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Research Article

The Cultural Weight of Silence: A Grounded Theory of English Speaking Reluctance in Japanese EFL Classrooms

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Abstract

The "silent classroom" phenomenon in Japan has been persisting despite decades of policy reforms in its English education geared toward adapting communicative approaches and producing more global human resources. Intending to examine the socio-cultural factors that deter Japanese high school students from conversing in English, this grounded theory study focuses on the roles of cultural values, the dynamics of the classroom, and the structures of educational institutions that conspire to silence students. The findings highlight the complex social, cultural, psychological, and institutional factors that underpin Japanese students' resistance to English spoken in the classroom. Grounded theory made it clear that silence is not simply the absence of speech or a sign of linguistic inadequacy, but is, instead, an adaptive, culturally permitted response that is deeply woven into the educational and social fabric of Japan. The Cultural Weight of Silence theory reveals that students' quietude is both a kind of shield and a statement of risk management, social alignment, and institutional contradiction. It turns upside down the simple and deficit-oriented narratives depicting Japanese learners of English as passive, shy, or unconfident. It provokes a deeper reflection on the essence of communication, emphasizing silence as not just the absence of sound but the presence of something that has as much meaning as a talk. Genuine effort to uplift the level of communicative competence in Japan must go well beyond instruction in the technicalities of the language. It must confront head-on and change, if only slightly, the cultural architecture of Japan's classrooms. It must do something so far unrealized: challenge the institutional structures that keep so many living and learning in unfortunate silence. Details of the theory as by byproduct of this study and the implications are also discussed in the paper.

Keywords: Silent classroom, EFL in Japan, EFL, Japanese students, grounded theory, Japan.

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Introduction

The "silent classroom" phenomenon in Japan has been persisting despite decades of policy reforms in its English education geared toward adapting communicative approaches and producing more global human resources (Hashimoto & Glasgow, 2021). Researchers attributed Japanese students' reluctance to speak to several factors like fear of making mistakes, conformity, and anxiety about losing face (Maher & King, 2022; Wan, 2021). In addition, the curriculum's emphasis on memorization or rote learning, the grammar-translation method, and examination performance limits the students' abilities to communicate spontaneously (Refareal et al., 2025; Ratunil et al., 2025). This also seems to create a disjunction between national language policies and the realities of English in the classroom.

Although previous studies have looked into anxiety related to using the English language, the willingness to communicate in English, and the silence that some students maintain in Japanese EFL classrooms, there is still a lot that we do not understand. This gap is the focus of the present study. We are interested in how various factors – socio-cultural norms, institutional expectations, and interpersonal relationships – come together to create the complex phenomenon of English-speaking behavior in Japan. We also shed light on an underrepresented sector of the student population in our study.

This grounded theory study examines the socio-cultural factors that deter Japanese high school students from conversing in English. It focuses on the roles of cultural values, the dynamics of the classroom, and the structures of educational institutions that conspire to silence students. Grounding the work in qualitative research that spans the perspectives of both students and teachers, this study offers a fresh perspective on the push toward more communicative forms of language education, while also reflecting on the Japanese education system.

Methodology

Research Design

This study used a qualitative design, specifically the grounded theory method, following the tradition developed by Charmaz (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2021). Qualitative research is particularly suited to areas like this one, where sufficient prior explanations are lacking. In such cases, research can benefit from building explanations directly from the lived experiences of participants. The complex interplay of socio-cultural, institutional, and psychological factors that influence Japanese students' reluctance to speak English, grounded theory provided a systematic, yet flexible, framework within which to develop an empirically grounded explanation of this phenomenon (Charmaz, 2021). The study adopted a constructivist grounded theory perspective, recognizing that knowledge is co-constructed in the interactions between researchers and participants. We also recognize that interpretations are shaped by both the data and the researcher's positionality (Charmaz, 2021).

Participants of the Study

We selected 25 participants using purposive and theoretical sampling as part of the grounded theory procedures (Creswell & Poth, 2016). The participants consisted of 20 Japanese high school students from three different schools in Osaka City, as well as five teachers of English as a foreign language who worked with the students during the 2024-2025 school year. The students were selected from three public high schools in Osaka, Japan, as part of a within-site triangulation of the grounded theory methodology. All students were currently taking a compulsory English communication course as part of their high school education. Each student had spent at least two years studying English as part of the Japanese educational system. All students exhibited reluctance or low participation (as verified by their teachers) in speaking English during class activities. The teachers had a minimum of three years of experience teaching English in Japanese high schools and familiarity with principles of Communicative Language Teaching.

