generally, Tommy felt that he needed to improve his skills in English. Although he was usually placed in the highest level class because of his oral skills, this was not true of other courses he took, such as writing. Because Tommy sought me out to confide to, I must admit that I felt a strong bond with him.

#### *Bob and George*

These two first-year students were placed in the lowest level oral communication classes. We had only been in class for a few weeks, so I didn’t know them well; however, they both took classroom activities seriously (although Bob appeared to have an oddly dark sense of humour) and had come to my office a few times to chat, eat lunch, and borrow DVDs from me. However, at those times, other male students from the same class had been there, and the conversation tended to be more in Japanese than in English. Neither student had studied abroad, nor studied English outside of the usual school context. While I felt friendly and comfortable with these two students, and was happy that they visited me, I didn’t know them as well as I did Maya and Tommy, and so didn’t

feel as close to them.

### *Research processes*

Three methods were used to collect data: audio recording, note-taking, and a follow-up interview with the participants once the second group of research questions was formulated based on the initial transcript analysis.

### *Recording/Transcription*

Audio recording was done using a small digital recorder which was placed on the centre of the table in my office, around which everyone was sitting. While recording, I took notes. I transcribed the first 5 minutes of our conversation, in which a discussion about famous foods from local areas took place. The following transcription conventions (Duranti, n.d.) were used:

Walter; Speakers' names are separated from their utterances by semicolons, followed by a few blank spaces.

(1.5) Numbers between parentheses indicate length of pauses in seconds.

... Three dots indicate an untimed pause.

// Double obliques indicate the point at which overlap by the next speaker begins.

(? ?) Blank spaces inside parentheses with occasional question marks indicate uncertain or unclear talk of approximately the length of the blank spaces between parentheses.

(( )) Material between double parentheses provides extralinguistic information, e.g. about bodily movements ( and laughter )

In addition, I added ( )-- material between single parenthesis -- providing a translation from Japanese to English. Due to the space limitations imposed on this paper, the transcript is not included.

### *Note-taking*

While participating in the conversation, I took notes. These notes resulted in providing the extralinguistic information referred to above.

### *Questionnaire*

To obtain more detailed information I created a bilingual questionnaire for students to comment on their reasons for participating/coming to the office hour and their expectations of the outcome; comments on their and other students' participation in the office hour, based on the transcript; how the office hour could be made better for them; and if they intended to participate in office hour discussions in the future and their reasons for continuing or discontinuing.

## Data Analysis

### 1: Transcript

#### Results

An initial analysis of the transcript seemed to indicate that the conversation had been dominated by me, Maya, and Tommy. Bob and George's lack of participation was obvious and while they seemed to understand questions posed to them in English, they generally seemed to answer them in Japanese. In order to examine patterns of student of participation more closely, I first looked at the amount of English produced by each person (including myself). To do this, I counted the number of turns, the total number of English words spoken, and the average number of English words spoken per turn, discounting any Japanese words, except for place and brand names. The following table lists the numbers of turns taken and average length of English utterances per turn (including self-repeats). Markers of receipt and acknowledgement, such as "mm", "hm", etc. were also included in the counts. The table below highlights the results:

Name	Number of turns taken	Total number of English words spoken	Average number of English words per turn
Maya	19/72 (26%)	128	6.7
Tommy	16/72 (22%)	127	7.9
Bob	5/72 ( 6%)	7	1.4
George	8/72 (11%)	9	1.1
Mel	24/72 (33%)	161	6.7

It is important to note that while I took the most turns and spoke the most words, many of my utterances consisted of one-word signals, backchannels or repetitions of utterances by Bob and George, hoping to prompt them to say more. The following extract from the beginning of the conversation illustrates this point:

- Mel; So, I was telling Tommy, ' cause he's from Sasebo, about my hunting for Sasebo burger. ((all laugh)) ((To Bob)) Have you had a Sasebo burger?
- Bob; No.
- Mel; No? ((to George)) How about you?
- George; No.
- Mel; No?

Tommy, while uttering more words per turn than anyone, tended to repeat phrases--he appeared to be working out the grammar in his mind. Notice his frequent use of the phrase " seldom eat " in the following extract.

- Tommy; I, I seldom, I **seldom eat** and my friend also **seldom eat, seldom eats**, and other person also **seldom eat**, but the Sasebo burger is very famous in another places, about Nagasaki Shi (City) or Omura Shi (City), or another places, so it's very strange. I think so. Very. Mm. Hm.

