

The Lonely Learner

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Introduction - The group vs. the individual

EFL learners in Japan are a socially unique subset of individuals that make up Japanese society. This is a society defined by its group culture. In this culture it is the group, not the individual, that asserts its dominance, makes decisions, and controls the social interactions between its members. Because of this phenomena there can only be 2 choices for the individual in Japanese society: to be an insider (incumbent member of the group) or an outsider (someone who is outside the group's rules and jurisdiction.) A well-known Japanese term that is used to describe these 2 states is "*uchi*" or "insider" and "*soto*" meaning "outsider."

Since the outsiders forfeit the privileges and social recognition of the group it goes without

saying that most individuals will seek to enter the former. However, the conditions for entry are quite severe by Western standards because the individual must give up their individual sovereignty to the group mind. This results in schizoid behavior because personal opinions, thoughts and actions of the individual are suppressed in favor of adhering to the social values and conventions of the group in order to maintain group harmony. The unique duality can be defined by 2 words in Japanese: "*honne*" representing the true feelings of the individual, and "*tatemaie*," which is adherence to the social conventions of the group. Since the true feelings and desired behavior of the individual will regularly diverge from the social conventions and affirmative actions of the group, Japanese students are often put in a state of conflict, which cannot be resolved unless they leave the group.

The influence of Japanese group culture on individual student behavior is keenly felt in the EFL communicative classroom. Student's shy and apathetic behavior is one way that the group maintains harmony amongst its members. However, harmony comes at a cost. The cost to students in the EFL classroom is two fold: Firstly, communication is hindered because the students are afraid that "inaccurate" communication of their opinions or beliefs will upset the group harmony, and secondly, "stress." Maintaining the façade causes the students to alter their communication and behavior towards peers in the group, which can be stressful for them.

Fortunately for teachers, most students in Japan are quite accepting of the stress that their social dynamics forces upon them. However, in

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every classroom there are one or two students who have decided to part from the group and become “outsiders” as an answer to this stress. Some of these students may have never actually joined the group to become an “insider” in the first place. It is interesting to note that on diagnosis, these students display similar characteristics to those people affected with pervasive development disorders (P. D. D.) The outsiders appear to lack basic communication skills and are overly withdrawn from their peers. They reject the group, and likewise the group rejects them. In turn, they become islands of silence while the communicative engine of the classroom carries on without their participation.

For EFL teachers who focus on teaching communicative English, this is worrying state of affairs. The problem is exacerbated in Japan by an information technology driven society that encourages individual isolation and excessive communication through computer interfaces. The lack of “face-to-face” contact or necessity of personal negotiation in daily life means that today’s university student is ill equipped for direct personal communication with their peers. This problem may be compounded if the student is attempting to master communicating in a foreign language such as English, which puts much emphasis on the use and interpretation of body language, gestures, personal space and such intangible things that cannot be communicated well over the computer medium.

There are many examples in Japanese society that point to the rising incidence of individual isolationism. Extreme isolationists have been given a variety of labels including: *hikikomori*, or those individuals who isolate themselves at home and don’t venture outside their rooms; *otaku*, who are people that have an obsessive interest in information technology; and individuals diagnosed with PDD. This disorder displays symptoms similar to the *hikikomori* or *otaku*, where there is a delay in socialization and communication functions. What is alarming if statistics are analyzed is that Japan now faces the highest PDD incidence

in the developed world. PDD affects from 1.2% to 2.2% of all Japanese children. Consequently the *hikikomori*, *otaku*, and PDD afflicted students invariably become lonely learners if they are ever physically able to make it to a classroom.

In the university EFL classroom there will always be one or two students present that fall into the “lonely learner” category. It is imperative that the needs of these students are addressed. This paper will outline possible strategies that may be used to engage the lonely learner in classroom activities and discussion. A case study will also be introduced to help illustrate the problem, its effects on the classroom dynamics, and the effectiveness that these strategies had for one student studying English as a foreign language, who was diagnosed as suffering from the “lonely learner” syndrome.