Instruments Used

The primary instruments used in this study were semi-structured interviews and classroom observations to gather detailed and reflective information of the participants' experiences, perceptions, and interpretations of the phenomena under investigation. The flexible nature of semi-structured interviews corresponds well with the grounded theory approach to data collection, which is also flexible and open-ended (Charmaz, 2021). The interview guides were developed to help us explore the participants' language anxiety, sociocultural influences, and participation in the classroom; they were adapted throughout the study to include emerging themes. Direct classroom observations were used as a complementary tool to provide context for the interview data. We were able to directly observe the patterns of interaction, both verbal and non-verbal, that provided the interview data with context. Observations were non-participant and descriptive. The aim was minimal interference from the researchers.

Data Collection Procedure

The data were collected over a six-month period and proceeded in three distinct phases. Before the data collection, access to schools was secured through formal permission from administrators. All participants received carefully prepared information sheets and signed consent forms. Parental consent was obtained for all minors who participated. During data collection, semi-structured interviews were conducted in Japanese with the student

participants. This ensured that all respondents were linguistically comfortable and able to respond authentically. Interviews with students lasted approximately 30-45 minutes. For teachers, the interviews ranged from 45-60 minutes. All interviews were audio-recorded with consent and transcribed verbatim. Classroom observations were conducted over several English lessons. These observations consisted of field notes that documented patterns of verbal and non-verbal participations, interactions between the teachers and students, and environmental factors that might be contributing to silence. After data collection, the data were initially analyzed for meaningful patterns and themes. Those preliminary analyses then informed subsequent interviews that were conducted with the participant students. The participants were then given the opportunity to review the transcripts of their interviews and the other data collected. At this time, they could also make any necessary clarifications.

Data Analysis

The systematic coding procedures of constructivist grounded theory were followed in the analysis of the data. These procedures comprise initial coding, focused coding, and theoretical coding (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2021; Charmaz, 2021). Initial coding involved a line-by-line analysis of transcripts and field notes to identify and give voice to the significant actions, processes, and meanings of the participants. As the hallmark of grounded theory, the actions, processes, and meanings that seemed significant in one case were constantly compared to those in all other cases. After achieving a certain level of theoretical saturation with the initial codes, the researchers used these initial codes as a point of departure for developing more focused or refined codes, which are intended to capture the more evident patterns across the cases being studied. The focused codes developed through this process served as the building blocks of the theoretical framework we constructed in the theoretical coding phase. Final analyses were performed by integrating all of the focused codes into conceptual categories, leading to the construction of a substantive theory.

Data Trustworthiness

To ensure trustworthiness, the study adhered to criteria that ensure the quality of qualitative research and the validity of its results. These criteria are credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Ahmed, 2024). For the current study, credibility was enhanced through extended immersion in observations and data triangulation across interviews and observations. Transferability was addressed by providing a detailed description of the context within which the research took place, as well as of the participants who participated in it. Dependability was ensured through the use of consistent field notes and an audit trail. We ensured confirmability through reflexive journaling, peer debriefing, and member checking with a select group of participants who were asked to validate the researchers' interpretations.

Ethical Considerations

The ethical obligations of qualitative research were strictly adhered to in this study, and approval was obtained from the school's administrators. Study participants were fully informed concerning the study's purpose and procedures. Their rights as participants, including confidentiality and the right to voluntary participation, were thoroughly discussed. It was emphasized that refusal or withdrawal at any time would incur no penalty or loss of benefits. The data were wholly anonymized. Indeed, this was done in such a way that even the research team could not identify any of the participants. Special procedures were followed concerning the minor participants in the study to ensure their welfare and understanding of what research they were a part of.

RESULT

Initial Coding

Coding at the initial phase involved examining the interview transcripts, field notes, and classroom observations associated with significant actions, emotions, and meanings tied to student reluctance to speak English. Each passage was examined closely, almost line by line, and dissected for potentially relevant codes. What emerged from this low-level, almost granular analysis of the data was a set of codes signaling various reasons for student reluctance in class participation, institutional constraints, socio-cultural expectations, and interaction dynamics in the EFL classrooms.