Finally, it is important to note that Bob's and George's utterances, while coded as "English" for being names of Japanese places or brand names, show little evidence of English production.

Bob; Hiroshima. Momiji manju. (maple-leaf shaped cakes)

George; Momiji manju.

Next, I wanted to know how language was being used. To this end, I examined the language functions (asking and answering questions, expressing and agreeing with opinions, etc.) and conversational strategies used by the participants. For the former, I coded each utterance in terms of a language function and for the latter, noted evidence of the following as listed by Dornyei and Thurrell, (1994);

- Message adjustment or avoidance (tailoring the message to one's competence)
- Approximation (using an alternative term which expresses the meaning of the target word as closely as possible)
- Appeal for help (asking the communication partner for help in finding words)
- Interpretive summary (reformulating the speaker's message to check that one has understood correctly)
- Use of fillers/hesitation devices (to fill pauses, stall, and gain time to think)

In addition, back-channel cues, such as "yeah", "hmm", "mm-mm", anticipating others' responses, such as finishing another's sentences, and the repair move of code-switching are included in "conversational strategies". The data showed that I used a wide variety of functions, but Maya and Tommy a wider and equal number of conversational strategies. Bob and George used more strategies than functions, but still far fewer than everyone else.

After analyzing the transcript, I began to wonder about the large differences in student participation, both in terms of how much they spoke, and what they said. Why did some students converse easily, while others did not, even when invited to? Then, I began to wonder why they came to the office hour, ostensibly to practice speaking English, but failed to do so. What did they expect from themselves, me, or from other participants? This led to the creation of a bilingual questionnaire mentioned previously.

## *2: Questionnaire*

### *Results*

The results of the questionnaire were analyzed in two ways: first, "surface" responses, i.e., what the students said, were examined; then, recurrent themes that arose from their responses were sought for. Since there was a slight discrepancy between what I expected from one question and the resulting responses, it is discussed below.

### *What would make office hours better for students?*

When I wrote this question, I expected students to give me concrete suggestions. In answering this myself, I suggested that I have a separate office hour for first-year students, and to make rules for turn-taking, so that the conversation would be more inclusive. However, Tommy, Bob,

and George seemed to interpret this question differently, which may have been the result of my intention not getting across when translating this question from English to Japanese (the Japanese version used the word “worthwhile” instead of “better”). Tommy said that he wanted to brush up on his speaking skills, Bob said that he wanted to spend the office hour improving his ability to speak, with me and with his friends, and George said that he wanted to listen to many people’s English and to think in English when speaking.

### *Themes*

Tommy’s categorization of participants into two groups (“listeners” and “informers”) underscores the dualistic nature of the interactions that took place during the office hour period. In order to understand what was underlying these exchanges, I looked for recurrent themes and found two: student orientation, and the influence of Japanese culture. Student orientation is drawn from explicit and implicit statements drawn out of the interview questions regarding how students position themselves and expect themselves and others to behave in office-hour interactions. Students positioned themselves in the following ways: as users or non-users of English, as novices or experienced members of the office hour community, and as equals or subordinates to others.

The influence of Japanese culture was also drawn from mostly explicit statements made about expected behaviour based on relationships among participants. These included statements about gender, age and seniority, and role fulfillment (of self and others). Some of the statements are listed in more than one category, as in some cases seniority implies that one must fulfill a certain role.

It seems that Tommy and Maya can generally be classified as learners who orient themselves as users of English, as experienced members of the office-hour “community” and as equal participants in the discussion, while Bob and George orient themselves as non-users, as novices, and as subordinates in the discussion. In addition, while Maya wishes the discussion to proceed with participants on an equal footing, something uncommon in Japanese culture, she still admits the existence of certain social expectations and acts on the belief that as a senior, she must fulfill them. Bob’s and George’s silence can be interpreted as “enryo”, a form of politeness used to distance oneself from superiors and to express deference (Honna & Hoffer, p.132). In addition, Bob and George expressly wish for “amae”, indulgence, in the form of patience and consideration, from their seniors (de Mente, p. 8).

## **Discussion**

The results seem to show that student orientation and social relationships as determined by Japanese culture, held true during the office-hour interaction studied here. While Tommy and Maya appeared to be full-fledged members of the office-hour community, Bob and George still seemed to be oriented towards behaviour expected of them, not only by society, but also perhaps by high school English classroom practices. George’s explicit desire to improve his listening skills, and “learn ways to remember vocabulary and various expressions”, while not my, Tommy’s or Maya’s goal for the office hour, may be a residual effect of his English learning experiences in high school in which he prepared for an entrance examination requiring the ability to recall vocab-



ulary and answer questions on a listening section of a test. Bob and George's orientation is not surprising: until a few months ago, they were still high school students, while Maya and Tommy are 3<sup>rd</sup>-year and 2<sup>nd</sup>-year students, and have been part of the university community for some time.