Solving the lonely learner problem

In the EFL communicative classroom the lonely learners may be easily identified by their lack of participation in pair-work and group-work discussion. Key strategies aimed at solving this problem must seek to engage the lonely learner with other EFL learners and introduce them back into a social group. For Japanese EFL learners this is much more difficult than it first appears because the teacher has to solve, or at the very least reduce the tensions generated by the opposing states of “*honne*” and “*tatemae*.”

The best way to do this is to adopt a “humanistic” approach to teaching. This approach focuses on the creation of a friendly environment that is conducive to discussion and confidence building. Student fears of being ridiculed by the group for small mistakes must be allayed. Central to achieving this is the creation of a decentralized classroom. Rather than conducting the class on a one to one basis of teacher vs. students, the student group as a whole should be broken down into small groups or pairs of students who are then encouraged to interact with one another. The teacher becomes a facilitator for discussion, rather than the commandant direc-

tor as encountered in traditional language classes. The student on the other hand, is charged with the responsibility of becoming an autonomous learner.

Student empowerment

Student empowerment is one characteristic of autonomous learning that must be encouraged to engender confidence as well as facilitate a “bottom up” learning style. This means that the students must be provided with many choices throughout the lesson so that they can feel in control and be given more responsibility for their own learning. Choices may be made available to the student in discussion activities (providing many topics for the students to choose from), assignment topics, partners in pair-work and small group-work exercises, and learning styles. That is, have a lesson that provides many different mediums for the students to express themselves and acquire useful information.

Although the teacher’s role as the main player in classroom discussion is marginalized in the lesson, it doesn’t mean that the teacher is excluded from the learning process. Having a decentralized classroom means that the teacher has more time to devote to fostering a “forgiving” classroom atmosphere. The teacher is freed from the traditional lecture mentality, and can move around the room to “inspire” the students.

Efforts should be made to change the teacher’s role in class and also change student perceptions of the teacher. The image of an expert but distant authority figure must be dismantled and replaced by a “friendly” councilor. The councilor’s job is to build up the learner’s confidence through giving positive feedback and significant amounts of praise to individuals and the small groups in the classroom. Furthermore, the tendency for educators to jump on small grammatical inaccuracies in students’ communication when giving feedback must be refrained from. This will only stunt the development of communication skills in lonely learners and those suffering from being overly conscious of group scrutiny.

Instead, the language teacher should open their sights to the wider picture - which is to encourage learners to send and receive significant oral messages to each other in English. If the message that is sent by the learner is understood by the messages’ recipient, (independent of their being 100% grammatically accurate) then the goals set for oral communication have been successful.

Grading for communicative competence

A small note must be made on grading as well. In the context of a communicative classroom that focuses on oral communication over written communication, it is preferable that the grading also focuses on the student’s oral skills because it is these skills that the students are practicing in the classroom. This may not always be possible with extremely large sized classrooms, or, if the teacher elects to give written instead of oral assessment. In these cases, there should be some leeway given to material written by the students that is not 100% grammatically accurate.

The criteria of assessment for each educator will be different, however, “how easily” the written message communicated by students is able to be understood should be one of the main grading criteria. Effectiveness and clarity of the message is to be tested, not the actual syntax. However, when considering the degree to which “incorrect” syntax / grammar can be disregarded, how significantly the syntax / grammatical errors impede understanding of the message should be used as a sign post by the teacher. If, in the case of the beginner student, the message is unrecognizable due to significant grammatical / syntax errors, then the teacher needs to direct the student’s focus to building up their basic grammar / syntax understanding, before meaningful dialogue can be initiated. On the other hand, if the student makes minor grammatical / syntax mistakes such as leaving out articles, mistaking the spelling of a word, or using singular nouns where plurals would be more appropriate, the mistake should be pointed out to the student, but not in a critical sense unless it has a significant

effect on the meaning of the message that they are sending their partner. For example, mistaking the use of “th” and “s” in a word can change the meaning of the sentence. The simple phrase “I am going to take a **bus**” when the student wanted to say “I am going to take a **bath**” is an example of a pronunciation mistake that has caused grief for many a Japanese exchange student living overseas. Pronunciation mistakes that occur with similar sounding vowels such as “v” and “b”, as well as “l” and “r” should be pointed out in the text or homework written by the student and taken into consideration in the teacher’s grading. In this way student fears over small grammatical inaccuracies, which stunt confidence and communication can be calmed.