Table 1. *Excerpts and Results of Initial Coding*

Participant/Observation	Participant Utterance or Field Note	Initial Codes Identified
Student 4 (I)	"*I'm usually worried because if I say something wrong, my classmates laugh. I'm shy and I feel embarrassed.*"	Embarrassment, Fear of mistakes, Peer judgment
Student 7 (I)	"*Sometimes I know the answers but stay quiet because I don't want to stand out.*"	Fear of visibility, Withholding knowledge, Social conformity

Participant/Observation	Participant Utterance or Field Note	Initial Codes Identified
Student 11 (I)	"*It's safer to stay quiet in Japan. Speaking English makes you stand out.*"	Fear of standing out, Risk avoidance, Social conformity
Student 15 (I)	"*I always get nervous when the teacher asks me to speak my heart beats fast, and I just want to disappear*."	Anxiety, Physical discomfort, Fear of public speaking
Student 16 (I)	"*Our tests are always writing and don't focus on speaking so we don't practice speaking much*."	Low perceived value of speaking, Institutional influence
Student 19 (I)	"*If I speak too much English, my classmates think I'm showing off. So it's better to stay like quiet like everyone else.*"	Fear of peer judgment, Modesty norms, Group harmony pressure
Teacher 1 (I)	"*Many of our students can write well, but they seem to forget everything when asked to speak. It's not about ability. It's about confidence*."	Ability-performance gap, Confidence barrier, Speaking anxiety
Teacher 2 (I)	"*Even students with very good English hesitate. They usually worry about losing face*."	Face-saving, Hesitation despite ability, Fear of negative evaluation
Class B (O)	*During a practice speaking task, only two students volunteered; most avoided eye contact and seem to be doing something on their desk.*	Avoidance behavior, Non-verbal resistance, Low participation
Class C (O)	*Teacher encouraged group discussion in English, but students switched to Japanese after a few seconds. They usually look at their notes*.	Language switching, Reluctance to sustain English use, Peer comfort zone

I = Interview; O = Observation

The first coding cycle produced more than 250 individual codes that, when aggregated, suggested a number of consistent socio-cultural and institutional patterns that were influencing the students' reluctance to speak English. From this initial coding, we identified several key themes.

Fear of Public Mistakes and Negative Evaluation. The deep-rooted cultural significance of haji (shame) and face-saving is reflected in students' frequent expressions of fear of making mistakes in front of others, getting laughed at, or harming their social image.

Group Conformity and Social Harmony. Many students prioritize peer acceptance over active participation in class and thus do not stand out and avoid disrupting the group equilibrium (wa) when they speak.

Physical and Emotional Anxiety. Physiological symptoms were reported by participants, who described feeling nervous and uncomfortable while completing speaking tasks. This indicated the possible psychological impact of their perceptions of what the classroom environment demanded of them.

Institutional Influences. A misalignment was perceived by the students between the practices in the classroom and the priorities of the assessments, where speaking held little weight in the exams, which in turn reduced the motivation to engage verbally.

Ability-Silence Discrepancy. Linguistic competence did not always equal spoken participation. Teachers noticed this. High-performing students often choose silence instead of taking social risks.

The initial codes laid the groundwork for later, more focused coding. In this next phase, we took the strands from the codes and wove them into patterns. These patterns represented what, in qualitative coding, is often referred to as the "story" that the data are telling L. W. Mills, 2006). These initial stories were subject to interpretation and then reinterpreted as more data were gathered and new insights were generated.

Focused Coding

We systematically scrutinized the initial codes, which were created to find higher-level patterns and recurring themes in participant talk and classroom observations. Using constant comparison, we distilled numerous micro-level codes into more manageable and targeted codes. These targeted codes get at the heart of the matter, capturing the key factors, institutional, psychological, and sociocultural, that influence some students' reluctance to converse in English.

The comprehensive, focused codes demonstrate that students are pathologically reluctant to speak English because of a confluence of socio-cultural, peer, psychological, and institutional factors.