Maya's imagined community, we may infer, is the English teaching community. This study showed that her participation mirrored mine in many ways, and that it may be that she identified herself with me and with teachers in general. I began to wonder what Bob and George's imagined communities might be, based on their high-school-like orientation and peripheral participation. However, perhaps they found their imagined community from their office-hour experience: George says that although he didn't participate actively himself, Maya and Tommy made him want to speak with confidence like them. This is consistent with Wenger's (1998) claim that " ... for a novice not to understand a conversation between old-timers becomes significant because this experience of non-participation is aligned with a trajectory of participation " (p.165).

The influence of Japanese culture and attendant expected behaviour seems to be exhibited more strongly by Bob and George than by Maya and Tommy. In our faculty, Multicultural Exchange, students in their second and third years of study have experienced being taught by a number of foreign teachers and have been studying courses with a cross-cultural focus. Students like Tommy and Maya, who are bi-cultural, or have studied abroad, and have been at this university for longer than one year, are perhaps more aware of cultural influences and exercise their choices in behaving " appropriately " or not.

### **Significance and implications**

This study, though limited in scope, points to the idea that orientation and culture may strongly influence student participation, especially that of first-year students. These students may not yet see themselves as part of the university community, and in their English classes where they are being taught English in English, and by native speakers who likely use different teaching methods than their Japanese high school counterparts, they may even feel some culture shock.

There are several practical implications that come out of this research, regarding office hours specifically and generally. Instead of having an open-door policy to the office hour, perhaps it would be better for teachers to assign hours for different levels of students, particularly first-year students who are new to the university and its culture. Even more importantly, it is essential for teachers to understand that first-year students, based on their previous learning experiences, may have different expectations of office hour interactions than their older and more experienced classmates.

There are also practical implications with regard to having ability-based classes instead of grade-level classes. In the past, at this university, students moved together by year, regardless of English ability. That policy changed two years ago and students can enroll in various classes depending upon their TOEIC score, regardless of their year of study. The change was made in order to motivate students and allow them more academic choices based on ability rather than age. While this seems like a good idea in theory, age differences may explain in part why in some mixed-level classes, students are reluctant to participate with others who are younger or older than they. According to De Mente (1997), the most important personal relationships " are those based

on same-group experiences from an early age, including birthplace, school and employment. Common interests or professions do not count ” (p. 321). Perhaps this could be extended to students at different years of study having similar TOEIC scores.

### **Limitations and future directions**

One limiting factor may have been the presence of the tape recorder. While taking notes, I noticed students glancing at it from time to time, and wondered if it was inhibiting them in their speaking. In addition, it was a little difficult for me to take notes while trying to participate naturally in the conversation. As a result, my notes were quite scant and I had to rely on memory to reconstruct some of the impressions I had of what seemed to be occurring during the initial recording. In the future, were I to conduct such a study again, I would either use the tape recorder many times until the students got used to its presence, or try to use something more powerful yet more discreet, which could be placed out of sight. Digital web cam recording, where the camera is closer to my computer and farther from my table, would be a possible solution. Also, in translating questions from English to Japanese, I would ask more than one Japanese person to check that my translation asks the question I intend it to.

Since this study took place over a short time and on a very small scale, future research could delve more deeply into how students acclimate themselves during office hours over a more significant period of time, such as a full-semester, or a calendar year. In addition, future studies could address how teachers and senior students can work together to create an atmosphere that will facilitate first-year students’ transition from “ outsider ” to “ insider ”.

### **Conclusion**

Generally, although I had no idea what the outcome of this study would be when I made my first recording, I was surprised to learn of the over-arching nature of culture and its strong influence on student participation in even what I felt to be a relaxed context such as an office hour conversation. I realized that I, and perhaps other non-Japanese English teachers, believe that by coming to our office hours, students will simply come and speak, because that’s what we assume they have come for. However, how much they speak and what they say will likely be influenced by their relationships, not only with us, but also with each other. This research has taught me to keep this in mind in the future and not to expect new participants to be so voluble initially, but to give them time to become members of the office-hour community.

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