The ability of the teacher to move around the room while students are undertaking communicative activities in the lesson reduces the intimidating presence of the “expert lecturer” that is prevalent in the traditional school system. The result of this is that the classroom becomes more egalitarian. Both the students and the teacher feel that they can learn from one another. This positive atmosphere for learning also carries over into the development of good rapport with students.

Counting personal experiences

The sharing of personal experiences of both the teacher and the students is integral to opening the communication channels. There are many avenues in the lesson for the foreign teacher to share their own unique cultural and personal experiences with the students in order to build rapport. One way to do this is to build these personal experiences into formal listening exercises. The students can use the information that the teacher gives them to give and share opinions, participate in activities and talk about the differences with the teacher’s country and Japan. The student’s analytical abilities here should be relied on so that they can come to an understanding of the cultural / personal differences, as well as similarities between themselves and the teacher. The intrinsic interest generated through shared experiences

can help the students come to terms with dealing with the native teacher as a “human being” rather than solely a cultural curiosity.

The sharing of student experiences with other students in the classroom is also important for building bridges between students in the lesson. Every student should be given chances to introduce themselves, and share their life experiences outside of the university. This window into the private life of the students helps to build comradeship amongst them (including lonely learners) as common experiences can be shared. The empathetic bonds between students that arise from this practice will aid individual learning by contributing to the “nurturing” classroom atmosphere.

Dissolution of hierarchy

A simple strategy to help cut down the walls between teacher and students is the use of student nametags (written in English) in the first few lessons. Class size at university level is quite large and may extend to around 40 or so students in one class. This large size contributes to student “anonymity,” which hinders the communication flow from teacher to student, as well as from lonely learner to the other students in the classroom. Students need to be formally taught the cultural differences in name use in Japan and the West. Establishing a first name basis for class participation and encouraging students to use their first names in conversation (and on written name tags in the first few beginning lessons) can only increase the flow of communication. Ice breaking exercises in the first few lessons can supplement the use of English nametags. These exercises can be student surveys, introductory exercises, or even games that encourage the learner to discover private information concerning interests, hobbies or the life style of his or her peers. Increasing student familiarity with other students inside the classroom can help overcome the intrinsic shyness faced by many Japanese students and their embarrassment, which is one factor that contributes to a lack of class participation.

The seating plan inside the classroom must also be considered for the lonely learner. Failure of communication may be caused by an incompatibility with the lonely learner's partner. It is recommended that students are encouraged to group in pairs (Fig. 1) and change seating positions (Fig. 2) and hence change their communication groups and partners several times through the lesson.

For example, in figure (1) there are 4 conversation pairs. At intervals throughout the lesson one partner in the pair will move to another group to give all groups the chance to conduct dialogue with their new members (Fig. 2).

This practice will give the lonely learner many opportunities to have contact with different conversation partners and locate one that is more sympathetic to their needs.

Mentorship

The teacher should also take a proactive approach to seating arrangements. If the lonely learner is found to interact more with any potential partners, then peer tutoring and mentorship should be encouraged between them. The student mentor selected by the teacher should not only look after the lonely learner but also be able to explain the required task, give examples and offer ideas to get them started on exercises. A mentor who has a higher ability level in oral communication should be able to do this because of their higher confidence level. However, care must be taken in the selection process as a gap in ability levels between the two students that is too big only leads to frustration on part of the mentor. Ideally, the student selected to be a mentor to the lonely learner must only have a slightly higher ability level than the student they are

helping. However, in order to avoid frequent frustration from a lack of communication the job of mentor may also be cycled to different students throughout the lesson and course. In this way, rapport can be established between the lonely learner and many students during the communication course.