In particular, speaking English is a socially risky thing to do for the participants because they are likely to be judged. However, modesty and harmony are group norms in Japanese culture. They encourage a low profile and discourage standing out, thus making it somewhat paradoxical that speaking English in those communities is fraught with risk. Even students with sufficient language abilities frequently choose not to speak up in class for

Table 2. *Development of Focused Codes from Initial Codes*

Cluster of Initial Codes	Focused Code	Supporting Evidence
Fear of mistakes, Peer judgment, Embarrassment, Fear of visibility, Fear of public speaking, Anxiety, Physical discomfort	Fear of Public Exposure	Students showed apprehension about committing errors or being unfavorably evaluated in the presence of classmates. They described elevated levels of anxiety, and in some cases, almost enough to be called panic attacks. Physical symptoms accompanied this kind of anxiety, such as turning red, trembling, a lump in the throat, or a sensation of rocks in the stomach. Teachers confirmed that some students were so fearful of negative outcomes that they would avoid participating altogether.
Fear of standing out, Risk avoidance, Social conformity, Modesty norms, Group harmony pressure, Peer comfort zone	Pressure to Conform and Avoid Distinction	The requirement to fit in with one's peers, not calling attention to oneself, and keeping group harmony (*wa*) were emphasized by participants as reasons they felt discouraged from speaking English. Some students show solidarity with their classmates who are not good at English by not showing off their English skills in the class.
Face-saving, Hesitation despite ability, Fear of negative evaluation, Maintaining reputation	Social Image Preservation	Seeing English as a possible threat to one's social image, students prioritized saving their face and avoiding *haji*, or shame, even when they were confident in their English language abilities
Avoidance behavior, Non-verbal resistance, Low participation, Language switching, Withholding knowledge	Passive Classroom Resistance	Observations and student accounts show subtle yet consistent avoidance tactics. These might involve withholding answers, switching to Japanese, or disengaging participants when they are asked to converse during speaking activities.
Low perceived value of speaking, Institutional influence, Assessment focus, Ability-performance gap	Institutionally Reinforced Silence	The participants, especially the teachers, pointed out that the way the curriculum was structured, the way exams focused on written skills, and the way speaking was hardly assessed all combined to reinforce the idea that it really does not matter much if students can speak English in an academic context.

fear of being seen as overly aggressive or, even in some instances, "insensitive."

The silence of many students is reinforced unintentionally by institutional factors. Examination systems and classroom practices minimize the importance of oral communication in academic success.

Classroom quietness is sustained by the observable behaviors that manifest passive resistance. These behaviors include, but are not limited to, silence, avoidance of eye contact, and the use of code-switching.

The focused coding phase guided the next stage of theoretical coding, culminating in the development of a substantive theory. This theory explains the socio-cultural mechanisms that keep the "silent classroom" going.

Theoretical Coding and Substantive Theory Development

The last part of the analysis was theoretical coding. During this step, all of the focused codes that had been developed in earlier stages were integrated and organized into higher-order conceptual categories. These categories represent a more advanced level of abstraction, wherein the concepts that lie at the core of Japanese EFL students' reluctance to speak in class are found.

Silence is not a passive or isolated phenomenon but an actively maintained practice shaped by the intersection of socio-cultural expectations and peer dynamics (socio-cultural), the psychology of the individual and the group (psychological), and the structures of the institution (institutional). These are the elements that interact to make silence seem like an appropriate response. They make it seem like a response that carries social and academic value in a context where, for English learners, speaking English appears to threaten group cohesion and carry an equally minimal academic reward.

Core Category: The Cultural Weight of Silence

A core category that emerged is the 'Cultural Weight of Silence,' which illustrates how students are shaped by their reluctance to speak English through layered mechanisms that are profoundly socio-cultural in nature and deeply embedded within Japanese society and educational structures. Figure 1 illustrates the dynamics of the cultural weight of silence theory, especially in the Japanese classroom setting. The framework is represented by a house with its foundation (psychological), columns or pillars (socio-cultural), and roof (institutional). Each individual or student is like a house being built. Although there are many other contributing factors in building

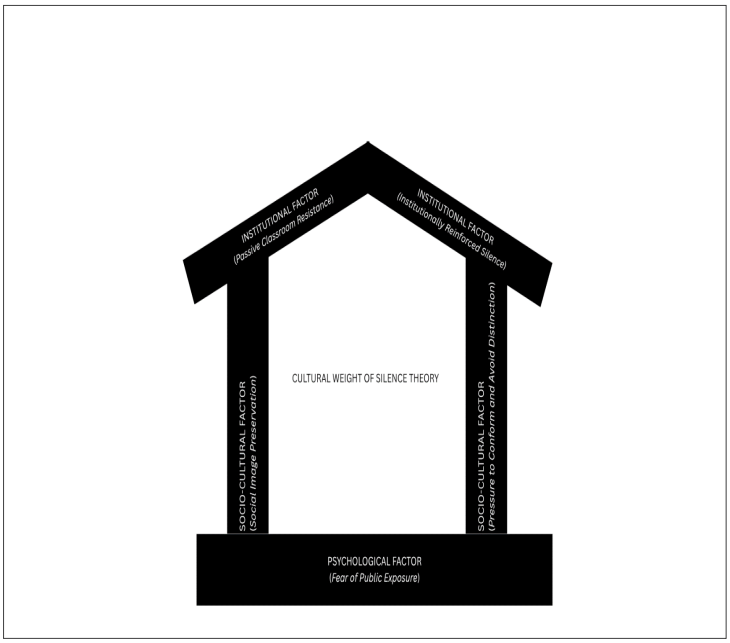

Figure 1. *Theoretical Model of the Cultural Weight of Silence*

each student, we argue that, in the context of academic formation, Japanese students are constructed with primary materials: psychological, socio-cultural, and institutional factors.

Psychological. The psychological factor that contributes to the cultural weight of silence is the *fear of public exposure*. To speak English is to engage in risk-laden, public performance that invites judgment and potential penalty for error, such as embarrassment or *haji* (loss of face). When students view English speaking this way, it overlooks English's potential as a tool for private, low-risk, public engagement — the space where most students dwell, judgment-free.

Socio-cultural. The socio-cultural factors that contribute to the cultural weight of silence include the preservation of social image and *pressure to conform and avoid distinction.* In terms of *Social Image Preservation*, students manage their reputations by limiting behaviors that could attract negative attention or disrupt the social identities they have worked hard to construct. When students are silent, they might be using silence as a protective strategy, not necessarily indicative of students' ignorance. Regarding *pressure to conform and avoid distinction*, in Japanese culture, *wa* (group harmony) is highly valued, as is modesty. These traits discourage individuals from standing out, even in positive ways. Speaking English in class can be seen as an act of self-promotion or as being too confident.

Institutional. The institutional factors that contribute to the cultural weight of silence are *passive classroom resistance and institutionally reinforced silence*. The EFL class participants employ subtle forms of resistance that are sanctioned by their culture. These are avoiding eye contact, switching to Japanese, and withholding knowledge. They are not resisting in ways that would get them in trouble, but if we add up the forms of resistance that class participants indulge in, we inevitably sustain silence in the classroom. For *institutionally reinforced silence*, educational systems and assessment structures often undervalue spoken English, thereby being almost complicit in legitimizing students' underdeveloped verbal skills. Part of the problem lies in the way in which oral performance is assessed. It tends to be assessed in a way that, while it may be fair to the average student, is almost depressing to the very few students who perform at the top of the scale. A good student may be a not-so-good speaker. This is not good practice and is certainly not a good outcome.

Substantive Theory

Just as a house where the dwellers feel safe, this grounded theory (the cultural weight of silence theory) posits that silence is not a deficit or lack of ability, but an adaptive behavior that is socially reinforced, and that fits well with Japan's broader cultural and institutional landscape. It sees culturally adapted students engaging in silent behaviors for the greater good of their academic lives. Many of the participants do not necessarily lack the ability to speak English when they are silent. They navigate a delicate web of social expectations, psychological risks, and educational contradictions, always seeking some kind of harmony and peace as they venture forth into their world.

Attempts to promote English proficiency in Japan must address these intersecting socio-cultural forces rather than viewing silence as a psychological barrier that prohibits people from speaking. Interventions that overlook the cultural weight of silence risk reinforcing the very dynamics they seek to disrupt.

Discussion

Initial Coding Phase

The first coding process illuminated deeply embedded socio-cultural, psychological, and institutional factors influencing the reluctance of Japanese students to speak English in classroom settings. This outcome is consistent with prior scholarship, which has indicated that Japanese classroom silence is not just about students' English proficiency (Shachter & Haswell, 2022). Their analysis reveals such silence to be a complex issue that is mediated by and through culturally specific values and beliefs.