Discussing Western expectations

In the first few lessons it is vitally important to discuss teacher and student expectations of their participation during the lesson. It is particularly important to stress the differences in Western and Japanese approaches to class participation / discussion, and teach these differences in class so that the students know what is expected and how this expectation differs from their usual experience in a Japanese class. In particular, the Western preference for openly stating personal opinions, and the importance of sharing viewpoints cannot be overly stressed. It should be explained to the Japanese EFL learner that in the West, when entering a debate or giving an opinion, no one viewpoint is absolutely correct. Therefore, offering differing viewpoints is a strength that can help the class group as whole rather than a being seen as a weakness. Japanese students should feel easier once expectations and certain conventions for participation "tatemae" have been established. Students need also to be made aware that the process of discussion and participation in discussion is more important than the end goal, which may or may not be to retrieve certain information.

The communicative toolbox

The teaching of "communication strategies" can facilitate class participation and communication especially when the conversation breaks down. For the average student a breakdown in conversation is sometimes natural and is a small obstacle for communication. However, it may be an insurmountable problem for the lonely learner. Simple communicative strategies must be established at the beginning of the communication course to boost fluency in conversation, re-start student dialogues, and build communica-

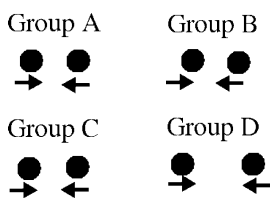


Fig. 1 Pair groupings

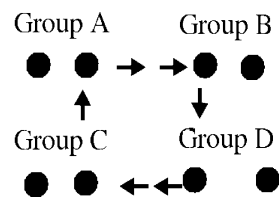


Fig. 2 Changing partners

tive confidence. Examples and the usage of these strategies have been discussed in a previous paper so they will only very briefly be summarized here. The communicative toolbox for the student should include expressions such as:

“I’m sorry I don’t understand.”

“Could you repeat that please?”

“What does…………. mean?”

“How do you say…………in Japanese/English?”

“Have you got it? / Do you understand?”

“I’ve got it. / I understand.”

“I’m sorry you’re talking too quickly for me. Could you slow down?”

It is advisable that “all” students be given a separate worksheet that they can carry to class with these communication strategies and explanations of the context of these strategies written on it. Throughout the class it is the teacher’s job to encourage referral to these 7 basic strategies when the communication process breaks down.

Development of interpersonal skills outside the classroom

Another weapon in the teacher’s arsenal to rein in the lonely learner in the lesson is the setting of specific assignments that encourage interpersonal communication outside the classroom. In many cases the lonely learners’ communication skills will be poor, even when they are interacting in their first language. Basic interpersonal skills can be developed outside the classroom through the setting of group based assignments or debate topics where the students must research and interact with their peers outside the bounds of a one and a half hour English communication lesson. Fraternization outside the classroom will not only give the lonely learner practice at direct communication, but it will also build up a support team that can help the lonely learner tackle the difficulties of foreign language acquisition inside the classroom.

This approach is very different from “online learning”, which can also take place outside the classroom and has been suggested by some

authors as a way to foster “community spirit”. However, in the context of differing cultures and their focus or lack of focus on body language, gestures and nonverbal communication, online learning can only exacerbate the communication difficulties for lonely learners because it encourages individual isolation and does not give learners practice at direct “peer-to-peer” communication (in the flesh,) which involves many nonverbal cues. Therefore, online learning has been discounted as a tool to address the problems of the lonely learner.

Case study - Taro the loner

A good example of the lonely learner phenomena and the positive effects that the above strategies have had for students can be found by examining one lonely learner in a third year university English communications classroom.

For reasons of anonymity this learner’s name will be given as “Taro”. Taro is unique in this study because his behavior and the consequent changes in behavior could be monitored over a 12-month period. Most students could only be observed for 6 months, or the length of a semester course. However, Taro elected to continue learning communicative English in the following year after completion of the preliminary 6-month course. His decision to continue a course, (which is designed to focus solely on communicative competence in a foreign language involving large amounts of student interaction) points to the beginnings of his successful evolution as a communicative student.