The recurrent theme in the first layer of coding was the pervasive fear of public mistakes and the anxiety surrounding negative peer evaluation. Students' statements revealed a significant amount of self-consciousness and an almost childlike fear of being caught doing something foolish. All this seemed to cover up for not really making very good English when we know they could if they also knew they had a right not to be perfect and could just get on with the act of really doing it if they wanted to. Previous studies on *haji* (shame) (Shirai & Ito, 2024) and face-saving tendencies (Muroya, 2023) confirm the participants' heightened self-consciousness, embarrassment, and avoidance behaviors. From a sociolinguistic perspective, it seems clear that speaking English in front of peers carries social risks that extend beyond language proficiency.

Equally intertwined with this is the influence of group conformity and social harmony, embodied in the Japanese cultural concept of *wa* (group equilibrium). Initial codes such as "social conformity," "fear of standing out," and "modesty norms" reflect students' prioritization of maintaining peer cohesion over individual expression. These findings align with Yashima et al.'s (2018) work on communication in Japan, which suggests that cultural expectations surrounding humility and the non-disruption of group norms significantly suppress spontaneous language use.

Also, initial coding emphasized that the students' anxiety was both physical and emotional. They accounted for the physiology of their anxiety when they described conditions like rapid heartbeat and just plain discomfort during the speaking tasks. These accounts add yet another dimension to the already rich literature on foreign language anxiety, a barrier to communicative engagement that has been well documented (Toyama & Yamazaki, 2022; Aubrey et al., 2022; Hayasaki & Ryan, 2022).

Institutional influences also emerged prominently. Students and teachers expressed a clear disconnect between national policy discourse emphasizing communicative competence (Yu et al., 2021) and classroom realities, where speaking holds little academic weight. The perceived low value of speaking, with assessment structures favoring written performance, mirrors critiques in the literature regarding the examination-driven nature of Japanese English education (Refareal et al., 2025).

Finally, teachers' accounts reveal an ability-silence discrepancy that speaks to a crucial tension: linguistic competence does not ensure verbal participation. High-achieving students often know much but say little, and for them, as for many, silence is a safer route. This finding calls into question deficit models that attribute silence to low ability. It also reinforces what Bao and Schachter (2024) seem to indicate that students who desire more verbal participation in the classroom but, due to existing social norms, remain silent, even though they are capable of engaging in discourse.

The empirical support gained from the initial coding helps to understand classroom silence as the result of a complex interplay of social, cultural, psychological, and institutional forces. The findings underscore the need for enhanced pedagogical practices that encompass various aspects of the language learning experience. This understanding establishes the groundwork for the study's subsequent focused coding and theoretical integration.

Focused Coding

The focused coding phase took the analysis a step further. It distilled more than 250 initial codes into five interconnected conceptual categories. These categories present a detailed and clear picture of why, at a socio-cultural and psychological level, Japanese students are so hesitant to speak English. Silence is a protective, socially sanctioned cover under which Japanese students can operate, essentially keeping them safe from the kind of public performance that speaking English in front of their peers really demands.

The participants' *fear of public exposure* reflects a pervasive anxiety surrounding visibility, peer judgment, and performance in English-speaking tasks. This aligns with established research on foreign language anxiety (Toyama & Yamazaki, 2022; Aubrey et al., 2022; Hayasaki & Ryan, 2022) but extends the discussion by situating anxiety within Japan's cultural emphasis on emotional restraint and avoidance of haji (shame) (Muroya, 2023; Shirai & Ito, 2024). Physiological symptoms, such as nervousness or discomfort, form the basis of student narratives. However, these symptoms are not isolated responses; they are more like the visible tip of an iceberg. Underneath these physiological symptoms lies a more significant issue: the expectation espoused in long-standing societal and cultural norms that individuals should avoid making mistakes (error avoidance) and that, when evaluated (such

as on a test), they should present themselves in the best possible light (self-presentation).