At the very beginning of the communicative English course Taro could be described as a typical lonely learner. That is, while physically present in the classroom, he appeared extremely shy and withdrawn from the rest of the class. There was no interaction with his class colleagues, and body language was nonexistent. Typically Taro sat at the back of the room and stared down at the desk. Overtures of communication from both teacher and classmates were extremely difficult because of the failure to initi-

ate eye contact as well as the lack of response to verbal stimuli. Taro's partner, or those seated in his vicinity soon evaporated because of the lack of response when typical pair-work activities were initiated.

(1) Observations of Taro

An early lesson in the course: The theme of this lesson was Japanese culture and lifestyle. One activity that was set to increase students' awareness of their own culture was a simple communicative pair-work crossword puzzle. This was an information gap activity. Student pairs had to create their own hints (for their partner) in English to define Japanese objects and cultural practices. These cultural practices were recorded as answers for one part of the crossword. For example, partner A had to look at their answer sheet and then create descriptive hints in English about Japanese cultural practices. Partner B had to listen to the hints in English to fill in the missing information in their section of the crossword. Communication between partners was essential for the task of completing the crossword. Unlike a normal crossword with its given clues, the challenge presented to the students reflects a probable scenario in real life where the students (traveling or living abroad) may have to try and describe their own culture using the limited English vocabulary that they possess.

Cooperation with a partner was necessary for the activity to succeed. The students were placed in pairs. Taro was also assigned a partner (without pre-mediation) and instructed to create English hints for his partner based on the items written on the worksheet. However, Taro did not make verbal contact with his partner. He kept his head down and also failed to achieve significant eye contact with his partner. In the end, the partner was forced to change from verbal techniques to written techniques (writing down the English hints that should have been verbally communicated to Taro) and which were required for the communication process. There was no contact between these two partners. However, when Taro was questioned throughout the lesson

he was able to communicate the answers in English directly with the teacher. The problem did not lie in a lack of understanding of the material.

This suggests that Taro's communication problem lay in one of two areas - (1) bad rapport with his partner, or, (2) intrinsic shyness at communicating in English in front of his peers. To eliminate the first condition Taro's partners were changed several times, however, the result was the same - a lack of eye contact and the lack of verbal communication. At the time, Taro was noted to be a loner, preferring to work alone rather than with other students.

(2) Changing learner strategies

Certain strategies were used during the semester to overcome Taro's preference for individual learning. Firstly, a first name basis was established with one-on-one communication with the teacher. This allowed the teacher to draw Taro into the lesson by calling on contributions from him in front of his partner as well as in front of his class peers. It increased his accountability in class and focused him on the assigned task because there was the possibility of being selected by the teacher. Next, lavish praise was heaped upon him when correct verbal answers were given by Taro in order to build up his self-confidence in front of his peers.

It was also noted that Taro ordinarily came in early to the classroom, before many of the other students had arrived. The teacher utilized this "pre-class" time in order to build rapport with Taro in an informal manner. For example, Taro was often asked in English how he had been, what he did over the weekend, or what his plans were for the week. At first, the teacher was ignored. However, after a period of time when Taro reconciled to himself that he had to communicate, he readily responded - first with one syllable "yes" or "no" answers, and later, as his confidence increased, with full sentences.

Gaining confidence led Taro to participate

more in class by more frequently volunteering answers in front of his peer group. His in-class participation also increased because cyclical rotation of student partners meant that he had many chances to interact with many different kinds of students (personality-wise). Activities selected in class (such as practicing greetings, self introductions and talking about personal interests) also provided opportunities for Taro to become more familiar with the other students and share experiences with them.

Activities allowing for an exchange of opinions and experiences in personal life created the opportunity to find a “mentor” for Taro that he was comfortable interacting with. Key characteristics displayed by Taro’s mentor were: a better than average command of English, an outgoing friendly manner, patience, and most importantly “empathy.” At times when Taro was less than communicative or refrained from making conversation his mentor was happy to work by-himself or with other students. However, when Taro could be engaged, his mentor made the best use of the time by communicating efficiently the nature of the task and offering encouragement and ideas to help the conversation flow.