The second and third focused codes – *pressure to conform and avoid distinction* and *social image preservation* – further illuminate the relational nature of silence. To speak English is not merely to accomplish a language task; it is also to engage in a sort of social act that risks disrupting group harmony (*wa*) or signaling undesirable individuality. This finding resonates with Muroya's (2023) argument that English-speaking reluctance in Japan is often more about complying with conformity pressures than it is about possessing or lacking worthy linguistic skills. Even high-achieving students in this study demonstrated a sort of pushover hesitance that makes one wonder just what kind of social image one constructs by speaking a foreign language. Bao and Schachter's (2024) work is thus relevant here, mirroring that for high school students in Japan, there may be more at stake socially when one speaks English than when one is silent.

Identifying the focused code of *passive classroom resistance* adds nuance to discussions that have already been held about learner silence. Prior studies have described the classroom reticence of Japanese students as passivity (Sato, 2024; Refareal et al., 2025). They have not considered that such behaviors as avoiding eye contact, language switching, and withholding responses might represent intentional, culturally appropriate acts of resistance. This study argues that these acts make silence a subtle strategy for navigating the prevailing power structure of academic settings, where conflicting individual language learning and group cohesion goals exist.

Lastly, the code *institutionally reinforced silence* shows how factors within Japan's education system are conducive to achieving and upholding silence. Despite national educational reforms that promote communicative competence, the actual practices that occur inside Japan's classrooms remain heavily biased toward written forms of communication, and judgment plans of assessment that are written (Yu et al., 2021). The participants in the study perceive that what happens in Japan's classrooms is not very conducive to demonstrating the types of communicative skills that would be valued in the academic world. The types of assessments used in Japan's education system tend to evaluate students' skills in written forms of communication (Refareal et al., 2025).

Altogether, the focused codes indicate that Japanese students are not simply shy or reticent due to psychological reasons or because they have not acquired the necessary pedagogical skills to converse in English. It reflects a complex combination of cultural, peer, and institutional factors that work against speaking even when students say they want to. This reinforces the argument that English education in Japan should extend beyond its current almost exclusive focus on teaching skills.

At this stage, the groundwork was laid for theoretical integration – where these conceptual categories were synthesized into a coherent explanatory model of the "silent classroom" phenomenon.

Theoretical Coding and Substantive Theory Development

The Cultural Weight of Silence: A Multilayered Construct

The final part of the analysis involved theoretical coding. In this final analytical phase, the focused codes established earlier were synthesized into higher-order conceptual categories. The analysis progressed beyond surface-level patterns to reveal the deeper socio-cultural, psychological, and institutional mechanisms that collectively sustain the Japanese students' reluctance to converse in English in institutional settings, such as classrooms.

This analysis led to the development of the Cultural Weight of Silence Theory, which views classroom silence in Japan not as a passive absence of speech but as a socially intelligent means of maintaining the appearance of silence in the classroom. This way of maintaining the appearance of silence in the classroom is, in fact, a hegemonic cultural practice. Classroom silence is taught, learned, and, hence, as a classroom practice, is hegemonically maintained.

From the data, the Cultural Weight of Silence has emerged. It captures how silence is reinforced in English language classrooms across three interdependent layers: psychological, socio-cultural, and institutional. These layers do not work in isolation. They coalesce and collide. They shape the students' perceptions of English speaking.

Psychological Layer: Fear of Public Exposure

At the foundation is the psychological burden students bear when they must speak English. Participants consistently framed English speaking as a high-risk, public performance that must pass peer scrutiny and that, if it does not, could cause the speaker embarrassment or haji (loss of face). Even students who are quite capable of performing in the target language hold back in order to avoid these risks. This resonates with existing research on foreign language anxiety (Toyama & Yamazaki, 2022; Aubrey et al., 2022; Hayasaki & Ryan, 2022) but situates the anxiety within the Japanese cultural context, where public mistakes carry more severe interpersonal consequences. Crucially, this foundational layer shows that silence has a protective psychological function – it does not always signal a lack of ability (Bao & Schachter, 2024; Muroya, 2023). More

often than not, it is rooted in a more clever kind of risk management (Sato, 2024; Refareal et al., 2025).

Socio-Cultural Layer: Social Image Preservation and Pressure to Conform

Japan's collectivist ethos, which emphasizes group harmony (wa), modesty, and social cohesion, undergirds the quietly obedient student. Speaking English in class is often viewed as a sign of distinction that might disrupt group or community norms in Japan. Such acts in public might violate fundamental Japanese social values. Moreover, quiet students also maintain social order by not disturbing the delicate balance between group equality and hierarchy. This behavior reflects broader cultural narratives that resist excessive self-assertion. This aligns with Harumi's (2023) findings that silence can be a socially valued form of communication. Indeed, as the socio-cultural layer forms a pillar and a wall of the silent life of Japanese students, which helps us understand why Japanese people are highly reserved and almost mysterious (see Wuwongse et al., 2020; Inazo, 2023), their silence in itself becomes a form of communication, both inside and outside academic settings.