The teacher also took advantage of Taro’s progress in communication with his mentor outside the classroom. Specifically, the student group was assigned a debating activity where they were given a choice of topics to voice their personal opinions on. At this point the teacher explained the cultural relevance of debating to the students and also why it is so important in the West to be able to voice personal opinions and defend them on any issue. This was contrasted with the need for group consensus in Japan to show the cultural difference to the students.

Once the student groups decided on the topic, they were asked to have a 4-minute debate concentrating on the pros and cons of the topic. The goal of the exercise was explicitly stated to the students. That is, for a successful outcome the conversation could not break down into silence.

The students had to keep talking the entire 4-minute period. As spontaneous conversation on a technical subject with no preparation is extremely difficult for lower intermediate students, the students were given class time to prepare their arguments.

The debate was deliberately set to take place in the following lesson (one week later). Before the lesson finished, the teacher stressed that apart from fluency, preparation was the other key marking criteria. Students would be given high marks for their debate if they came to class in the following week well prepared. This provided students with the motivation and opportunity to work on their arguments in their groups outside the classroom in their own time. Taro’s group consisted of Taro and a few fellow students, including his mentor. It was hoped that Taro would take advantage of the “out of class time” to interact with his mentor and the group by sharing ideas and information (as all of the students had to talk) - thus providing him valuable opportunities for the development of social skills outside the classroom.

The actual student debates exceeded the expectations of the teacher. Since the students had adequate preparation time, they (including Taro) were able to give their opinions and back these opinions up with evidence and examples. The conversations flowed back and forth as the students refuted each other’s opinions without the communication process breaking down into silence. Taro was readily able to talk about the pros or cons of a topic and refute peer opinions in his 4-minute talking period.

Seen from a long-term perspective, Taro had progressed from a shy withdrawn individual to an active class member with adequate communicative competence in a foreign language. At the end of the course in his third year he was given a “B” rating for English communication. This is a marked improvement over the “C” he received at the end of his second year. However, a better indicator of his success was the fact that he had

relinquished attachment to his mentor, and was able to fully participate as a member of any in-class group. Furthermore, by the end of the course his peers were also more accepting of him as a classmate. Strategies that aided his evolution in class focused on changing his status from a “socially starved reject” to a socially autonomous learner. Taro benefited from a nurturing environment where the group was made accountable for his symptoms of withdrawal. Personalization of relations, pre-class engagement, mentorship and the development of social skills outside the classroom were instrumental in developing Taro’s self-confidence, which led to his communicative success.

Conclusion

Lonely learners are those learners that either reject, or have been rejected by the student group in the classroom because of their poor communication skills. It is the teacher’s job to create a classroom atmosphere conducive to re-introducing these students into the group. Strategies suitable for doing this must build up the student’s self-confidence, eliminate their fear of making mistakes and provide opportunities for developing the student’s communication skills. This short paper outlines a few in-class and outside the classroom activities to address communication problems. It was found that even “lonely learners” develop communicative competence if their fears of group-work participation (participating in front of their peers) are alleviated. The best way to do this is by establishing a warm “personalized” classroom in which students collaborate to help one another gain communicative confidence.

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Summary

Japanese society is a society defined by its group boundaries. Lonely learners are those students who have rejected, or been rejected by the group. This has come about partly due to inadequate development of social skills and partly due to social pressure associated with following group protocol (toeing the line.) In the communicative setting of the EFL classroom, leaving the group invariably leads to a breakdown in interpersonal communication, with negative effects for the individual's self-confidence and class participation. This paper suggests a humanistic approach be adopted to re-engage the lonely learner in classroom activities. The creation of a positive classroom environment, student empowerment and the dissolution of the traditional hierarchical relationship between teacher and student can bring about positive changes to the student. An egalitarian classroom setting empowers students and gives them the confidence to make contributions and support the weaker members of the class. The sharing of viewpoints and experiences inside and outside the classroom helps to create a more personal atmosphere that is conducive to peer tutoring and mentorship. These practices are a pre-requisite for re-engaging the lonely learner in classroom life.