Institutional Layer: Passive Resistance and Systemic Reinforcement

The further institutional environment legitimizes silence through two mechanisms: (1) passive classroom resistance and (2) structurally reinforced silence. Students employ subtle avoidance strategies, such as avoiding eye contact, code-switching to Japanese, or withholding participation. They do this not as overt defiance—because that would be high-risk in their culture of collectivism—but as low-risk acts of disengagement that are natura by their culture. At the same time, Japan's educational systems, including their curriculum design and assessment practices, tend to undervalue the importance of spoken English. Despite policy statements extolling the virtues of communicative competence (Hashimoto & Glasgow, 2021;), students perceive very little in the way of English verbal participation (Refareal et al., 2025; Yu et al., 2021) that translates into rewards, and, therefore, silence is a rational academic choice associated with English in Japan. Consequently, as the framework illustrates, the institutional factor may serve as a protective measure, much like a roof in a house. However, this factor may also serve as a ceiling that limits students from further developing their speaking skills in the context of EFL.

Substantive Theory: Silence as an Adaptive Cultural Practice

The Cultural Weight of Silence Theory, a house built by society, posits that classroom silence is an adaptive, socially reinforced behavior. Students navigate a complex web of cultural expectations, psychological risks, and institutional contradictions, employing silence as a mechanism for self-preservation, social alignment, and academic pragmatism. Rather than framing silence as a communicative failure or deficit, this theory interprets it as a learned, contextually appropriate response deep in Japan's socio-cultural and educational ecology.

Implications

The theory challenges deficit perspectives that ascribe silence to individual shortcomings. It credits the theory with making a much-needed interventions that take into account cultural, psychological, and institutional realities. It also makes a clear argument in favor of the much-needed counter-narrative: that silence is not always a negative thing; instead, it can be a thoughtful, respectable, and safe form of communication. The theory argues, in effect, that warming up to the idea of silence as an act of respect might just be a necessary first step in moving toward a more verbally engaging culture.

Conclusion

This research has highlighted the complex social, cultural, psychological, and institutional factors that underpin Japanese students' resistance to English spoken in the classroom. Grounded theory made it clear that silence is not simply the absence of speech or a sign of linguistic inadequacy, but is, instead, an adaptive, culturally permitted response that is deeply woven into the educational and social fabric of Japan. The Cultural Weight of Silence theory reveals that students' quietude is both a kind of shield and a kind of statement—a product, that is, of risk management, social alignment, and institutional contradiction.

This research, in a critical way, turns upside down the simple and deficit-oriented narratives depicting Japanese learners of English as passive, shy, or unconfident. It frames silence in the act of learning as a complex, yet not well-understood, but highly valued behavior associated with Japan's collectivist culture, its social structure, and its examination-oriented education system. Whatever kind of linguistic proficiency Japanese learners of English may harbor, speaking English cannot be just that; it must also, if Japanese cultural norms are to be followed, be a precisely timed performance that somehow safeguards the kind of group harmony (wa) that the Japanese are so good at maintaining.

This study philosophically provokes a deeper reflection on the essence of communication. In a Western educational setting, talking is often seen as a sign of engagement, understood as a sort of "give and take," with the instructor

as the primary agent of the dialogue. But this research demonstrates that if you are going to give talking the sort of social weight it carries in Western educational settings, you also have to recognize that silence is something socially loaded as well. Silence is not just the absence of sound but the presence of something that has as much meaning as a talk.

Hence, anything that could be classified as a genuine effort to uplift the level of communicative competence in Japan must go well beyond instruction in the technicalities of the language. It must confront head-on and change, if only slightly, the cultural architecture of Japan's classrooms. It must do something so far unrealized: challenge the institutional structures that keep so many living and learning in unfortunate silence. In the end, the path to disassembling the cultural weight of silence leads not through the deletion of silence, but through the acknowledgment of its significance—and from that, to a far more inclusive vision of communication.

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